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"In Pursuit of Elegance is a fascinating intellectual romp that will change the way you look at your surroundings... This book is surprising, compelling, and, yes, extremely elegant."

—Daniel H. Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind* and
The Adventures of Johnny Bunko

*"Less is the new more." Easy to learn: symmetry, seduction, subtraction, and sustainability.
Very valuable to do. Step 1: Read Matt's book!!*

Twitter-length foreward by Guy Kawasaki
author of *Reality Check* and co-founder of Alltop.com

IN PURSUIT OF ELEGANCE:

Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing

By Matthew E. May

Foreword by Guy Kawasaki

As a soft economy meets a brutally competitive business environment, the need for creative ideas and innovative solutions will never be more keenly felt. In his new book, author and former Toyota consultant Matthew May digs deep into the art of crafting ideas and solutions through an essentially subtractive approach -- what he calls elegant solutions. These elegant solutions combine surprising power and uncommon simplicity -- they not only fix problems but they also create value.

IN PURSUIT OF ELEGANCE: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing (Broadway Business; Hardcover; May 19, 2009), looks at a wide swath of fields, from science to art, business to sports, and offers a provocative case for achieving the maximum impact with the minimum input -- seductive and sustainable solutions that cut through the noise, engage the customer, touch hearts and minds, and change behavior forever. He calls these "elegant solutions" that result in a way of a thinking that involves doing less, rather than more.

"Savvy innovators," writes May, "understand that what isn't there can often trump what is, and are executing subtractive strategies: artfully paring back their offerings, leaving out the

right things by design in order to fully engage the recipient. Those that don't understand how to aim for elegance will be left behind."

The elegant solutions that May explores in depth share four common characteristics. They are symmetrical, seductive, subtractive and sustainable:

Symmetry helps us solve problems of structure, order, and aesthetics. We are natural-born symmetry-seekers. Most of nature, with its infinitely repeating patterns, is symmetrical. Symmetry is where mathematics, nature, science, and art come together. We are adept at noticing a lack of symmetry, which is why we can exploit it to our advantage—when someone experiences a degree of asymmetry, they naturally want to “fill in” the obviously missing piece. It’s the nature of symmetry that enables us to find solutions given only partial information. When symmetry comes into play, what appears to be missing isn’t. It’s at once absent, and yet present.

Seduction addresses the problem of creative engagement. It captivates any attention and activates any imagination. The power of suggestion is often stronger than that of full disclosure. Leaving something to the imagination, open to interpretation, creates an irresistible aura of mystery, and we are compelled to find answers. The seduction is in what we don’t know. What we don’t know far outweighs what we do, and we are naturally curious; we are easily drawn to the unknown, precisely because it is unknown. What isn’t there drives us to resolve our curiosity.

Subtraction helps us solve the problem of economy. Doing less, conserving, doesn’t come naturally. Humans are natural born adders, hard wired to push, collect, hoard, store, and consume. And therein lies the conundrum. The same penchant we have to “fill in,” to add, is exactly why elegance, being subtractive, is so elusive. Whether we’re talking about a product, a performance, a market, or an organization, our addiction to additive solutions results in inconsistency, overload, or waste -- and sometimes all three. The trick is in understanding what to eliminate, and exactly how to go about it.

Sustainability helps us solve that problem; it implies a process that is both repeatable and lasting. To consistently find elegant solutions, we need to alter how we approach problems, so that the principles of symmetry, seduction, and subtraction can be applied effectively, over and over again. A sustainable thinking strategy helps us to do that by giving us a process we can use and reuse to tap the power of the missing piece.

