

Design Notes Episode 08 - Nathan Martin

Google Design Podcast Transcript

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- Liam Spradlin: Design Notes is a show from Google Design about creative work and what it teaches us. Each episode we'll talk with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice.
- Aaron Lammer: Hello and welcome to Design Notes. This is a very special episode. I'm your guest host, Aaron. Uh, I taped these interviews at the Span 17 Conference in Pittsburgh this fall. Um, this one is with a Pittsburgh local, Nathan, uh, who runs an innovation studio called Deeplocal. What is an innovation studio, I asked him. Uh, he told me they invent things. And, uh, some of those inventions are ads. Some of them are marketing. Some of them are in a nebulous area that I can't really explain
- Nathan Martin: "That is very much like a band. It is punk rock. You know, a guitarist breaks a string and steps to the side. Someone else picks up, you just keep playing. You don't stop."
- Aaron: He's done stints in robotics and hacking, art, music, uh, now sort of experiential marketing and product invention. But he says that he remains very much the same person, uh, he started off as.
- Nathan: "I think people stay, for the most part, who they were when they were seven years old. I think I'm still in my core the same person I was even when I was that ... Seven years old and I was the punk rocker and what I am right now."
- Aaron: Design Notes is put out by Google Design. You can learn more at design.google/podcast. That's design.google, there's nothing after the google. That is the domain. Slash podcast. Uh, here he is, Nathan. Uh, welcome, Nathan.
- Nathan: Thanks.
- Aaron: You are the founder, the proprietor of Deeplocal. Uh, what do you call Deeplocal? It's a studio?

Nathan: I call us innovation studio.

Aaron: Innovation studio?

Nathan: There's not really a good word to describe us so it works.

Aaron: Okay. So what is an innovation studio? (laughs)

Nathan: First, we invent things. Uh, things that have never been seen before. Uh, we do it mostly in marketing but we also work a little bit on the product side for our clients. We are ultimately a service company. So, um, a list of our inventions and the things that we build are for clients like Google.

Aaron: Well I-let's talk about a project cause that'll help ...

Nathan: Yeah ...

Aaron: Ground us.

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: So you did this project with balloons. This is unfortunately one that, uh, does not go well with audio ...

Nathan: (laughs)

Aaron: A picture would help sell this better ...

Nathan: Yeah ...

Aaron: But describe the project.

Nathan: Selfiebration. It's always good to start so, um, a lot of our work is really marketing. And what I mean by that is, and I'll describe that project, but it means that we're trying to put things into the world that are exciting and are authentic stories that people get excited about and talk about. So our clients tend to be Fortune 50 brands that want to tell a story about innovation or, you know, just feel like they're in touch with cultural trends, as well. So we come up with these ideas and often technology is just a tool that we use, uh, to kind of create experiences that are remarkable, that people are going to take notice of, talk about and share.

So for Old Navy, our retail client, we were working on a celebration of, I think it was, their 20th birthday. Uh, and they wanted to create something that briefed us. The challenge was create something that celebrates our audience, not us. So we came with, up this idea, a marketing campaign called Selfiebration ...

Aaron: That's a, that's a pretty wide open way ...

Nathan: We tend to get really wide open ...

Aaron: Yeah.

Nathan: I mean we are the company that gets the wide open briefs ...

Aaron: Yeah.

Nathan: Like make us feel innovative globally.

Aaron: Yeah.

Nathan: So with, um, Selfiebration, what it really was, well there is a machine component, but the marketing component was what if we kind of allowed people that already had, kind of a selfie trend was in full force, this was a few years back, and we allowed people to kind of create larger than life selfies. And how would we do that in a way that was remarkable?

So, um, we came up with a display apparatus that we actually hold a patent on now that uses balloons as if they were pixels. So almost like halftone images. Have you ever seen them? With large and small dots to help create a visual image. We do that but on a really large scale. So we created a modular system, basically a grid of balloons. Each balloon, the air inflation of it, is controlled, uh, by a hy-hydraulic system, um, so that we can kind of treat them as if they were pixels, making them bigger or smaller in-in real time. What it all-allows to do for a user is the user would send in a picture and hashtag Selfiebration, we would pull those images down, moderate them to make sure they weren't profane and then we would render their image out in near real time, ou-out of balloons in a matter of seconds, capture a video from that and then share back with them an animated gif of their image.

We installed this as a live event in Times Square in New York for a few days and then, uh, in City Walk Los Angeles for a few days. It's always connected socially. A lot of the stuff we do in the physical world has some

social connections so that a certain number of people can see it in the real world but we're really doing it for that secondary audience, which is almost our primary audience, which are people who live online, who can't see it in the real world but can see the manifestation of it through video or through documentation or remote participation.

