

## 2011 AIGA Medalist: Robert Vogele

Recognition

2011 AIGA Medal

Born

1928, Chicago, Illinois

Deceased

2018, Burr Ridge, Illinois

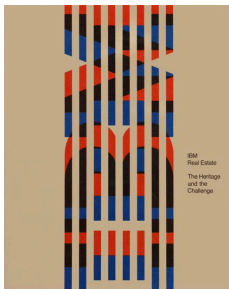


By Emily Potts  
2012

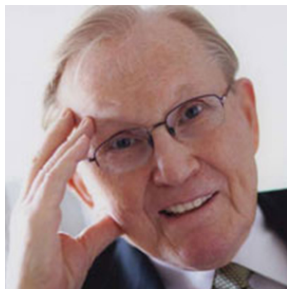
*Groundbreaking design entrepreneur and mentor, Robert Vogele is recognized for being a business strategist and visionary who nurtured the creative potential of generations of Chicago designers, challenging all to think about design for the greater good.*

Known for founding two of Chicago's most significant design consultancies, Robert Vogele had the uncanny ability to recognize creative talent, nurture it, and step back and watch it prosper. He is a visionary who ran his companies by providing the right platform and philosophy that enabled his teams to thrive. Vogele loved the business side of design more than the act of designing itself. Most leaders like to be out front, embracing the accolades of their collective, but not Vogele. Like the Wizard of Oz, he was much more comfortable working his magic behind the curtains, ensuring that his businesses were always moving forward.

When you consider who his contemporaries were in the 1960s and '70s, it makes his journey all the more remarkable. John Massey was in charge of design at Container Corporation of America; Ralph Eckerstrom started Unimark International with several partners including Massimo Vignelli, Larry Klein and Bob Noorda, among others; and Vogele was heading up Robert Vogele Inc. (RVI). These designers, and the extraordinary work they were producing, were instrumental in making Chicago an epicenter of corporate design.



IBM Real Estate Development  
brochure designed by Robert Vogele



Robert Vogele. Photo: Eric Herzog, 2011



Anslu Company Packaging designed by Robert Vogele



Spread from Gould, Inc. identity program designed by Robert Vogele

Born in 1928 and raised in Chicago, Vogele had a knack for drawing at a young age. Even now, he can vividly recall when his kindergarten teacher took him to the front of an assembled parent-teacher meeting to praise his drawing of a rabbit. She said it was one of the best drawings she had ever seen from someone his age. That early reinforcement not only encouraged Vogele's hand in art, but also taught him the importance of recognizing and nurturing young talent.

While studying advertising and graphic design at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1949, Vogele was invited by Ralph Eckerstrom to work at the University of Illinois Press art department. In 1951, they attended the first International Design Conference in Aspen, which proved to be a pivotal experience for Vogele. The conference theme was "Design as a Function of Management," and it profoundly impacted him and the way he would think about and practice design throughout his career.

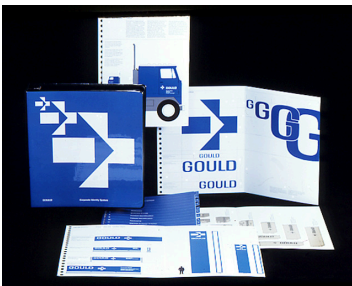
In 1956, after serving in the Korean War, he went to work at Latham, Tyler and Jensen (LTJ), a well-established industrial design firm in Chicago. Mentored by Dick Latham, Vogele learned about the importance of strategic design thinking. In his new role as the director of graphics, packaging and corporate identity, Vogele was allowed to be part of the strategy sessions with clients on the front end, asking questions, researching problems and following up with strategic solutions. At that time, it was practically unheard of for graphic designers to meet directly with the decision makers on the client side, but because Vogele was part of a larger industrial design collective he was given access. He saw a huge divide in the way that business and design functioned, and he was determined to close that gap.

In 1958, he left LTJ to start Robert Vogele Design, later called RVI, and in 1961 created a “communication clinic,” with three separate business units operating within RVI. In this capacity, his firm was able to offer full-service design capabilities—from advertising and packaging and branding, to industrial design—to small and mid-sized companies that would not otherwise be able to afford all those services. This collaborative atmosphere enhanced the client’s experience and was an early example of what a multidisciplinary design agency could be.

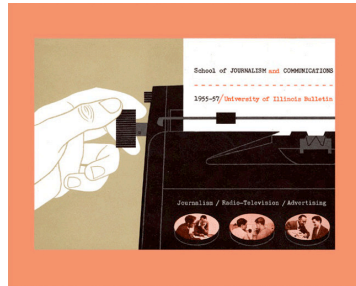
Designers managed their own clients and business units, while Vogele looked at the bigger business of design. He recognized talent and leadership qualities in the people he hired—often before they saw it in themselves. Bart Crosby, who worked at RVI, says, “He hired designers with the ability to run their own business so he could focus on the finances and plan ahead. He didn’t often involve himself in day-to-day design activities.”

