

# Legacy in the Making

FAST COMPANY  
PART ONE

Founded in 1995, Fast Company, the brainchild of two former staffers at the Harvard Business Review, launched as a way to begin a conversation about how modern business was being conducted. Versus addressing the company man, Fast Company spoke to the individual. Versus looking at technology as something to fear, Fast Company considered the power of technology to bring people closer together. Versus championing the goods and services economy, Fast Company celebrated the ideas economy. And versus advocating for business as usual, Fast Company advocated for new rules. Now, the upstart magazine is one of the standards for how many talk about business. Recently, *The Legacy Lab* spoke to **Alan Webber**, cofounder of Fast Company, to learn more about the origins of his magazine's legacy in the making.



ally, Japan was flexing its economic and manufacturing muscles. Ezra Vogel, a professor at Harvard, wrote a book that was called *Japan as Number One*. James Fallows, a Harvard alum and journalist, also wrote about the rise of Japan. On the one hand, there was admiration for how Japan had recovered from World War II and how it had become this incredible economic super power. On the other hand, there was a lot of xenophobia: What were they doing? Why were they buying up Rockefeller Center and Pebble Beach? All of this was very scary to the American mind-set. There was concern that America would lose its dominance in economic matters and world affairs, more broadly speaking.

So I got to go over to Japan and had a wonderful sabbatical where I could pretty much see anybody I wanted to see, courtesy of the Japan Society and Harvard Business School. While there, I got a glimpse of the trends that were shaping the future. I came back from my trip with four cross-cuts of change that were at the time not being talked about very much at all, but today are taken for granted. First, there was globalization. Now, we

## Can you share your personal story about the start of Fast Company?

■ For me, the origin of the magazine started with a three-month fellowship I received to Japan, courtesy of the Japan Society of New York, back in 1989. I had been running the *Harvard Business*

*Review*. And the faculty editor, Ted Levitt—an amazing leader, mentor, professor, marketing genius—was very generous in giving me a sabbatical from the publication to pursue the fellowship.

My travel was in and around the peak of the Japanese bubble. Glob-

all agree the world is a global economy. But at the time, it was just emerging that national boundaries were less important than the ability to do business anywhere, instantly, across borders. Second, there was a shift in technology. There was a digital revolution happening which, again, we now take for granted, but back then was occurring only in labs at places like Sony® and Fujitsu®. I was fortunate to see it. I got tours inside the working areas of these major Japanese companies. I saw the digital revolution being born. It was clear that once you could turn everything into Os and Is, it was going to transform how people worked, where people worked, how organizations worked and everything from top to bottom. Third, there was a generational shift. It was just beginning to become clear that the concerns of the World War II generation and the scarcity mind-set coming out of the Depression before the war would change because of the baby boomers. Boomers, in general, did not worry about putting food on the table. They had a different concern, which was to 'make it' and to have a bigger impact on the world. There was a fundamental shift in why you would go to work in the morning. Finally, from Japan you do see diversity in the world very differently than if you were in New York, Boston, San Francisco or Los Angeles. From this new view, it was clear that as a nation we had a myopic perspective on those who comprised the global workplace. Back then, if you picked up *Fortune*, *Forbes* or *Business Week*, those magazines were populated by white men facing right on the cover.

In contrast, if you were in Japan, and walked around offices and factories, you would see a lot of people who were not white men. It was a global hub. There were a lot of people from all over the world. They didn't all look like the folks who were featured in the American business magazines of the time.

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I came back from my sabbatical thinking the world really was changing in a rather dramatic way, and there really wasn't a business magazine that captured those changes. It was very difficult because of the nature of the *Harvard Business Review* to introduce those changes into HBR simply because, at the time and still to a large degree, the magazine wasn't driven by journalists trying to capture the spirit, the characters and the stories of the moment. It was, instead, driven by a more academic mind-set looking for articles that, if not written literally by the academic community, were by-

lined by professors or people whose credentials were primarily coming out of the traditions of academic writing and academic analysis. For me, that was the first glimmer that there might be a need for a new magazine.

