Getting Started in Design Today-
Managing Expectations

RitaSue Siegel

President

RitaSue Siegel Resources

an Aquent company

20 East 46 Street

New York, NY 10019

USA

ritasue@ritasue.com

Recently, The New York Times, Harvard Business Review and books about the Wharton School and Stanford Business School have pointed out that business schools have lost their way. The professors "know too little about how real businesses work and spend too much time cranking out highly technical papers of the kind that the academic system mistakenly rewards," was how The Wall Street Journal[1] described the situation. "They are locked into a dysfunctional competition for media rankings ("Top 10 Business Schools," for ex.), that diverts resources from long-term knowledge creation." The HBR Working Knowledge newsletter[2] points out that "the professional model of education, as in medical and law schools, combines the best of practice and the best of theory. Unfortunately, the scientific [theoretical] model prevails in business schools today. "

Advocacy

I advocate the professional model for design education (which points to internships), and that anyone teaching design has to have at least 5 years of real world experience in a consulting practice or corporate design group. Freelancing does not offer deep exposure about how design is integrated into companies, how to develop global programs and deal with diversity, work in teams, bring out the best in others, be a design advocate, and other personal skills required for success today. There is no reward for business schools to buck current trends. Nor are there penalties for design programs

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[1] 11 August 2005, "Vocational School for the Elite", Daniel Askt
[2] 11 July 2005

that shortchange their graduates with insufficient understanding of the real world and the personal skills to operate in it. They are all drinking the same Kool-Aid. The accreditation committees I have been involved with do not have the experience or incentives to suggest change.

Relevancy

Why should designers and design educators care about the relevance of MBA or undergraduate business programs? Design education is falling into the same bad habits they have, and this is the wrong time for this to happen. We are experiencing a renaissance in business's recognition of the value of design and we need to prepare designers who can deliver their expectations. Many new graduates have no idea how the profession has changed, and are challenged in their expectations of how they can integrate themselves into the world of work.

Experience

How do I know this? My business is to make connections between designers and employers. I started the company with this goal in 1969. At the time, designers didn't understand all the ways they could use their talents, and companies didn't know what designers could do for them. Those were the days of design conscious companies like IBM and Olivetti, and design firms lead by Raymond Loewy, Henry Dreyfus and Walter Landor. In the 1960s and 70s, the Swiss international style of typography influenced graphic design style as did Saul Bass, Chermayeff and Geismar, and Milton Glaser/Pushpin Studios.

The 1960 World's Fair influenced all forms of design and exposed consumers to products and environments from all over the world. In the 70's, Charles and Ray Eames profoundly influenced exhibitry and furniture design. Knut Yran established one of the first global design programs at Philips. In the late 70's, graphic designers April Greiman and Katherine McCoy gave a twist to the International Style.

Definition

In 1981 I wrote an article for the British magazine Design[3] (which no longer exists) saying there were only about ten industrial design consultancies in the US with more

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[3] Design 397, January 1982, pp. 22-27

than 10 employees, and that most industrial designers worked for corporations, 3,000 of which at the time had internal design departments. This was according to the Design Management Institute (founded in 1975). Included was a description of an overview of American design in New York moderated by Ralph Caplan, at one time the editor of ID Magazine. The three presenters were Jay Doblin, Lella Vignelli and Chuck Mauro, whose work emphasized human factors. Doblin was the guru of planning and methodology and Lella, a designer of furniture, exhibitions and interiors. When they finished their presentations, Caplan asked if they were all in the same business and they said," Yes."

If I didn't work with these great designers and/or personalities, I had at least met them, and learned from them.

Evolution

I used to describe our company as translators between what companies needed and what designers wanted to do. Very often, their goals were different. Design management, or the integration of the design language of products and environments and their relationship to their marketing communications didn't really start to be articulated until the mid 80's. Design strategy also was not that apparent until then. Many designers were more concerned with style than problem solving. A major jolt to the system was the introduction of the Mac in 1984.

Education Evolves

As design evolved, education was not far behind. Demand for designers was increasing as were the number of design programs and courses, because everyone wanted to learn computer graphics. Schools wanted to make money with that idea, many of them confusing computer graphics with graphic design, and misleading some students. Remember desktop publishing?

Carnegie Mellon and Pratt Institute had pioneered the Foundation Year but their structures of all faculty members on the same page had begun to break down. In all schools, whoever was teaching (teachers come and go), created minor and major differences between the graduates of various schools but only a few schools had a

consistent philosophy. Everyone had their favorites. Art Center grads were great renderers, Pratt grads great form makers, graduates of the University of Cincinnati were rated the best prepared students. Cranbrook's graduate program introduced the concept of product semantics. IIT focused on planning and process. At the time, I thought UK schools were the best for graphic and product design.

