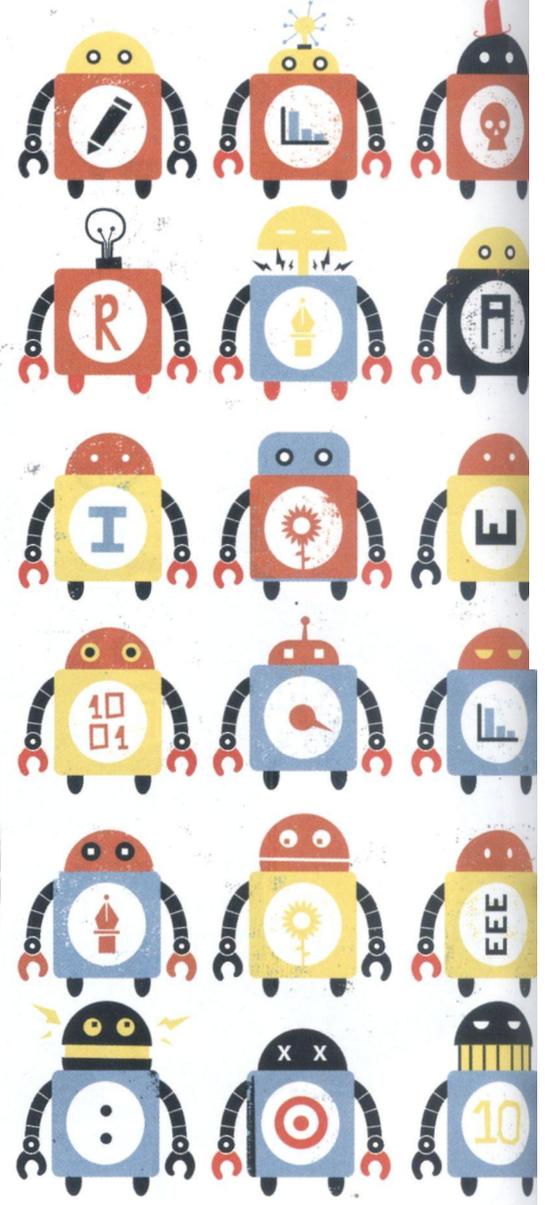
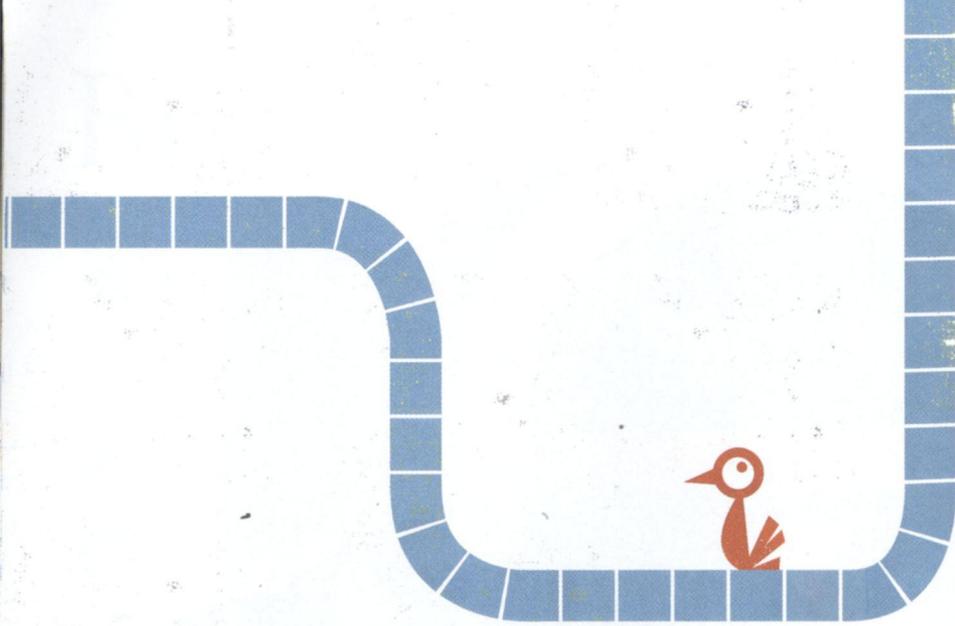


DESIGN'S DILEMMA

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SHAW NIELSEN

Designers regard crowdsourcing (and its cousin, speculative work) with dismay. But is this trend an unstoppable movement that's ultimately not to be feared? Or an unfair business practice to be avoided? Two respected voices in the design industry examine both sides of the argument.



