Insanely Simple

The Obsession That Drives Apple's Success

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Preface

Life is a combination of skill and luck. I won't claim to be the most skilled person in my profession, but I'm definitely one of the luckiest. Between NeXT and Apple, I got to work with Steve Jobs for over a decade.

It wasn't always easy. It might not even have been healthy. But it was always exciting, and I'll forever be in Steve's debt for the lessons I learned.

Steve passed away before I finished this book. Though his death was expected, part of me refused to expect it. I secretly clung to the hope that maybe, possibly, his health was better than it appeared. I didn't want to think of the world without him.

So in addition to its original business purpose, this book has taken on a personal meaning. I wish to pay tribute to Steve—for all he's contributed to the world and for the opportunities he gave me personally.

I didn't invent the concepts in this book. I merely observed them. Thank you, Steve, for making things so simple.

Introduction
The Simple Stick

Apple's package-design team had just returned from their presentation to Steve Jobs, and their faces told the story. There were no visible signs of carnage. They just had that "things didn't go exactly as we planned" look.

I felt bad for them, because I knew they'd been pouring their hearts into a project for several weeks, trying to solve a thorny packaging issue. I was working on an unrelated project in the building and had been invited into their high-security, hermetically sealed chamber at several points to join the brainstorming.

While the team was decompressing after their Steve meeting, I crossed paths with the project leader in the creative group's kitchen.

"The suspense is killing me," I said. "How'd it go this morning?"

"Well," he said, "Steve hit us with the Simple Stick."

Translation: Steve had rejected their work—not because it was bad but because in some way it failed to distill the idea to its essence. It took a turn when it should have traveled a straight line.

In this case it hadn't even been the creative effort that bothered Steve— it was the project itself. The person leading the project had directed the

team to create packaging for two versions of the same product. Steve had decided this was brain-dead. "Just combine them," he said. "One product, one box." There was no need to explore the idea of a second package.

He was right. It was simpler, quicker, better. The conversation was over in minutes, and it left one very smart and talented group of people wondering why they hadn't thought of that before.

The Simple Stick symbolizes a core value within Apple. Sometimes it's held up as inspiration; other times it's wielded like a caveman's club. In all cases, it's a reminder of what sets Apple apart from other technology companies and what makes Apple stand out in a complicated world: a deep, almost religious belief in the power of Simplicity.

As those who have worked with Apple will attest, the simpler way isn't always the easiest. Often it requires more time, more money, and more energy. It might require you to step on a few toes. But more times than not, it will lead to measurably better results.

Simplicity has been a driving force at Apple since the earliest days of the two Steves, Jobs and Wozniak. It inspired them to create a computer that could actually help a human being accomplish something wonderful— as opposed to just processing data in the dark basement of some faceless corporation.

And of course Simplicity was the guiding light for Macintosh, which introduced the biggest leap in the history of computers: a graphical interface controlled by a mouse. (Now, don't get all technical with me about who *really* invented this. Macintosh was the first computer to popularize it.)

When Steve Jobs took the stage to announce Macintosh in 1984, he used words that would resonate for decades to come. He called it "insanely great."

It was the kind of insanity that caused people to line up around the block to get a closer look at this technology milestone. When Steve returned to Apple after eleven years in exile, so did the insanity—and the lines started forming once again. First he reignited computers (iMac), then he revolutionized music (iPod and iTunes), then smartphones (iPhone), and most recently computers all over again (iPad).

Every one of Apple's revolutions was born of the company's devotion to Simplicity. Each new device either created a new category or turned an existing category on its head—all because, as an old iMac ad put it, the technology was "simply amazing, and amazingly simple."

Having played a lead role in the marketing of Intel, Dell, and IBM, as well as Apple, I can assure you that Apple's focus on Simplicity is unique. It goes beyond enthusiasm, beyond passion, all the way to obsession.

