



What's on Your Not-To-Do List?

Video interview with Matthew May, Supporting Faculty, Graziadio School of Business and Management

Danielle L. Scott

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Start

Danielle L. Scott: Hello. This is Danielle L. Scott, managing editor of the Graziadio Business Report blog. Today we have Matthew May, author of the recently released book, *In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas have Something Missing*, which debuted at number one on 800ceoread.com and number two in the creativity and genius section of Amazon. Professor May joined the Graziadio School's supporting faculty last year. He was a consultant to the University of Toyota and is also the author of the critically acclaimed *The Elegant Solution* which won the Shingo Research Prize for Elegance. Matt, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today.

Matt May: Thank you. A pleasure to be here.

Danielle L. Scott: First of all, what is elegance really in terms of business?

Matt May: Well, elegance- the term "elegance" in any domain, business or otherwise, is the combination of two things. It's the combination of unique or uncommon simplicity paired with surprising power, and sometimes that uncommon simplicity is so rare and extreme that it seems as if something's actually

missing so whether you're talking about for example when the very first iPhone came out everyone saw that there was something missing physically, which was a keyboard, but beyond that for six months the marketing campaign for the iPhone was nonexistent. And Apple didn't have any PR campaigns, didn't have any advertising until just before the release, and what happened was all the Apple loyalists filled in the missing piece, the missing marketing, and it came across as the most hyped product ever but if you go back and look there was no marketing at all. The customers supplied the marketing so that's what elegance really is all about in business, which is it's the ability to achieve the maximum effect with the minimum of means.

Danielle L. Scott: What would be the opposite of elegance then?

Matt May: Well, the opposite of elegance is stupid stuff or if you ever have the unfortunate opportunity to get lost in voice mail, the automated voice response systems that banks have and technical support centers have, and it just seems like you're going round and round, the results are inconsistent, there is an overload of information, there's too many options, too much stupid stuff, waste, complexity. That's what inelegance looks like so I don't want to point out any one particular company, but we've all as customers experienced inelegance.

Danielle L. Scott: Can you explain the four key elements of elegance?

Matt May: Sure. I actually started my search for elegance many years ago when I sort of traipsed across the planet looking for a framework, and I finally found it. Professor Donald Knuth of Stanford offered a definition--he's the father of computer science--offered a pretty simple framework. And he said, "If something's elegant"-- And he was talking about computer code. "If it is symmetrical, spare, pleasingly memorable with the ease and immortal ring of an E equals mc squared." So I massaged those a bit and I came up with four elements: Symmetry, subtraction, seduction, and sustainability, and symmetry is the beauty of patterns. Designers clue in to symmetry or the lack of symmetry when they're designing products and services. Seduction is the notion if symmetry is in play, you don't have to give complete information. We can seduce people and grab their attention by leaving something out in an artful way, for instance, the last episode of *The Sopranos*, a ballyhooed event, had no ending. It stopped in mid scene but the viewership was triple what a traditional ending might have been, and those two elements are governed by the laws of subtraction, which is to say think about removing something, and that goes back to the definition of elegance, right, uncommon simplicity and surprising power. If you're artful and thoughtful and purposeful about what you subtract, you can create far more power and impact because of it, and sustainability is the notion that gosh, we all have more to do and less to do it with, especially in this economic environment right now. And so it's the notion that true innovation really can be spurred by a focus on and exploitation of finite resources. So those four elements come together to help us craft elegance and elegant solutions.



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Danielle L. Scott: In practical terms, how could a business manager find elegance in his work?

Matt May: Start looking at the things that get in the way I think of customer value. You have to have an absolutely picture-perfect notion of what your customer truly wants, needs, requires and desires, and then working from the customer back systematically subtract all the things that get in the way of delivering that value to a customer in a way that- that's effortless, that's memorable, that's spare and seductive at the same time. Right here in southern California all you have to do is go to the local In-N-Out Burger to see this in action. They have a very spare menu of four or five items but the secret menu has about six or seven times that many items, and so what happens is if you're- you resist adding your customers will co-create for you. So as a practical matter think about what it is you can remove to have greater impact for your customers.

Danielle L. Scott: My final question: For readers of your book, what is the one thing that you really hope that they take away?

Matt May: I guess the one thing that I would hope that they take away from this book is that whatever you're doing, whatever you want to achieve, stop thinking about what more you can do, start about what you can actually stop doing, and it's a different way of thinking and that lesson hit home with me several years ago when I heard Jim Collins who I'm sure everyone knows about, business management, who wrote Good to Great and his new one, How the Mighty Fall. He said, "Whatever your to-do list is, come up with a stop-doing list and not-to-do list," which is to say rank order all of your priorities, goals and objectives and as a practice get rid of the bottom 20% as a ritual even and forget about them forever. So the take-away is not so much what are you doing to achieve elegance; what are you not doing that will help you achieve elegance?

Danielle L. Scott: I think I like that one. That was my last question. Matt, thank you so much for spending time with us today and best of luck on your book.

Matt May: Thank you.

Danielle L. Scott: This is Danielle for the GBR blog. Find us online at gbr.pepperdine.edu.

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