

Insights Into Design Management

by Meredith McCain

Have you ever been in a design review when a great design was overlooked, not because it was not relevant to the brand, but because the client personally disliked the color used in the design? Have you attended a focus group where the question, “Which design do you like?” was the primary question asked, leaving you thinking, “How can I provide direction to the agency based on this feedback?” Have you ever been reviewing the design options, only to have someone make the suggestion, “Let’s take a vote...”? Has a client wanted to take your design to the lunchroom to gather opinions?

These are all common struggles every Design Manager faces. In light of that, this article will endeavor to provide helpful tips and insights to keep your life sane and make your job easier. The ideas shared here are drawn from real-life situations and lessons learned. You may find yourself relating to and agreeing with some thoughts, while disagreeing with others, simply based on your experiences in the industry.

Regardless of your reaction, you are sure to agree that a Design Manager’s job is difficult, but there are rewards for doing the job well. A Design Manager’s role is twofold—part art director and part business manager. To be effective requires the ability to use both sides of the brain. Using the right side of the brain, the Design Manager takes on the role of the Art Director. At the same time the left-brain ability helps to interpret the business strategy in a manner that will get the best work out of the agencies. The Design Manager’s role adds value

to the company—without great Design Managers, brands such as the Apple iPod or Nike would not rise to the top.

RELATING TO THE CLIENT

One of the most important aspects of a Design Manager's career is building good working relationships with clients. It is common in large corporations to find similar personality types performing specific roles, such as brand management. Typically, the clients have strong egos and can have a tendency to be condescending. These characteristics can be frustrating but should not be taken too personally. When a client makes an unreasonable request or overreacts to a simple mistake, it is important to keep in mind that the client is the captain of the brand ship and is under a lot of pressure to deliver results. Bottom line: When dealing with clients, it is key to build credibility and trust.

- **Communication**

The first critical requirement is to establish a common language. If your background is in art and design, you can easily become overwhelmed upon the first exposure to marketing jargon. A language barrier often exists between Design Managers and Brand Managers. If that is the situation you find yourself in, the best solution is to learn the language that the each client speaks. Take notes in every meeting, jotting down words and phrases that people use often. It may help to take classes on communication and presentation skills.

Did you know that 93% of communication is not what you say, but how you say it? Is that not incredible? There was a fabulous TV show that was aired on BBC America called *Faking It*. This reality program showed how average people who had a dream profession would be taught in as much detail as possible to act as though they were successful in that role. For example, if an individual's dream job is being a chef, the show would bring in famous chefs to coach this person on how to cook...but more importantly, this person would be coached in how to talk and act just like a successful chef. At the end of the program was a competition where expert judges tried to determine who were the "real" professionals and who was the "fake." It was fascinating to watch because, much of the time, the judges were not able to recognize the one who was "faking it." This show really demonstrated that how you act (ie, tone, body language, etc) is just as important as your understanding of the details of your specific trade.

With the importance of nonverbal communication in mind, watch how people in higher positions dress, their poise and their mannerisms. You can learn a great deal from their manner of conduct and how to relate it back to why they are in their current position.

- **Projects**

"Most companies set out to design a product that everyone loves; what they end up with is a product no one hates." This adage is fulfilled quite often in our industry for several reasons. One reason is that design can be

subjective. Take, for instance, the Dada movement. The philosophy of the Dada movement is the creation of art for art's sake; any object—even a toilet seat—can be called art.

A second reason we settle for mediocrity is that everyone thinks they are a designer. Design Managers can easily end up as “art waiters” if projects are not managed in the right way. Brand Managers take marketing courses where they are taught surface-level aspects of design, such as how to evaluate layouts and font usage. To borrow a phrase from a colleague, they receive just enough design knowledge to “make them dangerous.”

So what can we do to make our projects less subjective to get the best work out to the market? Here's a list of ideas, organized under the headings of specific tools:

- *Design Briefs*

Own the design brief. Request input from the client, but ensure that, at the end of the day, you have the final edit.

Narrow down the objectives. A brand can't be everything. When writing your objectives, realize that it is critical to prioritize, or even eliminate, certain objectives so that the final product makes a clear statement.

Have a vision. Provide examples of how you envision the outcome of your project, or at least benchmark brands that you feel have been successful at a similar objective. At the same time, when

providing examples, think about ways in which you can set the trends, not just follow them.

Create a mood board. A trend showing up in a number of companies, such as Target, is to add the development of a mood board at the beginning stages of a project. This is extremely helpful not only from a cost standpoint (ie, eliminating rework), but it helps the Design Manager receive buy-in for the creative direction prior to developing all of the deliverables.

Establish clear success criteria with measurable objectives.

This is difficult, but is essential to the success of any project. A classic example of poor success criteria is the use of words such as “fun,” “friendly” and “uplifting” to judge a design. These words mean different things to different people. A good criterion for success should evoke some kind of visual. You need to establish measurable objectives. Will a decision regarding design direction be made through consumer research or by pure judgment? If it’s judgment based, who will be making that decision? There are numerous ways of measuring success—having the chosen method outlined in the design brief will make your job much easier.

Be sure the timing is feasible. Do not make the mistake of underestimating the amount of time it will take to complete the project. Whenever possible, tack on some additional time to the schedule that the agency proposes. Try not to be pushed around

on timing by the clients, but also you need to be sensitive to product delivery plans. Most people perceive design like a cooking recipe. All you need is the ingredients and instructions. However, the creation of design involves some trial and error, which takes time. Make sure your clients are aware of this.

