

DK Holland



## Believe in Magic

*Do our clients? Do we?*

**E**xotic Menials, the demeaning, pathetic moniker given to us by Ralph Caplan back in the '80s, stings even more today. Although graphic design is often based on intuition, this is not necessarily valued or trusted by the reality-based client. While all people use their instincts in making most decisions, they are quite often unaware of this process and routinely rationalize their thoughts to make them more acceptable.

Now that technology is king, the relationship between the client and designer is rapidly tilting in the direction of hard reality: defined now by the client's bottom line. The fact that an administrative assistant is often "designing" the internal

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newsletter nowadays doesn't help. And because of all this, even more designers feel like proud peacocks ensnarled in the vendor trap.

Do designers do themselves a disservice if they don't provide clients with insights into their process? Walter Landor<sup>1</sup>, head of the brand/package design giant Landor Associates, was

vilified by his fellow designers for listening to market research as part of his process: Landor's designs were commercial. Clients listened to him. His roadmap made sense. Many designers back then (and maybe now) prided themselves on *not* asking the consumer or constituent what they thought or wanted because it interfered with the channeling of their design muse. Intuition vs. reason. How do you balance both in the design process?

### Garbage in, garbage out

Conjuring the muse means using your gut instincts, which are quick responses using nonverbal information stored and organized by the unconscious.<sup>2</sup> No one is born with intuition; it requires discretion, so it develops with age and experience. While much about instinct remains a mystery, we know it's important to hone your intuition so it becomes more intelligent—less fuzzy, more reliable. You do this by taking in

useful ideas, actions, processes, hard data, visuals and stories that the unconscious may organize and therefore access when you need to put them to use. Putting odd things together is one way to innovate. This process is only successful if you are accessing your intelligent intuition in the process. It's "garbage in, garbage out" otherwise.

Smart designers are constantly taking the world in, methodically sopping and storing experiences and data. Since so much of what we observe is visual, explaining in words where design ideas come from risks ruining the experience. But it's also absolutely necessary to learn to do this, for clients, consultants and other team members who, while they appreciate the work, do not trust the nebulous quality of intuition. Since their frames of reference will be completely different than yours, this can result in a kind of Rorschach. So if you all use common language, it allows the whole team to participate more fully.

### Two kinds of clients

There are two kinds of clients: One who knows that good design is a necessity; the other who doesn't think it will make a big difference. High value/low value; intuition/reason. If you start by understanding which type you are speaking to, you are in better shape to successfully communicate<sup>3</sup> (or to decide to save your breath and walk away).

### Good client?

The design studio Open was brought on board to design the prototype for the new magazine *Good* in Los Angeles and went on to design fifteen issues in its first three years. Working a lot by text, e-mail and extranet, Scott Stowell, proprietor of Open, and, on *Good's* end, 24-year-old co-founder and creative director Casey Caplowe, developed a trusting, communicative partnership that led to a sophisticated, uniquely branded and successful product. Key to this success: Caplowe is a decision-maker with excellent design instincts paired with a natural curiosity about design. Clearly they developed a mutual shorthand, an easy and effective way to communicate. The *Good* target audience has a high awareness—design-literate, college-educated and politically-alert readers—which

freed up Open to think/design innovatively and to develop a visual vocabulary for *Good*. Caplowe, using his instincts and wits learned on the job. Stowell says, "When we met, I'm not sure Casey was qualified to be our intern. But as a client, he turned out to be one of the best creative directors I've worked with. He's dedicated, smart and really good at literally directing the creative work. And working long-

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distance was great. By the time *Good* would get to the office, we had our act together. By the time *Good* had their act together, we'd be going home—except when we were here all night shipping, of course." Now *Good* has a design staff in L.A., Stowell is "designer at large" and Open has moved on to its other projects. The harmony of intuition and reason is proving to be a recipe for success.

But when the balance is off, does the soufflé flop? Pepsi values design and brings good designers to its teams. When Arnell Group redesigned the much-loved Tropicana packaging for Pepsi (investing \$35 million), the new packaging was rejected by angry consumers screaming, "We want our orange-poked-with-a-straw back" (a very clever solution, let's face it). Pepsi capitulated. Peter Arnell<sup>4</sup> agreed with the reversal. Arnell also tweaked the Pepsi logo and many people felt that the new logo, which launched at the height of the 2008 presidential campaign, was too derivative of the Obama campaign logo. Arnell denies this was an influence, spying he "designs in a vacuum." What was going on here? Clearly in both cases, Pepsi and Arnell must share responsibility since one assumes they agreed on the new design at key junctures.

### Bad client?

In any healthy relationship, there is a tacit agreement that all are working in good faith. But how can you trust a client if they might take your ideas and run with them, leaving you behind? Doug Jaeger, innovation director of the New York agency Taxi, says, "It happens in advertising every day. You pitch your idea to the client, but they can't afford you so they hire a freelancer to finish off the project. Now we have a contract that they must sign before we even show our ideas to them. It says the client acknowledges that we own our work."