While Apple's love of Simplicity started in the mind of Steve Jobs, it's now burned deep into the company's DNA, serving as a guide for legions of employees around the world. It pays off in the satisfaction that comes with sparking revolution after revolution. It also pays off in a more traditional way—with massive piles of cash.

To appreciate that, you need only look at the size of Apple's profits versus those of any one competitor. Better yet, look at the size of Apple's profits versus those of all of its competitors combined. In the third quarter of 2011, Apple's 4 percent of the smartphone market accounted for over half of the entire industry's profits. In PCs, Apple's small market share (about 5 percent worldwide) also rakes in a greatly disproportionate percentage of the total industry's profits.

By no means am I saying that Simplicity is the sole factor behind Apple's success. Leadership, vision, talent, imagination, and incredibly hard work may have just a bit to do with it. But there's one common thread that runs through it all. That's Simplicity. It's what drives Apple to create what it creates and behave as it behaves. It's Apple's devotion to Simplicity that forms an unbreakable connection with its customers and inspires customers to evangelize to colleagues, friends, and family.

Simplicity not only enables Apple to revolutionize—it enables Apple to revolutionize *repeatedly*. As the world changes, as technology changes, as the company itself adapts to change, the religion of Simplicity is the one constant. It's the set of values that allows Apple to turn technology into devices that are just too hard to resist.

There's nothing subtle about Apple's love affair with Simplicity. It's

everywhere you look. It's in the company's products, its ads, its internal organization, its stores, and its customer relationships. Inside Apple, Simplicity is a goal, a work style, and a measuring stick.

But all of this leads to a very good question: If Apple's obsession with Simplicity is so obvious, and the financial results are equally obvious, why on earth aren't other technology companies simply copying Apple's methods to achieve the same level of success?

The quick answer: It ain't easy.

Simplicity is not merely a layer that can be grafted onto a business. It isn't available in a prepackaged version. It doesn't work with an on/off switch. Yet it's there for absolutely anyone to take advantage of, if only they have the determination and knowledge.

Simplicity doesn't spontaneously spring to life with the right combination of molecules, water, and sunlight. It needs a champion—someone who's willing to stand up for its principles and strong enough to resist the overtures of Simplicity's evil twin, Complexity. It needs someone who's willing to guide a process with both head and heart.

As you can imagine, it's a lot more fun to wield the Simple Stick than it is to get whacked by it. By embracing the values of Simplicity, you will be the one who promotes change, keeps colleagues on course, and proves your value to the company day by day.

The Undeniable Truth

Since this book is about Simplicity, it's important to point out that virtually everything you read here is born of one simple fact: People prefer Simplicity.

Maybe it's a little early in the book to be quite so simple. So here's a slightly wordier version: Given the option, any sane person will choose the simple path over one that's more complicated.

If that still seems too obvious, then you're well on your way to appreciating one of Simplicity's most outstanding attributes. It looks, acts, and sounds perfectly natural. Your head involuntarily nods in agreement.

But never underestimate the degree to which people crave this kind of clarity and respond positively to it. Most of us live in a world that's become increasingly complicated, where Simplicity isn't all that easy to find. It boils down to basic supply and demand: As Simplicity becomes more rare, it also becomes more valuable. So your ability to keep things simple, and protect things from becoming more complicated, becomes more valuable as well.

People of all ages, religions, cultures, and political beliefs prefer Simplicity. In fact, it's not just human beings who prefer it. This preference is burned into the basic wiring of all living cells. When it comes to ordinary, everyday decisions, most life-forms agree: The simpler path is the far more attractive one.

Whether you're a person, dog, fish, or amoeba, you will respond more positively to the simpler solution—even if it isn't a conscious response. Businesspeople who understand, embrace, and leverage this fact are destined to achieve greater success than those who do not.

Now if everyone and everything has a built-in preference for Simplicity, why does business—and life—remain so complicated? Well, nature has this thing about "balance." While there exists this wonderful idea called Simplicity, there also exists that dark cloud called Complexity. Complexity can be powerful and seductive, so it should never be underestimated.