I was very fortunate that a guy who had come to work at HBR from MIT, our most talented editor, was a friend named Bill Taylor. Bill is about the smartest guy I ever met when it comes to framing issues and knowing about what is going on in the world. Bill's got an encyclopedic memory, and he is just a brilliant analyst and observer of the world of business. Bill and I began to talk about all I had seen in Japan. And we began to talk, in the evenings and weekends, about the idea of starting our own magazine. Our elevator pitch was that we were going to create something that was a cross between the *Harvard Business Review* and *Rolling Stone*. We would combine the thoughtfulness of HBR, the authority of HBR in terms of quality of thinking and writing and analysis, but with the spirit and energy and look and feel and generational appeal of *Rolling Stone*. When it finally came time to do it or shut up, we put together our business plan. We rewrote it 50 times or more. There was a case study in the vaults of the Harvard Business School about the way a different magazine was founded, so we went to school on that. We read up on all the great magazines of America's past that we could find written up—books and studies about how *The New Yorker* got started, and about how Jann Wenner started *Rolling Stone*.

We had the business plan for *Fast Company* done in and around 1992. It took us about eight months to raise \$550,000 to finance a test issue and a test mail drop to see if what we believed the market would respond to did, in fact, work. Then, we revised our business plan based on what we learned. We went looking for a full-time partner, a big deal publishing company, because we did not think that we could sustain a one-title publishing company all on our own. Nor did we ever want to agonize over buying paper or signing printing contracts. We only wanted to do the editing and creating of the magazine. So we agreed to a deal with Mort Zuckerman and Fred Drasner. They bankrolled our launch. The first official issue of *Fast Company* went on sale in 1995, just over 20 years ago.

***Fast Company* has been famous for making a statement with its design language, particularly on its covers. What kind of design statement did you and Bill want to make starting with the first issue, and what kind of statement were you trying to avoid?**

■ One thing that Bill and I agreed on from the beginning was that ours would be a different kind of business magazine. We wanted a design language, front to back, that would be dramatically different in the space—something that was unique, symbolized change and opened a different kind of conversation.

Again, one thing we did in the course of getting ready to start our magazine

was to look at the things that made other magazines successful. I came to the belief that pretty much every decade a magazine launched that really captured the public's imagination, and that part of what got people excited was how it looked. That was true of *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone* and even the original *Playboy* magazine. Give Hugh Hefner credit. *Playboy* was capturing a moment in time of not a work revolution, but a sexual revolution in the country. For additional inspiration, I looked beyond publishing to also review the work of Tinker Hatfield who designed some famous shoes for Nike®. I explored his design philosophy, how he got different ideas for creating his shoes, and how he matched the look of a shoe to its purpose, using the language of design. Today, we know that design is an important factor in how many companies work to capture the public's imagination. But in the early 1990s, that kind of thinking was still less common. For us, making design an integral part of expressing our philosophy would be essential. This even related to the type of paper we used. I wanted to print on paper that felt like, when you touched it, you had a sense that you were interacting with something strong, organic, rough, authentic and honest. I wanted our magazine to have so much paper in it that you could virtually see the chunks of the tree still in it.

When it came to the cover, I observed that, throughout history, those magazines that were truly iconic had a very unique look right on the front. *TIME* magazine, for example, is famous for the face it features on the cover as

its person of the year, and it uses a distinct red frame as a way of highlighting an individual it wants to focus on. In contrast, in the modern era, a lot of business publications were all doing pretty much the same cover: a white man facing right. The reason was straightforward. If you decode symbols, a white man facing right represents a power pose: Bill Gates as the smartest man in the world, or Warren Buffett as the most brilliant investor in the world, or you name it. Stereotypically, *Fortune* would run cover stories that said, 'Meet so and so, the toughest SOB to run a company in America.' They were lionizing one very specific kind of business leader. It was a macho style, leadership as a contact sport. At *Fast Company*, we would steer away from what I considered to be that clichéd portrayal of leadership, where the only person that mattered was the CEO, and everybody else was a munchkin who executed only

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what the heroic CEO wanted. We would, instead, use our cover designs to announce that we had a different vision of what a magazine was, what business was, what work was, what a career was. We had the benefit of a phenomenal Creative Director in Pat Mitchell. Pat initially created a typographical solution around the ideals that our publication believed in—work is personal, computing is social, knowledge is power and break the rules—as part of an inside treatment for our first issue. When Bill and I saw it, we both said, ‘That’s not just the inside, it’s the cover.’ Over time, we always used our covers to break the rules by trying new things with type, cartoons and drawings. Our unifying cover look was one of constant change.

