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Design to Grow

How Coca-Cola Learned to Combine Scale & Agility (and How You Can Too)

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

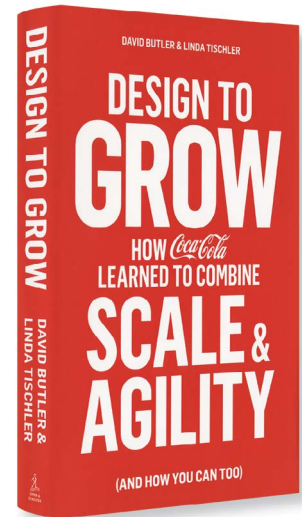
In today's ever-changing marketplace, every company is at risk of having a "Kodak Moment"— watching its industry and the competitive advantages it has developed over years, even decades, vanish overnight. The reason? An inability to adapt quickly to new business realities. Established companies are at risk, but it's no easier being an agile startup, because most of those fail due to their inability to scale. Tomorrow's business winners — regardless of size or industry — will be the ones that know how to combine scale with agility.

In *Design to Grow*, a Coca-Cola senior executive shares both the successes and failures of one of the world's largest companies as it learns to use design to be both agile and big. In this rare and unprecedented behind-the-scenes look, David Butler and *Fast Company* senior editor Linda Tischler use plain language and easy-to-understand case studies to show how this works at Coca-Cola — and how other companies can use the same approach to grow their business.

Design to Grow is a must-read for managers inside large corporations as well as entrepreneurs just getting started.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Key differences between scale and agility.
- What it means to design on purpose.
- The three realities underlying the new normal of today's marketplace.
- The power of modular design for creating agility.
- How open systems can help you create a leaner organization.



by David Butler and
Linda Tischler

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: DESIGN TO GROW

by David Butler and Linda Tischler

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PART I: DESIGNING FOR SCALE

It's not enough to be big: At its peak, Blockbuster had about 9,000 retail stores across the United States. It had the scale but not the agility to remain relevant. And, while every founder dreams of creating the next Twitter or Instagram, 90 percent of companies won't live to see year two. While they're all designed to be agile, most of them struggle with scale. Every company needs both scale and agility to win.

If you're working for a startup, you *get* agility. You're iterating your product/market fit daily and pivoting when necessary, just to stay alive. But the thing that keeps you up at night is *scale* — stabilizing your business model so that you can move to the next stage and become a company. This requires more funding, more staff, more customers, more of everything.

If you're working for an established company, you *get* scale. You're successful because you know how to leverage scale with a high degree of effectiveness and efficiency. Managing your scale is always a concern, but what keeps you up at night is mainly agility — how to meet expectations this quarter but also create the speed and flexibility your company needs to drive innovation and create the culture you need to remain relevant to the next generation.

What if there were something that you — your startup, your team, your function, your division — could use to create the kind of scale and agility you need to win? Design can create both scale and agility.

Coca-Cola and Design

When you think of Coca-Cola and design, your mind probably goes immediately to the company's most iconic

brand — Coca-Cola — with its familiar color, distinctive logo and iconic packaging. While logo and colors are important, it's the stuff you can't see, the stuff that's invisible, that's often doing the heavy lifting.

For example, when Coca-Cola designs a new package, its goal is to actually solve business problems, not simply to pick colors, specify materials or determine its shape and size. All those things are important, but the new package must also connect to its supply-chain strategy, help the company meet its sustainability goals, work within the constraints of its bottling and distribution system, fit well with its retail customers' business plans and, of course, meet the needs of its consumers. When all these things connect, the company is using design strategically to help it grow.

Originally, Coca-Cola used design to simplify, standardize and integrate its business, which made it much easier to drive its growth strategy. That's essentially how the Coca-Cola company grew from a little startup in 1886 to a company valued at over \$120 billion in 2001. By 2002, the same design strategy would no longer work for a product portfolio that ranged from sparkling beverages to coffee drinks to dozens of juices. Coca-Cola needed an approach that would help it to leverage its scale but also help create more flexibility and adaptability across its business.

The company's design revolution had to start with Coca-Cola. An idea was mapped out called "designing on purpose." Designing on purpose refers to design that is strategic, with a clear connection to our growth strategy; design that creates scale and agility — across markets and media; and design that inspires people. Designing on purpose should ultimately be design that leads culture.



