

# The Medium Is the Message

This year's top winner is tiny (\$1.3 million in sales) and bootstrapped. But what Syndesis lacks in resources it more than makes up for with imagination, diligence, and founder David Hertz's clear vision of what he wants design to tell you about his business • By Robert A. Mamis

The business card David Hertz handed out to prospective clients when he started Syndesis Inc., in 1981, was as stiff as concrete. In fact, it was concrete, with its 21-year-old bearer's particulars rubber-stamped on one side. Fresh from architecture school, Hertz was fascinated by concrete as a surface for finished products and sought patrons who'd pay him to cast beautiful things in it, such as chairs and countertops.

But Hertz's concrete was not the old-fashioned gritting kind. He had developed his own mix, one that used silica sand, required no steel reinforcement, and was composed in part of recycled-waste aggregates. It was less than half the weight of common concrete and twice as strong. Flecked with whatever post consumer detritus Hertz chose to add to it (broken glass, plastic scraps, metal shavings), pocked with tiny air marks from the casting process, and pumiced to a smooth luminescence, it was far better looking, too.

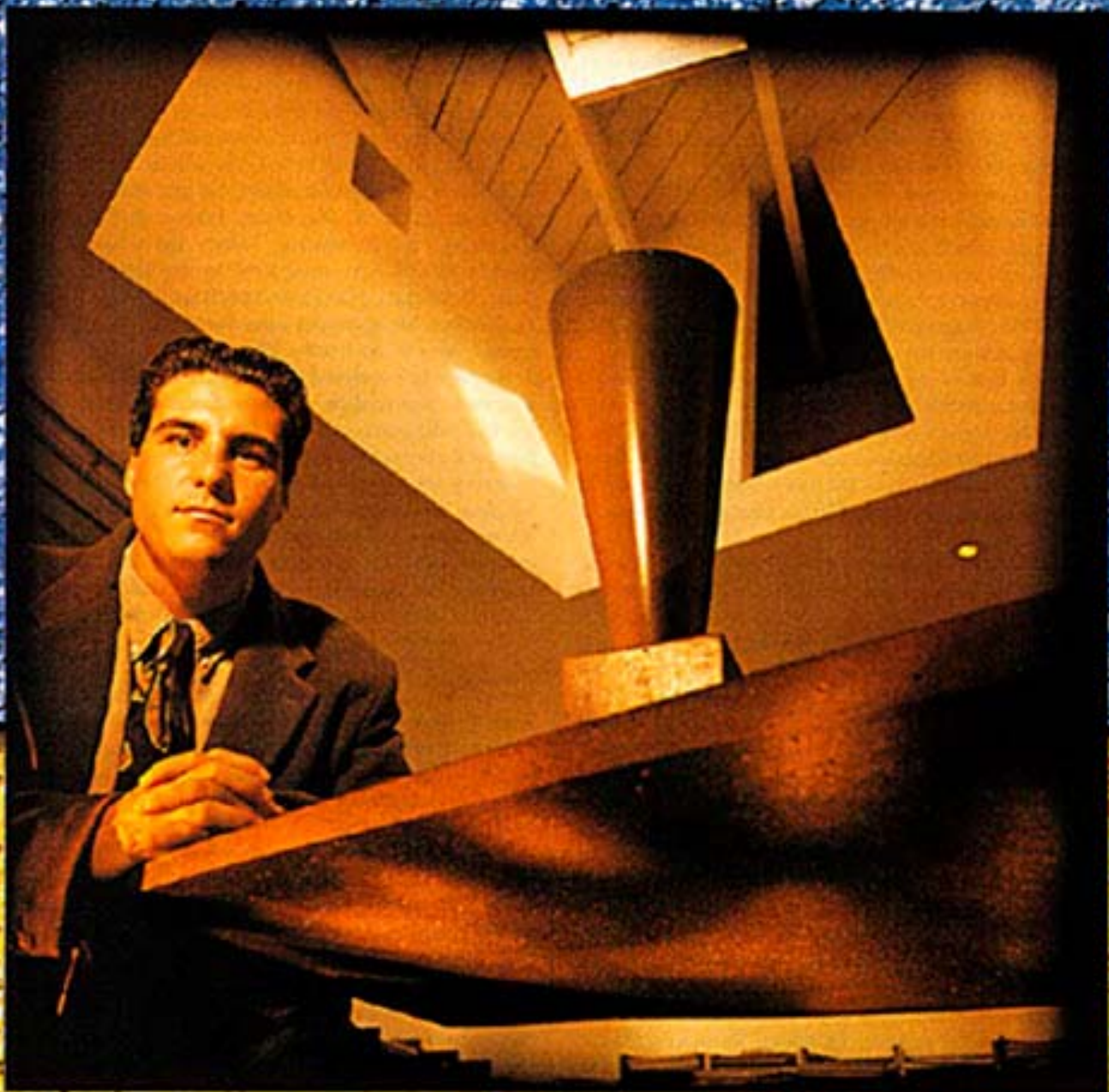
In sum, precisely the attributes Hertz's 3-D business "card" imparted.