Some examples of these subtractive solutions that May examines include:

- The final episode of HBO series “The Sopranos” cut to a black screen instead of neatly tying up the story, leaving 12 million viewers stunned and then outraged that creator David Chase would leave them hanging. The inconclusive ending, which Chase says was the easiest way not to alienate each half of the audience – one who wanted to the series’ lead character Tony Soprano to die and the other half who wanted him to survive – became one of the talked about episodes in television history and in the end, got three times as many people to watch the episode for clues. The result? Viewers in essence supplied their own conclusions about what happened based on subtle dialog and visuals in the highly debated episode.
- Steve Jobs eliminated the keypad, using a touchpad for his products from the iPod to the iPhone and even carries the concept to the elevators in Apple’s multilevel stores which are without conventional buttons. His approach infuses everything from the visual look of the product, to its functionality, to the company’s marketing strategy, all of which centers around what Jobs called a “stop doing” strategy. When *Fortune* magazine named Apple the country’s most admired and innovative company, Jobs cited this strategy that he says forces employees to focus, pick their ideas carefully, and then stop trying to innovate on the hundreds of other ideas they might have. They subtracted the possibility of other solutions, choosing instead to focus on just a few.
- In-N-Out Burger, a freakishly popular hamburger chain in Los Angeles, has built its brand on the “less is more approach” with an interesting twist. The menu offers only five items – a hamburger, cheeseburger, double burger, French fries and a short list of beverages. By keeping things simple, founder Harry Snyder says he is able to provide the highest quality food in a sparkling clean environment. The twist? There is a secret menu at the restaurant that only regulars are privy to – mostly just different combinations of the standard fare, like three burger patties and three slices of cheese. These special combos have never been allowed on the regular menu and apparently never will, as they offer the customer a certain “mystique,” the suggestion of the missing piece that the customer himself is allowed to provide.

May’s message seems particularly apt now as leaders struggle to move their companies forward while using fewer resources. Elegant solutions provide the opportunity to do more with less, maximizing impact while minimizing outlay.

May also explores the fascinating connection between brain function and solution, with a shocking number of the world's major discoveries happening in strange locations and random moments. Einstein's theory of relativity came to him in a daydream, car designer Irwin Lui sketched the innovative lines of what became the Toyota Prius after helping his child with a school project involving hard boiled eggs, and Richard Phillips Feynman was watching someone throw a plate in the air when the spinning medallion spurred his Nobel Prize-winning idea of quantum electrodynamics. This state of "quiet brain" and how to achieve it concludes the book, sparking thought about creating the proper state for elegant solutions to emerge.

IN PURSUIT OF ELEGANCE is a counterintuitive, unconventional, but undeniably powerful book and concept. It definitely proves that the best ideas are those that are intentionally open to interpretation and leave something to the imagination.

Matthew E. May is the author of the critically acclaimed book, *The Elegant Solution* (Free Press; 2006). A popular speaker, he lectures to corporations, governments, and universities around the world on ingenuity and innovation. He spent nearly a decade advising Toyota, and his articles and profiles have appeared in *USA TODAY*, *strategy+business*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and on CNN and National Public Radio. A graduate of The Wharton School of Business, May lives in Lake Sherwood, California.

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Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing
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IN PURSUIT OF ELEGANCE:

Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing

More examples of elegant solutions that exploit the seductive power of the missing piece

- Architect Sarah Susanka designs homes that feel twice as large by eliminating traditional structures that effectively shrink usable space.
- Cities in Holland have eliminated traffic controls and experienced not only better traffic flow but also a significant drop in automobile accidents.
- Toyota's youth brand Scion refused to advertise and drastically reduced the number of standard features on its vehicles to allow ad-averse Generation-Y buyers who wanted to make a personal statement to customize their cars with trendy accessories.
- The British bank, First Direct, went branchless and became the most highly recommended bank in the United Kingdom.
- French manufacturing company FAVI realized better employee relations when they eliminated their human resources department.
- Lance Armstrong gained greater training effectiveness by a reduction in the hours spent on the bike through a subtractive process of tailoring workouts to specific goals.

Adapted from **IN PURSUIT OF ELEGANCE: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing** by Matthew E. May; Broadway Business; Hardcover; May, 2009;
<http://inpursuitofelegance.com>.

An Interview with

Matt May

IN PURSUIT OF ELEGANCE

Q: First of all, what do you mean by elegance?

