



LESS HULK, MORE BRUCE LEE

The Xbox Brand Transformation

Don Hall Brand

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Summary

At Microsoft, I directed the Xbox brand program over three-and-a-half years and ran global brand marketing for the 2005 launch of Xbox 360.

The program objective was to make Xbox an iconic digital entertainment brand driven by a powerfully motivating idea—a brand that was both aspirational and accessible, that cultivated an influential core and engaged the broad audience of recreational gamers around the world. My brand responsibilities included naming and visual identity, advertising, interactive, retail packaging, advertising and market research. I managed a team of 20 and guided the efforts leading creative firms such as JDK Design, 72andSunny, T.A.G. and AKQA.

Xbox has become another profitable multi-billion dollar business for Microsoft, demonstrating that Microsoft can succeed in a highly competitive consumer electronics category. The Xbox 360 brand work won numerous industry awards and, in 2005, I was named to Creativity Magazine's Top 10 most creative marketers of the year.

The Challenge

After launching in 2001, the first Xbox had sold over 20 million units worldwide in its first four years. In 2005, as Xbox developed a new hardware platform, it held a credible but secondary position in the video game market behind Sony's PlayStation.

In order to make its multi-billion dollar investment in Xbox pay off, Microsoft needed to dramatically increase sales and market share of its second-generation system. With more consumers buying high-def TVs, the new console needed to offer visually stunning gameplay. At the same time, Xbox needed to widen its lead in online and deliver new capabilities via Xbox Live.

In short, the new Xbox needed to be both a kick-ass game console and an innovative digital entertainment system.

Brand Evolution, from Xbox to Xbox 360

With its 2001 launch, the original Xbox was designed to get a foothold in the video game business controlled by Sony and Nintendo. The all-black hardware signified brute-force power. The brand was sci-fi laced with testosterone, geared towards the critical early adopters, male gamers, ages 15-24.

Looking ahead, it was clear that to achieve success in the next generation, Xbox needed to expand its appeal to a broader, more diverse audience.



The majority of casual gamers viewed Xbox as too dark, too hardcore and ultimately “just not for me”.


The Xbox team undertook a comprehensive overhaul of the Xbox brand strategy culminating in the launch of Xbox 360. In 2003, the strategic foundation was laid with the long-term brand vision, a project I directed globally. Working with Landor, I proactively enlisted hands-on participation from key stakeholders in each geography and function via a series of moderated work sessions. I also engaged product development leaders and the Xbox executive team throughout the process to ensure that the final strategy was deeply internalized by the entire organization.

Our fundamental strategic conclusion was to differentiate Xbox based on the connected/social gaming experience in which friends and family can play together, whether they're in the same room or across the country.

The social gaming positioning was rooted in a key product advantage (Xbox Live) and tapped into a powerful consumer desire. It represented a clear opportunity for Xbox to elevate its unique product capability to a brand-level idea.

The long-term brand vision we crafted was *Ultimate Social Magnet: For the most exhilarating game experiences, nothing brings people together like Xbox.*

This statement encapsulated the Xbox positioning strategy for the next decade and served as an internal rallying cry that expressed our shared aspiration for the Xbox brand.

 **XBOX 360™ POSITIONING**

Long-term Brand Vision

ULTIMATE SOCIAL MAGNET

Xbox 360™ Positioning

XBOX 360 IS A LIVING ENTERTAINMENT EXPERIENCE POWERED BY HUMAN ENERGY

LIVING: Always evolving, organic, connected, dynamic, and software-enabled
ENTERTAINMENT: Games and more
LIVING ENTERTAINMENT: Personalized entertainment that you create
EXPERIENCE: Not just a “product” but an all-encompassing experience
POWERED BY HUMAN ENERGY: Fueled by individual and social power

Communication Themes And Product Proof

CREATING & EXPRESSING Playing and interacting with people, the console and games in ways that I define	COMMUNITY & CONNECTIONS Connecting with friends and making new ones as part of a vibrant, always-on culture	COMPETITION & PROGRESSION Coming together to challenge, compete, progress and collaborate
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Brand Character And Values

A MAGNETIC CULTURAL LEADER Xbox 360 represents a primary place in entertainment culture that is inviting and exhilarating.	A CATALYST FOR IMAGINATION Xbox 360 does things that make other things happen. We don't define what happens, or where you take the experience.	AN OPTIMISTIC FUTURE VISION Xbox 360 is an optimistic vision, enabled by software, that is open, constantly evolving and with a potential that is undefined.
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The positioning framework for Xbox 360 built upon the Ultimate Social Magnet vision.