Do what is asked *and* what is right. Keep in mind this takes a bit of finesse, but try to show the clients what they are asking for *and* a vision of what it could be.

- *Design Reviews*

After the design brief is approved by the key stakeholder(s), it may be good idea to schedule weekly meetings with the client and the design firm. It is essential to have alignment and a strong design brief, but the second barrier to great design work is not having the ability to manage productive design reviews. Here are six guidelines to consider:

1. **Ensure decision-makers will be there when scheduling a review.**
2. **Display and review success criteria at the beginning of the meeting.**
3. **Review the design work with the design firm prior to review with the clients.** This sets you up for success—you are able to discuss the rationale behind the designs, and align on the design direction.

4. **Present the work yourself.** This shows ownership and builds credibility with the project team.

5. **Lead the discussion.** A Design Director once told me a story about a time in the early stages of her career working in the food and beverage category. She and her team were reviewing designs at the grocery store with the Brand Director, who made a comment about the design with which she disagreed. The first thing that came out of her mouth in response to his remark was, “That is just tasteless.” In the context of talking about food packaging, it did not sound so harsh—but she soon realized that it was probably not the most appropriate thing to say, considering her position within the company. The point is that there are bound to be times when you feel like your client is needlessly redirecting you, but you need to remember the fact that design is subjective, and it’s important to avoid being confrontational.

How do you address comments such as, “I just don’t like the color...”? Typically, the best approach is to use the same tactics we use in focus groups: ask open-ended questions, including “That’s interesting...can you tell me more?” That often helps to get at the root cause and allows you to respond appropriately to such comments.

When leading a discussion, try to discourage voting based on like versus dislike. Use your success criteria to judge the

designs. When a concept does not deliver the message it needs to deliver, kill the concept, don't just bruise it. You can waste considerable effort and time reworking an "okay" idea when it should have been killed in the beginning. The bottom line is that it either delivers the message or it doesn't. Have you ever watched a foreign film that was so well acted that you began not reading the captions—it made sense even though you couldn't understand what they were saying? A good design should be like that, with the visuals capturing the idea so well you could take away the writing and it would still make sense.

6. Request the agency to write a recap of any feedback. This ensures that there was no miscommunication and proves to be a helpful tool you can use when reviewing the revised work.

- *Research*

Finally, we get to the research part of the design process. Just as it was essential to judge design based on the success criteria in the design reviews, the use of success criteria also applies to focus groups. The best results are received when a design is shown in context. Encourage your team to keep this in mind when conducting research. Again, own the documentation. Be sure to write, or help write, the discussion guides and recap summaries when researching design. You do not want to have someone who

does not have a design background telling you how you should design.

You are probably reading this thinking, “Wow, that’s a lot of work.” Keep in mind that each project is different and each client has a different personality. These are just a few thoughts that may help as you undertake new projects. For example, when a design project gets reworked over and over, thousands of dollars can be wasted. This waste could have been prevented in the early stages of the project if there were clear success criteria and if a mood board had been created and approved. Also, remember that having a good working relationship with your client or key stakeholder is going to be critical to the success of a project.

RELATING TO THE AGENCIES

Just as relationships with clients are key for success, so are our relationships with the agencies. The design firms should be viewed as “partners” versus clients. The stronger your relationship with an agency, the better the work you will receive.

RELATING TO YOUR DESIGN TEAM

When thinking about how to make your job easier, it’s simple to focus on projects and relationships with clients, but remember that a good support system within

your design group is just as valuable. Here are a few ideas for creating an inspiring design environment:

- **Showcase great work in the work environment.** Having work on display and showing how the team has helped other brands achieve great design is not only inspiring to the team, but helps build credibility with your clients.
- **Share ideas.** This is not a novel concept, but it remains essential. It's one of the most challenging things to do when the whole team is busy with different projects. Some ways to share ideas may include e-mailing articles you have read about design, bringing in trend experts to give presentations on a regular basis, hiring employees that have different skills sets (such as fashion designers) or writing white papers on issues the team is having. One significant barrier to sharing ideas is a lack of design terminology. Vocabulary used in the graphic design world may overlap with industry terms used in the product design field but can take on completely different meanings. It's difficult enough for your clients to understand designer speak; a common language as a design group is vital to success.
- **Create tools.** As a common understanding of terms is established, it is necessary to ensure that the team has a consistent message. It can be helpful to establish a design brief template that is used by all Design Managers. It's beneficial to maintain an agency list identifying specific capabilities and rating performances. Also, there should be a defined process that clearly outlines roles and responsibilities within the team.

ADVICE

This article has covered quite a bit of ground—from how to work effectively with your clients to steps you can take when leading projects. Here are a few last insights:

- **Don't be something you are not.** The best Design Managers are great because they have their own unique style that is brought out by their personalities.
- **It's just a job.** As you climb the corporate ladder, you may have a tendency to lose your work/life balance and become a workaholic. Don't allow this to happen! Design Management is like any other job—there are advantages and disadvantages. Even so, if Design Management requires you to use your talents and allows you to give great products to people, you are sure to think that it's one of the best jobs out there!

We all have different experiences and lessons learned as Design Managers. Consider this article a working document—feel free to e-mail some of your personal advice (my e-mail address is mw_cain@hotmail.com), and it will be added to the list!