**Not only did the design choice to use typography on the cover of issue number one stand out, but also the themes *Fast Company* used to introduce itself—about the way society works, computes, thinks and defies the rules—made a clearly defining statement. Can you elaborate on the themes in your brand’s opening manifesto?**

■ The words on the cover of that first issue represent our core beliefs. They were written to be nailed up on our office wall to say, ‘This is our manifesto. This is what those who subscribe to our way of thinking believe. It is our perspective on business and work and change and technology.’

And we shrunk it down to some very simple Ernest Hemingway-esque statements.

‘Work is personal.’ That’s a big shift from what the *Harvard Business Review* said. Back in the old days, if you took classes at Harvard, what the Business School faculty called the ‘unit of analysis’ was always ‘the firm.’ It was the company. We very clearly said that is not our point of view. We believe the new unit of analysis is the individual. The one person that can make a real difference in the way they work—in what they do—is not the firm. The individual, each one of us, is a leader of our own opportunities and our life.

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‘Computing is social.’ At the time, we did not know just how right we were. It was very clear that tech was going to play a critical role in reimagining and reinventing how work got done and how people con-

nected. It was clear that you didn’t need to be physically co-located to be collaborators. Technology was going to be a big through line. If we had been a little smarter, we would have invented Facebook. Instead, we built the Company of Friends. This was an early version of a social network of people meeting both in person and electronically to share their passion for the ideals that *Fast Company* held dear.

‘Knowledge is power.’ Peter Drucker had already been writing about the birth of the knowledge economy and the transition from mass marketing, mass manufacturing, mass everything to an economy driven by ideas, talent, creativity and thinking. In a world where work is personal, then every individual’s knowledge, talent, creativity and belief system is the only thing that is relevant. That is a decided reaction to the notion of *Fortune* magazine’s ‘organization man’ which, in 1995, was also still alive and well in many American corporations. The idea that you leave your personality at home and you just show up and do what you’re told really was something that was not in the DNA of our new magazine.

‘Break the rules.’ Our final admonition was a call to action. The game was changing. If you want to be part of it, you cannot keep doing what you have been doing. The rules are written to keep people in place and under a set of operating assumptions that no longer apply.

It was time for people to innovate and write their own rules.

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### **Do the new rules of business, as *Fast Company* outlined them 20 years ago, still apply?**

■ When we talk about what’s going on in business today, I would say that they are not only still true, but they are amped up even higher across all four crosscuts that I observed in Japan back in 1989. They are manifesting, maybe evolving, but at their core they have remained and been raised to a higher level.

Globalization persists as the driving force in the world today for virtually every conversation—whether it’s about business or national security. Technology, connectedness and the digital revolution are transforming everybody’s everyday life—not just how we all work, but how we live and connect to our friends and family. Generations continue to shift. The boomers are moving off stage. It is

now the next generation’s turn. And every generation has its own set of issues or interests and does things in its own individual way. So we are now witnessing the turn of the dial. Diversity is beyond anything we’ve ever witnessed in this country and globally. You no longer have to be a white man facing right to hold power. Recently, author Dan Pink reminded me that one of the most traditional jobs that, typically, went to a white man of ‘great breeding’ in the United States was the role of Secretary of State. To which he added that, other than John Kerry, we have started to see a more representative series of women or African Americans or both in the position since the 1990s. So just as Bill and I believed back then, we are seeing a transformation of leadership, power and profile happening even now.

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**One of the hallmarks of *Fast Company* has always been not just what it says, but how it says it. Can you tell us a little about what inspired the unique voice of the magazine?**

■ Bill and I used to joke that if you were a company man and you read

the *Harvard Business Review*, when your spouse asked at home, ‘How was work today?’ you’d probably say, ‘Let me draw you a four-box matrix to describe it to you.’ Whereas, if you were a *Fast Company* reader and your spouse asked you the same question, you’d say, ‘I can’t believe what a jerk my boss is.’ We wanted to sound the way real people talk. We wanted to engage with business people at all levels of an organization. We wanted to have the voice and language—including the simplicity and directness—of modern work life.

