



BUSINESS

DESIGN BY COMMITTEE

If 'design by committee' is such a bad thing, this creative pro argues, it's probably designers' fault—not our clients'.

On a recent, large(ish) identity redesign project here at Pentagram, we found ourselves at the proverbial crossroads of waiting for our client to pick between two strong logos. Similar in premise but different in execution, both of the proposed logos had their own merits and detriments, they equally fulfilled the brief, and they both reflected the path we'd traveled thus far. From the beginning of the project, it was made clear that many interested parties on our client's end would be involved—and their opinions heard. So it wasn't a surprise when the client spent several weeks circulating the contending logos.

What did come as a surprise, however, was the result of that corporate merry-go-round; We received an e-mail with a PowerPoint attachment titled "Logo_Compromise.ppt." Our collective double-clicking fingers trembled at what awaited us when we opened

the document. As you may have already imagined, the file—the result of conversations, discussions and agreements among the aforementioned interested parties—showed a spliced graphic of the two logos, creating one new logo. Of course, our gut reaction was to be offended by something like this—this Frankenstein. The nerve!

After our initial shock, we looked at the PowerPoint file, in all its blotchiness—and the combination of the two logos made perfect sense. We redrew the logo, tightened the typography, selected the PMS colors and sent it back for more circulation. After extremely thorough deliberation, involving literally do/ens of screenings of the logo (and other elements of the identity), it was finally approved. We were happy; they were happy.

It took two or three months to get to this point, and it was a consistent back-and-forth between us and our

dfrecl clients, and between them and a myriad of *their* constituents, with opinions that were logged in a lengthy Word document (many of which we had to address).

In other words, it was designed by committee.

THE BUTT OF ALL JOKES

Those three little words, a simple description of a common process, turn into venom when uttered by designers. When critiquing any kind of design project—specifically identities—saying that “it looks as if it was designed by committee” is the ultimate pejorative, making it clear that the result is not up to the critic’s own design standards. Or, possibly, meaning that the designers were defenseless against the tasteless wrath of design-illiterate clients besotted by their significant others’ love of the color blue ... clients with the sole intention of watering down the design through bad decisions and a total lack of understanding of how much more effective Mrs. Eaves is at 9 pts. than at

11 pts. ... clients who don’t respect the professional advice of a graphic designer but are happy to bring in more and more account executives and marketing senior vice presidents to make decisions based on what their boss wants (which is probably the opposite of what they *think* she wants, anyway).

Whatever the insinuation, one thing is clear: “Design by committee” is never meant as a compliment. And that’s too bad for us designers, since the majority of the work we do is initiated, executed, resolved and troubleshot through collaboration with our clients, who, as individuals or as groups of vested folks, make up committees.

If your vision of a career in graphic design doesn’t involve clients and you have the resources to maintain a sustainable practice of self-initiated projects, then you don’t have to worry about committees. Lucky you. Otherwise, your work life hinges on the rapport and **dynamic** between you and any given committee.

HOW TO SURVIVE THE COMMITTEE

Not all is rosy when working with committees, of course. Knowing when to push or pull, realizing when to step back and understanding which battles to pick are all key considerations for completing a project as unscathed as possible and in good standing. Here’s some advice:

1 Let them get tired. Committees enjoy discussion, both with you and among themselves. Opinions—about the work itself and about the internal questions the work will likely spark—will abound, and they will differ. Whether this happens in a single meeting, over the course of a week or in a span of six months, you must listen to everything, but try not to get entangled in every query that flies through the room. Nor should you attempt to answer every question they pose about your work.

Let them go back and forth a little bit. Besides being entertaining for you and therapeutic for them, all this discussion will raise some key points, so note any that might help support your case. As the meeting (or the project) wears on, be ready to make a confident, knockout statement based not just on your opinion, but also on what you’ve heard. By now, they’d be worn out and ready for a fresh, creative perspective. Which is what they hired you for in the first place.