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Over time, Coca-Cola introduced a systems-based approach to design. This would give both the consistency that was needed to design at scale and the agility they were lacking to quickly adapt to a rapidly changing world. It was a journey based on learning by doing.

They began with an area that most people could easily understand — branding and communications. They then moved to packaging and equipment. Then, they tackled retail experiences. Finally, they expanded the approach deeper into the operations of the business, into the distribution system and supply chain.

However, what really made the difference was opening up design to everyone, every function and every geography. The goal was to change how everyone designed — to make everyone a designer using a common approach — no matter what his or her title was.

In the past decade, Coca-Cola has added 10 billion-dollar brands to its portfolio and doubled its stock price. It is now on a trajectory to double the size of its business by 2020, essentially replicating in the space of a decade what took the company 100 years to build. Design isn't the only factor that's created this kind of growth, but it is an important one. ●

Design

Everything you see is designed by somebody. That coffee mug you're holding, or the plastic cup holding your airline O.J., the lamp beside the chair, the pattern of the fabric on the seat. In fact we're all designers — we all design things like meetings, deals, plans for the weekend, the menu for dinner. It's just that each of us is better at designing some things than others. The challenge, for all of us, is to design better — to get the most value out of the way we design.

Design is about intentionally connecting things to solve problems. Design is only good if it solves a problem. Good design makes something easier to read, easier to understand, easier to use. If you want to run a company successfully, you have to solve problems for your firm, your customers or your stakeholders. As a business, you may use art to stimulate. But you need design to solve problems.

Once you understand that we're all designers and the difference between good and bad design, we also need to understand how design relates to the stuff that we can't see. To really understand the value of design, you have to begin to understand how the visible and the invisible elements connect.

Another way to think about how visible and invisible elements connect is to think about them as a system. A system is a set of elements and behaviors that connect to do one thing.

If you're in business, your goal is to make sure the visible stuff (your products, communications, employees, etc.) connects to the invisible stuff (partnerships, processes, culture) in a way that helps your company succeed. If they don't connect in the right way, this can actually hinder growth. And this is how design becomes *strategic* — the way you design, or the way you connect the visible with the invisible can actually enable growth or prevent it.

Anyone can learn how to connect things in a way that makes them less complicated, simpler and easier to do. Connecting can apply both to very tangible things like machines to abstract things like supply chains, organization charts and customer relationships. When you design the solution as a system, you can begin to solve many connected problems across your business.

Designing for the Why

The Golden Circle is a model that Simon Sinek, researcher, author and educator, first introduced in his book, *Start With Why*. Sinek uses a simple model — three concentric circles — to discuss the interdependencies between the what, how and why great people and companies succeed. Great leaders, companies or individuals “think, act and communicate” and “inspire action” by starting with the Why. They focus on their purpose first — why they do what they do — not how they do it or what they make.

Most companies focus on what they design. But companies that get the full value out of design start with why they design and then shape how they design — their process — around their purpose.

Ask yourself these three questions:

- 1. Is design aligned with your growth strategy?** Start with the Why — what's the purpose driving how you design in your organization? Is your growth strategy more about growing through scale or agility?
- 2. Then move to the how — what's your design process?** Have you codified how your organization designs? Does it align with your growth strategy — your Why?
- 3. Do your products (or services) enable your Why?** Does everything connect to enable your purpose? Does the invisible connect with the visible? When you look at your products or services — are all of the elements and behaviors connected to drive the Why? ●

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Scale

Scale is the ability to increase in quantity without reducing quality or profit. All companies struggle with scale on some dimension. Every company is trying to expand to the next level, however they may define it, but startups have an especially hard time. All startups are temporary. They only exist to find a viable business model.

These are the questions startups need to answer if they are to become viable companies:

- How can we create a product that can scale up and down? As sales grow, patterns begin to develop. Your challenge is to figure out how to make more stuff when your customers need it and less when they don't.
- How can we create a business model that will scale? Your goal is to figure out how to do more for the same cost.

Scale is all about flawless execution — to create or leverage scale, everything must be designed to make it as easy as possible to execute with precision. To do this, you must eliminate all ambiguity, excess and waste. To achieve scale, everything must be simplified and standardized to integrate with the least amount of friction.