With the long-term brand vision in place, my next step was to apply the brand strategy to ‘Xenon,’ the code name for the second-generation system under development. I was the internal voice of the brand on the Xenon team, representing the brand point-of-view in debates about business trade-offs, consumer needs, and product design. I worked hand-in-hand with the user experience team responsible for industrial and UI design. The close-knit collaboration and design dialogue between the brand and product design teams sparked a conceptually rich visual language.

**Our shared mantra for the new Xbox was:
“Less Hulk, More Bruce Lee”.**

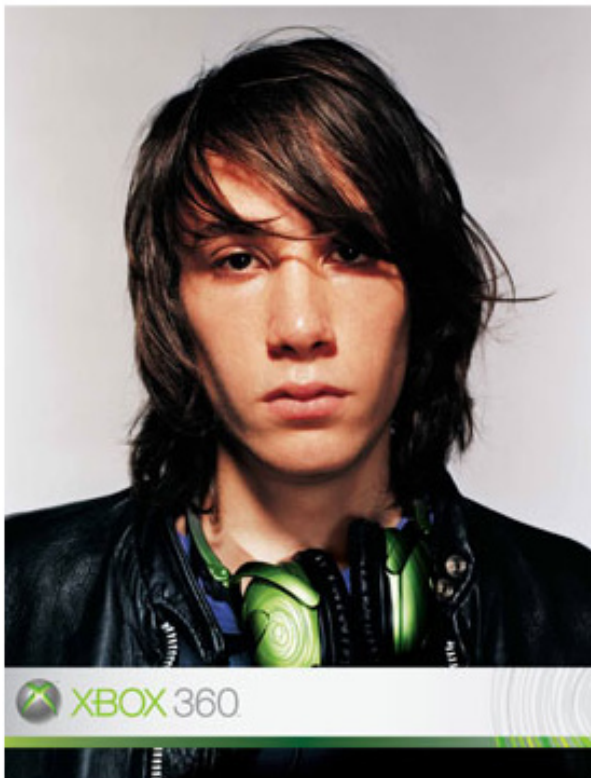
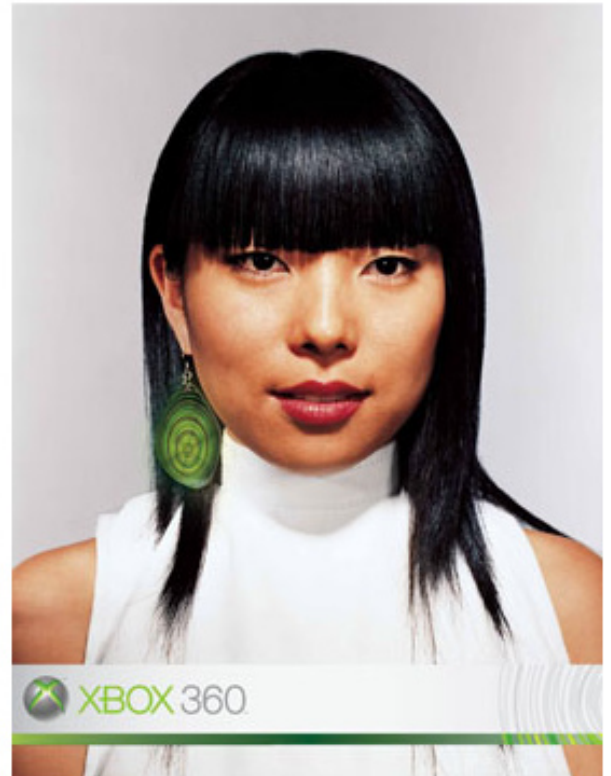
In other words, less brawn, more finesse.