Aaron: So I think people listening to this will be familiar with the, um, tech, the digital side of that which is like ... Okay, photo comes in, you moderate it, it goes off to a server and then it comes up ...

Nathan: Comes in ...

Aaron: Getting to the Raspberry Pi ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: That's on the back of it, I can wrap my head around.

Nathan: (laughs)

Aaron: But when you've got to do the balloon part ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: Where do you get a balloon engineer?

Nathan: Well, that's the fun, that's sometimes, um, that's the most fun part of our job. It's because, yes, our staff, you know we're about 60 people and half those staff comes from different engineering backgrounds, very diverse backgrounds, as well, but robotics, mechanical, electrical ...

Aaron: Yeah.

Nathan: Software combined with industrial designers. All that kind of stuff happening. But then there is those things happening outside like you're talking about. Like, okay, we need to create balloons. If you think about balloons, interesting challenge because, uh, latex isn't designed to be inflated and deflated, inflated and deflated. There's, the physics of latex just doesn't allow it to do exactly what we want it to do.

Aaron: It's kind of designed to pop.

Nathan: Yeah. Exactly.

Aaron: (laughs)

Nathan: You inflate once and that's it.

Aaron: Yeah.

Nathan: And you remember they get more stretched out over time. So you can either like correct for that in software and try to figure out, well what is the degradation over time and all that crazy stuff.

Um, we ended up going to, uh, we found one of two balloon manufacturers in the US. I think this one was based in Ohio. Um, they have a lead chemist, a chemical engineer, who works on the materials. Um, we worked with them to devise a coating based on our needs. So their engineer devised a coating, um, that provided more UV protection since we were going to do this outdoor and that would also degrade the material. Uh, and then essentially balloons are made, you learn all these interesting things along the way, balloons are made by dipping. They have these forms that dip in latex. They come up, it's why they have a little kind of tip at the bottom of them. So we essentially double dipped balloons. We made them so thick that you couldn't blow them up with your mouth, just not possible so machine would have to do it. But it allowed them to last for the 24 hours we needed them to last with, like, very minimal degradation. So that's, that's what we did.

Aaron: And then you also, I assume, had to figure out a way how to blow up that double thick balloon.

Nathan: Yeah, yeah.

Aaron: Seems like another challenge that I don't know who you would hire for.

Nathan: And, and those are the problems that excite the engineers that work at Deeplocal because once you kind of figure out the idea, which is pretty difficult to get there. But once we get to an idea, our client gets excited about it and they buy into the, the concept that yeah, this is going to get excite, people are going to talk about this, it sounds good. We do it all. So we're developing the launch strategy, the partnership, all the marketing side of it. But then there's all the engineering challenges, as well. And for the most part, our clients just assume we can figure it out. And we do that, too. We assume we can figure it out.

Aaron: Yeah.

Nathan: As long as I have figure-it-out people, um, that are excited by that and problem-solvers then, uh, then we will.

Aaron: The kind of, um, marketing you're describing, which I'll call like loosely experiential marketing ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: It can feel gimmicky ...

Nathan: Sure.

Aaron: And stunts and part of what really unified a lot of the projects and why I find a lot of stuff that you do at Deeplocal fascinating is it feels like it could fail.

Nathan: Mm-hmm (affirmative)- Oh, yeah.

Aaron: And that live wire element of the possibility of failure can kind of elevate it to a more art-like state.

Nathan: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Aaron: Um, that's a quality I identify with. Art I like ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: Is like, you know, when you go see a band play live, they could fail. You're not listening to a recording, you're listening to people who are either going to succeed or fail. So how do you look at failure ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: Or at least the specter of failure at Deeplocal?

Nathan: Well, first, I love that observation. I actually haven't had anyone, uh, give me that observation before and it's, it's awesome. Yeah, I think about, we think a lot about the stuff that we do. It is all kind of, uh, on that edge, um, because it's, it's, we have a fixed budget, fixed timeline, and the thing I always tell the engineers we have is we don't have the chance to go back and say I need another week.

Aaron: Right.

Nathan: Or I'm a little behind that deadline. And, and you think about a lot of our clients that do employ engineers, they, those deadlines often get pushed. Our deadline never gets pushed. So what that means is, you have to have an extreme ability to adapt your problem solving along the way because we're going to hit unknowns. We, we never know everything when we start. We know pieces of like, yes we think based on past experiences this is how it's going to work. We think that we can figure this out. But along the way, there's going to be variables. It may be a variable cost buy, um, hey that LED that we need 16,000 of is discontinued and there's only 12,000 and we better figure out what we're going to do. You know, or it could be a, be about sourcing or it could be about just technical challenge where something doesn't behave the way we thought it would behave. Or the user experience isn't good.