AN IRREVERSIBLE MOVEMENT

BY DAVID C. BAKER

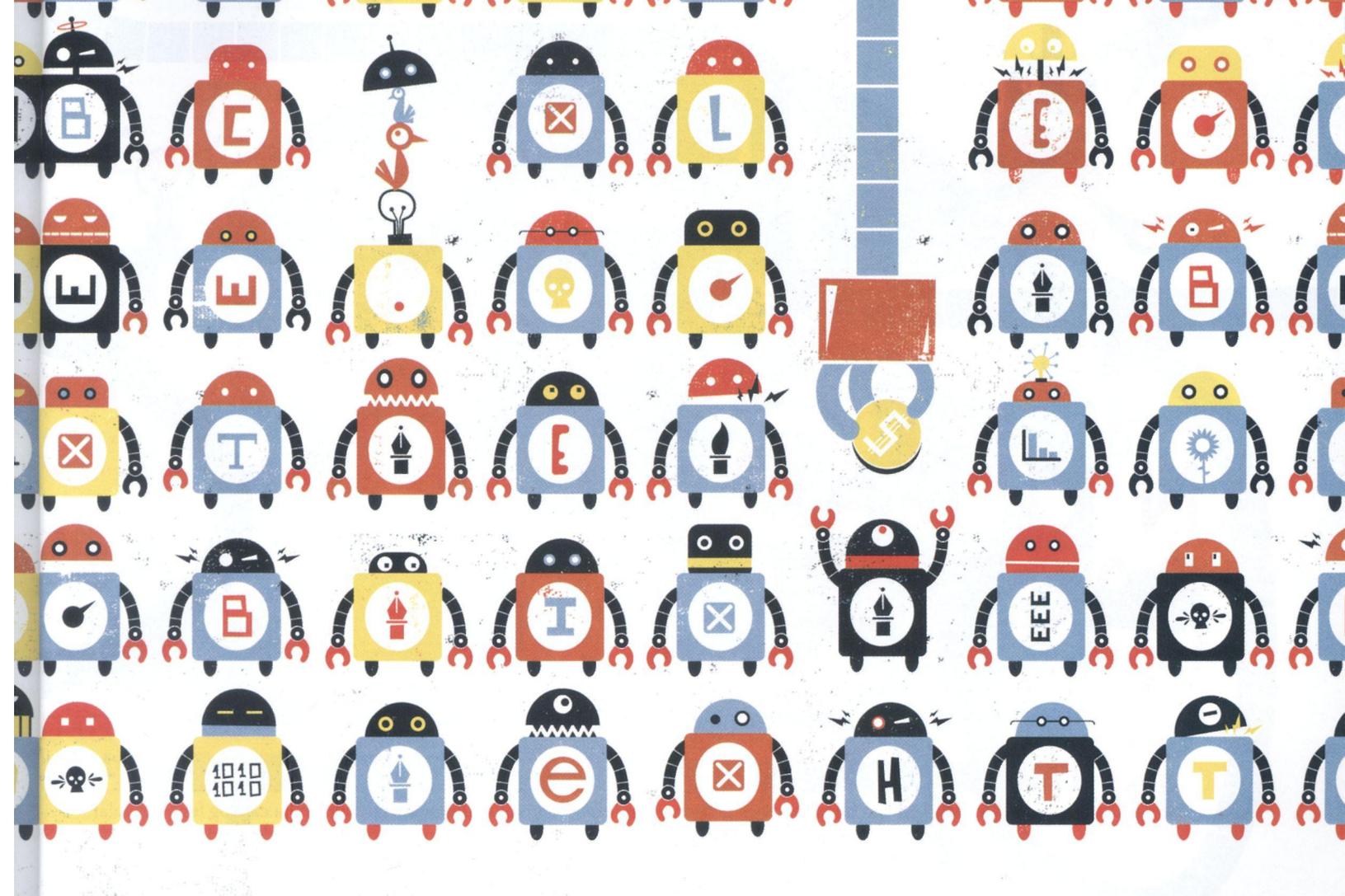
Let's start by defining our terms: First, crowdsourcing is outsourcing to a crowd of people via an open call for contributions. There's nothing inherent in the term about a contest, though sponsoring a design contest seems to be where the controversy lies. In such a contest, a project is posted and anyone can participate by offering a solution. Typically a winner is chosen, and only that solution is rewarded monetarily. The other participants retain rights to their offerings but are not paid for their work.

Crowdsourcing has been a polarizing development, eliciting mass hysteria from some design devotees. That's partly because it's misunderstood and partly because it deserves our collective ire. What it does not deserve, however, is our fear. It's nothing more than disintermediation, accomplished on a web 2.0 platform. Disintermediation is just a big word that means the middle guy is getting screwed, and that middle guy is you. Crowdsourcing is enabling end clients to ignore your services and go straight to this crowd of designers who will do the work and who expect to get paid only

if the client likes the work. So, how is this a good thing and not something to be feared, you say? Let me offer 10 reasons why this irreversible movement should not terrify us.