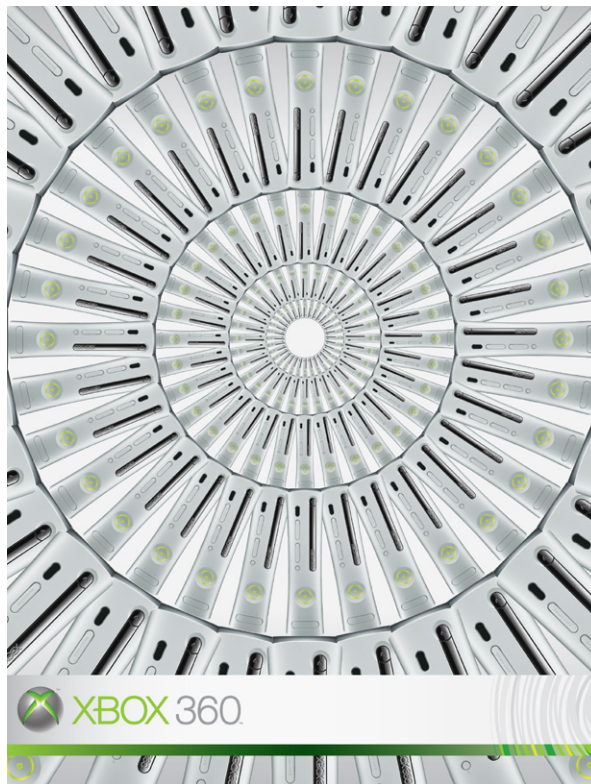
To raise the bar creatively, I brought in JDK Design. We started with the critical building blocks—the Xbox 360 name and logo featuring the new ‘sphere’ icon and streamlined typography, plus an expanded visual identity system we called ‘FLAV’ (for feel/look/attitude/voice).



The ‘360’ name signaled revolutionary change and re-positioned ‘PS3’ as incremental; the visual identity re-interprets key elements from the original Xbox with a modern, inviting aesthetic.



One of our design strategies was to re-invent the gamer geek stereotype and depict a more progressive, inclusive Future Gamer.



Two is better than one and a chorus is louder than a solo—conceptual imagery elevates the tangible product to an iconic idea.



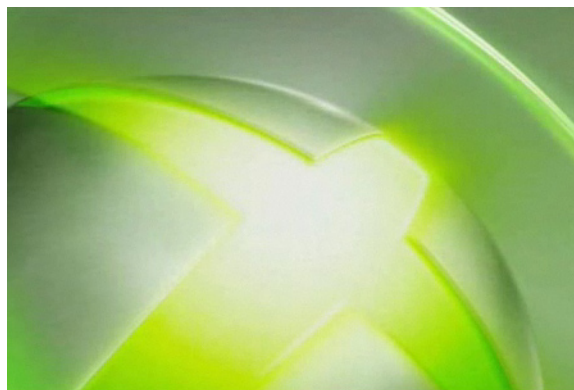
The brand as badge—this poster portrays Xbox 360 as a platform for self-expression.



The new hardware design, with its sleek tapered look, evoked 'contained power'. Industrial design, color, imagery, typography, animation, sound design and UI were all designed in concert with the brand identity to achieve a new personality for Xbox. We consciously built upon the first-generation strengths but moved the brand into a more optimistic direction.



The user interface 'blades' mirror the iconic double concavity of the console; the start-up animation depicts the transformation of Xbox, from old to new.





72andSunny joined the brand team and helped shape the Xbox 360 positioning. Building upon Ultimate Social Magnet, we articulated the brand idea that Xbox 360 is a living entertainment experience powered by human energy. We reframed the category as 'living entertainment' and we put 'power' into a new context by shifting the focus to human energy instead of graphics processing.

Instead of using PowerPoint, we shared our strategy internally with a poster gallery and a series of videos communicating the Xbox 360 brand idea. By creating these concepts, we showed the creative possibilities to hundreds of Xbox sales and marketing managers and external agencies around the world.

We also produced a short documentary about the Xbox team to help the rapidly expanding world-wide organization coalesce around a shared culture and mission.

Bringing Xbox 360 to Life

Now that we had the core brand strategy and creative assets in place, we had a clear blueprint to build from. Starting with the E3 tradeshow in the spring of 2005, we unveiled Xbox 360 to the world.



The E3 booth was a living, breathing expression of the Xbox 360 brand idea. At the E3 press briefing, the C'Mon Everybody video introduced Xbox 360 and invited everyone to join a new era of interactive entertainment. The Xbox360.com microsite enabled users to explore the new capabilities and discover hidden 'easter eggs' in an immersive branded environment.



"C'Mon Everybody"

This video introduced Xbox 360 to global media, major retailers and partners.

