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## Build a goofy shopping cart...

...and the media will build a path to your door. Guest diamond by Joseph Glydon, Citibike.



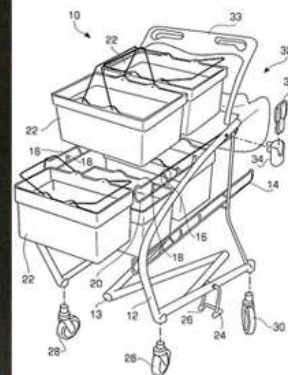


By Joseph Glydon

I wrote the first draft of this column some time ago. I would probably have let it languish in the belly of the computer had a certain late night TV news show not recently re-run the piece in question to re-incense me. The program profiled a Bay Area "industrial design" firm that we shall call Bideo. Any resemblance to a real firm manned by real people who might run heavy on attorneys and light on humor is due to sheer coincidence and a pathetic lack of imagination.

Bideo's guiding philosophy, as [outlined by its gratuitously non-titled founder-person](#) whom we shall call "Mr. Skylight", is that silly people working in a low pressure, non-judgmental environment, are the masters of innovation. Apparently, stiff working under the gun on The Manhattan Project, assorted tasks at Lockheed's Skunk Works, and the Space Program just got lucky despite heavy attitude. Doubtless too, the nature of Edward Teller's and Werner von Braun's humor is too dry to tickle the Bideo chuckle meter.

Bideo, like many of its prosperous South Bay neighbors, commends itself for rigorously cultivating the inborn creativity of its employees. In a related pose, Bideo, in the person of the heavily mustachioed Mr. Skylight, proclaims that the company is terribly proud of its non-hierarchical personnel structuring. Bideo hails itself as a "playful" company with a fully developed sense of social self-consciousness. Bideo's proudest achievement, that of elevating its "corporate culture" to embrace new heights of personal indulgence in the "workplace", appears to be far more important to its founder than service performed for clients, who incidentally must be "trained" to "handle" Bideo's Romper Room



climate. In comparison to stodgy old traditional design firms, Bideo emerges as seductive, self-absorbed, and vain as a teenage mall bunny.

To anchor and lend substance to its piece The Show assigned Bideo the task of building a better grocery store shopping cart. The half-hour program documented Bideo's creative design process from the introduction of the task to the production of a handbuilt prototype. The entire job took them a week, which, as a Bideo "spokesperson" mentioned, is considerably quicker than they move when billing by the hour.

The Bideo crew, in holistic defiance of hidebound design group convention, included the likes of a psychologist, a biologist, a masseuse, and someone who could talk with the plants. There were a lot of short pants and Hawaiian shirts in evidence. In the place of drafting boards were round-edged Formica tables equipped with day-glow Slinkys, colorful plastic tubes that held the shape the "designers" imposed upon them, and other CPSC [Consumer Product Safety Commission] approved pre-school toys. "We don't think work should be work," an "associate" quipped, proud of his wit.



On-camera brainstorming sessions showcased the sort of cloyingly non-sectarian teamwork that I associate with the "new age" communal living of a bygone era. Not being a team player myself, such smiley egalitarianism gives me the creeps. Everybody at Bideo was in a constant fit of good-natured, affirmative openness. Just one big happy family of humble creative geniuses. They treated one another's unworkable ideas like the delicate blossoms of gifted visionary minds, recalling the mandatory deference that progressive day school teachers must display for the most harebrained ravings of their well-born charges. If any member of the "Team" transgressed and made an unflattering remark about another member's idea, an "Adult" (their term, not mine) rang a bell to non-verbally curtail any descent into festering negativity.

And what sort of innovative shopping cart did such a supportive and nurturing environment produce? The I-Mac of shopping carts: an underbuilt rolling rack for plastic hand baskets with attached scanner and luxury accommodations for a single child. ("The Children! The Children! What about the Children!") Incidentally, one of the design parameters for the Brave New Shopping Cart was to make it all but worthless to the homeless.

Apparently Bideo's humanism doesn't embrace adults with incomes under \$50K. Bideo's creation would probably accommodate the food hauling needs of urban singles strolling through Bon Appetit in search of Gorgonzola and Arugula. More typically suburban encounters with fifty pound bags of dog food and Chevy Blazers would likely leave this hothouse engineering exercise a crippled tangle of metal tubing. [Shopping carts, like bicycles, adhere to one basic form](#) because the classic, fully matured designs have best stood the test of the real world. Unlike bicycles, shopping carts are units of fleet purchase by pragmatic business folk, a situation that tempers any allure spiffy form may enjoy over long term function. All the pretentious fresh thinking Stanford's prodigal sons and daughters can muster will never displace solid, conscientious engineering.



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Bideo's greatest achievement, Mr. Skylight proudly informs us, the shimmering touchstone of its creative potency, is a flexible-handled toothbrush.



I am reminded of what Orson Welles' Harry Lime said in *The Third Man*: "In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci,

and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love and five-hundred years of democracy and peace. And what did they produce? The cuckoo clock."

That pretty much sums up my understanding of the gulf that separates serious innovation from sandbox time; novelty from design.

Motorcycling is fortunate not to be burdened with a glut of novelty mongers capable of promoting the notion that a limp toothbrush handle is a major step forward for mankind. (Despite the perils, I have come to revel in the surgical precision of a stiff handle since I've mastered the skills necessary to avoid most serious toothbrush-inflicted injuries.) In motorcycling, we have men like David Robb of BMW, Martin Manchester at Honda, Pierre Terblanche at Ducati, and our old friend Willie the "G-meister" marshaling Harley-Davidson. These are men who still take their jobs seriously. Men dedicated to the notion that improving the product takes precedence over cultivating a sunny, feelgood, corporate culture.

The names of great designers cascade through our century: Turner, Taglioni, Honda, and Hopwood. Men who took a hard look at what was possible and may, on occasion, have been guilty of insensitivity toward their employees' feelings. Men, not boys, who concentrated on building competent motorcycles rather than obsessing about the comfy, colorful, flesh-friendly surfaces. They assumed that those who bought their machines might well employ them urgently. Dilettante engineering is not welcome when lives are at stake. The dialogue between motorcycle designer and rider remains to this day adult and, despite the growing presence of women, basically masculine in timbre. This legacy endures in the tone of motorcycle advertising: "Take this, 'O my Brother, and whup their shiny asses."

There is a bond of trust that goes with the offering of potentially lethal devices, be they motorcycles, guns, or chainsaws. Among responsible individuals who deal in hardware, there is an implied understanding that mature human beings may be trusted with sharp objects. In our media-mentored consumer world, and as Bideo's success serves to confirm, bright colors, pre-school levels of safety, and gee-whiz novelty are far more marketable than are devices edged to carve hefty chunks of experience from life on this planet.

As we await word that yet another celebrity has wielded a reproductive organ, a kitchen knife, or a tobacco product in a newsworthy fashion, we and the after hours media may have to content ourselves with pondering some of life's less lurid, but perhaps more overarching, moral questions. Quilted toilet paper and fail-safe toothbrushes versus scintillating motorcycles and properly lit cigars; whether the point is to take a large bite out of life or to strenuously prevent it from abrading sensitive skin.

And whether or not news can be compelling if it lacks abraded skin.



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