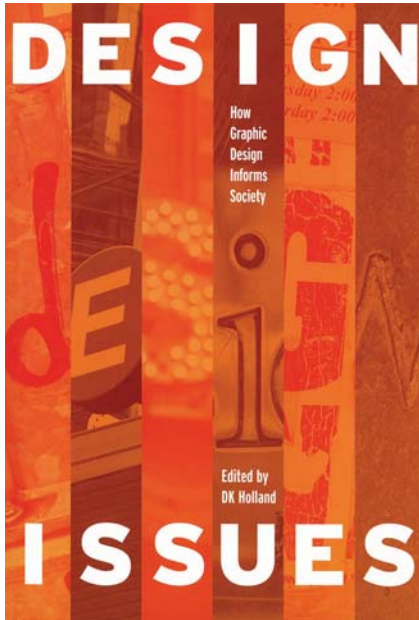


Protecting Corporate Identity



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If we took a survey of the steps people follow when starting a new business, we would probably find that creating a logo is in the top ten. From coffee shop to computer company, almost no self-respecting business goes to work without a logo.

One reason there are so many logos may be that designing logos is fun. Design problems do not get much more focused, visual, or direct. The possibilities for exploration and iteration are broad and deep, and few things in design are so pure and clean.

But things don't remain pure and clean for long, because logos almost always end up being used by someone other than the designer. Most designers are concerned about how the logos they create will be used by others. They often provide usage guidelines or standards manuals or corporate-identity policies or even branding strategies to go with new logos. However, even if the rules are not spelled out, the original and subsequent applications of the logo form a precedent and imply a set of rules for using it.

Explicit or implicit, every organization has rules governing the use of its logo, typography, photography, copy, layout, tone, and style. Together these rules, these corporate-identity standards, constitute a house style, what some call corporate voice.

To me, the value of consistently applied corporate-identity standards seems self-evident. Consistency makes communications clearer and reduces confusion. Consistency ensures recognition. Consistency builds loyalty and brand equity. Consistency builds wealth for shareholders. That's really the bottom line.

This monotheistic view of corporate identity, in which the designer is caretaker, custodian, or curator of a system that will survive him or her, is hardly new. In fact, it's quite conventional. It is surprising then, given the love most designers have for making logos and the conventional view of corporate identity, that so many designers seem to dislike following other people's corporate-identity standards.

For the last nine years, I have worked as a design manager at Apple. During that time, I have often seen designers produce work for Apple that does not follow Apple's corporate-identity guidelines. Some of these designers are freelancers, relatively inexperienced, and may not know any better. But some work for large firms, are very experienced, and not only know better but also have consciously decided to break the rules.

Here are a few examples in which reputable firms, firms that consistently produce high-quality work, knowingly chose to break Apple's rules.

Example 1

A Los Angeles firm produced a system of signs for a group of new Apple buildings. Instead of using Garamond, as called for in Apple's corporate signage manual, the designers used Gill Sans. Choosing the wrong typeface might seem of little consequence, but a system of signs is not a piece of ephemera. It will last for years. Hundreds of people—customers, vendors, and employees—see it every day. Using the wrong typeface sends a message that consistency doesn't matter. It makes it a little easier for others to break the rules.

Example 2

A Seattle firm produced a series of pieces for the Apple Developer Conference. The designers made use of a comic-book character, colored backgrounds, and typefaces never before seen on Apple materials. Inconsistent communications from Apple to its developers hardly helps convince them of the importance of consistency following interface design standards—a principle on which rests much of Apple's success.

Example 3

Even Apple's advertising agency is not beyond reproach. In a series of ads aimed at the design market, the agency distorted and mangled type in ways that would make David Carson proud. In fairness, I must admit that the Apple corporate-identity guidelines don't actually include a section on distorting and mangling type—at least not yet. While the ad agency argues that mangled type appeals to the design audience, I believe that mangled type makes the ad's sponsors less likely to be recognized.

The problem is not Apple's alone. When design firms show me their portfolios, they often include projects they have done for other companies—projects that violate those companies' standards.

One design firm proudly presented slides of an IBM tradeshow booth. This firm had created signs that abandoned IBM's traditional use of Bodoni and featured purple script running across the IBM logo. Paul Rand would not have been pleased.

More than a few design firms have presented work they have done for Hewlett-Packard, whose offices are near Apple's. Often these firms tell stories of how they avoided the HP design standards and the "design police."

Why they confess these sins to me, I cannot say. They seem not to have considered how a corporate design manager is likely to view design standards—whether the manager's standards or someone else's. My fear is that having violated someone else's standards, a designer would be likely to violate Apple's as well. I expect that any corporate design manager would be reluctant to hire or recommend someone who has violated another company's standards.

Having witnessed so many design firms ignoring design standards, I raised the subject at a recent American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) board meeting. The board was discussing revisions to the AIGA code of ethics. I suggested including the following sentence: "A designer shall acquaint himself or herself with a client's design standards and shall follow those standards."

I thought this statement was pretty innocuous and expected no debate on the subject. I was wrong. Several members of the board were uncomfortable with the idea that not following standards might be called unethical. They made it clear that they do not wish to be bound by standards and view their role as design consultants to be one of changing design standards. After some debate we agreed on this ambiguous revised statement: "A designer shall acquaint himself or herself with a client's design standards and shall act in the client's best interests within the limits of professional responsibility."

