



Charlie Tyke: A Design Legacy Spanning Decades

Charlie Tyke is a name that resonates with great design. With a career spanning over 70 years, Tyke has left an indelible mark on the design world, touching multiple industries, and revolutionizing how we live, work, and play. From his early days designing the first garage door opener with an integral light fixture to revolutionizing the rotational mold industry to accommodate other products to his innovative approach to office signage, Tyke's legacy is one of creativity, ingenuity, and lasting impact.

Early Life and Artistic Passion:

Born in Pittsburgh, Charlie Tyke's passion for design was evident from a young age. As a child, he spent his Saturdays attending art classes at the Carnegie Art Museum, fueling his desire to create products that were unique and efficient. After graduating high school, Tyke joined the Air Force and served in the Korean War. Before being sent overseas, he married his wife, Dorothy, and they had their first of five daughters while being stationed in England.

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Education and Career Beginnings:

Upon returning home to Pittsburgh, Tyke enrolled at the Carnegie Institute of Technology (known today as Carnegie Mellon University), where he studied industrial design and sculpture. In 1961, he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and embarked on a series of jobs, including designing tools for The Stanley Works and housewares for Fesco (Citgo), a plastics company. These early experiences honed his skills and laid the foundation for his future success.



Little Tikes - A Toy Revolution:

While Tyke's design portfolio is vast and varied, his claim to fame lies in the creation of Little Tikes toys. The idea for this iconic molded plastic toy line came to Tyke one Christmas Eve in the late 1960s when he struggled to assemble a metal toy range and refrigerator. Recognizing the need for safer and more user-friendly toys, he used his sculpting talent to design a frog-shaped toy box. "What I really am is a frustrated sculptor," Tyke said. "Designing toys is an out for me." This innovative solution was not only easy to assemble and safe for children but also visually appealing. Tyke's use of rotational molding in the creation of toys opened the door for other products. The success of the first Little Tikes toy paved the way for it to become a household name, establishing Tyke as a pioneer in the toy industry.



Designing for Westinghouse:

In addition to his work with Little Tikes, Tyke joined the Westinghouse Design Center in Mansfield, Ohio. His design assignments encompassed a wide range of products, including electronics, appliances, office furniture, and office interiors. Tyke's creative vision and expertise contributed to the development of groundbreaking products such as the Pedestal and Tub Drawer Systems, Inner Cabinet Storage System, and Word Processing System. His designs garnered numerous awards and accolades, further solidifying his reputation as a design luminary.



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The Birth of Open Plan Accessories:

In 1978, Tyke decided to strike out on his own and founded Open Plan Accessories. To invest in his new company, he sold his interest in Little Tikes toys while continuing to work as a design consultant for Westinghouse. Open Plan Accessories introduced its first product line, System 2/90 Signage, in 1980. This innovative system featured structural rails, sliding graphic inserts, and end caps, allowing for easy message changes without replacing the entire sign. Tyke's daughter, Rebecca Tyke, Director of Marketing, proudly states that the company was sustainable before sustainability became a trend. Over the years, OPA's name was changed to System 2/90, Inc. to reflect the success of System 2/90's signage penetration into other markets.

Success and Expansion:

Today, the company is known as 2/90 Sign Systems to encompass several interior and exterior sign systems now offered. It is a thriving business known for its quality and innovation in signage. The flexibility and adaptability of their signage solutions have made them highly sought after in ever-changing environments. What started in the office furniture world has now expanded into healthcare, education, and government sectors. The company's signs can be found in prestigious institutions like General Motors, John Hopkins Health System, and Penn State University. Additionally, 2/90 Sign Systems holds contracts with the General Services Administration (GSA) and UNICOR, providing them access to numerous government projects.

Tyke's Humility and Legacy:

Despite his immense success, Charlie Tyke remained humble and prioritized his employees and customers. He firmly believed that a company's success relies on the people who work for it, which led him to make the decision to leave his company to his employees by making 2/90 an ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan). That means each employee has a vested interest in providing superior products and services. No matter who you speak with, you are dealing directly with an owner. As Tyke celebrates his 90th birthday in 2023 and reflects back on his greatest achievements, his marriage to Dorothy for almost 70 years, and his five devoted daughters, he replies with a touch of humor, stating, "I just laid there." But there is nothing funny about the visionary impact he has had on our everyday lives, playtime, and work. Tyke's designs have pushed boundaries, created innovative solutions, and made the world a better place.

Charlie Tyke's extraordinary journey as a designer has left a permanent mark on the design world. From the creation of Little Tikes toys to his pioneering work in the system signage industry, Tyke's career has been defined by creativity, innovation, and a commitment to making products that improve lives. As [2/90 Sign Systems](#) continues to thrive under the ownership of its dedicated employees, Tyke's legacy lives on, inspiring future generations of designers to think outside the box and create designs that shape the world around us.