WATCH: <http://vimeo.com/20352586>



The outer wall of the E3 booth featured dozens of circular portals showcasing different Xbox 360 products; The Pipe, a stylish circular take on the classic photo booth, gave attendees a fun place to escape the show floor to express themselves on video (played back on large screens throughout the booth).

As Xbox 360 marketing went mass, it was critical to maintain an authentic dialogue with core gamers and stoke their enthusiasm.

In the months leading up to launch, we created an underground movement, with the Colony Ant as its mascot and a secret codified language to transmit clues to a special launch event at an airplane hangar in the Mojave Desert dubbed Zero Hour.

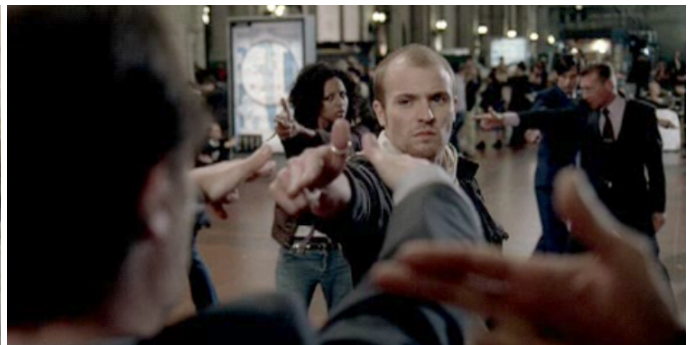


In Fall 2005, the broad-reach consumer campaign launched to coincide with Xbox 360 hitting store shelves in North America, Europe and Japan. With over \$30 million in U.S. advertising during the holidays, Xbox 360 was a ubiquitous presence on network and cable TV, online and outdoor.

The launch campaign introduced the new global tagline “Jump in”. Created by a unique cross-agency partnership of T.A.G. (now Agency215) and 72andSunny, the campaign featured 3 aspirational brand films that celebrate the human energy powering Xbox 360’s living entertainment experience. These ads worked in tandem with a series of humorous :15 product proof spots showcasing exciting new platform capabilities.



WATCH: <http://vimeo.com/20351074>



WATCH: <http://vimeo.com/20351341>



WATCH: <http://vimeo.com/20351272>

The TV spots center around familiar childhood games—jumping rope, water balloon fights and finger-gun battles—taken to an entirely new level. Intensely fun and communal, each film is a metaphor for the Xbox 360 experience.



In New York, Xbox 360 did a take-over of the Union Square subway station. In major cities in the U.S. and around the world, Xbox 360 billboards showcased the iconic new product design.

The Results

The Xbox 360 dominated the media landscape and generating a frenzy of retail traffic and selling 2.5 million units in the first 90 days. Despite some early hardware glitches, Xbox 360 went on to sell 12 million units in the first year and over 42 million as of 2010.

After trailing PlayStation for years, Xbox 360 vaulted Microsoft into the leadership role in console gaming for the first time. By broadening the Xbox brand, the Xbox 360 launch also set the stage for the mainstream success of Kinect in 2010.

Xbox 360 brand communications won a long list of global accolades in advertising, interactive, design and retail, including Silver and Bronze Lions at the Cannes International Advertising Festival, the 2006 ADDY Best in Show, and Marketing Team of the Year at the Marketing Interactive Awards.

Most important of all, the Xbox brand made a deep and lasting connection with a growing legion of consumers who have embraced the spirit of the brand and made it their own.

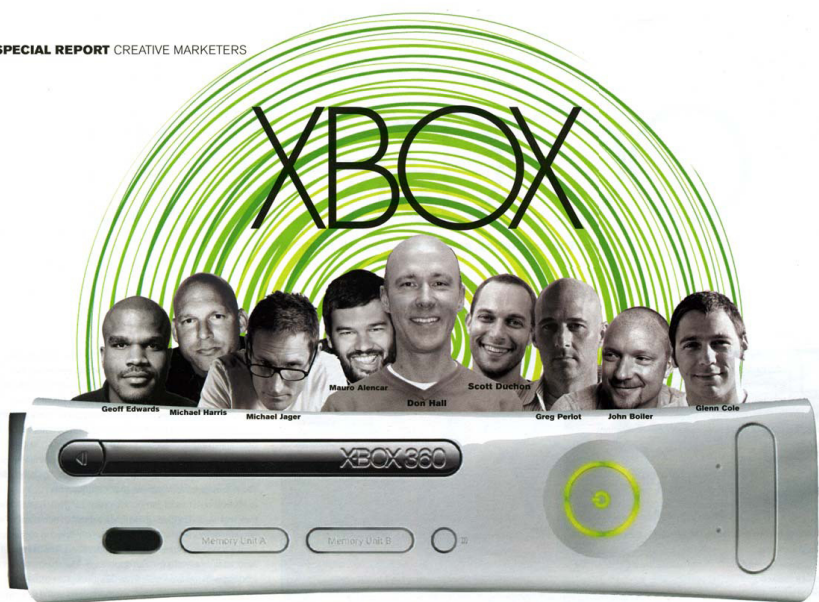
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BRAND ROYALTY THE CREATIVE MARKETERS REPORT