A. An idea is elegant if it is two things at once: unusually simple and surprisingly powerful. It comes from science. Theoretical physicist Brian Greene used it in his wonderful book, *The Elegant Universe*, which talked about the amazingly simple “string theory” to describe the most complex of all things, the universe. The individual considered to be the father of computer science, Donald Knuth of Stanford, though, was probably the first person to begin using the word to describe something other than people or fashion. He used it in of all things computer programming. He defines elegance as something that is spare, symmetrical, pleasingly memorable, and having the immortal ring of $E=mc^2$. You can see the connection!

Knuth’s description was actually my point of departure on my search for elegance, because I thought his four criteria offered a beautiful way to framework for an admittedly esoteric term and concept some practical utility.

Q: What drew you to the concept of elegance and elegant solutions in the first place?

A: Two things, really. I first became familiar with “elegance” and “elegant solutions” when I was working with Toyota, a company that gets over 250,000 people fired up to come into work every day looking for new ways to do things. At the heart of that was the notion that they’re always trying to do more with and for less. They try to make tiny changes with big impact. “Elegant solutions” was a term used for these kind of ideas, and elegance as a concept had great weight.

Toyota talked about it the same way scientists like Greene and Knuth think about it, where you’re trying to combine an unusually simple solution that has surprisingly powerful outcomes. That notion of simple is good, but elegant is better, was an informal mantra that stuck in my head.

The second thing was an essay business guru Jim Collins wrote back in 2003 called “Best New Year’s Resolution? A ‘Stop Doing’ List.” In it he wrote something that helped to change my view of the world:

“A great piece of art is composed not just of what is in the final piece, but equally what is not. It is the discipline to discard what does not fit—to cut out what might have already cost days or even years of effort—that distinguishes the truly exceptional artist and marks the ideal piece of work, be it a symphony, a novel, a painting, a company, or most important of all, a life.”

That got me thinking about, and wanting to explore, the role of subtraction in the best ideas. There are examples all across the planet where something has been subtracted in a thoughtful way, and greater impact has resulted.

Q: Why is elegance so important?

The point of elegance is to achieve the maximum impact with the minimum input. That's especially important during this economic crisis, where everyone is trying to move forward while consuming fewer resources. Every day we've got more to do and less to do it with, and the urgent question is just how DO we maximize our impact with a minimum of input?

Q: You draw lots of examples from pop culture, science and even sports. Tell us who you wrote this book for and why you wanted to work with such a broad approach for your concept?

A: I wanted to write a “big idea” book, a counterintuitive narrative, a “change the way we think about the world” kind of book. And I wanted to pursue Collins’s “stop doing” strategy, because it was just such a notion. In order to prove his thought had merit, I needed to test it against a wide array of domains, from the arts to athletics, from industry to architecture, from science to society.

I found individuals, teams, and companies that have become adept at exploiting this uniquely powerful principle to better sculpt their ideas, performances, and lives.

The point of my quest was to answer a single question: What can we discover and learn that might allow us to bring more elegance into our own endeavors?

Q: You also delve quite a bit into brain studies and work on how the brain operates. Can you tell us a bit about that?

A: Sure. I had the opportunity to spend a significant amount of time with a neuroscientist in southern California, Jeffrey Schwartz, coauthor of *The Mind and The Brain*. He explained to me that our brains are essentially pattern-makers. All day long they record all the events and experiences—auditory, visual, and sensory—and instantaneously make patterns. Those patterns, also known as mindsets or biases, help us make it through the day, so that we don't have to solve problems at a very deep level. We see new things and our brain associates it with something we already know so that it can move on to something else. So when something is somehow missing from what we know to be a pattern, it rivets our attention. It makes us curious and we want, and need, to fill in that gap to resolve our curiosity.

It's very difficult for the human mind to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty for any length of time. When things aren't presented in a complete pattern, we inject ourselves into it to

make sure that the pattern is complete to our satisfaction, so we can resolve that dissonance in our brains. If we exert effort to complete the pattern, it has a greater impact on our lives.

