

The Client-Designer Relationship

by Rebecca Katterson

All designers, as they enter their occupation or get their education, hear of the legendary tension inherent in professional relationships, from horror stories about the astonishing stupidity of clients, to the urban myths of how great a project could have been if the client hadn't gotten in the way. But every young and impressionable designer should be advised: both problems *and* opportunities can be found along the way in the relationship between a designer and his or her client.

Without clients, designers would rarely get an opportunity to use their expert skills, so at worst the client is something of a necessary evil. And of course, upon agreeing to work together, clients and designers try to communicate some basic desires. The client wishes to gain from the designer's expert skills, as the designer hopes to gain by having a fresh, challenging problem to tackle. How successful they are at communicating these wishes often varies, but some kind of agreement must be reached for them to be able to work together at all.

Because of communication barriers, parts of this agreement are often stated explicitly and parts are often assumed. If any part of this initial pact begins to deteriorate, the entire relationship can deteriorate as well. For instance, the client can lose respect for the expertise of the designer or begin to doubt whether they needed that expertise at all. The designer can lose respect for the client's knowledge, assuming that they can better evaluate the quality of a solution by utilizing design principles. This is often a misstep, however, in that these principles are often only appreciated by other designers. David Fleming summarizes this attitude when he writes, "Designers here are no longer outside experts who solve the inside problems; they are outsiders whose skills and values are accessible only to other outsiders" (98). In both of these cases, one group dismisses the expertise of the other, when in reality both kinds of expertise are essential to a good solution. "...Separate discourses are the natural and necessary condition of interaction between designers and their clients. Successful projects will be those in which the two meet in mutual respect and rational communication..." (Fleming, 89).

But even when these fundamental needs are met, other problems can appear. When the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved are not clearly defined, they can lead to overlap, confusion, and miscommunication. Language can be a central part of these problems; if it does not create them, it helps to exaggerate them. The lack of a common vocabulary, straightforward questions and discussions can lead to frustrations between the designer and the client.

Fortunately, however, the thoughtful designer can also use language to try to prevent these problems. As Fleming writes, “The social, task, and material parameters of design... are *constructed* by the participants themselves—over time, through language, in interaction with one another” (86). Any party involved can take steps to consciously construct their relationship by attempting to discuss problematic topics and situations before they occur. In particular, it is important for everyone to discuss the project at hand, each party’s roles and responsibilities, how solutions will eventually be evaluated, and what kinds of authority will be given to both insider and outsider expert knowledge. The designer can also take this chance to try to build a sense of partnership with the client, instead of butting heads.

When the relationship is seen as a partnership, it can become far more productive. Designers can gain a wealth of information about the problem in their clients, from insider information about the intended users, to the current situation or the history surrounding the problem. The client also becomes a great sounding board for ideas. A wise designer can discuss possible concepts with the client in order to verify the real quality of their solution as a team. By working closely with the client, the designer gains the best opportunity of all—the chance to make better, more appropriate solutions than they could have created alone.

Works Cited:

Fleming, David. “The Rhetoric of Design: Argument, Story, Picture, and Talk in a Student Design Project.” *Carnegie Mellon University: Pittsburgh, PA, 1996*