First, crowdsourcing will distract our worst clients by tempting them with great work at cheap prices. That'll help us quit wasting our time serving them in the first place. Every hour we spend with an unqualified client is one less hour spent really delivering value that's appreciated. If you have a client who honestly sees crowdsourcing as a viable alternative, you don't really have much of a client at all.

Second, crowdsourcing will speed the marginalization of implementation by applying even more budget pressure. That's good because it'll make it increasingly impossible to continue living in denial about how little clients honestly value design. What they value is problem-solving; design (in most cases) is viewed merely as a means to an end. Bravo for them. That's precisely how it should be viewed. The value of design is what it facilitates—not the process itself.



Third, the exact same thing can be said about the pressure of deadlines, which are critically important in the minds of clients. The idea that multiple people can be working on the same problem to shorten the design cycle is justifiably alluring. The world does not generally exist to protect design deadlines. It's in a constant state of flux, and we'll have to adapt to that pressure or become irrelevant. In a world where the average tenure of a top marketing executive turns over every 21 months, we can't expect to be given generous deadlines to get things done. Few execs have that kind of pull anymore.

Fourth, crowdsourcing provides a platform for designers who wouldn't otherwise be given a chance to showcase their talents. It breaks down barriers in education, geography and socioeconomic status.

Fifth, crowdsourcing can help you discover talent for your own firm. All you need to do is scan the contest entries from time to time and note entrants who consistently follow a creative brief and produce great work. Then, crowdsource a project of your own and

make it invitation-only. Seek contributions from those handpicked designers and then split the prize among all of those that you've invited to participate so that no one is working for free. Or, get their contact information and work with them directly in the future, treating them respectfully as freelancers.

Sixth, crowdsourcing helps to develop the same talent that gets discovered. Participants get honest (and often brutal) feedback in the cold, hard light of the marketplace. Would you rather work with a designer who's been coddled or one who's discovered that some ideas are stupid and deserve to be labeled as such? In crowdsourcing, they (can) get real feedback, and apparently it's valued or there wouldn't be so many participants who keep coming back for more of it.

Seventh, crowdsourcing places the spotlight on the real value in design, and that's the management of the process itself. Design is (or soon will be) approaching commodity status, but the management of the design process is difficult, misunderstood and undervalued. When you feature a commodity (like design) and

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AN UNFAIR PRACTICE

BY DEBBIE MILLMAN

In the late 1980s, after five years of being employed by others, a good friend and I optimistically hung out a shingle and started our own design firm. As with most new ventures, we were hopeful and hungry for work and called everyone we knew in an attempt to drum up business. Most of the projects we snagged were dreary and unremarkable: They consisted of an ad campaign for a ceiling fan company, a brochure for an electrician and a catalog for a modular office furniture distributor. We were desperate to make our mark both as entrepreneurs and designers in New York City, and we longed for what we considered the big time: working with magazines, museums, musicians, restaurants and theater companies.

As we paged through design annuals and the hefty monographs of the practitioners we both envied and adored, we were baffled by the abundance. Given our tiny business network, the limited bandwidth of our current clientele and our marginal sales acumen, we wondered how we could ever hope to get the sexier, more exciting work that was being done by firms such as M&Co., DoubleSpace and Manhattan Design. We were stumped and kept on dialing for dollars (phoning companies whose work we coveted). If someone actually answered the phone, we requested an opportunity to present a portfolio that was inevitably jam-packed with an ad campaign for a ceiling fan company, a

brochure for an electrician and a catalog for a modular office furniture distributor. Needless to say, it was a conundrum we couldn't combat.

One company we were most eager to work for was MTV. In 1989, designing anything for the trendy upstart was one of the coolest gigs on the planet, and both my partner and I fiercely wanted in. An opportunity finally arose via a referral from a friend of a friend of my partner's brother, and we were summoned to MTV's swanky headquarters in midtown Manhattan. Together, we took the subway from our small Chelsea office and imagined what we might be hired to do. Would it be something for the Video Music Awards? Could they want a new logo?

With hopes high, I remember high-fiving my partner in the lobby before going up to the meeting. We couldn't believe how lucky we were: At long last, our dream might actually come true. As soon as we heard the details about the project, our excitement waned.

Apparently, our contact at MTV had asked five firms to work on the first phase of a brochure project, all at the same time. She explained that when she evaluated all of the submissions from the participating agencies, she would pick the company whose work she liked best to finish the project. I consoled myself with the notion that the fee for the one phase could still help us with our mounting bills—until we



were informed that this stage of the assignment was uncompensated.

We paused. Uncompensated meant speculative—no money. MTV wanted us to do the first phase of the project for free.

We were heartbroken. We thought about it. We considered saying no. Finally we decided that in order to get our foot in the door, we'd participate in the pitch.