So you have to course correct, like every, you-you're kind of like constantly solving problems. I think about failure a lot. Like, we-we don't fail because we control what success is, to be honest. I-I think what that means is that as long as we have really good communication there are a lot of ways to correct, uh, a problem in the midst, in the middle of a, of a work stream.

So because we have these different pieces of the company, we can say, hey if we're struggling in software to solve a problem, maybe hardware can do some more heavy lifting. Hey, if we're struggling in both of those, maybe we hire a human to sit and do something that we can't, we don't have time to program. It's because things live for a short period of time, as well, um, most of our work lives for a short period of time. Some live longer but the short period of time work, we have that freedom to say as long as we know what the problem is, the people are talking and not just doing their piece of the work. You never get to a point where it, just, you plug it together and it doesn't work. Then I think that that's, um, a willingness that we, that we take that is very much like a band.

It is punk rock, you know. A guitarist breaks a string and step to the side, someone else picks up. You just keep playing. You don't stop. We never stop playing and I think that that is, uh, it's really hard to fake authenticity. And I think in marketing often people try to fake authentic stories. And I think that audiences are pretty aware of and we're seeing this in, in recent ads that have been criticized, um, you know by Pepsi and Kendall Jenner

and stuff. It's, it's hard to fake an authentic story and it's increasingly hard to do that with a-a really well connected universe that we live in.

Aaron: It's rare that an authentic story will have the word authentic attached to it.
(laughs)

Nathan: Yeah, yeah, exactly! You just do it.

Aaron: Yeah.

Nathan: And I think that's what, and that's why we are, we're very much like coming to the kitchen to see what we do because we have nothing to hide. And you'll find in-in-in advertising, the world that we entered, um, because you know we didn't start there, what we saw is there are so many different businesses that what's happened over the years is they focused on their slices and in-in that industry there's what, there's the advertising agency which will do creative and there's a production company that produces stuff. And they've divided themselves over the years because they've figured out where they can make money. And there's, and production making stuff has risk. So why not leave that up to three people who can go bid on it and put all the risk on them, yell at them if not done on time. We've collapsed that back to probably where it started, which is we come up with the ideas. We're beholden to the user experience. Our success, you know, is measured in marketing language but we're doing engineering so we have to succeed at that, too. But by collapsing it, we have total control. And that allows us to-to behave like a rock band.

Aaron: The people that you've cited as people you work with and collaborate with have a very Pittsburgh flair for ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: You know, um, there's, uh, some people who can do some machine shop.

Nathan: Yep.

Aaron: Some people who can manipulate the robot arm.

Nathan: Yeah, yeah.

Aaron: And some people who can write the, um, firmware ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: For the robot arm. For one person, yourself, um, who has a pretty varied background ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: But how do you evaluate new employees and people to work on these projects ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: When I can't imagine you are, like, both an expert welder ...

Nathan: Oh, I'm not.

Aaron: And hacker, yourself. So when you're, like, bringing in someone who is in a discipline that you're, like, I don't know the first thing about this discipline ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: I got to decide whether to trust you ...

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: On a sprint. What do you look for?

Nathan: It makes me think a lot about when I, so I used to teach and I was a horrible teacher because I'm not a super patient person. And I hated teaching technology. Uh, I remember I taught a class once and it was supposed to be on flash and I think the student went and complained to the director because I said, kind of day one, I know I have this curriculum but I think you need to learn flash on your own and ...

Aaron: (laughs)

Nathan: I'm going to talk to you about design. Um, because I really do believe I-I don't put huge stock in specific technical skills. I think that it's about personality more than anything else and-and-and who a person is. Now there's definitely a technical competency level but the people that thrive at-at working with me are people who want to learn, who want to be challenged, who are okay with a subjective goal. I mean, which, a big

problem for engineers is, you know, that subjectivity of there is not a clear right. We're figuring out what correct is along the way. Um, and that's difficult because marketing is subjective. There's no guarantee that the thing we're putting in the world is going to get talked about on Good Morning America. We can, we can use our best judgment and kind of, uh, the things that we've learned to make sure that we're putting ourselves in the best position. There is no guarantee.

So what I've learned, uh, is that we, as a team what we did, uh, a couple of years ago is we started to develop these kind of core values. And we have, I think, five that we, that we pay attention to. Uh, efficiency became key. Can I get things done, uh, you know in a quick way?