Its recruits often look and act just like the rest of us. You meet them just about every day in the course of your business. These people either believe or have been led to believe that their complex ways are somehow more ingenious. Sometimes it's possible to show them the light. Other times all we can do is try to defang them. In an odd way, we should be thankful that these agents of Complexity exist, for their presence makes Simplicity stand out that much more.

Simplicity is power, whether it's used by individuals or organizations. The question is, do you have the insight and skills to turn this power into your own business advantage?

You will soon.

Is This a Marketing Book or What?

This is a book about the obsession that drives Apple's success: Simplicity.

But to truly understand Simplicity—to appreciate how it's implemented, maintained, and enforced at Apple, to learn how you can use its power to achieve your company's goals—you need to see it in context. And in the organization that Steve Jobs built, marketing is the context for just about everything. It's not an exaggeration to say that marketing is as critical to Apple's success as the devices the company makes.

So will many of the stories I share in this book revolve around marketing? Absolutely. Will this book be helpful to you if you're in the marketing business? I'd feel wounded if it wasn't. Do you have to be in marketing to gain important business insights from this book? Not at all.

This book is about ideas and processes. It's about creating the best work and giving it the best chance of survival. It's about getting from point A to point B more efficiently and with far happier results. These principles apply to a range of businesses—certainly not just marketing.

If you engage with clients, manage a team, work against deadlines, or coordinate groups to solve thorny problems, this book will spark ideas and insights to make your business more successful, whatever your business might be.

If you're not familiar with marketing, trust me, you will hardly be intimidated by the situations described here. As you've seen in *Mad Men* and a hundred other TV shows and movies about this business, it's easy to understand. And in Apple's world, the real-life stories are at least as entertaining as the Hollywood versions.

In this book, you'll be a fly on the wall inside a conference room with Steve Jobs. You'll be on the receiving end of his midnight phone call. While many of the conversations I describe are about various facets of marketing, they'll illuminate the love of Simplicity that makes Apple Apple—and can help your business win, Apple style.

Your humble guide for this journey is an advertising creative director who spent seventeen years working in the worlds of Apple and NeXT,

conspiring with others of my ilk to create the marketing campaigns that helped define these companies. It was my job to turn complicated ideas into interesting and compelling stories—a feat I will attempt to replicate in this book.

*Insanely Simple'*s Raison d'Être

As the legend of Apple has grown, so has the stack of books written about it. Many are authored by journalists or other outsiders who've done their homework and pulled together disparate stories from the inside.

This isn't that kind of book.

The operative theory here is that, while Apple does many things well—hardware, software, manufacturing, strategy, product launches, PR, marketing, retail, and much more—Simplicity is the common thread that ties them all together.

If you understand how Simplicity has helped make Apple the most valuable company on earth, you can apply it to your own business in a hundred different ways. You can use Simplicity to separate your business from the pack in much the same way that Apple has used it to eclipse its competitors.

To be honest, Apple was not the only inspiration for this book. As a writer who caught technology fever long ago, I toiled for many years creating campaigns for other iconic companies, including IBM, Intel, and Dell. It was the stark contrast between Apple's culture and the cultures of the others that made me appreciate the power of Simplicity. On one side I saw a company rising on the wings of Simplicity; on the other I could see companies losing everyday struggles against Complexity. Across the board I saw companies that showed an interest in Simplicity—but only one made it an obsession. And only one rose to such astronomical heights.

I not only had the opportunity to compare Apple to other companies but was able to compare Apple to its former self. That's because in addition to serving the Steve Jobs administration, I was a creative director at Apple's agency during the dark days when John Sculley reigned as CEO. I also had

the opportunity to work with two different versions of Steve Jobs: one at NeXT, the other at Apple.

Selected experiences from all of these times are distilled into this book. My goal is to present a diverse selection of stories that together define the obsession that drives Apple's success. I do this in the hope that it can also drive your company's success.