If it happens every day, there is a reason people feel they can get away with it. Too few lawsuits. Too little professional outcry. The unfortunate result must be a lessening of great design, a quieting of the muse.

TBWA\Chiat\Day, Absolut Vodka's agency of record, has

worked with designer Stefan Sagmeister in the past. Last summer, an ad aired for Absolut that looked a lot like Sagmeister's work, but Sagmeister had taken the year off to live in Bali. What gives? The ad used different materials to configure each word in a wistful or pithy phrase, in a kind of magical diorama. This is a very distinctive concept that Sagmeister has become well known for around the world. It's become his stock in trade. Was it Sagmeister's work or just an Absolut ripoff? When searching the credits, Sagmeister's name was nowhere to be found.<sup>5</sup>

Jaeger himself has worked on Absolut campaigns. He says, "It's sad, because a brand like Absolut could have brought more eyes to his work, and helped amplify his commercial success. However, instead of amplifying him, it seems like they have stolen from him."

If it's not Sagmeister's work, what did TBWA add to his concept? If you are going to steal, steal from the best but make it your own: Make it new and make it better. What if TBWA submitted the Sagmeister look-alike ad to the Art Directors Club Annual Show? Jaeger, who is also the president of the Art Directors Club, says, "It would probably not be awarded if it's derivative."

Designer Debbie Millman, Sterling Brands, is also president of the AIGA. She says, "It's really troubling if TBWA would deliberately use the specific vernacular that Stefan created. It's ironic: Absolut is flying in the face of the very value they tout—innovation—by committing visual plagiarism." If this is true, what good did this ad do for TBWA or their client Absolut? What bad?

Designer Brent Marmo of Design Marmo speculates, "In situations like this the whole community has to stand up and protest the ripping off of a designer's work. It's creative abuse. Sagmeister worked his whole life to develop this voice and if TBWA stole it, that's thievery." Whether taking someone's work is considered plagiarism or copyright infringement is open to debate; whether it is unethical is not.

Everything comes from someplace; everything is appropriated. The cliché is a big part of our visual language. How would people ever interpret what they're looking at if the cliché weren't universal?

The tools for innovation come from the world we live in. It's the creative mind that puts it all together to enrich the world. Sagmeister, whose year in Bali was "experimental," does not design in a vacuum. Sagmeister absorbed Bali, adding selectively to the seemingly endless bounty in his unconscious.

### Disastrous pairing: technology and ignorance

Since all designers' works are influenced by what they see and experience, it's dangerous to think that nothing is protected.

On all sides—the client, the young and/or clueless designer—people want what they want. They feel they can go on the Internet and grab anything: Use anything without recourse. Unless they are taught there are repercussions, this will only get worse. They are heading down the road to being very bad designers, very bad clients, very bad employees. What are design schools doing to help avoid this calamity?

Designer Tom Dolle, Tom Dolle Design, questions, "Because of the newness, the rapid change, do younger designers lack a moral center when it comes to their work?" Dolle teaches in

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the graduate communication design program at Pratt. He systematically ingrains the need to think in his students. He says, "I talk to my students about making choices. I get them to think about how they develop their design. A lot of young designers don't realize that each decision—developing a concept, picking a typeface, color, illustration—is the result of informed judgment and

that's what designers are hired for. What research did you do that led you to these choices? Learning how to make good choices is essential to becoming a good designer." Critical thinking (paired with succinct articulation) is essential to developing effective communications.

The caution: Don't kill the golden goose, don't over think. Honor your muse. Take in rational information, organize it, then let it go into the unconscious. See what comes out: in a client meeting; in the shower; in casual conversation. This is the magic that smart, savvy clients hire good designers for. Clients, who do not work on design projects every day, are not necessarily able to be active players when it comes to design since they have not developed a methodology (Caplowe is a good example of a client who has).

### **We have met the enemy and he is both of us.**

Speaking of the increasing devaluing of design, Millman says, "Designers feel so insecure, we find it difficult to stand up for ourselves. We are constantly questioning the value of what we do. It's not surprising that this is happening."

Designer Craig Bernhardt of Bernhardt Fudyma agrees, "Since there is a vendor mentality towards us, the client wants to keep decision-making in house. With the right kind of person, in the right company that appreciates what designers do, they are happy to give you back some of the power." The designer earns that power by courting a relationship of

common understanding based on the needs of the project.

Designer Mark Randall, principal of Worldstudio, tells a tale of power usurped. "We were developing a logo for a long-standing client, they knew what they wanted and we knew what to give them. The logo was enthusiastically approved by all, and then presented to a consultant on the project who swiftly rejected everything we did. Our client was intimidated and as a result let the consultant derail and take over the entire process." Dismayed, he adds, "All of her decisions were made on a whim without the benefit of the strategy that we put into the process. Our client ended up with a logo that represented the opposite of the brief they gave us initially."