One of the inspirations for our voice came from going to parties and events and listening to what people were actually saying to each other about their careers. In the early days of the dot-com boom and digital revolution, it was a common refrain to hear people excited by what they were doing say, ‘Hey, what are you working on?’ It wasn’t fancy. It was just how ordinary people talked about the enthusiasm they had for their work lives. We wanted to find a way to give that expression. We aimed to speak with that same real enthusiasm and candor.

Bill and I long thought that part of what made our magazine different was that we were good listeners. We listened carefully to what people were saying. We found a way to turn what we heard into useful, helpful, inspiring or educationally valuable articles. Bill had a serious knack for looking at the world and framing it in a way, using language, to draw you in. You can feel your synapses con-

necting because of the way he used language to frame conversations in *Fast Company*.

**Beyond having a shared interest in the way modern business was done, what else did you know about your audience? Who were the aspirational *Fast Company* readers you were seeking to mobilize?**

■ I personally come out of the baby boomer generation. And to the extent that every editor is his or her own personal reader, I was, first, writing for me. Bill is 10 years younger than I am, so we had the benefit of his shift in generational perspective. Most publications are linear in defining an audience. *American Banker* is ostensibly published for bankers who are American. *CEO* magazine is published for those who are either CEOs or who want to be. While you could easily segment an audience by job title or industry, we believed that was old thinking. From the outset, we felt that we weren't just for a key demographic. We felt that we were for more of a psychographic.

We identified mind-sets that considered the values and attitudes of our readers. We built profiles based on what we learned from asking and listening. We considered the cars they drove, the liquor they consumed, the watches they wore, the places they shopped and so on. The goal was to make our readers as real as possible for our writers. We wanted to hear and, in return, reflect back the reader's voice. We initially saw four primary

types of readers in our brand's Venn diagram that overlapped into one united psychographic.

The first type of reader was a younger person in an older company. When I say younger, I do not mean in age. I mean someone who is younger-thinking. The change agents in big companies. There was a guy at IBM we wrote about whose self-appointed title was Shit Disturber. He saw his role as Vice President as making sure that IBM didn't miss the next technological revolution. He was a younger-thinking guy in an older organization. The second type of reader was a more senior person inside a startup company, a guy like Jeff Bezos or someone starting a new ad agency. They did not view themselves as a small-business person. Instead, they thought of themselves as a startup entrepreneur of a big company that was, only for the moment, small. These leaders did not identify with *Inc.* or *Fortune*, which they saw as their fathers' business magazines. They wanted something more in line with their modern way of thinking. The third type of reader included thought leaders: management consultants, professors, business writers like Jim Collins, Tom Peters, Seth Godin and Dan Pink. These were the people who were changing how we think about work and business. The fourth type of reader included the emerging community of free agents—people who didn't work for a company full time and, instead, worked by taking a series of jobs as part of the 'gig' economy. Today, this would include Uber and Lyft™ drivers or people who list

properties on Airbnb as another way to make income.

When you overlap those four types, that was our *Fast Company* audience. If you think about what they have in common, it's a different mind-set toward career, technology and all the things that get packed into our magazine.

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**In addition to listening to your audience, and speaking to their shared mind-set, what else did *Fast Company* get right from the start when it came to building and nurturing lasting relationships?**

■ We had a very different relationship with our readers. We were very clear that we were not just starting a magazine. We were starting a movement. Our movement used words to help make a difference. Success was not about whether we could make the most money or get the largest circulation. We had a high purpose. For us, it was whether we could make the most impact. That is why in our first letter from the editors we said that we did not want *Fast Company* to be the last word in business,

we want it to be the first word—to trigger conversation that gets people talking about what really matters in their lives and in work. We set out to change the conversation about business, engaging with people and giving them tools to make a difference in their work, so they could have more of a sense of purpose in the world.

