

'My own business always bores me to death. I prefer other people's.'

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), *Lady Windermere's fan*

Taking the high ground

Clients buy designs, but they also buy individuals who clearly convey relevant, informed and surprising opinions. They buy the charismatic mind, not just the brilliant execution. While designers need to show that they understand clients and their businesses, they also need to show that they can anticipate developments in and beyond the sector those businesses are in.

There is no reason to have pretensions to be a management consultant, but there is a reason to differentiate your business from those run by design-only designers. That way, you can hope to achieve higher margins and to secure more durable client relationships. A critical attitude, mastery of facts, numeracy, and real brain skills – in finding things out, writing and speaking about them – are the invaluable complement to the skills of hand and eye.

Remember, too, that although a fierce intellectual approach doesn't guarantee a close attention to client briefs, it can help to create the right forensic skills and environment to allow such attention to flourish.

The management advantages of a practical, but also intellectual, stance don't end with client relationships. Your ability to motivate, retain and get the best out of staff will be improved if they believe that they will learn from you. Your relations with suppliers and regulators will get better, the more you understand where they are coming from and going to. Your ability to get into the mainstream media, and to win more respect from everyone, will depend on your taking the high ground.

To help in this, there are plenty of books and journals on economics, leadership, management and human resources. However, although designers need to know about the dynamics of the workplace, the supply chain and perhaps even corporate finance, the imperatives for them have more to do with understanding future trends, communicating their ideas with the maximum clarity, and doing good research. Designers also need closely to follow developments in innovation and marketing.

Understanding future trends

There are many pitfalls in forecasting future trends. Designers, as much as anyone, have a habit of impressionistically representing ideas they have picked up from the mass media as their own, freshly minted. They also have much to learn about the history of ideas: understanding the past is important to grasping the real outlines of tomorrow. The Web and sites like Wikipedia make the history of ideas a much easier subject to grasp than once it was.

The chief thing to remember when working on future trends for clients is that they grow out of both the present and history, but they never repeat them. Nor is the future just something that happens to people; it's something that people, including clients, make happen.

It is always hard to predict the timing of coming developments. However, a way to avoid mistakes is to collect more professional forecasts and, having collected them, suspect them more. In particular, there is a clear need to adopt a critical and independent stance towards breathless declarations about new trends, whose novelty, poor durability and weak force make them better described as fads.

Communicating with clarity

In 1963, the legendary British advertising guru, David Ogilvy, could insist that discipline was needed to write good ads. He admonished his readers that the then 'fashionable' word 'creativity' was 'not in the twelve-volume Oxford Dictionary'.¹ His other rules included:

- What you say is more vital than how you say it
- Unless your campaign is built around a great idea, it will flop
- Give the facts
- You can't bore people into buying.

Communication needs to be simple, incisive, and, as George Orwell said of good prose, like a windowpane.²

In all your communications with clients, you need to put yourself in their shoes. The key to that is to research their overall position and operating context.

Doing good research

Your business can only benefit by conducting a programme of research that runs independently from the different projects you have running with clients.

Make sure you build separate files on:

- Sectors;
- Clients;
- Rivals;
- Issues.

With research, outcomes cannot be predicted in advance. It involves taking risks, accepting serendipity and, often, embracing the bizarre. It must have an inspiring goal. It must be comprehensive, and done from every angle. It means learning about how other people have, historically, approached the problem you're looking at – what they've got right, and what wrong.

Be prepared to suspend judgment, at least initially: don't take the problem as given. You will also find that it is particularly useful to start by thinking hard about the most topical, concrete and puzzling paradox about the issue you are researching.

For example, why is it that, despite all the interest in fashion and in mobile phones, few applications have yet emerged for what specialists have been talking about for some years: 'wearable media' – electronic textiles that can monitor your blood pressure, or adjust to different conditions of temperature and humidity? Part of the answer to this difficult question is that it is hard to make flexible electronic garments that can withstand the rigours of washing and drying. What the example shows is that, by selecting paradoxes, one is led both into useful directions for research, and into what to do next. In this case, the next thing to do would be to find out who is doing what in flexible and waterproof electronics. Makers of thin, bendy plastic electronic screens, and of underwater cameras, would be worth a look.

This broad approach to research is also relevant to how you present your ideas and your past work. Organise these things by topical and knotty theme, not by chronology. Start with the present dilemmas, explore their history from the standpoint of the present, and build design directions from scholarly, creative challenges to received opinion and the status quo.

1 David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, 1963.

2 George Orwell, Essay, *Why I Write*, 1946.

Innovation and marketing among clients

Not a few clients are rather averse to taking risks and engaging in technological innovation. Activities related to accounting and finance ('business models'), human resources, regulation and environmentalism tend to win out against hard work, leadership and long-term programmes of basic R&D.³

An obsessive interest in the West in branding, customer segmentation and customer loyalty is the flip side of disdain for the messy business of developing and applying new technologies and designs. Indeed there are signs that the East, despite its continued commitment to new technology, is also beginning to revel in marketing as a low-cost, line-of-least-resistance route toward profitability.

A big trend in the West is to talk up any aspect of innovation that isn't technological. This is all too convenient at a time when business spending on R&D, and – even more – government spending on R&D is stagnant. R&D in energy, and in services, is particularly weak.

While clients and designers both have much to learn about users, the exaltation of users as the key to innovation only flatters the user-conscious designer. Just like conventional market research, it is unlikely to lead to groundbreaking innovations. Bill Gates, Google, Sony and James Dyson did not do what they did by fixating on consumers.

In fact, investing in daring, risky, supply- and expertise-led innovations contrary to the business cycle tends to make the biggest differences. Design should be a willing collaborator in such projects, and not a cheap alternative to them.

Convincing your clients

After all these years, design is part of the mainstream, and is managed more professionally than in the past. However, for many board-level clients, it is still more about styling than about real practical benefits. To spell out those benefits convincingly, in terms of costs and time saved, ease of use, likely profitability and other factors, is the main task facing the managers of design today.

That is why you should broadly price your work by the benefits your design brings, not by the timesheets you have filled out. What clients are interested in paying for is not your blood, sweat and tears, but rather the difference you make to the bottom line. To compute that difference convincingly, you will need to understand the client's business and its future – in some ways, and without being arrogant, even better than the client.

That is also why, to give them the persuasive powers that are required, your staff need to be able to work in and feel comfortable with high professional standards of reading, writing and public presentation. Such skills can never substitute for creativity in solving design problems, but they are now the indispensable complement to professionalism in design.

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³ See James Woudhuysen and Joe Kaplinsky, *Energise! A future for energy innovation*, Chapter 7, Beautiful Books, 2009.