What Makes Simplicity Tick

For a concept that's supposed to be obvious, Simplicity can be difficult to describe. It can be a choice, a feeling, or a guiding light. You might even think of it as a spirit, for you can tell pretty quickly when you're in a place that believes in it and when you're in a place that doesn't.

Simplicity is the love child of two of the most powerful forces in business: Brains and Common Sense.

Since most people are endowed with both, you'd think that Simplicity would rule the world. Unfortunately, that's not the case. For example, Common Sense would suggest that when Microsoft created the Zune Store to compete with the iTunes Store, it would have charged a fixed price per song, much as Apple did. Instead, it offered "Microsoft Points," which required customers to purchase points by the hundred, then use a conversion rate of eighty points to the dollar to buy a ninety-nine-cent song. The architect of that scheme seems to be missing the Common Sense gene—and those who approved it were a bit light in the Brains department.

No, the fact is that Brains and Common Sense often go AWOL in this world, even inside companies that were founded on sheer smarts, like Microsoft. Once again, that's because Simplicity has its own kryptonite in the equal and opposite force of Complexity. If one were to judge by the balance we currently see in this world, a strong argument could be made that Complexity may even be the stronger of the two.

It is because of the existence of Complexity, and the safe haven it finds all around us, that even those with the best of intentions—well stocked

with Brains and Common Sense—sometimes fail in their quest for Simplicity.

Simplicity and Complexity have been locked in mortal combat since the dawn of civilization. And Complexity, unfortunately, is part of the human condition. It lives inside all of us—yes, including people like Steve Jobs. By the end of this book, you'll see that even Steve, champion of Simplicity, was perfectly capable of lapsing and falling victim, if only momentarily, to the Complexity within.

Unlike Simplicity, which normally presents itself with a certain elegance, Complexity can get ugly. Even worse, it can never die. But the good news is, neither can Simplicity. It's capable of defeating any challenge from the dark side—it just needs someone to fight on its behalf.

Happily, you don't have to start from scratch. You can take some lessons from the company that wrote the book on Simplicity. Like Apple, you can use the power of Simplicity to get noticed in a complicated world.

Your competitors may be bigger or better funded—but you'll have the Simple Stick.

Prepare for Battle

Over years of meetings with Steve Jobs and his Apple marketing team, it was obvious that I was working in a special place. So I made it a habit to put an asterisk in my notes when something memorable happened or a key decision was made. I wanted to bookmark the things that made Apple different from other companies I'd worked with.

When I looked back at my notes, I thought there were way too many asterisks to make any sense of them. However, when my harvest was complete, I realized that just about every one of these moments in some way reflected Apple's obsession with Simplicity. Though Apple applies its obsession in many different ways, the moments I recorded formed a pattern. Ten core elements of Simplicity seemed to emerge.

These elements aren't trademarked by Apple or anyone else. They

belong to all of us. Apple may be the world's greatest practitioner of Simplicity, but there's room for everyone to play.

If you're prepared to do battle with Complexity, you'll have no trouble finding a fight. Chances are, you're surrounded by it. Unless you work in the rarest of environments, Complexity lives inside your organization's hierarchy, its goals, and probably most of your colleagues as well. If your company is ever to fail, you can be sure it won't be the fault of Simplicity—it will be the result of its absence.

In each chapter of this book, I will focus on one core element of Simplicity and show you how Steve Jobs's and Apple's deep devotion to it led them to act as they did. By book's end, you'll understand how all these elements fit together, and you'll be armed with a powerful weapon to move your business forward.

Just understand that Simplicity is more than a goal—it's a skill. To successfully leverage its power, you need to get good at it. That takes practice. And this is where things get a little tricky. Because the irony is, becoming skilled in Simplicity isn't that simple. You can't just learn it; you need to make it second nature.

As important, you must understand that Simplicity is not a smorgasbord from which you can pick and choose at whim. You buy the whole thing or you buy none of it. Because if your understanding or skills are incomplete, you'll be no match for Complexity, which knows every trick in the book.