WITH BURGER KING,
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SPECIAL REPORT CREATIVE MARKETERS



Microsoft Xbox's Don Hall does a 360

By Ann-Christine Diaz

Even months before Microsoft officially unveiled the latest evolution of its Xbox console in May at the E3 Gaming Conference and in a super-hyped 30-minute MTV special, gamers' thumbs had been twitching wildly with anticipation. And for good reason. The Xbox 360, set to land on store shelves on November 22, aspires not just to lead the next generation of gaming devices, but it purports to revolutionize home entertainment on a broader, all-encompassing scale. While it will ramp up the gaming experience to HD, it will also act as a command center that hooks up with every other techno-pleasure provider in a consumer's living room. Oddly enough, the same thing seems to be happening with Xbox's entire communications strategy behind the launch of the new product. Don Hall, the Redmond, Wash.-based Xbox global brand marketing director, has done quite a 360 himself, assembling creative talent from multiple shops and syncing them together to produce what promises to be a massive global launch, set to break later this month.

Nearly two years ago, Hall started to draft his dream team, having been given virtually free reign by Peter Moore, Xbox corporate VP/worldwide marketing and publishing, and J. Allard, corporate VP and chief XNA architect and the key driver behind Xbox's revolution-minded strategy. Early on, Hall brought on Vermont-based JDK Design, best known for building the Burton snowboard brand. Led by co-founder Michael Jager, the JDK team started out on package design, but ended up staying on for overall branding and identity strategy, working in concert with Xbox's in-house industrial and package designers as well as a boutique Hall had enlisted to work on global brand strategy, El Segundo, Calif.-based 72andSunny, founded by John Bolter and Glenn Cole, former creatives at W&K/Amsterdam, celebrated designer Robert Nakata and former Microsoft colleague Greg Perlot. Meanwhile, they were joined

by interactive shop AKQA, itself home to a crew of interactive talents whose CVs include work for Nike and the massive web launch of Halo II. In addition, there's Xbox's agency of record McCann-Erickson, which last spring shifted its Xbox account from New York to its San Francisco office, now designated as a global creative center and home to newly arrived SVP/group creative directors Scott Duchon and Geoff Edwards, the talents behind much of the recent award-winning adidas basketball work out of TBWA/Chiat/Day/SF, as well as former Chiat strategy director Mike Harris, who became SVP/group strategy director.

While a major marketer having multiple agencies at its disposal is not unusual, it is when that marketer makes it a mandate for all of them to truly work in concert. "I think pitting one partner against each other to win a project is not the right way to go," says Hall. "One of the expectations I set is that the partners are going to have a checkpoint with each other and then bring me in." That kind of interplay is necessary, he believes, given the nature of the campaign. Hall and company won't disclose specific details about the effort except that it will involve intertwining and interacting components of TV,

web, print and packaging, directed toward both a broad audience and diehard gamers. Production insiders also say that the creative bar has been set high, involving directorial talents like Frank Budgen and Rupert Sanders. "If I go to any one of the parties," continues Hall, "they've contributed to the idea, they've had a chance to think about how might this extend to what we're doing on the web or in retail and packaging. It's a lot easier to achieve integration when you have a team that has a shared vision. It's not as if I'm the air traffic controller bringing it all together. It's a multipoint collaborative model as opposed to one that's centrally directed."