In the US, design schools, colleges and universities began to adopt the idea that teachers were not required to have experience practicing design, and many schools hired their own graduates who didn't have any. The University of Cincinnati had a 5-year program which insured 18 months (3 non-concurrent periods) of internship -- or working in the real world. Its students did not have the problems of other design school graduates in starting their careers because they knew what practicing design was all about. Often, companies they interned with hired them.

Business Evolves

I think this slight historic perspective illustrates how design and design education has evolved. Heads of design consultancies like Raymond Loewy and Walter Landor—salesmen of style, are very different from Gianfranco Zaccai of Design Continuum and Tim Brown of IDEO--leaders of design consultancies, teaching companies about design thinking and innovation.

Businesses' understanding that design has value has accelerated. The excitement "great product" generates creates an emotional connection with consumers and gives a company a way to talk about themselves to consumers. Design also has the potential as a platform for organization integration.

Ways of Work Evolve

With very few exceptions, designers did not move into senior-level management positions until the last fifteen years. In fact, Arnold Wasserman who in the 80's was the vice president of design at Xerox, labeled designers 'exotic menials' (which, in a sense they were), laboring in the bowels of organizations rather than having a pipeline to the top.

Designers used to refer to engineers and marketing people as "the enemy," because work used to be accomplished by people in silos, not collaboratively, and forging close relationships with them was impeded. Concepts often originated from marketing and were passed over walls to designers who passed them on to engineering, manufacturing, distribution. Now work gets done by teams, and working on teams requires a different set of personal skills.

Bringing in Education Up-to-Date

For a long time, I worried that there would not be enough designers with the personal, presentation, and intellectual skills to fill the number of design management positions that were being generated. Actually, there are still not enough qualified candidates, but there has been an additional change. Designers are now expected to manage and lead even when they first leave school. I think many design educators don't know this, and one of the reasons is that so many of them are not practicing professionals.

I keep up-to-date on what's happening in design schools by speaking at them in the US, Asia and Europe and seeing students' work. I do portfolio reviews at the Industrial Design Society of America's regional and national conferences, and am on a jury that reviews seniors at Pratt for a scholarship our Pratt-related organization gives out every year.

Where are we today?

Times have changed. Many leaders of organizations have had their expectations raised about what focusing on consumers or users can deliver. This strategy, or as Bruce Nussbaum calls it "a business behavior," is what design today is all about. The goal of many companies is to develop design as a core competency, with designers as the consumer or user's advocate. Now that building brands in the US cannot depend solely upon mass market advertising as the best way to reach consumers, companies are looking for new ways to connect with consumers, or more precisely, to be invited into their lives.

The design of products, communications, services and environments has become more important than ever. The ways companies try to get consumer/customers' attention are becoming increasingly fragmented, making critical the creation of consistent experiences

at every touch point. The game of attracting consumer's attention, and/or entertaining them has expanded to the Web, live events, online gaming, movies, cell phones and PDA's.

What are the implications of the blurring of boundaries between design disciplines for design education? And what does it tell us about the thinking, personal and design skills designers will need to master to be successful working in this context?

John Heskett says, "There are deep gulfs of understanding between design and other disciplines."[4] We all know this is true, but what changes in curriculum have been made so that design graduates can be interpreters?

Companies are eager to incorporate what and how designers learn about consumers' needs. They want to hire designers who know about this stuff. Are all of our design school graduates steeped in this knowledge?

In addition to understanding the needs of the organizations they are joining, and how they can add value, designers need to have had educational experiences to teach them to collaborate, communicate, strategize, interpret, adapt and lead. These kinds of skills are talked about only by faculty with real world experience because theorists do not recognize their importance. The best way students can practice these skills is by participating in internships. An understanding of business and cultural contexts is also a requirement of recent design school grads.

How are getting a job expectations being met of design school graduates who have not had significant internships? They are not, and many have to do lots of scurrying to try to catch up. Many don't. And this is not fair.

And what of an employing organization with its arms open to receive the latest design thinking, who happens to interview a designer who has trouble talking about his or her work? It's embarrassing to all concerned.

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[4] INDEX: Newsletter 2005 (dK)

The last time I tried to reinvent education in a speech (at the Stanford Design Conference which became my first article in Communications Arts magazine, 1972) I was the subject of a nasty campaign by educators to discredit me. It didn't work, but students are easy to influence, and I do not have the face time with them that their teachers do.

Many educators will complain that I am a asking for too much. How can we do all this in four years? I have some ideas, but they will have to wait for another time. I leave you with these thoughts. 1. Every designer is involved in some level of design management (whether or not they are a Design Manager), 2. An understanding of marketing and sales is an integral part of being a designer.