



BOOK REVIEW

Michael Johnson, *Problem Solved*

Phaidon

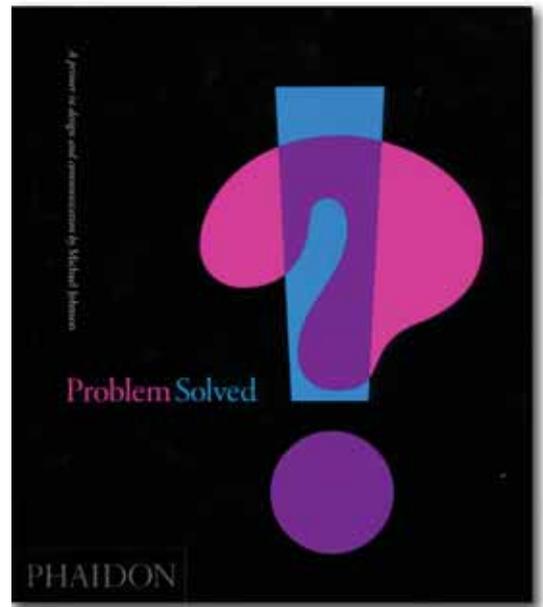
Phaidon seem to have cornered the market in good value, offbeat, books about graphic design. Classics like *The Art of Looking Sideways* and *A Smile In The Mind* have found their way onto most designers' shelves, as well as a good few coffee tables. *Problem Solved* is unlikely to gain the living room popularity of its siblings, but it should catch the attention of professionals.

The book's conceit is that problem solving is a central part of being creative, but few books address the process. *Problem Solved* is divided up into 18 common problems faced by companies trying to communicate with customers, each with a catchy name such as 'The Cargo Pants in Middle Age Problem'. Each problem is discussed in detail along with a selection of different approaches and the usual inspirational examples (read "ideas to steal").

Ultimately the Problem/Solution approach is nothing but a gimmick, albeit quite an effective one. The value of this book comes from its truly excellent text (which may sound obvious, but really isn't when it comes to design books) and the author's intriguing and personal selection of examples. Some of the most inspiring examples are small, but important, details in everyday communication rather than multimillion pound rebrands or advertising campaigns. My favourites are from the chapter on information rejection. Johnson showcases the 1998 redesign of the Yellow Pages font, which allowed more information to be crammed into a smaller space whilst improving legibility, and also mentions the nearly invisible work of road sign designers:



“...BRITISH DESIGNERS JOCK KINNEIR AND MARGARET CALVERT...NOT ONLY PROVIDED A ROLE MODEL TO THE WORLD OF HOW TO EXPLAIN CRUCIAL INFORMATION IN THE MOST DEMANDING OF CIRCUMSTANCES, THEY UNWITTINGLY BRANDED A NATION AT THE SAME TIME. IT'S ONLY WHEN TRYING TO NAVIGATE ANOTHER COUNTRY'S SYSTEM THAT A DRIVER REALISES HOW INGRAINED THEIR OWN SYSTEM HAS BECOME...”



He drives his point home by laying out a UK sign in US style and vice versa. This level of design may win few awards, but its very invisibility is a testament to its success - the message is everything.

All in all *Problem Solved* is a more thoughtful book than its Problem/Solution gimmick might lead you to believe. Unusually for Phaidon it is also a book that rewards reading rather than browsing, it should find a home with anyone who takes business communication seriously. **S**