Such creative collaborations aren't new to 360 and have proven successful, says Hall. For example, when it came time to design the console, the company approached both Astro Design in San Francisco and Hers Design from Osaka, Japan. "We sort of threw them into the room together and said, 'Both of you have done really interesting things from a design perspective, and we want you to collaborate and come up with an integrated proposal,'" Hall explains. "If you have a really clear brand idea and strategic platform, I think it's really healthy to bring experts together. It's a little bit more chaotic,



Scene from mysterious countdown site www.origenxbox360.com



Film from the Xbox 360 E3 showcase

and it has to be managed somewhat diplomatically at times, but so far I really buy in deeply to this collaborative roundtable approach. It's really about getting the right people who have extraordinary talent in their areas but who also have to believe that the collaborative approach is really the right way to do it." McCann's Duchon explains, "If we needed to be 'managed' this would never work. We knew from the beginning that we had to manage all the different relationships ourselves. Otherwise Don and Xbox would never get a single point of view on how to do a big global launch and begin to transform Xbox from a video game machine into a cultural icon."

Another reason Hall has set up his dream team is because he recognizes the risks of brand dilution in the quagmire of a big-agency network. "It's very difficult for publicly traded communications conglomerates who have different arms that do different parts of the media and communications mix to deliver an integrated solution," he says. "They each have their own profit and loss responsibilities; they're large global organizations which can be sometimes unwieldy. We have our own challenges as a company on that as well, so we know that first hand. On some level, we've taken sort of the roll your own approach to an integrated model, as opposed to saying to any big multinational agency holding company, bring this all together for us, because I think that's really, really hard to do. On some level, I think the client is better suited to doing that than they are."

This might sound like he's pointing a finger at the only multinational on his roster, but Hall says, not really. "What McCann has done is remove the obstacles to have the kind of room to maneuver and have a very dedicated Xbox team, with the support network and the infrastructure and resources of a big agency. I don't want to characterize it as the prototypical big agency, because in this case they've recruited the resources we needed—Scott, Geoff and Mike—and created an environment in which they can exist fairly autonomously. So far, it's a case study for success. I think it's unusual at many other agencies to be able to do that."

Having several all-stars playing on the same turf might sound like heavy-duty fertilizer for ego-clashes, and industry insiders privy to some of the early interactions between the partnering agencies believe that this multishop formula is a recipe for disaster. But the teammates say that over time, Hall has nurtured the dynamic in a more fruitful direction. "We had experience with the partnership between TBWA and 180, so we have first hand knowledge of how things can work if everyone's on the same page with the same agenda," explains Duchon about his previous work on adidas. "Don was very curious about our experience and asked us a lot about what works and doesn't work in a creative partnership." It helps that the talents Hall has assembled all have enviable credentials. "Being with people whose work you respect is great because everybody's ideas need to rise," notes 72's Bolter. "It's like sitting around a table getting drunk and there are a couple funny guys—you don't want to be the lame guy. The opportunity here is for us to do this together. Don's tried to do this so that it never gets to questions of ownership." Adds AKQA CD Mauro Alencar, "We're all the brain cells, but we're acting as one brain that's creating the entire campaign; I really believe it's a great example of how different agencies will work together to deliver a concise and compelling communications story."

And it doesn't hurt that the forces at the senior level have proven to be just as inspiring as Hall. "It's one thing to set up collaborative networks and have all these really sharp people and a level of respect," notes JDK's Michael Jager. "But it's really magical when you also have a sense of a cause. Building a brand, having sales objectives—yes, that's part of it—but when it kicks over that the cultures internally and externally are blurring together with this energy that's more cause-related, it's amazing what happens. I truly feel we've crossed into that place. I was lucky to experience that with Burton, where it was cool to be building a brand, but there was also the cause of the snowboard culture. I really feel that's one of the big differences here. J. Allard and Peter Moore are really inspiring. They have got a vision of the future of technology, entertainment and the convergence of people's lives with it. It wasn't just launching the next version of Xbox, it was about helping to deliver an important thing that would change how people relate with technology in their homes and in a social context. It's dramatic and incredibly exciting. I truly feel that that made a difference."

Hall admits his marketing approach has been unconventional, but baby steps are not an option, given the task at hand. "We're the up-and-comer brand in the category," he says. "If we're going to make serious inroads on PlayStation, we have to take risks. We have to push the limits on breaking through with consumers. It's not an option to play it safe because that's not going to create the shift in the market that we need."



Detail from Xbox 360 countdown site