You must understand the critical details that make your product unique — the specific things people love — and then codify them so that they remain fixed over time and across geographies. Once you do this, it's time to standardize as much as possible. Standardization helps a company plan, resource, predict and, ultimately, grow consistently. Everyone moves in the same direction. That creates massive efficiency. Standards create a common language and clear direction.

Scaling Coca-Cola

There are seven different systems the company has used to scale Coca-Cola. Each of them was designed for scale and contributed to helping the company reach the vision to be “within arm's reach of desire.”

1. The Formula. Very little has changed in the Coca-Cola pattern since it was launched over 100 years ago. The formula, locked in a vault in Atlanta, is still the basis of the product. That has made it much easier for the company to scale into so many markets.

2. The Spencerian Script. The company's first accountant thought using a cursive form of the brand name would differentiate Coca-Cola from other brands. The company standardized the logo in 1923, and it's exactly the same today, 90 years later. It is one of the most recognizable logos in the world.

3. The Contour Bottle. By 1920, the contour bottle, as it's been called, had become the company's most celebrated artifact. That bottle has become one of the most recognized objects of the 20th century, available in more than 200 countries.

4. Thirty-Six Degrees. Coca-Cola was designed to be consumed at 36 degrees Fahrenheit. The ice-cold language the company used on its various pieces of point-of-sale communication was a subtle reminder that the company expected retailers to always serve Coca-Cola at no more than 40 degrees.

5. The Nickel Price. For 70 years, from 1886 to after World War II, a bottle of Coca-Cola cost a nickel. The nickel price was a part of a very innovative form of brand building. Keeping the price fixed for seven decades greatly simplified the business and was critical in helping Coca-Cola scale globally.

6. Brand Marketing. By 1895, everywhere an ad for Coca-Cola appeared, it had the same four words: “Drink Coca-Cola. Delicious and refreshing.” By 1908, some 2.5 million square feet of American building facades were advertising the delicious and refreshing properties of Coca-Cola. Designing for standardization helped scale the brand and the company on a national level.

7. The Franchise Business Model. The genesis of the company's franchise business model was an interdependent partnership between The Coca-Cola Company and more than 250 independent bottling companies around the world. This model has allowed the company to leverage global brands but remain very local. The Coca-Cola Company isn't one giant company; it's a system of small companies.

In 2001, the company's management decided that it would become a total beverage company. This changed everything. Simultaneously, the environment in which Coca-Cola was doing business was also changing, becoming more challenging and complex.

If the company wanted to build the next set of billion-dollar brands — in juice, in coffee, in water — it needed to figure out how to combine its expertise in designing for scale with a new aptitude: designing for agility. ●

Complexity

Our world is more complex than ever. This complexity is making it harder for every business to grow. What used to be called “getting back to basics” doesn't always work. Marketers must now be experts in *social listening*. Listening and reacting quickly is everything. Your management

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team used to worry about taking costs out of your supply chain and meeting monthly sales targets. They still have to do that, but they also worry about big societal problems.

Everyone Needs Agility

Let's take a look at three new realities that create more complexity for everyone — from the startup that launched yesterday to the century-old multinational.

Reality #1: We are surrounded by wicked problems. Wicked problems are highly complex — they have many connected issues with no single solution. Examples include political upheaval, economic turmoil and natural disasters. Everyone is affected by wicked problems: people, governments and companies. However, for a company, some wicked problems not only disrupt business but can fundamentally change the industry, significantly challenging long-term goals and short-term results.

One of the most global wicked problems that affects Coca-Cola's business and the communities in which it operates is water. There's the issue of scarcity, of quality, of pricing, of policy, of flooding, of climate change and of infrastructure, to name just a few.

In 2010, the company outlined a goal to be *water-neutral* by 2020 — to safely return to nature and to communities an amount of water equivalent to that which it uses in all its beverages and production. To date, Coca-Cola has close to 500 water projects in development around the world.

Reality #2: We live in an After-Internet world. Today's world is open sourced, collaborative, dynamic, two way, co-created, always on, constantly evolving, shifting, linked, fluid and changing every second of the day. According to Internet visionary Joi Ito, one of the biggest disruptors for established business is that the cost of innovation, collaboration and distribution has decreased significantly. That means that big companies no longer have a monopoly because of their capital resources, factories or networks.

A couple of guys with a big idea in Bangalore can go to Startup Weekend for \$100, rent a desk in a coworking space for \$500 per month, buy some space in Amazon's cloud, and possibly disrupt companies that have huge assets and have been around for decades. This is what an After-Internet world looks like. What's more, young entrepreneurs don't need the permission of an organization to act on their ideas.