At first Hertz regarded business as "an enemy that compromises art." But he was seduced into it when the Los Angeles flower shop whose displays he executed began selling more of his cone-shaped concrete vases than the roses that were in them. Within three years the idea of business had become so appealing that Hertz launched four separate lines of it—architectural-design services, custom manufacturing, ready-made furniture, and household gewgaws (including the vase). In 1985 he gave his lightweight-concrete concoction the brand name Syndecrete, rented commercial space, hired assistants, and began to fabricate market-driven good. For

convenience, his calling cards became paper like everyone else's, but he continued devising ways to link the distinctive materials to promote it.

Today all collateral matter associated with Syndesis is calculated to hint—directly or subliminally—both at Syndecrete's uncommon properties and at the capabilities of the company that makes and sells it. Some examples:

- It's an attention-grabber to receive promotional pieces that describe pricey goods but are tucked inside drab, basic-brown corrugate cardboard. Cardboard's unmistakably primitive origins stress Syndecrete's gravel-and-sand heritage, lest the product be presumed a synthetic (which it isn't).
- A folding brochure is designed so no envelope is needed to mail it. On the outside, a collage of Syndecrete tiles in subdued tone acts as a teaser. Inside, a sample tile glued to a reader-response card shows customers what the product feels like.
- An address label is laser-generated on transparent sticky paper, not on the usual opaque stock. Because the label blends seamlessly with the background of the mailed item, the recipient's name and address seem to have been custom-printed onto the piece itself. The result: an instant, personalized bond between company and customer.
- The covers of the three-ring binders sent to clients to hold reference material are plain cardboard, with no shiny plastic coating. The idea: the bare cardboard binders, which don't pretend to be anything other than what they are, symbolize the integrity of Syndesis and Syndecrete. (*Continued*)



FOUNDER DAVID HERTZ, WITH A DESK AND A VASE MADE OF SYNDCRETE

THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE  
THE ROLE OF THE CEO

For everything about a company's look—from its products and logo to its work space and billing statements—to successfully communicate a message, that message needs to be clear in the first place. Which means the CEO is the de facto head designer. Only the CEO can definitively answer questions like these: What business are we really in? What values shape our company and are important for customers and employees to know? As Hertz, of Inc. Design Award-winner Syndesis, would attest, you can't design anything well without understanding your company first.

- The logo ties two logotypes together as one. A wide and airy *Syndesis* perched atop a condensed and brawny *Syndecrete* conveys both flexibility and stability—of the company as well as the product.

- Whenever possible, Syndesis's brochures are printed on recycled paper (complete with blemishes) with soy-based inks, underscoring the company's concern for the environment—a good-business buzz-phrase. More subtly, their use reminds sales-literature recipients that Syndecrete's singularity also stems from imperfection and understatement.

- A price list, on a stark white sheet laced with delicate particles that bespeak the Syndecrete look, pops out from the other materials, which are uniformly brown. While design connoisseurs will admire the white paper's elegance, meat fanciers will recognize it for the cheap industrial butcher wrap it actually is. The suggestion in either case: don't get hung up on the prices—admire the creative spirit behind them.