IBM hired the agency in 1969, essentially to create an advertising plan to lease office space in its new and half-vacant building at One IBM Plaza. Vogele saw that as a waste of time and instead hired an outside agency to do a study on the market. Using the research—which showed an overbuilt real estate market and a less desirable location some distance from the financial district—Vogele developed a business plan. He proposed that IBM offer potential renters a turnkey deal where IBM would amortize all the build-out expenses—design and furnish the spaces—and add it to the rent. It was a risky proposal, but Vogele pushed IBM’s lawyers to find a way to underwrite tenant build-outs. He presented his plan to three levels of IBM management at three different times—a “horrible experience,” as he recalls—and got approval at each level. His plan paid off tenfold, well exceeding the expected lease income within the client’s targeted time goal.

“It was the first time we [designers] were given the business problem and we had to come up with a recommendation and manage the plan,” says Vogele. “If you can’t create the business criteria, you won’t understand the assignment, and your solution won’t work.”



Gould, Inc. identity program designed by Robert Vogele



Bulletin for the University of Illinois School of Journalism and Communications designed by Robert Vogele



John Deere trademark designed by Robert Vogele



Identity designed by Robert Vogele for Robert Vogele, Inc. (RVI)

His passion for design and the role it could play in business was a major reason he became so involved in local and national design organizations that helped establish Chicago as a design capital. In 1975, he formed the Design Foundation with Patrick Whitney to promote the role and value of design. Whitney’s primary role in the foundation was to run the Icograda Congress to explore and develop other programs to promote design. The resulting conference, “Design that Works!,” was chaired by Vogele, and it was a huge success with more than 800 attendees from 37 countries participating. Vogele was also instrumental in establishing the first Chicago chapter of AIGA, with Crosby, and served on its board of directors.

“Bob was very creative, and restless and impatient with the design field. He had a bigger picture for design. Even though he ran the most successful corporate design office at the time, he still had higher aspirations for the field,” says Whitney.

In 1982, Vogele wanted to start a new kind of design agency. Along with his son Bruce and Ted Stoik, they formed the Communication Design Group, which became Vogele, Stoik Associates, Inc., after Bruce left, and eventually VSA Partners in 1990, when Dana Arnett joined the firm. Vogele again hired great talent to lead the design consultancy, while he took more of a hands-off approach when it came to the creative aspects of the firm.

At VSA Partners he created compensation models for the staff. Whether you were 22 and fresh out of design school or a seasoned designer with 20 years under your belt, he wanted everyone to feel ownership in the business and be rewarded for their billing and performance. Vogele’s philosophy was based on the assumption that everyone works hard and has goals they want to achieve. To keep good people from leaving, he provided opportunities within the organization. “I wanted them to grow and learn how the businesses were run. I spent a lot of time with all the employees, because you never know who’s going to show that real spark that makes the difference,” Vogele says. He built an environment where people felt empowered to look at VSA as their own business.

Vogele was not averse to taking risks by investing in a noncore leader or activity if he saw the potential benefit to the greater good of the firm. He would say, “Let’s try it. It may be out on a limb, but we may grow here.” Not many business leaders are willing to take those kinds of risks, because they’re looking at the immediate pay-off, not the investment down the road. “Bob would say, ‘If you’re worried about your rent, you’re really in trouble,’” Arnett says with a laugh.

“He wanted us to think of the collective and be proprietary for the greater good of the firm, not on whether my book of business is better than yours,” Arnett continues. That takes a special kind of group. Partnerships often fail because of ego. Vogele set up a collective that could sustain itself, while constantly evolving and changing. He retired in 2002, and today VSA Partners employs 179 employees with nine partners who still follow the basic tenets that Vogele established.

He now splits his time between Chicago and his home in Phoenix with Ruth, his wife of almost 60 years. They are avid collectors of fine art and folk art, donating much of the work to museums such as the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art, the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois and the Milwaukee Art Museum, among others. He and Ruth not only enjoy the artifacts—they befriend many of the artists and encourage them in their creations. He hasn’t stopped mentoring.

In a speech he gave in 1977 to the first Design Michigan Assembly, he stated, “We must stop being satisfied with just decorating the landscape. We must begin participating in the building of a creative environment that truly respects man and his personhood—an environment that places real value, social and economic, on human perfection and achievement, that believes in the power of human creativity. This is our greatest untapped resource.” Fast forward 35 years, and we’re still having the same conversation, only now people are listening and acting on it.

“Bob is not a romantic designer but he is a romantic idealist when it relates to what a designer can be,” says Crosby. He is a man in constant motion, and perhaps misunderstood because he didn’t acknowledge the “craft” of design as the primary function. His passion was planning and writing and staying one step ahead of the game—not working in reactionary mode.

Crosby adds, “I wouldn’t be where I am without Bob, and even though our working relationship was push-and-pull much of the time, he knew how to run a business. And he would do anything for you.”

Vogele wants to be remembered as a designer, but not in the traditional sense. In many respects, he helped redefine what it means to be a designer. He pushed designers to think beyond style choices and to consider the long-term value design can offer to clients. Designers started listening to him and they sought his advice, which he eagerly gave. Vogele likes to say that he didn’t need to be the smartest person in the room, but we suspect that, more often than not, he was.

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*Robert Vogele was presented with the AIGA Medal at “Bright Lights: The AIGA Awards” on April 19, 2012, in New York City.*

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