

CREATING GOOD

In addition to being expert visual communicators, graphic designers are often eloquent and verbose talkers. One topic about which graphic designers have plenty to say is design ethics. It is commonly agreed that one's design should not only serve the needs of the client, but also do as little harm to people and the environment as possible. Serving the needs of the client remains a widespread imperative for graphic designers—after all, the client provides the means for designers to feed their families—but it's the “doing as little harm to people and the environment” part that is often overlooked. For many, this ethical practice does not hold as much influence as fulfilling a client's needs for the reason that its consequences feel less urgent and direct. Usually, one does not receive a monetary reward for fulfilling these considerations, nor is he punished for flat-out ignoring them. All too often, the immediate effects of a designer's disregard for environmental and social concerns go completely unnoticed. But as pervading social issues and a rapidly degrading environment become increasingly difficult to ignore, designers will be forced to deal with these consequences which once felt so distant. Merely talking about these issues will no longer be sufficient; action is required if we are to make any kind of positive change.

Even the most trivial-seeming changes can make a significant difference: changing to soy-based inks, implementing a recycling program, reviewing proofs on-screen rather than on-paper—all of these little changes can accumulate into something impactful. The immediate pay-off of these changes may not be obvious, but long-term rewards will be monumental. These rewards may not come in terms of monetary compensation, but should you make environmentally-conscious choices throughout your design process, you will be doing a service to families, people, and the planet whose benefits will not only be self-actualizing, but will further extend to the whole of mankind.

Not only should the environment be of concern throughout the design process, but the extent to which one's design pays service to humanity is also of utmost importance. Does the design provide for or detract from the quality of life? Does the design rely on deceptive techniques or does it showcase a worthwhile product? It is a designer's responsibility to his fellow man to present information that represents truth and actuality to the best of his knowledge. This may feel like a daunting task—after all, graphic design is a commercial practice in which contractual duties generally take precedence over societal ones. Furthermore, the role of money in the design world is rarely a neutral one. All too often, a hunger for monetary gain distorts one's sense of responsibility. However, graphic design is fundamentally a social practice that inherently affects a large number of people. It is this power to influence that negates a graphic designer's moral obligation to humans first (and business second).

Some clients may not share this people-first perspective. Some clients may not share any of a designer's ethical or creative perspectives. Dissimilar ways of thinking and seeing are often the root of frustration and turmoil in client/designer relationships. It is easy for a designer to completely surrender his own point of view in favor of conforming to the client's—after all, they're the ones with the money, right? The problem with this concession is that when a designer completely gives up his beliefs, he is completely surrendering his perspective and voice as a designer. Without a voice, he no longer feels compelled to put his best self into the project, resulting in sub-par work and reflecting negatively both on the designer and the client's business. For this reason, rather than shut oneself off from the client, it is important instead to practice empathy in trying to understand the client and his needs.

One way to employ empathy is try to evade client/designer labels. Of course, in a business setting, it is important to practice professionalism, but it is more than acceptable to refer to The Client by his name rather than The Client. “I have a meeting with Bob at three,” rather than, “I have a meeting with The Client at three.” Remembering that underneath The Client label is a person with a history, a family, and emotions, can help bridge the distance created by client/designer roles. It's okay to get to know the client on a personal level. Not only will this allow for a more pleasant working environment, but it will facilitate communication and collaboration, increasing the likelihood of developing an end-product that both parties feel proud of.

In focusing so much time on creating design that is aesthetically elegant, graphic designers have become negligent of a changing culture and furthered the stereotype that graphic design is a subsidiary profession. The importance of aesthetics seems completely irrelevant in a nation in which, in 2009 alone, thousands of businesses have filed bankruptcy, hundreds of thousands of houses have been foreclosed, and millions have become unemployed. It is difficult to argue for the merits of graphic design when its purpose seems only ‘to make things look pretty.’ For this reason, it is no longer an option to create design that is exorbitant, conceptually weak, and culturally irrelevant.

From here on out, we must commit to substance. If graphic design is to survive as a profession, we must make sure its intent extends beyond aesthetics. Design must serve, rather than seduce, its audience; it must clarify, rather than complicate; it must be sensitive to, rather than unmindful of, the society and environment in which it exists. Graphic design has become a passive profession. We must take back its name and do something great.