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From the beginning, it was easy to explain how our relationship with our readers was different versus our competitors. *Fortune*, *Forbes* or *Business Week* would say, ‘I can get on Bill Gates’ plane and interview him and write about it. And if you, the reader, give me five or six bucks for a subscription, I will let you see what Bill Gates told me.’ It is an ‘I know something you don’t know’ sort of transaction. At *Fast Company*, we think our readers ought to be sitting next to us and not across or at arm’s length from us. The world is changing dramatically, unpredictably, in ways that are very hard to understand. But we believe that if we talk to each other, we can figure this stuff out and we will all be better off if we figure it out together. It is not so much a transaction as it is

a collaboration. It is how you build a movement rather than simply sell subscriptions.

One of the really positive things that happened along the way was that we got an e-mail from a reader, I believe from somebody in Columbus, Ohio, saying, ‘I love your magazine, I’m out here in Columbus, are there any other readers in Columbus, Ohio? I’d like to meet my fellow *Fast Company* readers.’ It was one of those moments where we smacked our heads and went, ‘Oh my goodness, we should have thought of that.’ We immediately sent him back an e-mail saying, ‘Yeah, great, if you want to convene a meeting of *Fast Company* readers in Columbus, we’d be happy to help you.’ That was the genesis of the Company of Friends social network. We hired a guy whom we nicknamed Mr. Airport because his actual name is Heath Row. He became the coordinator of the Company of Friends. He gave himself the title of Social Capitalist, and he was creating social capital for us by weaving together groups of Company of Friends members all over the world. It grew into a phenomenal grassroots, self-organizing movement.

**By reputation, another important element you got right from the start was the culture you and Bill created with your team. Can you talk about the culture you built at *Fast Company*?**

■ There were a number of things at HBR that did not work well that we did differently at *Fast Company*.

First, it had to be the kind of place where we wanted to work every morning. I interviewed everybody that we hired, including the receptionist. The receptionist was the most important hire because they would be the one who talked to the most people in a day on behalf of *Fast Company*. How the receptionist treated others would determine how many felt about their relationship with us. In total, we did our best to avoid hiring anybody at the magazine who Bill and I didn’t want to walk by their desk each morning to say hello. There are plenty of places where people work where, each morning, they already know they are going to find a path to their seat to avoid the people they do not want to interact with. I didn’t want to hire anybody that I didn’t want to interact with just to quickly fill an open position.

Second, we communicated clearly that we were hiring people who wanted to embark on a very uncertain journey. In fact, in our first business plan we used language from Sir Ernest Shackleton’s supposed ad in *The Times of London* which, according to legend, said, ‘Men wanted for hazardous journey.’ We adopted the mindset that this would be an adventure. It might work out and it might not. But we were going to succeed or fail our way, not anybody else’s way, along the way.

Third, we were very egalitarian and open. A lot of people who had written for other magazines couldn’t do what we wanted because they thought business writing had to be

done the way it had been done in other business publications. Meanwhile, we were asking different questions and we had a different voice and a different language and a different way of storytelling that required us to either hire people who had not yet been affected by other magazines or who were willing to do it our way. That meant we were hiring a lot of young people, and we were training on the job. It meant that we were small and flexible and willing to work incredibly long hours for the first couple of years. We had to overcome a lack of organization with energy and passion. Everybody knew everything about everything at *Fast Company*. There was no hierarchy, which really was the way the magazine evolved.

Fourth, I think there was a great deal of good spirit that came from the energy of being a startup where everyone was having a blast. There's nothing more fun than putting out a magazine. It is comparable to the old 'my uncle's got a barn, so let's put on a show' mind-set. In the early days, the incredibly talented Polly LaBarre didn't have an office. We didn't have enough space. So her office was the coat closet with beads as a curtain. Cell phones weren't as ubiquitous in those days, so we had a phone wired into the coat closet so she could have a telephone. Everybody overheard everything. There were no secrets. It was a very energetic, fun, slightly profane place. Credit, again, to Bill. It was his idea of a fun workplace. He was a big fan of the New York Giants, and I think he wanted our workplace

to resemble the locker room of the Giants with a lot of towel snapping and fooling around, working hard and playing hard.