These and a host of similarly well-considered components were deemed so meticulously integrated and sensibly executed that all nine *Inc.* Design Award judges (see "Judgment Day," page 90) plucked Syndesis—in 1991, a 30-employee enterprise grossing a modest \$1.3 million—from a field of 73 finalists as winner of the overall Design Leadership Award.

FROM ITS ENTRYWAY TILES WITH SYNDECRETE "FLAGSTONES" to the decor of its factory walls, Syndesis's 16,000 square-foot sales and manufacturing facility, in Santa Monica, Calif., is an outpost of design. Not the design of jazzy shapes and eyeball-twisting typefaces (California is awash in those), but design as a coherent message aimed, in all its manifestations, at assuring viewers that this company is a stayer. Its specific burden is to convince prospective buyers that products made from so magnificent a substance—which, for all its promotable uniqueness, is still concrete at heart—are fairly priced.

Even at half the heft of the old stuff, lightweight concrete is an oxymoron. One reason Syndesis has remained largely a West Coast operation is that Syndecrete can't be poured on-site. It has to be precast in the Santa Monica factory and is heavy and costly to ship. Most of the company's revenues come from high-end residential sales. That was fine before the recession, but when the economy softened, so did the price of competing decorative materials such as natural stone.

Hertz's reaction was to lower his prices. The result: the old "volume" joke—twice as many contracts, twice as many headaches, same dollar amount of sales. He had no formula for determining what it cost to produce his material and priced it based on the nearest comparable material. "I figured if granite is selling at \$60 a square foot, I'll come in at \$50, and that should do it." It didn't. Syndesis could make sales at that rate but not profits. When Hertz had to jack prices back up, he undertook a self-schooling campaign to learn business. The first subjects were job-costing and break-even analysis.

The misleading assumption was that Syndecrete costs next to nothing. The semiliquid brew it comes from contains such cheap ingredients as industrial throwaways and recycled postconsumer waste. A nearby screw manufacturer, for example, donates brass spiral-shaped shavings, which, Hertz marvels, "pick up the light beautifully." Nonetheless, Syndecrete remains labor-intensive to produce and tricky to bring to a smooth finish. Plus, its margins are low by the time it's installed. (Drop a section and you start all over.)

"I'm interested in developing some highly designed pieces and in producing them in mass quantities at an economical level," Hertz says. But the problem remains that Syndecrete doesn't readily lend itself to mass production. The company's tiny line of home decorations (vases, bowls, tabletops, soap holders) is sold directly to one catalog merchant—instant cash flow, but barely profitable. Still, Hertz has taught himself enough about breaking even to have canceled production on a set of bowls when the pace of orders at a recent trade show suggested they wouldn't recapture fixed costs soon enough. "I never thought that way before," he admits. "In the early years, if I felt it was a beautiful object, I'd just make it."

Other studies at the Hertz School of Business include marketing and accounting, which the school's star pupil pledges he will have completed by the time this article appears. Until then, Hertz won't push for growth. "I haven't felt ready to go for aggressive sales forecasts," he says. "The last thing I want to do is sell a lot at a loss."

By now he's resigned to Syndecrete's relatively high price structure. Sold straight out of the factory, with no middleman markup, the product is still at a level where some 60% of potential clients for whom Syndesis generates proposals reply that they love the product but regret they can't afford it. If Syndesis can't manufacture competitively—and it's doubtful it can, given set-in-concrete labor and materials costs that commodities such as granite and marble don't suffer—Hertz knows he has to convince customers his stuff is worth the extra dough. That's where corporate design—the business subject he's learned best—comes in.

HERTZ STARTS THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATIONS BY SENDING prospective clients an elaborate four-color brochure. "From the mailing label, to the way it's packaged, through the pieces of identity inside," he says, "customers can tell we're no uninitiated precaster, that we're a business architects and builders can relate to."

The recipient can request specific information by checking items off a list on the response card enclosed in the brochure. What arrives next is likely to be printed on cocoa-toned stock and wrapped in corrugated cardboard—a curiously drab setting that risks being dismissed as the budgetary concession of a business short of funds. Hertz appreciates that his back-to-basics approach treads a fine line between sophistication and out-and-out cheapness. "Unless you do each element sensitively, so it's a recognizable part of the theme," he says, "it looks as if you're cutting comers."