Reality #3: Winning is about creating shared value. Companies must think much more holistically about value creation beyond simply doing the responsible thing in the geographies in which they do business. Growth must be based on a shared understanding of the goals of

everyone involved. Truly sustainable companies create not only economic value but also value for the communities in which they operate. Michael Porter and Mark Kramer call this shared value.

You have to create value in all areas of a company's activities to win — for you and for your suppliers, your customers, your consumers, your community. ●

PART II: DESIGNING FOR AGILITY

Only a few brands make it to the billion-dollar status — a special club of brands that have a market value of at least 1 billion dollars. While it's getting easier than ever to create a brand of this magnitude, it's getting harder than ever to keep one.

Billion-dollar brands only stay that way by finding new ways to create competitive advantage and relevance. Resting on your laurels in today's world is an open invitation for disruption. Unless companies, especially big, established companies, can actually embrace complexity by being more agile, they put their billion-dollar brands at risk.

Startups like Airbnb, Square and Uber started very lean — with little to no cash — and focused on a big unmet need and their business model from day one. By the time they reached billion-dollar status, they had devised and validated a repeatable business model that could challenge the old guard and even disrupt entire industries. The way startups design everything, from their products to their staff, partnerships and revenue model, enables agility.

If big companies, with their huge assets and global scale, can adopt new entrepreneurial behaviors — like the agility of a startup — they can actually lead in this new era. ●

Smarter

Like a startup, in many cases, a company doesn't fully know what consumers want or how a market may evolve; no one does. The only thing it knows is that things will change, and it needs a way to change with the market. The way it designs must help it learn and adapt.

One example that perfectly encapsulates how we need to think about design in fluid situations is Legos. Think about it. All the Lego bricks work together to help you make whatever you want to make — a wall, a house, a bridge, a starship.

And the great thing is that they are designed so that it's super easy for a child to make something great. You don't have to know anything about physics or architecture or en-

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gineering to create a masterpiece. Plus, they're easy to use right out of the box. You don't need a manual to tell you how they work. They come in just enough different colors and sizes to bring an idea to life, simply and intuitively.

Integrated systems work best when you want to scale, but modular systems work best if you want to create agility. Like Legos, each element in a modular system is designed to be interchangeable and connect with other interchangeable elements in many different ways. This difference may sound small, but it is actually quite big.

Modular systems, like Legos, allow you to learn by doing. They give you options. They let you learn and adapt on the fly. When you were a kid playing with Legos, if you didn't like how your house or castle or airplane was looking, it was quite easy to change it. In this massively volatile world, this is how we need to learn to design our products.

More is More

Design must connect to a company's growth strategy. And for most companies, growth is all about agility. For agility, less is actually *not* more — in fact, *more* is *more*. To adapt, we need more elements, more options, not fewer. We must use design to adapt — to figure out what works — to move quickly in rapidly changing conditions.

The Coca-Cola Company is acutely aware of this. For example, most of what the company sells tastes better when it's cold. One of the biggest challenges for the company, especially in developing countries, is simply to keep Coke cold — not perfectly cold, just cold.

But most people in China have never even had a Coke or know that it tastes better when chilled. In fact, lots of people have never even heard of drinking a cold beverage. And since everything is new, there are no standards, no patterns, no formats for anything. That's a problem if the perfect way to enjoy your product is for it to be frosty.

The company doesn't need one standardized cooler in China; it needs an adaptive system that can respond to very different and changing conditions. It needs little ones, medium ones and big ones. It needs low-cost ones and premium ones. It needs coolers that are easy to service and ones that can essentially service themselves. It needs coolers that can manage different types of electricity.

It needs coolers that it can brand Coca-Cola, Sprite, Minute Maid or VitaminWater, depending on what the shopkeeper wants to feature. The bottom line is, the company doesn't need one perfect cooler. It needs a box of Legos — an adaptive system it can use to design different kinds of coolers that can flex to different conditions. This approach itself is infinitely flexible. The company has used

it to design everything from musical signatures to coolers, to its distribution systems.

These days, companies must learn how to continuously disrupt themselves, or someone else will. It only happens by design. The way you design your products, your relationships, your operations and your organization can help you learn and adapt. Most of the issues that companies face today are not only complicated but connected. However, any company can design for the agility that it needs to fail fast, adapt to constantly changing conditions and remain relevant.

