

Talking the Talk

How to Communicate Up the Food Chain

Every year a number of great ideas meet untimely deaths. The culprit? Communication breakdowns — those frustrating occasions when you just can't seem to connect with your clients or convince them of the merits of your concepts. Few situations are more aggravating than going back to the drawing board when you've just come up with the Pablo Picasso of ideas or, worse, watering down your Picasso so thoroughly that it begins to resemble a toddler's art project.

While there's no magic formula for making company decision-makers see things your way, the manner in which you present your ideas often determines how well they are received. Designers who have mastered the art of effective communication frequently assume three different roles — that of anthropologist, lawyer and counselor. By wearing these hats as appropriate, you can more effectively “sell” your most inspired (and often most risky) ideas, ensuring that you deliver the best possible product.

Designer as anthropologist

It's no secret that designers and corporate executives don't always share the same worldview. For example, many creatives cringe at the thought of spreadsheets, while those in other disciplines relish the order these documents bring to their lives. In fact, many of your clients' values and challenges may be foreign to you — until you do some digging to try and understand them. Tod Martin, president and chief executive of Unboundary, an Atlanta-based design firm, said business publications are a good place to start. “We foster an environment where people are accustomed to reading *The Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *Fast Company*, etc., so they understand the culture of business,” said Martin.

Martin also provides his team a list of business books, such as *What the CEO Wants You to Know* by Ram Charan, and encourages staff members to read them. Not

only does this give employees a frame of reference — it also helps them learn the language of executives. “We make sure we’re all comfortable with the vocabulary and lexicon of business. That way, we can take words that are valuable in business and figure out how to make them relate to design,” said Martin.

Glenn Arnowitz, assistant director of corporate graphics for Wyeth, a research-based global pharmaceutical company based in Madison, N.J., echoed this sentiment. “Designers are often very good at design-speak but not so good at business-speak,” he said. “Senior management doesn’t care why you placed the type flush left or why the background is red. To gain their respect, you need to speak their language by talking about design as a problem solving discipline and how your work can impact the company’s core business objectives.”

While it’s important to speak the language of business, you also must tune in to each client’s particular dialect — that is, the organization’s corporate terminology. Martin notes that each company’s lingo is different, and it pays to familiarize yourself with corporate catch-phrases. For example, when Martin took on a global management agency as a client, he spent two full days studying corporate materials to try to map out their language. The strategy worked, helping him communicate more effectively by employing terms familiar to the client. “You need to take responsibility for your communications,” said Martin. “It’s never the audience’s fault if they don’t get it.”

Along with talking your clients’ talk, it’s also wise to cultivate a beyond-the-basics understanding of what they do. Jennifer Sukis and Pamela Zuccker, partners at Principle, a design firm with offices in Cleveland, Houston and Quebec, said they learn all they can about their clients’ industries. For example, when working for a high-end framing company, they studied the marketing of luxury goods. Subscribing to trade magazines and reviewing industry websites are additional ways you can keep tabs on the challenges your clients are facing and how you can provide the best solutions. And, of

course, there's always the age-old skill of listening. Pay attention to what your client is telling you, and ask questions to help fill in any blanks. These may include:

- What's on the horizon for your firm?
- Who are the key players in this field?
- What industry trends keep you awake at night and how is your company responding?

If you work in-house, you likely have an advantage over agency folks when it comes to the volume of information available to you. "One of the benefits of working in-house is the access you have to all of these resources: marketing, public relations, human resources, IT, benefits, sales and meeting planning," explained Arnowitz.

Making contacts outside of your department and taking advantage of the materials and trainings offered can significantly enhance your knowledge of the firm, its culture and its business needs.

Designer as lawyer

No matter how much information you gather — or how well you know your client — your ideas won't get off the ground if they're not built on a solid foundation. Building a case for your concepts isn't that different from putting together a legal case: You need evidence to back up your ideas, and that evidence comes in the form of business strategy. In fact, the ability to think strategically was rated the most important quality for creative freelancers to possess in a survey of advertising and marketing executives by The Creative Group — beating out both creativity and initiative. Never miss an opportunity to give the rationale behind your recommendations. "It takes the emotion out of the discussion," Sukis said.

Focusing too intently on design for design's sake is a mistake many new creatives make. To avoid this problem, Martin said he tries to shift his team's frame of reference so they're focusing on outcome rather than output. Communicating via case studies can help professionals make this shift. It entails presenting your ideas in three parts: the

business problem, the proposed solution and how, specifically, that solution meets the company objectives. Using this format forces you to consider every choice from a business angle. It also ensures that when questions arise — such as “Why not use a different type?” or “Wouldn’t another color be better?” — you have a solid and defensible answer.

“We’ve had a client say, ‘One reason we like to work with you is because you actually defend your work,’” said Zuccker.

Indeed, being able to explain the rationale behind your choices puts clients at ease. After all, most people don’t feel qualified to make creative decisions — that’s why they hired you. But if you present your ideas outside of a business context, clients may start to question everything. “You can lose control so fast,” said Sukis. “That’s why it’s important to tie everything back to the company’s goals. You need to move the conversation from the subjective to the objective.”

Designer as counselor

That’s not to say all conversations should be devoid of feeling. Sometimes using words with the right emotional impact can help bring people together. For example, a client tasked Martin’s firm with building consensus on a major internal change among a diverse group of employees. To accomplish this, he labeled the new initiative a “healing decision” in hope of creating a feeling of optimism. It worked! “Language linked to certain ideas or modes of thought can help people shift their focus,” explained Martin.

Asking questions is another strategy to transition a conversation from potentially negative territory toward common ground. For example, when a client suggests a change that you don’t agree with, you might respond by saying, “How do you think this change will help us meet the goal?” or “Is there another way to address this concern?” These types of queries will help you get to the root of the problem and find a solution that works for both you and your client.

Becoming a powerful communicator doesn't happen overnight. It's not easy to seamlessly switch from anthropologist to attorney to counselor as you discuss your design ideas. For those starting their careers, the best advice is to learn from the masters. Let your manager know you're interested in improving your speaking abilities and ask to sit in on meetings where ideas are being presented. Find mentors within your firm and outside of your organization whose communication skills you admire. "There's a little bit of magic when you see senior managers and principals of design firms selling," said Zuccker. "The sooner you get a chance to get comfortable in that role, the better."