Confidence is also a huge factor in team building. "A lot of clients are worried their brand will fail—and can't get beyond the fear," Millman observes. "I'd say this happens 40 percent of the time. In those cases, it makes it very hard to be effective." Millman says it matters with whom you are working. "You want to be hired by someone who believes you can solve their problems. A lot of companies have visual brand stewards with MBAs. They are more apt to accept the design process." How do great ideas gel, especially those developed by teams? Designer Tracy Turner, Tracy Turner Design, cites the documentary, *Art and Copy*, "The film examines many of advertising's watershed events and the key creative players. What emerges is the real importance of play, the absolute necessity of creating a space that encourages camaraderie, communication and the free flowing of intuitive ideas."

### **Thought leaders, not thought vendors**

The ability to "read" people is another skill that uses intuition and is essential to successful team dynamics. Knowing how to do this actively sets you up to be a leader. Marmo, an effective communicator, designer and "people person" says, "I haven't shown a portfolio in so long. I don't think you can compete on visuals anymore. Our talent is getting rid of the extraneous to promote what's special, what can be celebrated; designers are a unique breed that way."

Marmo, a graphic designer in the classic sense, says, "I mourn the days when there were carte blanche budgets and big huge clients. I miss the smell of printer's ink and Polaroids, but my work has shifted dramatically to the brand experience, not just graphic design. It was probably six years ago when I first designed an internal brand. I saw that people hated working at this place. I realized the contrast: I love my work. The contrast made a shift in my head. I'm more interested in the bigger picture, the entity and how I can engage the people working in the entity. And that extrapolates to the product, the external experience of the product. Eighty percent of my work now is helping clients understand the core of their work." He adds, "It's all collaboration. For instance, after a

lot of research, I'm working with the Minneapolis Public Schools to write their brand platform. It's been accepted by the superintendent cabinet and board of education.

"I'm facilitating discussions on what they do in the context of the brand promise. We are developing messages based on the different departments' motivation—getting them more focused. They don't see me as a designer, they see me as a brand expert and I can execute ideas visually.

"Facilitating, collecting data, listening and then the visualization I design will be used to create training, recruitment and the tone of speeches. It's the benchmark for all communications. This will all be tied together in the brand manual that will be handed over to the Minneapolis Public Schools Communication Department that will update it. I empower my clients while planning my own obsolescence."

This mature approach is one a lot of good designers adopted. Randall, who, in addition to Worldstudio runs Worldstudio Foundation, knows a lot about strategy from an organizational level. He says, "We're helping the client develop their ideas to result in design solutions. It's not just the artifacts that solve a problem. Marketing and strategy come first. Design supports it. Sometimes we don't even create the design. We are consultants. We often find this much more interesting, more challenging, more substantive. Younger designers might find this frustrating. They just want to make the logo."

The attitude that design is the most important thing can be the downfall of the designer. Randall adds, "It's not a simple transaction anymore; there are a lot more moving parts and design gets pushed down the ladder of importance. Deadlines are so shortened." Remembering the old days he says, "When I worked with Massimo Vignelli, who sometimes gave no options, he would present the client with their new logo. That was it. The narrow view no longer exists." And the "no option" was a bad idea anyhow. Bernhardt says strategically, "Designers should always show the client options and not try to force a single idea in the meeting. Don't show ideas that you can't implement successfully. Make recommendations." This approach encourages clients (and other team members) to be more engaged and ultimately become a more important part of the process. Bernhardt says further, "If the decision-maker is involved in the earlier decisions, by the time we get to the end they aren't questioning why and what we are doing." If they were developing the project through clear communication all along (intuitive and rational), they will feel comfortable with the roadmap.

Designer Tucker Viemeister, Rockwell Group, adds some perspective, "The retail trend in the 1800s was quantity and sales. In the 1900s it was branding and services. In the 2000s it is about the experience and maybe they will buy some-

thing. The trend is that people are buying less. The \$50 million bonuses on Wall Street created unrealistic expectations for the rest of us. Our life is either making money or spending money. Life is not all about economics." Designers can help create a rich and meaningful experience in this context, when clients let them.

Speaking of money, photographer Sean Kernan says, "Lower-level managers in any company have to save money. That is their mandate. You have to be working at a higher level to have a higher value of creativity." When you are highly creative and working low level, the project is often doomed.

### Comparative professions

Relying on intuition interpreted by reason is not unique to design. The excellent doctor with a very sick patient; the

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highly decorated policeman and the uncooperative suspect; and the star hockey coach with his freshman team. It's crucial that these very accomplished people remain disciplined in their thinking and communication skills in order to put their intuition to work in decision-making. Not doing so could result in bad outcomes—overly intellectual, fuzzy or just emotionally convoluted. While people may or may not be aware of the important role instinct plays

as part of their process, they will all rationalize their decisions until our Western society learns to value and trust what they can't necessarily see. Your intuition is non-transferable. It's indefinable. It's your alchemy, your magic. Believe in it.

### Notes

1. Walter Landor died in 1995.
2. *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious* by Gerd Gigerenzer (director of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin) Penquin Books, 2007.
3. Latin: to make common.
4. Peter Arnell was asked for comment, but did not respond.
5. Stefan Sagmeister had no comment. TBWA, when asked for comment, did not return calls.