The fundamental difference in designing for agility is that you need to think about many solutions to many problems simultaneously. This goes against our natural inclination to think that there's one right answer, one elegant solution, which will adapt to all situations.

Understanding the need for flexibility, allowing for continuous iteration — being constantly open to better ideas or solutions as they present themselves — is a powerful way by which to stay ahead of the game and keep your business viable and ahead of the competition. ●

Faster

There are two things that make Legos modular. First of all, Legos have *fixed* and *flexible* elements. Among the fixed elements are color and shape. Their material — plastic — is also fixed. This helps Lego manage a global supply chain and maintain consistency and quality across its manufacturing and fulfillment processes.

In addition, all Legos connect in the same way, with little round studs on top that snap into holes on another brick's bottom. They're super easy. This is what makes the whole system of bricks modular — each brick, no matter what size or color, connects with the other ones quickly.

Designing this way, with both fixed and flexible elements, has created agility for Lego. The company is able to easily create, delete or combine various elements to introduce new sets into the marketplace based on changing consumer behavior.

What if you could design your products, your factories, your supply chain, your marketing campaigns and even your strategies to be modular systems? Imagine that you could add a new feature or quickly swap a component or bolt on a new acquisition as quickly as you used to add a few bricks to your Lego house when you were a kid. That's the power of designing this way as a company.

Coca-Cola used this approach to design a new modular system for one of its fastest growing categories: juice.

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Global Juice Visual Identity System

A brand's visual identity system has to do two things. First, it must translate the brand's emotional connection to people. Second, it must connect with the product's rational attributes, creating a unique identity for the brand. Then, art directors, designers and brand managers can use the visual identity system to brand everything from packaging to advertising to the retail experience.

The company needed a visual identity system (VIS) that could provide a common look and feel across its juice portfolio. To do that, it needed a modular system that would give it the flexibility and speed it needed to add (or delete) various brands and products as it tried to capture maximum share of the juice market.

They needed a solution that could adapt from Beijing to Buenos Aires.

From their research, they knew that the packaging needed to reflect the actual fruit inside with visceral resonance. Then it hit them: "The one core truth around Coca-Cola's juice business is that the company is in it from grove to glass," said Coca-Cola design director Tom Farrell. "It owns the farms. It partners with the growers. It doesn't buy juice on the open market. So this notion that it's connected to the land is fundamental." How do you translate that into a brand's identity? What does "from grove to glass" look like?

They finally landed on a very deliberate presentation of the fruit. They knew they were on to something when one person in the test group, looking at the cartons lined up next to each other in the refrigerator case, said, "Oh, it looks like the produce aisle."

Local marketers amplify the pieces that resonate in their regions, while the design's DNA remains recognizable worldwide. Take the Minute Maid logo, with its black rectangle, white text and green horizon line that appears above. That green line acts as a metaphor for the company's deep connection to the land, and it stays the same across all packages.

The Global Juice Visual Identity System that was created had three parts: the brand identity elements (fixed and flexible), the information architecture (the logic) and the standards (the rules) for how everything connected to one another. Together, they created a consistent, or common, look and feel across the portfolio. And because they had designed a modular system, the company could pivot faster than before.

Minimum Viable Product

There's a lot we can all learn from how startups devel-

op products. When companies like Twitter, Foursquare or Evernote were startups, they first began designing features or products by learning what end users really wanted or needed, which was often very different from what the developers thought they wanted.

The only way to do this is to get a very rough version to market — in front of actual users — as quickly as possible. The process for doing this is often called hack, release, repeat. The goal is to design a *minimum viable product*, a product that's just good enough to get in front of users — real people, often early adopters — who can use the product and give feedback on what's working and what isn't, as quickly as possible. Then developers go back and hack, or tear their product apart, to make it better, stronger or more intuitive to the user. The more users like it, the more users. The more users, the faster the startup can get to scale.

Then, Do It Faster

In short: Speed is the critical differentiator in a world driven by relentless change and daunting unpredictability. Every company wants to be able to get its products out faster and better than its competitors. Here's the rub: Could you be both faster and better at the same time?

The key to success is learning by doing. Constant iteration, a willingness to test ideas with real customers and gauge their responses, then pivot if they're not working, is critical. Rather than betting the ranch on a big idea, small tests can help a team determine if an idea has the legs for a bigger rollout.