As core to our culture, everybody had to understand what we were doing and why—what made our culture and our offering so different. As I said earlier, everybody had to see me before they got hired and then go see a lot of other people too. As our manifesto says, 'Work is personal.' That means each person matters, and everybody has got to be on the same page. I am very gratified when I see old *Fast Company* alums and they say stuff like, 'That was the best job I ever had.' I really look back on those days as a time when I learned more than I've ever learned, and I created friendships and ongoing relationships that really have affected my life 20 years later.

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**As you reflect upon *Fast Company's* accomplishments, not only its legacy, but also its legacy in the making, what else was essential in paving the way for your brand's lasting success?**

■ Beyond things like the design, the language, the voice, the purpose and culture, I do give our organization high marks for constantly listening and learning. A long while ago, Peter Senge coined the notion of being a 'learning organization.' We did a lot of learning by listening to what readers were telling us. We responded to our community pretty effectively, very openly too. For example, in the early days, we published ads for tobacco products. In response, we would sometimes get e-mails from our readers saying, 'I cannot believe you are publishing ads for cigarettes. I thought you were the good guys. I am disappointed.' All the e-mails came to me, and I would respond directly to them. I would say, 'Thank you for e-mailing. I appreciate your concern. We have taken a hard look at tobacco and cigarettes, and I agree with you. They are a product that we should all avoid. But our publisher tells me if we don't publish the ads, we are going to jeopardize our financial startup. So we are making a business decision that we will publish the ads. The money they do spend on our startup is really important. You will notice that from an advertising perspective we have got criteria for what's acceptable and what's not acceptable. We will not print ads that are abusive toward women, for example. Thanks for writing. Sorry to disappoint you.' Typically,



I would get an e-mail from the writer saying, 'Are you really the editor? You took your time to answer my e-mail? I forgive you. I've never gotten an actual e-mail from the editor of a magazine before. I love *Fast Company*. Thank you.' At *Fast Company*, we listened, we corresponded and we learned with our readers every day. Being a learning organization helps to make sure we stay relevant and never get stuck in the past.

**The launch of *Fast Company* is a remarkable story. You disrupted the established media space to create something that today feels essential to the world of business reading. Given your history, what advice would you give to others trying to build a lasting brand legacy of their own?**

■ For me, it is a very simple notion: Everything matters. I don't think you can ever take the point of view with a startup that we will only worry about this part now, and we will deal with the rest of it later.

Bill and I worked for three years to get the magazine up and running. We worked through the design, the language, the character and even the paper stock. We worked through the things we would and wouldn't do. We spent an enormous amount of time and energy lovingly caring about everything—caring about the kinds of people we hired, caring about the office space we were in and the coffee we would have in that space. We not only wrote up a busi-

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ness plan, but we identified the kind of people we wanted as our first-round investors because we didn't believe that all money was created equal. There was money that we did not want. We cared deeply about every facet. We were granular in how we approached this thing.

If we were guilty of over-thinking, I think that actually turned out to be a virtue. You could look at the way the magazine looked and felt, the design of our office space, the culture of our team and the people we hired—including job titles—and you could fairly say that in any place you touched this brand, you got the exact same message. Wherever you encountered *Fast Company*, in the magazine, at a live event or at a Company of Friends meeting, there was a consistency and coherence to what you got.

I think when you are starting anything that you hope lasts for a long time, you really need to think through every component and try to have that kind of clarity and consistency.

*In a little more than 20 years, Fast Company has evolved from a dissenting voice challenging the way business had been done to an authoritative voice on the subject of how contemporary business is now conducted around the world. The magazine has and continues to succeed not only on the basis of offering observations that are pertinent to the times, but by building a strong internal culture around its beliefs and a vital external community of readers who also share those beliefs. In turn, the publication persists as not only topically relevant, but highly involving for a large community of fans. In 1995, there were many who questioned whether Fast Company's way of thinking and writing on business reflected a fad or something more enduring. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, we see the tremendous foresight of the publication. Now, like then, work is personal, computing is social, knowledge is power, and the ones creating new rules are thriving. By being unique in its point of view, by involving readers in its growing movement and by not keeping them at arm's length, Fast Company continues to grow its modern-day legacy—writing history, not reading from it, every day as the modern standard for business journalism.*

BY MARK MILLER

*Mark Miller is the Chief Strategy Officer at Team One, an ad agency with global expertise and proprietary research into premium categories and aspirational consumers.*