

IN-HOUSE ISSUES

CLIENT RELATIONS

Manage your client relationships well and you'll see a pay-off not only in the way other departments interact with yours, but also in the quality of work you're asked to do.

The phone rings and you're a little startled. It rings again. And again. It doesn't stop. Then you realize that the phone calls are coming from inside the house. Don't be frightened, though, because that house is the company you work for and those calls are coming from your clients.

Your internal clients—the stakeholders—are your lifeblood. Not only that, they're also your co-workers, colleagues and peers who embrace the same values and corporate vision. They have a vested interest in the well-being and overall success of your company. They're brothers and sisters in arms, fighting the same fight with mutual dedication and a common purpose. These will be the most important associations—outside of your boss—that you will have in your organization, and because you can't hire or fire your in-house clients, it's important that you take the time to manage these relationships well.

As an in-house creative, you have the opportunity to work on a wide range of project types and interact with more people than you would on the outside. You may develop product concepts, advertising, motion graphics, brochures, newsletters, stationery, logos, mock-ups and corporate communications. And you'll have contact with people not only from marketing and sales, but also from all the administrative departments that support a corporation; benefits, HR, finance, IT, public affairs and travel, to name a few. This exposure will give you more experience in dealing with different types of people and job functions as well, and the more you learn about how your company works, the more work you'll get from your company.

REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEONE

When I was building my in-house department, one of my primary goals was to capture high-profile work that would make our services essential and contribute to the success of the organization. I achieved this by building relationships and reaching out to the various internal business groups throughout the company. But it didn't happen overnight. These relationships developed over many years, through the implementation of initiatives designed to attract and keep clients: Branding and marketing the department, creating a department intranet site and capability brochure, displaying framed samples of our best work, holding open houses, and winning design awards all contributed to this effort.

My ultimate goal was to become an indispensable resource for all design and production work. If we weren't able to assist our clients internally, I would work with a creative team at another site or external vendors to facilitate the process. Recognizing our limitations and accepting the fact that there were projects that exceeded our capabilities led me to create a network of vendors I could rely on, which in turn helped to build trust from our in-house clients who felt secure knowing their projects were in good hands.

Be accommodating and show your new clients that you're adaptable. Those initial introductions and project meetings will set the tone and foundation for building trust. And remember, first impressions are everything. If you don't deliver the first time you work together, chances are your clients won't be coming back for seconds.

SPACE INVADERS

Many in-house creative departments are inherently "flat" models eschewing the agency hierarchal structure with art directors, project managers and copywriters in favor of designers who multi-task and employ a wide variety of talents and skill sets. And my department is no exception. My staff is responsible for navigating projects from concept to print, and they wear many hats: project manager, art director, designer, production artist and print coordinator. This enables them to work very closely with clients to assess their needs and ensure the work meets their expectations, and is completed cost-effectively and on time.

But it also places a lot of stress on the designer because, let's face it, clients often abuse the onsite convenience you offer and can latch onto a designer like a blood-sucking leech, never allowing them time to do their job. If you're the design manager, this would be a good time for you to step in and help control the process. Work with the client directly and give your designers some space so they can do what they do best: design. You may also find that it's not appropriate for everyone in your department to interact with clients. And that's OK, too. Many designers would rather be left alone to think, dream, play and explore and may not have the people skills needed to manage an overbearing client. It's up to you to identify those designers on your team who can work well with clients and those who may alienate them and end up costing you business.

WRONG, NUMBERS

Unlike a design agency, you can't choose your clients and you can't fire them either. You're stuck with them. They came with the building and aren't going anywhere. And because your stakeholders are only an elevator ride or maybe a cubicle away, there are a variety of challenges that will impact you and your team, especially the demand for faster turnaround. Over your tenure, you will be both blessed with good clients and cursed with clients from hell. You know who they are: the helicopter clients who hover over your shoulder and like to play art director. The clients who proof their work *after* it's printed and never have time to complete a requisition or meet with you to discuss the details, yet need everything ASAP even when you have no information or direction. The ones who like to design by committee, and always, always want the logo bigger. I could go on and on.

The most effective way to handle those "challenging" clients is to maintain your professionalism at all times. People come to you for your experience, skills, talent and knowledge. So be confident and self-assured and be prepared to justify your design choices with conviction. Use corporate and product branding guidelines when possible to explain your design decisions. This strategy moves the conversation from a subjective one to an objective one focusing on design standards and compliance. Remind your clients that design is a problem-solving discipline and your role is to create compelling visuals to help them meet their business objectives. Take a proactive stance and show

These will be the most important associations—outside of your boss—that you will have in your organization, and ... it's important that you take the time to manage these relationships well.

your clients that you're the expert, and they'll begin to value your judgment and respect your choices.

KEEPING IN TOUCH

Remember, just like any other relationship worth keeping, client relationships require constant attention, massaging and TLC. And there will always be new hires, so take advantage of the opportunity to introduce new employees to your department. Over time, you may have to realign your services and capabilities to meet the needs of new clients or the changing needs of your existing ones. Periodically schedule time to meet with business unit leaders to assess their short- and long-term objectives and to better understand how you can provide effective design support. Determine what additional skills, services, capabilities or technologies are needed to keep your department competitive, and eliminate non-essential and redundant services that don't directly support the business. Listening is key, not only during the life of a project but after it's been put to bed. Solicit feedback from your clients through an online satisfaction survey that will show you where you're winning or falling short, which in turn will help you identify those areas that need attention.

COLLECT CALL

Attracting clients and keeping them happy is an ongoing process that requires networking, empathy, sensitivity, tact and diplomacy. Reach out and connect with your clients, commit to delivering quality work, within budget and on-time, and communicate often. Eventually, you'll get their work, respect and trust. And don't ever take them for granted. For without them, where would you be? MI

Glenn John Arnowitz is director of *creative services* at Pfizer, a research-based, global pharmaceutical company, where he manages an award-winning team of six designers. He has contributed to Graphic Design.USA, HOW, Dynamic Graphics, The *Creative Groups* eZine, and the books "Bringing Design In-House" and "In-House Design In Practice." Arnowitz is speaking at the HOW Design Conference in June (www.HOWdesignlive.com). As co-founder of InSource (www.in-source.org), Arnowitz is passionately committed to helping in-house creatives achieve design excellence and recognition within their companies and the business community. www.bigcowstudio.com; gainsource@gmail.com