Resourcefulness, which is hey I'm not going to be given every, you know, every-every piece of technology I maybe need. I have what I have, let me figure it out with what I got. You know, authenticity was important to us. And all these things kind of evolved, as well as understanding over the years who didn't work and why didn't they work.

Aaron: Right.

Nathan: And we start to kind of, uh, reverse engineer it and say, you know, the things that don't work well are big egos. Someone comes in and they're better than everyone else. They know better. I want confident but I don't want an ego. So people that walk in on day one and say "well that's not how it's done. At my last job we did it this way. Or you need to do this. Or you should do this." There is no should for us because we're in uncharted territory. So we need to figure out what works best for us.

Aaron: I've heard it described that in things like marketing ...

Nathan: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Aaron: Basically you want to figure out how to do something once and sell it to nine other people ...

Nathan: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Aaron: And do it exactly the same way. And the first one was expensive and the next nine are cheap.

Nathan: That sounds nice. (laughs)

Aaron: It doesn't sound like you ever get to sell the next nine.

Nathan: No, not typically. Um, and I, you know, I-I don't know. We go back and forth whether that's good or bad, you know? I-I-I don't have a firm take on that. I mean definitely a lot of the work that we've done for Google in the last few years, uh, ends up being, um, recreated or traveling to different events ...

Aaron: Sure.

Nathan: And they've been good about that. I think then our clients see the benefit, uh, a residual benefit of using this work over and over again. You know, for example, we worked on the Chelsea location of Google's headquarters and in the lobby area, there's a wall about 6,000 arcade style buttons, old school arcade buttons. These are all custom. Behind them are custom circuit boards, all modular as well that-that have light pipes that go to these buttons and basically it acts as a low resolution touch screen. So you can interact with it by touching the buttons, rolling your body against it, throwing your hands against it. Or it can be a display of 16 million colors in super low resolution. And then we built a software platform behind that so that developers and artists can program for it the same way they program for their Chrome browsers. So it's super simple, can be fresh. And what we did after we did that is the installation, is we build our version of that with more modular that's now traveled like the Mobile World Congress event and traveling to some other Google events.

So for us, there is benefit to re-usability. I-I think I always struggle with it because I'm a person and a lot of our staff are people who like that initial challenge. Sometimes it would be nice to have a chance to take another crack at it. I think that's where we always feel like if we, if that first time you're always kind of figuring it out and if you have had a second chance to do it again, you'd do things a little bit differently. We never usually get that second chance.

But as a business, our whole brand and our identity is really built on being the first. Doing something that's never been seen before.

Aaron: This is not what you started out doing.

Nathan: No.

Aaron: This is not the career you envisioned ...

Nathan: (laughs)

Aaron: At high school graduation.

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: What were you doing before?

Nathan: It's funny you say that. I always say that myself. That I'm not doing anything that I thought I would ever be doing. But it's funny cause my wife also works at Deeplocal as our CMO and she went to school for, for marketing and she says that, in her opinion, I'm doing exactly what I, what I was trained to do. Because, so I went to college at Carnegie Mellon for basically robotic art. But I did a lot of interactive installation work. I was self-taught so I would learn software engineering. I would learn a little bit about hardware. This will date me, like parallel port control and I worked in, uh, lingo like macromedia director ...

Aaron: (laughs)

Nathan: And stuff and you kind of work. But at that time, there was no, um, there was, there was no plan to do that to make money, like definitely.

Aaron: Yeah.

Nathan: It was about how much am I going to spend on this thing. And-and I made art for myself. And there is a difference between art and what we do. I realize that but I do think that what I really loved was I started to collaborate with people in different disciplines that had skills that I didn't have. I realized really quickly in college that, that things that were in my head that I wanted to build I couldn't do on my own. I wasn't learning fast enough. I was good at managing, kind of like figuring it out together holistically ...

Aaron: Yeah.

Nathan: At a higher level and then I needed expertise to help pull it off. And I needed the experiences that were different than mine coming from different backgrounds to make the idea better. So I always collaborated and, um, and I ran a band for a long time around the same period. And I was ...

Aaron: Was that before or after college?

Nathan: That was around the same time.

Aaron: Around the same time. Yeah.

Nathan: Yeah. My band started when I was 16 years old. It changed a few times. But the last kind of version of, lasted about a decade was throughout college. So the same time I had an art group, I had a band. And I was again a no-talent, I mean, I feel like a little bit like I am now as a CEO. I can't do the stuff that my team can do. Just like when I was in a band, the musicians that worked with me, um, were much more talented than me.

Aaron: Yeah.

