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creativity rx for in-house designers

Coming up with clever concepts is a common challenge faced by all creative professionals. But for in-house designers who work on the same brand day in and day out, keeping fresh can be even more of an uphill battle.



Yet experienced in-house professionals will tell you there's plenty of room for innovation in a corporate environment. Take it from Glenn John Arnowitz who helped build - and now manages - an award-winning team of six designers in the creative services department at Wyeth, a research-based, global pharmaceutical company. He and his team have learned valuable tactics for sustaining a strong creative spirit no matter what hurdles they must cross. Arnowitz shared some common inspiration obstacles and real-world cures for overcoming them and motivating team members.

Inspiration Obstacle #1: Dealing With Deeply Embedded Rules

Taking a completely new direction with a product or service can be quite daunting for in-house designers who are accustomed to brand standards that have been in place since time immemorial. Tight budgets and conservative management teams also can be powerful forces that curtail creativity. "But these limitations also present an opportunity for in-house designers to rise to the challenge and find ways to produce innovative work," said Arnowitz.

The Fix: Breaking the mold can be easier once you know the company, its products and services, culture and brand essence. In fact, Arnowitz said it's an essential step to producing quality work. "Learn and live the business's mission and values, and know what the vision is and how you can support it," he said.

Arnowitz also noted the importance of knowing who you're working with inside and outside the department. "Familiarize yourself with the corporate organizational chart and reporting structure, and find out where you and your department fit in," he said. "Position yourself as a key player by becoming involved with business strategies that your company is pursuing. Be proactive and make design proposals for products that don't exist yet. And most of all, have passion for your work, because if you don't, no one else will."

Inspiration Obstacle #2: Fighting the Clock

The pressure to deliver quality work under tight deadlines can be particularly intense for in-house designers. "Unlike an agency, your key stakeholders are only a floor or maybe a cubicle away, and the demand for faster turnaround becomes even greater," explained Arnowitz.

The Fix: Arnowitz said a good way to manage your team's workflow is by discussing each project with the client and the resources needed to produce quality results. "Assess and determine if you can meet their deadline and if you can't, suggest alternate outside resources. By enlightening your clients you are in essence helping them to understand the process and the time involved in producing a well-crafted piece of design. And, believe me, they will walk away with more respect and a greater appreciation for you and your team than if you delivered mediocre work," he said.

Inspiration Obstacle #3: Selling Ideas to Skeptics

Corporate standards, close-minded clients and judgmental colleagues are all potential factors that can prevent in-house designers from bringing their creative concepts to fruition. And those who aren't prepared to sell their concepts to company decision-makers frequently find themselves having to scrap their initial ideas and start over from scratch.

The Fix: Just because in-house designers face skepticism by upper management or employees in other departments, doesn't mean they should surrender their ideas immediately. "People come to you because they value your knowledge and experience, and most importantly, because you have earned their trust," said Arnowitz. "Reinforce your proposal to show how it will solve the business problem at hand. Talk about design as a core business competency and show the financial, process or service improvements that will result from the proposed design."

Inspiration Obstacle #4: Getting Lost in the Crowd

Establishing credibility is a perpetual obstacle for professionals who work in corporate design departments, particularly at large firms where they can easily get lost in the crowd. "In-house designers often experience isolation because of the insulated corporate culture and general lack of information available in the design community targeted to in-house designers and managers," Arnowitz shared.

The Fix: "Designers are inherently introspective and like to be left to their own devices," explained Arnowitz. "But they need to get out and about, and reach out to their in-house neighbors, and gradually build business relationships with other departments. Partnering with a peer on one of your initiatives might take you to a new place and will broaden your in-house experience."

In order to enhance the understanding and value of in-house design within the corporate environment, Arnowitz established [InSource](#) with Andy Epstein, assistant director of graphic design and print production at Bristol-Myers Squibb. The association is committed to design excellence and effective design management, and provides in-house creatives with a forum to share strategies and information. Becoming a member can help you keep up with in-house issues as well as network with your peers.

Inspiration Obstacle #5: Feeling Inconsequential

It's hard to keep the creative fire burning if you're an unsung hero. In-house designers who slave away and aren't recognized for their contributions by their teammates or others in the organization have little incentive to keep the quality of work coming. "Employees want to feel that their efforts are making a difference," said Arnowitz.

The Fix: Arnowitz encourages managers to recognize team members' successes as often as possible. He said one easy yet effective way to do this is by hosting a "show and tell" at weekly staff meetings in which a particular designer is recognized for a job well done. It's also valuable to share award-winning designs with staff throughout the organization and the creative community at large. "Find ways to display the team's work in venues outside your department, including in the pages of the company newsletter, for example," he explained.

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creativity chargers

It's no secret in-house designers have to work a bit harder than their agency counterparts to expose themselves to new perspectives. But there are plenty of ways to keep fresh and inspired if you're part of a corporate design team. Wyeth Corporate Graphic's assistant director Glenn John Arnowitz shared a few of his favorite creativity chargers:

- **Look everywhere.** Because of the broad range of departments within a corporation - administration, public affairs, human resources, marketing, sales and benefits - there are countless opportunities to provide creative solutions for a wider variety of initiatives. "Potential design projects are everywhere and it's up to you to find them," he said.
- **Create an interactive infrastructure.** Most in-house designers are constantly crunched for time, and scheduling regular brainstorming sessions can be near impossible. To ensure his team keeps in constant communication, Arnowitz has created an open layout in his department where individual workstations open up to communal tables and individuals can easily brainstorm on the fly.
- **Switch it up.** Often a designer will take ownership of a particular project because it provides a certain level of comfort, but over time this can lead to uninspired work because the individual is no longer challenged. To prevent this problem, Arnowitz moves projects around to give team members the opportunity to work on an unfamiliar assignment and inspire them to try something new.
- **Pursue outside interests.** When Arnowitz isn't in the office, he's usually writing, performing and recording music, or acting in a theater production. "All of this activity gives me a high-fidelity buzz that fuels my creative energy and opens my eyes to new possibilities in design," he said.

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