



**CASE IN POINT**  
A comparison of two annual reports developed for Louis Dreyfus Natural Gas in 1998 and 2000 provides a *perfect example of the benefits of project planning*. The 2000 edition was double the size and cost (ess, thanks to *an improved planning process at the job's beginning*).

## PRODUCTION

# MAKE TIME TO SAVE TIME

In today's fast-paced world, every project may seem like a rush job, with little time for organization. But if you make it a priority to plan up front, you can save time, money and quite possibly your reputation in the long run.

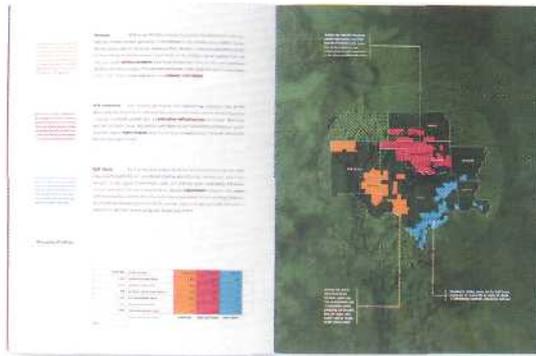
As technology permeates nearly every facet of our lives, it's broadening the scope and quickening the pace of commerce and communication. How we work, play, shop and interact is vastly different—and much more instantaneous—than it was just 10 years ago.

Businesses around the globe, both large and small, are being forced to make their products and their staffs readily available, day or night. The economics of reaching consumers allow more and more businesses to compete for attention, adding intense pressure in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

This combination adds up to challenging yet exciting times for those of us who make our living creating the materials that promote our clients' goods and services. On one side of the scale, your clients need speed to reach their audiences before the competition does. On the other side, clients and consumers demand a higher level of quality than ever before; sloppy and ineffective materials can be more than just costly—they can be downright detrimental. Whether you're an agency designer, a corporate creative or a freelancer, guiding your clients along the narrow path-

### 1998 ANNUAL REPORT

The 1998 Louis Dreyfus report was a lesson in *chaos and expense*. At just 10 pages (excluding financials), with no photography and minimal illustration, we spent \$47,500 on design, production, writing, miscellaneous and photography (we paid or photographed that wasn't even used).



### 2000 ANNUAL REPORT

Counter that with the 2000 report, which cost \$3,626 less, but was twice the size, sported numerous custom and stock photographs, and had a much cleaner design and more powerful message.

way between speed and quality is more important than ever. Though it can be a challenging task, there are steps you can take to succeed.

### DISCUSS AND DEFINE

The first step is to make sure both you and your client fully understand the project. Taking the time at the beginning of the process to assess and properly plan each project not only increases your chances of reaching the correct audience with the proper message, but can actually save you time in the long run. Just as important, it can save money and effort.

A few years ago, I worked in a creative department that was tasked to develop a direct-mail postcard. The card was sent to a select group of potential customers and was to be the first piece of an ongoing campaign. After spending a significant amount of time designing the card, taking care that the product and the company were prominently and appropriately displayed, we mailed it out and waited for the results. After several weeks and frighteningly few responses, it became clear that the project was a dismal—and expensive—failure.

What went wrong? The card was well-designed and offered a great incentive for the customer. By all accounts it should have worked. Unfortunately,

we didn't understand the project. Neither company management nor the creative team took the time up front to ask and fully answer the questions necessary to gain a true appreciation for what we were trying to accomplish.

We forgot to ask the most important question, probably because it's the most difficult one: "Why are we doing this project?" Asking "why" can be hard because it's a question filled with negative connotations. It often comes across as a challenge to authority or motives. Asked in the right way, however, it can be the key to understanding the deeper aspects of the project: Why was this specific type of project chosen? Why not a different type of project? Why now?

Going hand-in-hand with the "why," are the "what," "who" and "how." What are the goals for this project? What is the one message that must get through? What is the desired response to that message? Who is the audience. How can we reach them effectively? Finding answers to these questions (beyond the obvious "increasing sales" or "bolstering the corporate image") will help guarantee that both you and your client share the same perspective on the project. It may even lead to a total restructuring of the brand.

Once we understood why the postcard failed, we also understood that direct mail was an inappropriate way to reach our market. With this new insight, we retooled, created a different type of campaign and met our goals.

### TASK AND TRACK

Once the project and its goals have been defined, it's time to get to work. Before moving into the development stage, however, you need to identify all the ingredients necessary to complete the project, then make some decisions about how you'll obtain those essential elements.

Most projects require some form of artwork. Will you use photography, illustration or a combination of both? If photography is necessary, will you use stock or custom? Are there any taboo areas—types of shots that simply won't be allowed, despite how well they might fit into the project's design?

Speaking of taboo areas, what about the overall design? Are there any colors or themes that won't be acceptable, no matter how clever or how well they fit the project's goals? I once knew a CEO who hated purple. No matter how well a piece met the objectives, if it contained any purple, it wasn't going to fly.

What about copy? If it's a copy-intensive project, like an annual report, for example, will it be written in-house or will it be outsourced? If it's outsourced, who will be the writer's primary contact and editor within the company?

At this stage, you'll want to appoint a single project manager to shepherd the project through the production process. It will be this person's responsibility to keep everyone on track by regularly checking in with all parties and to help resolve any issues that arise along the way.

The approval process is a key item that needs to be discussed in detail at this stage, too. Who needs to

review what? At which points along the time line will those approvals need to be complete? Make sure those developing the various components are tasked with getting things to the approval authority in time to allow a thorough review. Likewise, ensure that the approval authorities know their deadlines so the project doesn't sit idly in someone's inbox.

Also, be sure to identify areas where potential pitfalls could occur. At this point in the process, you may not be able to answer *all* the nuts-and-bolts types of questions. But by answering as many as possible, both you and your client will be aware of your responsibilities. Then work with the client, using the agreed-upon goals, to measure your ideas every step of the way.

### REVIEW AND REPORT

The project is finally complete, and your client is tickled pink by how smooth and cost-efficient—not to mention successful—the process was. Take a moment to relax and pat yourself on the back.

Before you jump into the next big job, though, schedule some time to review the project. Collect all the materials that accumulated throughout the project's development—timelines, invoices, written correspondence, proofs—and reconstruct how the project unfolded. Determine what went right, why it went so well and how you can repeat the process next time. Examine what didn't go as well as expected and think about how, if a similar situation arises in the future, it can be improved.

If you work in a team environment, thoroughly review the project with your team members. Get their feedback and insights. Be sure to include any pertinent management personnel who aren't a regular part of the development team in the discussion as well.

Finally, provide a report to your client. Although you want to always present yourself, your team and your company in the best possible light, don't be afraid to acknowledge things that could have been done better. If you need to address difficulties that were caused by the client, it's important to do so in a positive way. The client needs to understand how they can improve, too. If at all possible, meet with the client face-to-face. Doing so will allow the report to become the basis for an open, positive discussion.

Benjamin Franklin once said that time is money. If it was true then, it's certainly true today. Nearly instantaneous global communication has become commonplace, and speed to market, whether it's with the product itself or the materials promoting it, is more important than ever. Yet even in such a time-sensitive environment, presentation is of equal (or perhaps even greater) value. Taking the time at the beginning of your project to fully understand and plan is an investment that will pay enormous dividends down the road. HOW

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*guiding your clients along the narrow pathway between speed and quality is more important than ever.*

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# HOW

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