



CREATIVITY

SPINNING A STORY

Knowing how to weave a good tale isn't just for bedtime anymore: Award-winning designer Jakob Trollback explains why you should start thinking of yourself as a storyteller and how to use design to move the plot along.

It started innocently enough. I was running a record store in Stockholm and DJing Saturday nights at a hip art gallery. I had to make invitations for my DJ events, so I was rubbing Letraset transfer type across the milky white breasts of pin-up girl illustrations cut from '50s black-and-white magazines. It was just for fun, and the last thing on my mind would be to call it design.

But as I continued, I started to see how design related to what I loved about DJing: Behind the turntables, I could mix different sounds together to create a new tune—one that would speak to the audience and urge them to jump to their feet and interact with it. Design was no different, I realized; it was also a language of expression.

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PICK UP THE PEN

Viewing design as a language and as a way to communicate with people entails great responsibility. Design has the capability of being one of the coolest and most emotional systems for dialogue. If you spend your time just making things look pretty, the language is pointless. You must make sure that you're not just decorating; there has to be a reason behind your design.

The solution is storytelling. It doesn't have to be writing in a traditional sense, but defining the design's message is very important. When you start to think of your design as a story rather than just a creative execution, you'll find it much easier to recognize and discard gratuitous design. Every element in your composition should add something to the story, or it has to go. This

doesn't mean that you should strive to create dry and unemotional design. On the contrary, the real power of design is the ability to make a message emotional. The trick is to understand how your design affects people. There are so many ways to communicate today and you have a very powerful toolbox; you can simultaneously design posters, websites, video blogs and short films—all from a single computer. But you can only excel in delivering your message when you understand how to put people in a particular mind-set, which comes from knowing how to capture their attention.

START WITH THE SCRIPT

A good way to get started is to put together a creative statement about your project. Do it as if you were ready to present your design to the client, and write a script. What's the idea and philosophy of the approach? Why is it different and new? Why will people care about it? Actually, why should they pick your idea? (It's definitely not going to be because you know how to use a computer with Illustrator and Photoshop and can copy trendy graphic styles.)

Coming up with the creative statement can be really challenging. Even though it won't capture any of the design's details, it's about figuring out the essence of your approach—or you won't have one at all.

You'll revise it many times as you get additional ideas and insights, but you should get it going right away. When my design firm, Trollback + Co., was faced with the task of re-branding the CBS network,

CREATIVE THINKING

Putting thoughts about a project into words helps you get a clear sense of where the project's headed. Here's the creative statement that my firm, Trollback + Co., did for our recent re-branding of CBS Network:

While it's true that since the invention of the remote control viewers have become more fickle and (less faithful to any one network, the notion of a network is still very important.

In spite of threats to the traditional model, we believe that a network that understands the transformations and disruptions in the media delivery systems, along with the changing viewing patterns, can become even more dynamic and have an even greater relevance in the future.

A couple of thoughts:

- There's a fundamental difference between active and passive entertainment.
- Storytelling will never succumb to interactive experiences. We need stories to gather understanding of our world and ourselves. They're the essence of what makes us human, and they'll never go away.
- Interactive experiences are fantastic for community-building. This is the foundation for in-depth communication and feedback.

- The explosion of media outlets isn't enabled by more free time for entertainment. We're bombarded and need to weed. A great network can be an irreplaceable curator of entertainment and information.
- Many, especially younger people, are shunning traditional viewing patterns and bypassing established commercial models. It's liberating to be able to watch outside a set schedule. Any attempt to stop this tendency is futile. We must embrace the choices these viewers make or we'll become irrelevant to them.
- Still, the traditional viewer isn't going away. Viewing-pattern research often uses young audiences in order to predict trends for the future of entertainment—largely excluding viewers with families. After a long day at work, followed by a struggle to get kids fed and in bed, they want to be entertained in the comforting glow of a great show.
- An image of what the network wants to be must run through everything it does. We always expect more and strive for success at every level.
- A successful network begets a successful network, but only if its viewers are constantly rewarded with new experiences. In the end, there's no substitute for a great show.