2 Spot the villain and pick your allies. Okay, so “villain” might not be a nice thing to call anyone on a committee. But unless the stars align for you, there will be someone who’s not convinced about your proposal. And if he or she is a key decision-maker, the going will get tough for you.

Instead of writing him off as a nuisance, use the “villain’s” feedback to make your work stronger and more bulletproof. In most cases, this professional and benign friction brings out the best in your work, as it forces you to think harder about the project.

And unless you broke a mirror, walked under a staircase and spotted a black cat, you can always count on one or a few individuals who will be smitten by your work and be on your side. (If they’re the decision-makers, congratulations! Submit the invoice—quick!) Tap their knowledge and investment in the project to help you navigate the committee and to interpret the mixed signals you may be getting. Don’t ask them to convince anyone or to slay the villain; they’ll likely do it of their own accord.

Oh, and if you can’t find any allies, now’s the time to start believing in miracles.

3 Speak your design mind. You were charged with doing a design job, so don’t be afraid to talk about fonts, paper stock, imagery or the benefits of white space. After all, this is where your expertise lies. You have the ability to visualize and to produce tangible manifestations of loose ideas and peculiar constraints, so don’t hold back on explaining how you made the leap from the brief to the designs you’re showing, even if it sounds like hocus-pocus.

However, be prepared to justify your work against the terms and conditions of the project and to explain how your choices and recommendations reflect the sensibilities of the committee. Just don’t get overly geeky (no one really cares about the advancements in ligatures and alternate characters that OpenType has made possible). Keep in mind that there will be no shortage of disagreements with your work and your comments, and in plenty of cases you’ll be overruled. But as long as you’ve stated your opinion, you should feel comfortable with any of the many possible outcomes you’ve proposed. Design can take many shapes and forms, and it’s the collaboration between you and your clients that best defines the outcome. So be prepared to embrace the twists and turns that working with a committee will undoubtedly bring.

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Perhaps you think of the committee as an evil association of faceless drones that eat away at good graphic design like termites at yummy wood. In fact, they're the group of people you work with, to varying degrees of involvement, from the start of a project until the end. Whether they're note-takers, brand managers, vice presidents or CEOs, they're the people you talk to and trade e-mails with. They're the ones who brief you on the project and sit through the presentations of your work. They're responsible for informing your process and ensuring that your work is beneficial to their organization. They're the ones you celebrate with once the project is completed. They are real—and they make or break your days, weeks, months and years.

And this is why using "designed by committee" as an insult or an explanation for poor work, even if it's meant as a joke, is detrimental to our profession—and perhaps an underlying reason why graphic designers are less prone to be taken seriously. If we don't respect the decisions made by those we work with, why would anyone want to respect ours?

When we, by default, assign blame to our clients, the committee, for not allowing us to do our most "creative" work, we're insinuating that they don't know any better and that we do—that we are, indeed, more talented, but those shortsighted fools don't notice our greatness. We're questioning their expertise and understanding of their client base. We're placing blame on their decisions and input instead of taking responsibility for the work we do based on the feedback we receive from them. We're putting emphasis on the styl-

ings of the finished product, as opposed to the process that brought it there. We're forgetting that design is not about us, but about them.

And we seem to overlook the fact that everything we do is designed, to differing extents, by committee. No designer can claim to have done everything his or her way (and if they could, I can't imagine anyone wanting to work with them). Graphic design can't be practiced as a one-way street where it's our way or it's a dead end. When we use the "committee" as a scapegoat for pointing out our profession's failings, we're rejecting the idea that graphic design is an inherently collaborative process. Unless we want to add narcissism to our service offerings, we need to realize that committees shape, for better or for worse, the work we do. And any insult on them is an insult, above all, on us as we fail to honor the working relationships we build with our clients.

So the next time you're tempted to crack that "designed by committee" / .inger, think about the people you work with, who allow you to do what you love.

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