In Syndesis's bootstrapped beginnings, standards were indeed tempered by economic necessity. "We bought rolls of that corrugated stuff," Hertz recalls of his early days, when he operated out of a garage, "because it was incredibly cheap, yet it made for interesting packaging." He still buys rolls of the stuff, he says, simply because "I rather like the aesthetic." A major difference: visual interest in the otherwise lackluster cardboard has been introduced by means of a cutaway, each one scooped out by hand, that reveals an address label.

The rough-finished binder that holds Syndecrete data also seems to be the mark of a tightfisted operation. Unbeknownst to the recipient, however, it costs about three times more than the usual vinyl-covered model. The extra cost is to get the manufacturer to interrupt its production run and not apply tacky plastic. "It costs more to get less," Hertz acknowledges—meaning for raw goods, not cultivated effect.

Hertz has to be the only merchant in the world who



PRODUCT LINE ICONS



**THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE  
ATTENTION TO DETAIL**

Just as successful design is uniform and evident everywhere, it also reflects an almost obsessive attention to detail. At Syndesis no shipping package, piece of stationery, or work-space layout (as shown in materials bins here)

fails to demonstrate that in the company's view the small stuff matters. Attention to detail broadcasts to the outside world that a company follows through and implies that it delivers on its promises and doesn't let things fall through the cracks. Employees note the attentiveness, too, and are more likely to practice such thoroughness themselves.

*'What's extraordinary is that these marketing and promotional materials were internally produced and done inexpensively.'*

—Design judge Paul Cook

**THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE  
ON THE CHEAP**

Small companies don't have big resources to lavish on self-presentation. But as the example of Syndesis shows, a tight budget can work to your advantage by demanding creative solutions instead of purchased ones and by suggesting to all your company's constituencies that resources are husbanded and maximized, not squandered—a message that customers, investors, suppliers, and employees all will appreciate. Syndesis uses raw—and attention-getting—cardboard (at right) to cover most of its product-information packages, and ties its sheet materials in with the packages by matching the cardboard's color and texture.

SYNDESIS'S LOOK: HONEST AND UNPRETENTIOUS



delivers marketing matter on butcher paper, the same utilitarian stuff your rib roast is wrapped in. He considers butcher paper's suggestively stark ("Read this!") and grainy (like Syndecrete itself) veneer more suitable than conventional bond for presenting certain printed information. So much so that he doggedly shopped among grocery suppliers rather than printing-paper mills for a bulk supplier. "If I asked a mill for the effect I wanted," he says, "they'd have come up with some premium-priced designer paper speckled to look like granite. I got *real* speckles at a small fraction of the price."

The butcher's shop theme is echoed by rugged meat-locker doors that seat manufacturing off from office space at Syndesis headquarters. Through them pass clients, invited to examine and critique work in process. Inside the manufacturing area, where Syndecrete is being made, visitors are immersed in monochrome, as if they're in a movie that's suddenly turned black-and-white. Everything in view—walls, forklifts, stepladders, company-supplied uniforms for employees—has been unstintingly rendered gray. Hertz calls it his "battleship aesthetic," and, of course, it serves a function. "Some companies have well-designed interiors, but the design stops on the manufacturing floor; we put a lot of money into making sure the workplace is not only safe but also attractive for customers." Consciously or not, the workers respond to the orderliness of it all by not leaving tools lying around, returning them instead to their appointed places in the storeroom.

Nor does Hertz's notion that everything matters stop there. On the street, Syndesis trucks have logos stenciled on by an expensive procedure that makes them look as though they've been chiseled into the doors. Even the tool kits Syndecrete installers take to the field have been neatly dressed with Syndesis logos. The message: if we take this much trouble for us, think what we'll do for our customers.