Content and presentation are inevitably linked together, and unless you care equally about what you're saying and how you do it, it's impossible to succeed.

the first thing we did—before any designing started—was to write a creative statement (see "Creative Thinking"). In it, we jotted down all our thoughts on and mapped out our intentions for the project. The question that had originally surfaced when we were presented with the project was whether we should market the network itself or focus on its shows. But as we worked through the statement, we could see that the decision was only hard if we insisted that a choice between the two had to be made. Instead, we were able to realize that although the shows are the network's lifeblood and must be heavily promoted, it's crucial to market CBS along with them. We believed that only by building equity in CBS as a brand could we expect a positive predisposition toward the programming as a whole.

The next part is to take that strategy and determine the project's motivation—what purpose is at the heart of the story, what's the energy that drives it forward? Think about it this way: If you raise a child, telling them, "I'm confident that whatever you set your mind to, you'll succeed in," there's going to be a greater likelihood that the confidence will make them successful. Believing in a product and a project's success is much the same. Look at HBO: They claimed, "It's not TV, it's HBO," at a time when the channel was totally uninteresting. But the projection—their motivation—worked. It's ultimately about cause and effect.

Your motivation should look at that end and be formulated in words. What's good about the product? Can you believe in it? (If you can't, the solution is to find a better client.) For our CBS re-brand, we used our frustration with the political climate in America as our motivation and reasoned that it's high time to take this country back from the cynical and the shrewd. We saw elements of CBS throughout the country's history and started to project the idea of a "Good America." We translated that by saying that CBS must be a force for truth, honesty and goodness. We put these pieces together and came up with the self-affirming concept of "We Are ...", as in "We Are CBS," "We Are 60 Minutes," "We Are CSI," "We Are Sports" and "We Are David Caruso."

SET THE SCENE

Once your statement (which you can loosely think of as the plot) is intact, you can start thinking about the

elements that paint the picture **and** provide the story's backdrop. All communication exists in a cultural and social environment. Instead of trying to invent your expression from scratch, you have to immerse yourself in this environment and let it (and the stories that come from it) serve as inspiration.

Natural references and life experiences often can define and invoke feelings that are hard to describe or pinpoint. Imagine the feeling you have when you're lying on your back in the grass, looking up through a sun-drenched canopy. You may want to re-create that thrill in your design. Or maybe it's the force of a massive train shooting by. How can you visually describe those feelings?

When you're trying to invoke **a** certain message, think about an experience—in any field—that made you feel that way. It may have been a photograph that made you smile, a live music performance that made you feel alive, or a poem by Billy Collins that left an imprint. Figure out what moved you and tap into that feeling. Was it a color, movement, sound or scale? And don't focus exclusively on the design trade. If you limit your perspective to design, the impressions and inspiration will lack dimensionality. I rarely get inspired by graphic designers, however much I may admire them. Buildings, movies, photography, choreography and music create different contexts for design and provide great inspiration.

Another great exercise is to envision your project in another medium. For example, even pointless messages can be made very seductive when they're set in motion. To combat that, at Trollback + Co. we frequently convert our on-air branding projects to print—making them static—to make sure that the idea is strong. When you formulate your message for another medium, you'll learn a lot about what you're actually saying.

There's inspiration everywhere, and, by tapping into the stories around you, it can guide your creativity to reverberate with your audience and set the scene for the story you're about to unfold.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

What I learned from years of playing music is that it's not only what songs you play that matters, but also how you play them. You could give the exact same vinyl to two different DJs, and one may have you screaming for more, while the other may make you want to get out—fast. A DJ who's brilliant at sampling and mixing may be admired (especially by other DJs) but still won't feel the love of the floor unless the content is great. A designer without a story is in the same boat. Content and presentation are inevitably linked together, and unless you care equally about what you're saying and how you do it, it's impossible to succeed. **WW**

HOWdesign.com **Extra** Read more about Jakob Trollback and how *he* got into design at *HOWdesign.com*.

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