Interestingly, at the same time in history, the late nineteenth century, William James looked into curiosity as the human nature to close a gap, and the Gestalt psychologists talked about the notion of closure. If you show someone a diagram of a square with a little gap in it and ask people what they see, 99.99 percent of the population will say it's a square. Their mind has automatically filled in that gap for them, when in fact it's not a square because a little piece is missing.

Even though you know there's a piece missing, you call it a square to resolve the lack of closure. That was one of the primary elements of the body of thought of the gestalt psychologists. And if you know that, you can use it and exploit it in ways that end up being a lot more powerful than if you just call it a square.

Q: *The last chapter in the book talks about how elegant solutions often appear. Can you tell us about that?*

A: My premise in the book, until the last part, is that instead of acting right away and adding something to the equation, maybe what we need to do is to stop, look around, and think a little bit more. But then I wondered, "At what point have we thought too much?"

I had read enough about elegant solutions and "Eureka!" moments to know that a lot of the most famous solutions really came to people not when they were consciously working on the problem at hand, but when they had taken time away from the problem. Isn't that what elegance really is all about? It's about not doing. It's about stopping exactly what you're doing for a moment. And if that's thinking, then so be it.

The key is the quiet mind.

Quieting the mind is what Buddhist monks do. They spend an awful lot of time meditating and being mindfully aware. Buddhist monks who meditate for 10,000 hours have significantly different brainwave patterns as shown by functional magnetic resonance imagery and eeg technology. Lo and behold, the brain patterns that some of these Buddhist monks exhibit are the exact kind of brainwaves that precede the legendary "Eureka" moment. Jeffrey Schwartz is an advocate of mindful meditation. He taught me how to do it, and I couldn't do it.

There are other neuro-mechanisms out there to quiet the mind, and as I began to investigate further, I found that all sorts of people in sports and business have started going to neurofeedback centers. Neurofeedback centers try to do exactly what mindful

meditation does, which is to find that zone where you are of a quiet mind and you're not consciously thinking of anything, which is when those connections actually get made.

Q. You won the New Yorker magazine cartoon captioning contest...did what you learned about the mind and the brain help in some way?

A. Absolutely. To be honest with you, I thought I needed a bit of street cred when it came to the mastery of seduction, which is what that contest is all about. They purposefully leave out the caption and ask readers to submit them. Instead of just using the contest as an example of a seductive idea, I thought I'd participate. I had tried a couple of times over the years and nothing.

I looked at the cartoon and asked five or six questions: who, what, where, when? I brainstormed against the answers to some of those questions before just tossing out a caption, and came up with one that I honestly didn't think most people would find funny. The panel was of two people in bed in hazmat suits. Had I leapt immediately to a solution, it would likely have involved something rather obvious, and thus unfunny to the cartoon staff and audience of *The New Yorker*.

I gave it deeper thought and let it sit with me overnight, and a caption came to me when I was on a bike ride the next day. And I won. It was, "Next time, can we just get flu shots like everyone else?"

Q: Although you call elegant solutions simple ones, they still strike me as big concepts...things that will take people some time to get their heads around. Is that what you wanted to do in writing this book? To speed up that process?

A: It takes time to get our heads around anything that flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Think of it this way. Elegant ideas are always simple. But not everything simple is elegant. I wanted to reveal the two enemies of elegance: *adding* and *acting*. They are dangerous. They lead to excess. They lead to unsustainable solutions with unwanted side effects and unintended consequences. What I wanted to do for people reading this book is exactly what Jim Collins made me do: stop, take a break, and think.

We all reach for elegance at some level, and yet it so often exceeds our grasp. Just why that's so is the interesting story.

Q: There's no special formula or specific prescription for elegance in your book, yet the kinds of ideas and solutions you write about don't magically appear. IS there a key that unlocks the power of the missing piece?

A: There is. As it turns out, there is a never ending source of innovation, one that is so utterly simple that we often forget it and bypass it entirely when we try to solve problems. But for you to discover what that is, you will need to read the book!