Perplexed by the controversy over the proposal, I have raised the subject with several other designers. On a recent trip to Boston, I discussed it with three people who run their own design businesses: Marc English, Marc English Design; Judy Kohn, Kohn Cruikshank, Inc.; and Karin Fickett, Plus Design, Inc. They had some interesting insights.

First of all, they pointed out that the client who calls the design consultant is not necessarily the corporate design manager.

Judy Kohn said, “You have to decide if your client is the person who hired you or the corporation which employs him or her.”

Marc English concurred, “It’s got to be the end-user that you’re really working for.”

Karin Fickett added, “You have to assess whether what the client is asking for is in the corporation’s interest or is driven mainly by the client’s ego.”

More often than not the client is a marketing manager with relatively little design experience and little branding experience. Often the marketing manager’s job is to make as much noise as possible about the product, and the manager is often rewarded for optimizing communications for the product alone. That is, the marketing manager’s product competes not only with products from other companies but with other products from the same company. A marketing manager’s local concerns often put the manager in conflict with more global or corporate-wide concerns.

Judy, Marc, and Karin agreed that part of the solution involves educating the client. “If you design a corporate-identity system, it’s your responsibility to teach the client how the system works,” Judy said.

The responsibility for educating marketing managers does not rest with the consultants alone. It is largely a role of the corporate design department. Bonnie Briggs, who manages Caterpillar’s corporate identity, has put together a program of workshops to educate everyone at Caterpillar who buys design services. The program serves as an excellent example of how support for design consistency can be developed throughout an entire company.

Of course, being able to educate clients requires that design consultants know their clients' standards. Karin believes, "It's the designers' responsibility to ask for standards when they start work for a new client or when they start a new kind of project."

Educating the design consultants is another increasingly important function of a corporate design staff. This function becomes more important as businesses restructure—laying off staff or doing more with the same resources—and consultants take a larger role in corporate design programs. The corporate design staff also needs to forge alliances with the other people within its corporation who deal with design consultants. The lawyers who write the contracts and the finance people who approve the purchase orders can help put in place controls that require consultants to complete training on the corporation's standards before beginning work.

Judy, Marc, and Karin also felt that many designers have limited understanding of corporate identity. "You're assuming that all designers understand identity," said Marc.

"A lot of young designers think identity is a logo," added Karin.

"I have done identity systems, and within a month, someone bastardizes them. Then they send me a printed piece, like I should be happy about it," Marc explained.

They also pointed out that sometimes clients simply get bored with their house styles and lose sight of their value. "The people in-house get tired of the same look," Karin said.

"It is a constant battle to sell red to Harvard. It is the same with blue at Yale," Judy asserted.

After about an hour of talking around the subject, I pushed each of them to tell me whether they would knowingly violate a company's corporate-identity standards if pressured to do so by the client.

Judy explained, "You have to redefine the problem. You try to find a solution that does not violate the guidelines. It can be difficult to negotiate the difference between what the client says he wants and what he probably needs."

Marc asked, “Why don’t you come back with an alternative?”

Karin countered, “I would always come back gently to the standards. But you can’t say ‘no’ to a client.”

“When a client says, ‘We want something fresh,’ it’s not politic to answer ‘No, you don’t.’ Of course, there are times when you say ‘that’s not appropriate,’ or haul out phrases like ‘in my professional opinion,’” Judy added. “But it’s presumptuous for a designer to tell a client, especially a new client, that his or her approach is wrong.”

Marc said, “The issue is not what a piece looks like. The issue is the idea. Why don’t you come up with a great idea? You need to define the message, present it clearly, and dramatize it. If you have a great idea, a great way to visually convey the message, you can make it work within almost any set of standards.”

They all acknowledged the economic reality of the situation—the clients pay the bills. They also acknowledged the greater difficulty of pushing back on new clients. “There’s a big distinction between a first-time client and one with whom you’ve had a long-term relationship,” Judy stated.

“What do you do when you’re just starting your own business and a clients asks you to do work that violates his company’s design standards? You try to stay within the standards, but you work with him,” said Karin.

Finally, Judy pointed out that the real value designers add is their ability to define problems and present options, “Wouldn’t it be awful if someone handed you something and said, ‘I want a piece just like it.’ What would you say?”

I was pleased to find that these designers expressed a great deal of concern about their clients’ identity standards. Their observations reinforced my conviction that consistency cannot be legislated and that standards manuals are, at best, only part of the solution. There’s no way to foresee every possible design option, let alone include them all in a standards manual. In a world of shrinking budgets and shrinking staffs, a corporate design manager’s role involves not only defining standards but also educating and motivating both the firms that supply design and the marketing people that buy it. Ultimately the standards will not be used unless the consultants and the marketers see them as their own.

During the course of our conversation I was also reminded that another part of the designer manager's job is to make sure his or her identity system has the right level of flexibility. A good system will have processes built in that allow for review, growth, and change. A good system must be able to keep pace with product and market changes.

Designers have to decide whether to work within clients' identity systems or reinvent them. Producing individual projects outside the system seems to me, if not unethical, at least irresponsible. If one believes the identity system is flawed, then the responsible course is to change it.