Using design to learn by doing — using minimum viable products to learn as fast as possible — actually reduces risk and the fear of failure for everyone. You don't have to be a startup to move as fast as a startup, but it never happens by chance — only by design. ●

Leaner

Design can actually make a company leaner: You can design to use fewer people, less time and less money to get better results.

Open, Not Closed

Modular systems have fixed and flexible elements. But there is a third aspect: Modular systems are designed to be open. This openness makes it easier for everyone to take part in the design process, to contribute new ideas, elements and behaviors into the system. Open systems allow others to play in your sandbox.

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Why is this important? Modular systems enable more collaboration and create much more diversity. Opening up and letting others in allows the system to develop in ways it never could by remaining closed. Crowd-sourcing, crowd-funding, coworking and open-source development are all based on this kind of approach to design.

While it may seem counterintuitive, opening up, sharing and allowing others to codesign, develop and build your products actually makes you leaner. When a company opens up, it can tap into the creativity, resources and passion outside its own team, group, function or company, often for free.

When you're designing an open system, the goal is to enable sharing. With an open system, if you can get your whole company to join in, the very act of participation creates a lot of buzz and excitement, since everybody feels as though he or she is contributing to the company's success.

Emergence

Emergence is when individual elements interact or work together to create something new, something that couldn't be created if each element acted alone. The word may be unfamiliar, but we've all seen emergence in action.

In the startup community, a good example of emergence is Kickstarter. In November 2010, Scott Wilson, a Chicago designer, posted his idea — a watch that grafted an iPod Nano onto an aluminum case — on the popular funding platform for creative projects. Within a week, he had raised \$400,000 from 5,000 backers. Within a month, he had amassed a war chest of \$1 million from 13,500 people in 50 countries. Kickstarter had enabled Wilson's project to emerge.

Emergence relies on self-organization. To create emergence, you have to design in a way that creates order between diverse elements so lots of people can share lots of stuff. The order must be spontaneous and decentralized, not directed or controlled by anyone. It must come from within the system and feel intuitive to everyone involved.

Focus

To win, you have to focus. Without focus, it's easy to waste resources, like time, money and people.

There is a great tool that startups use to stay focused on what really counts — it's called the "One Metric That Matters." As the name implies, it's the one indicator of real progress. At any given time, you'll be trying to answer a hundred different questions and juggling a million things. You need to identify the riskiest areas of your business as

quickly as possible, and that's where the most important question lies. When you know what the right question is, you'll know what metric to track in order to answer that question. That's the OMTM (One Metric That Matters).

One of the OMTMs Coca-Cola has created is around the packaging it uses in its products. In 2009, the company set a goal of sourcing 25 percent of their PET plastic for packaging from recycled and renewable materials by 2015. This easy-to-remember (but hard to do) metric has created great focus for employees. It's easy to understand, actionable and fundamental to reaching the company's sustainability commitments.

A more recent goal is to use PlantBottle Packaging in 100 percent of its PET packaging by 2020. PlantBottle is not only the name it uses for the material but is actually another great example of a very open modular system.

"The majority of our products are produced locally," says Scott Vitters, head of Coca-Cola's global PlantBottle Packaging program. "We're not shipping products all over the world. Because of that local production, we can actually shift the type of packaging we use for local markets."

When you design for agility and let others play in your sandbox, everybody wins. ●

Epilogue

In his book, *Massive Change*, designer Bruce Mau said, "It's not about the world of design; it's about the design of the world."

As the world becomes more complex, we all have the opportunity to use design to make our world — our families, our communities, our companies, our cities, our countries — better, more agile and adaptable to change, if we design on purpose. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Design to Grow*, you'll also like:

1. ***Change By Design* by Tim Brown.** Brown introduces the idea of design thinking, the collaborative process by which the designer's sensibilities and methods are employed to match people's needs with what is technically feasible and a viable business strategy.
2. ***Moments of Impact* by Lisa Kay Solomon, Chris Ertel.** The authors provide a creative process by which leaders can make good strategic choices while engaging more people with different perspectives more effectively.
3. ***A Team of Leaders* by Stewart Liff, Paul Gustavson.** By improving the core design components — the systems, processes, knowledge, management and visual management — teams will take responsibility for delivering better results.