STUFFED WITH INFORMATION, THE CARDBOARD BINDER, ARRIVING inside one of the ubiquitous corrugated sleeves, is engineered to end up on clients' shelves. "In architects' Offices", Hertz says, "if you give them a two-dimensional container, they'll place it in a file drawer, where it's never seen again. But they can't file a three-ring binder, so it goes to the general library for everyone to use as a reference." Not only that, but when Syndesis does follow-up mailings, the binder is the obvious place for recipients to stow the materials.

Not every element was deemed unflinching by the design award judges, however. One downgrade was earned by the logo. "The product is brilliant, and the use of the corrugated material makes you stop and read about it," says Woody Pirtle, and his fellow judges agree. "Unfortunately, the identity—the logotype—suffers from what's happening in the design industry today with regard to typography." Specifically, Pirtle regretted that the typeface of *Syndecrete* had been "squeezed beyond recognition" of its classic Futura origins. Hertz, though, favors the choice on three grounds: (1) its individuality asserts that the product "isn't an imitation of anything"; (2) an instantly recognizable logo hastens brand name identification; (3) its pronounced ruggedness "gives the idea of building blocks, like a Stonehenge."

HERTZ LOVES PHOTOCOPY MACHINES, BUT MORE FOR GRAPHIC than economic ends. Rather than directly submitting a photograph to a client, Hertz may scan it through a laser printer, then photocopy the output into a high-contrast third generation. "A

photocopy has an immediacy, as if it's just been imprinted," he says, "whereas a glossy photo can look too finished." And, of course, like everyone else's.

As a variation, Hertz has created a concrete countenance on stationery surfaces by reenlarging one blank sheet of copy paper through several color-photocopy runs. On that background is overprinted-by in-house Macintoshes and laser printers—marketing-support information. All internal transmittals, such as work-flow schedules, requests for vacation, expense vouchers, and shipping, receiving, and invoice forms are laser-printed or photocopied only as needed.

Among the stickers affixed to shipments of promotional materials is one that at first glance appears to be cheaply rendered in only two colors; on a closer look, it can be seen that Hertz had these stickers printed in four colors (which, incidentally, costs plenty). The reason: that's the label he uses to send unsolicited promotions to architects and interior designers, a discriminating audience that'll appreciate the subtle difference. "I had a hard time justifying their cost," Hertz admits, "but I feel it's worthwhile. First impressions are everything. When they get it, they automatically say, 'wow, that company has a design aesthetic; there's a thoroughness, an identity, from the first label all the way through.' "

At Syndesis's offices, no document meets an ignominious end in a waste bucket. After it's been recirculated for printing on the other side, it goes to the shredder, there to be joined by magazines, flyers, and anything else lying around unread. "We get this interesting texture, kind of like confetti," says Hertz admiringly, who forwards the slivers to shipping for reuse as protective packing.

Hertz turned to desktop graphics to compose the set of icons that visually represent Syndesis's five divisions: a Monopoly-like house for architectural applications, a chair for furniture, a cone for retail accessories, a cluster of shapes for contract manufacturing of precast configurations, and a representation of the earth for research and development in waste recycling. The symbols are arrayed on most public and internal communications; they're even debossed, like hieroglyphs, into hulking slabs of Syndecrete posted outside construction sites.

To establish an integrated program of corporate design, any company would obviously be lucky to have an architect/ designer for a CEO. But Hertz seeks outside talent for important components such as the main brochure and the Syndesis logo. "Identity is absolutely worth spending money on," he insists. "If I were a start-up company, I'd put everything into my business card, even if it was all I had."

Address labels printed in four colors, trucks bearing "chiseled-in" logos, photocopied-to-death images, transparency holders treated so there's no stickum to gum up clients' projectors—are such declarations of individuality productive, or are they merely indulgences?

In Hertz's case, they helped reassure one of his earliest clients, Smith & Hawken founder Paul Hawken, of the young and unknown company's professionalism. Hawken happened on an exhibit of architectural materials, was attracted by Syndecrete's looks, and sent for backup material. On receipt of the corrugated-carton collection, he hired its creator not only to convert—an old school building into corporate headquarters for his mail-order business but to install Syndecrete tiles, counters, sinks, and baths—and several vases throughout his own home.