In an effort to be fair, MTV identified the other agencies involved in the competition. We realized we were small fish in a big pond; other much more prominent firms were asked to do the free work as well, and we were told that everyone agreed to participate except a company called Frankfurt Gips Balkind. We stayed up for days on end and, at our own expense, hired a great illustrator to help us with the work. But, alas, we didn't win the project.

A year later, we found out that Frankfurt Gips Balkind ended up getting hired for the job. Apparently, MTV didn't like any of the speculative work

from any of the pitch agencies, and hired the one firm that wouldn't do the work for free. Shortly thereafter, I decided that I needed to relearn everything I knew about the design business and left my partnership. One year after that, I went to work for Steve Frankfurt, Phil Gips and Aubrey Balkind, and I've never done speculative work since.

Sadly, the demand for this type of work seems to be growing in scope and momentum. As I witness the requests tendered to my staff, my students and young designers trying to build a reputation and a portfolio, and as I measure the popularity of crowdsourcing sites and initiatives, I have become more outspoken against these practices, knowing full well the damage they can do to designers and the clients who work this way.

On the most simplistic level, speculative and crowdsourced work is unfair. Professional designers are practitioners who earn a living designing things. Most designers are educated, with degrees in design or business or both. I believe that requesting a designer

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minimize the management of that process, bad things happen. And when those bad things happen, the better clients will begin to understand that there's a reason you're as successful as you are: because you've learned how to manage the process.

Eighth, crowdsourcing forces you to institutionalize processes and information. The art of articulating a point of view in writing is too easy to skip when you have ready access to a designer in the cubicle next door, but crowdsourcing forces the articulation of a project in a good way because it must be boiled down to verbal concepts.

Ninth, crowdsourcing can help build a flexible, on-demand workforce. You might take advantage, say, of the work that can be done across multiple timezones. Of course it's easier to stop using a contractor than to dismiss an employee.

Tenth, terrifying or not, crowdsourcing is a reality. Fear is only useful to the extent that it motivates you to get your act together so that crowdsourcing isn't a threat. Here's another way to say that: If you're terrified, well, you ought to be, because the movement is highlighting how poorly prepared you are. Consider this an early warning sign.

So, good or bad, it's not to be feared. In fact, you might even take advantage of it.

The first thing you might do is use one of the services firsthand so that you understand it. Better yet, have a rising creative on your staff lead that process. They'll find that it sharpens their skills in terms of how they relate to other creatives and give them feedback. As described above, it forces articulation, and that's always a good thing.

The second thing you might do is make up your own mind—in writing—about crowdsourcing. Develop a non-hysterical, cogent position paper that's fair, and then publish it on your website. If nothing else, it'll be easier to point to an existing policy rather than having a prospect think you're winging it with an on-the-fly response their query.

May I make one other suggestion? Let's not have selective ethics about this. Really, now, is crowdsourcing all that different from using unpaid or under-paid interns? Or under-charging and over-servicing clients? Crowdsourcing participants take part in the process willingly, just like you do.

If you're any good, you should be frying bigger fish than crowdsourcing. Let's save our fear and ire for the more pressing issues like the increasing marginalization of design as a profession. Crowdsourcing is evidence of that—but we're the overall cause.

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www.recourses.com

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to participate in a scenario wherein they deliver design work for a commercial project requires compensation: the exchange of work for a fair fee. Engaging a designer to do work that a client gets to evaluate before making a determination to pay them—or not—denigrates the profession of design and all designers everywhere. No one would consider asking a plumber to work on spec. Why should a graphic designer?

I also believe that speculative and crowdsourced work compromise the quality of product clients are entitled to. This type of work precludes the most important elements of most design projects—research, thoughtful consideration of alternatives, and development and testing of prototypes. Designers often risk being taken advantage of, as some prospective clients see this as a way to get free work; it also diminishes the true economic value of the contribution designers make toward clients' objectives. Finally, there can be substantial legal risks for both parties should aspects of intellectual property, trademark and trade-dress infringements become a factor.

Last year, the firm I now work for, Sterling Brands, was approached by a major food organization looking to redesign their corporate logo. As part of the pitch process, we were asked to present speculative design work. Instead, we went to the pitch meeting and outlined how we might strategically partner with them to solve their design and marketing challenges, but we did not include any speculative creative whatsoever.

We explained that the professional ethics of the design profession have long included a prohibition on speculative work because it compromises the interests of the client, it prevents designers from practicing the discipline of design as a problem-solving process, and it fails to respect the profession and the value it creates through designers' creative gift and professional discipline. We expressed to them that many designers—backed by this legacy of professional conduct—believe that if we give away our design work for free, if we give away our talent and our expertise without compensation and respect, then we give away more than the work: We give away our souls.

We got the job. **HOW**

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