Nathan: And they went on to prove that and be in other bands and do well for themselves. But for me, I was good at organizing them, at motivating them, at planning the tours, at building the relationships, at doing the graphic design for our records, and-and working on the record deals. Like I did all of that and then kind of singing in the band which is where I did screaming, more so, was, uh, was almost like secondary. I was like a manager. And I feel like that's what I am right now. At Deeplocal my job is to steer the ship, uh, to make sure I have the right people there, that they're excited and motivated and I have the right challenges for them to keep them motivated, as well.

Aaron: What was that moment like at the end of the time? Like, you're ...

Nathan: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Aaron: You're in like a punk band.

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: You're probably not going to do like do that while you're a CEO.

Nathan: Yeah.

Aaron: What was that period of your life like to-to transition so sharply.

Nathan: It feels, it's interesting cause I'm reconnecting with some of my old band mates now, uh, recently. Uh, actually I was just texting with one before I walked in here and, um, she had an old photo that our drummer sent me and I was thinking. I've been thinking a lot back, I mean I'm 40 years old

now. So I think a lot now about, you know, my 20's and what they were like and what's different and what's the same. And I think, um, it is funny sometimes when I think about what I do and that I'm marketing brand. When I think about that, I-I come up with marketing for big brands and I used to be more of a political activist.

And I think I always have, I think people stay, for the most part, who they were when they were seven years old, I think persists. I think I'm still in my core, the same person I was even that, seven years old and I was the punk rocker and what I am right now. I think I am, um, I don't, I question authority. I don't like to be conventional. I don't like conventional wisdom. I don't like being told that's the way you do things, that's just how it's done. I like to reinvent, you know? And I always have that perspective, of just I want to be doing something interesting and different.

Now the context is totally different so when I think about back then, you know, my-my band was, uh, talked a lot about technology. We were even different in that world because we would play shows and then we would do like hacker workshops. And I ran a, my art collective was called Hacktivist and we would talk about how to reverse engineer technology and how to gain access to mainstream media. And I was, um, the projects that, that landed me in some hot water with the law a few times. And, and I think it-it was contestational but it was always, and it was, and a lot of it was more political. But I always kind of liked to-to stir things up, to get people to notice things.

To me, art and my vision of art is that artists see the world or whatever thing that might be. It could be a flower on the street. It could be a piece of music. They see things in a different way and their job is to then communicate that perception, that experience to someone else. How can you see the world and look at it differently? And why I was a somewhat political artist cause I was looking at things that were, you know, often times critical of advertising and saying, if you just step back and observe, let me try to show you this thing that you're not noticing.

Um, so things like Washington Mutual Bank used to do marketing with Che Guevara's image to advertise low finance charge checking accounts. And I was like, you can walk by that every day on a billboard and never notice the absurdity of it or you can kind of reflect on it. And I think artists' jobs are to not tell us what to think but to get us to think for ourselves about the-the things that we take for granted around us.

And I think I've-I've, you know, while-while I don't believe what I'm doing is, uh, a greater service to the world, the service that I've reconciled for myself, that I feel like I-I'm doing is I'm trying to create a place, uh, in Deeplocal for employees. And I want to create a space where we are free to solve problems, be creative, be proud of our work, put things in the world that we get the credit for. And I'm-I'm comfortable with that. If I, if I can kind of carve that space of a business I don't think anyone else has created, that's what I'm most proud of. As long as I can kind of keep that going and keep a quality of life while doing it.

Aaron: Well, thank you very much, Nathan.

Nathan: Hey, thanks so much.

Aaron: So, I'm Aaron. I am the guest host for these special episodes from Span 2017 in Pittsburgh. But this show is actually a normal show that comes out with a regular host and his name is William Spradlin. Hey, Liam.

Liam: That's me.

Aaron: Uh, Liam. What, what was your inspiration for Design Notes?

Liam: So, I'm a big believer that talking to people from other creative disciplines really feeds into my own creativity.

Aaron: Yeah.

Liam: So the ulterior motive is really that I'm just interested from hearing from people working on different stuff.

Aaron: Yeah, I like, I checked out the-the first episode and you've got some people who have a background in architecture, talking about what that brings to their design practice. Is that-that the kind of stuff you like to get into?

Liam: Yeah, exactly. Uh, we like to look at kind of the commonalities running through all design work and the different ways we approach them in each discipline.

Aaron: You can find Design Notes at design.google/podcast. You can also subscribe to the newsletter at design.google/subscribe. We have four episodes, four special episodes, from Span 2017 in Pittsburgh. I hope you'll check them out and thank you for listening.