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PLEASE, DON'T BE A DICK

(A client's handbook to working with a designer)

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pleasedontbeadick.com



Advice books for designers appear in abundance in your everyday bookstore or Google search. The sheer volume is infinite, with books on design theory, history and trends, advice on working with contractors, tips on how to keep accounts organised and detailed explanations on how to manage day-to-day business. These books are great at dispensing knowledge from one designer to another, unfortunately they aren't really helpful for the clients that have to work with designers.

If design clients endeavoured to read one of the books that instruct designers on how to work with clients, hoping to reverse engineer the solutions, they would probably be left feeling attacked. Many of these books comfort designers, cushion their egos, assuring them that none of the failures that happen from the drawing board to the meeting room are their fault and reassuring them that the victories are purely the result of their hard work.

The clients are then, if they choose to make the effort, left scouring for valuable bits of information on how to tackle problems they may encounter when working with designers. If they are lucky they will find a few tips here and there on how they should trust their designer, how they should explain what they want to communicate clearly and how they should allow the designer to have appropriate space to work. These are valid points that a client should understand, but they fail to paint the entire picture and they do not help a client to feel more confident as part of the design process.

Let's face it, designers are an unforgiving bunch. One request for animated business cards and a client unwittingly becomes the laughing stock of thousands of designers on websites like "[Clients From Hell](#)". This is not their fault though; their business is not design. A client cannot be expected to fully understand what can and cannot be requested from a designer. He or she cannot know how to separate the acceptable from the ridiculous for one reason – it's not their job to know.

This is where this book comes in. A client's job is to elicit a product out of a company or individual equipped with the skill-set to produce it. Therefore, we present a collection of advice, a carefully (at some points) laid out handbook for clients on how to work together with designers. After reading this, you can expect a more efficient collaboration, hopefully resulting in a beautiful piece of work that solves your problem as effectively as possible. More importantly, we will have succeeded in fulfilling our self-important desire to write a book that tells you how to act around us. But seriously, this book should work both ways — to educate design clients on what to expect from a designer, and to encourage designers to understand what clients should expect from them.



If you think you understand the nuances of design and designer-client relationships because you've watched a few episodes of *Mad Men* then this book is not for you, owning the whole box set won't help either.

This is for people who work with designers, regularly or for the first time, and want to make things easier and smoother for both parties. It is for those who want to be able to finish a project without angry phone calls, stressful meetings and back and forth emails that go nowhere.

If nothing else, the main message of this book is that each party has a specific role in a project.

What you, the client, know better than us, design tutors and trending styles on design blogs

We don't know your business, and for your sake, we hope we will never know your business as much as you. For this reason we need you to tell us about your business, how it runs, who your customers are, what your goals are and why it is that you want what you want.

What we, the designers, know better than you, your wife and your neighbour's son who uses Photoshop to design party invitations

You don't know our business, and for your sake, we hope you will leave it to us. You probably don't have the experience we have, you may not know what amount of work goes into what we do and chances are you don't understand the theory as well as us. This will only sound condescending if you believe that you do know as much as us.

What neither of us know before we start working together

Before starting the collaborative process it's hard to know how it will all unfold, what sort of project timeline there will be, what the price will be and, most importantly, if the working relationship will function at all.

What is known is that certain steps need to be taken to enmesh the client's knowledge with that of the designer's for any project to work.



**FIRST, LET'S
SYNCHRONISE
OUR WATCHES**

This book is about graphic design, so it is important for you and us to share the same definition.

What is graphic design?

Search for the definition of graphic design online and you will be met by countless differing opinions and definitions. In fact, explanatory texts on the subject can be deduced to the many different opinions of individual critics and historians. It is important, therefore, that we clarify which opinion we will henceforth refer to in this book.

Philip Meggs, a graphic designer and historian, proposes the following definition:

“ graphic design, the art and profession of selecting and arranging visual elements — such as typography, images, symbols, and colours — to convey a message to an audience. Sometimes graphic design is called “visual communications,” a term that emphasises its function of giving form — e.g., the design of a book, advertisement, logo, or website — to information. An important part of the designer’s task is to combine visual and verbal elements into an ordered and effective whole. Graphic design is therefore a collaborative discipline: writers produce words and photographers and illustrators create images that the designer incorporates into a complete visual communication.

So be it — the definition of graphic design for this book.

What is a graphic designer?

A graphic designer is a person who uses his experiences, skills and whatever tools or materials needed to create an illustrative message. If done correctly, the end result should be the best possible solution for visually communicating a specific meaning.

The designer is an expert. No, that is not the beard-stroking air of a couple of self-important doodlers; it’s the plain truth, buttressed by years of education — both practical and theoretical. If you required a root canal procedure it is unlikely that you would pick up a drill, clamps and forceps and take to your mouth with unwavering confidence. The result, although admittedly inexpensive, would be disasterously messy and colossally painful. No, we can safely assume

you would call your dentist. For similar reasons, when you require a service related to design, you approach your graphic designer. You trust his expertise in this field and you are willing to pay money for it. Moreover, you are not hiring a pair of hands to visualise your ideas, you are hiring a graphic designer to come up with ideas about how to solve your communication problem in the most suitable way(s) possible.

The many hats of graphic design

Graphic design is an umbrella term that covers a large range of disciplines. These vary from typography to illustration, art working to art direction, and web design to package design with countless other variants in between. Most designers specialise in certain areas and understand others, while other designers claim to be “experts” in all disciplines. But we all know that wearing too many hats just makes you look like a fool.

The many homes of graphic design

Designers go off and work for large agencies, small studios or set up shop on their own. Each one has their own pros and cons.

Large Agencies

Large agencies tend to have a great amount of resources compared to smaller studios and freelancers. They may be better suited at dealing with very large jobs that will take up a lot of man-hours and need an entire team. With more staff working on a single project it means that they tend to be more reliable as the responsibility falls on the hands of many rather than a single worker. If one person leaves the company or is not available the whole thing doesn't shut down. However, all these resources and a larger workforce also mean greater fees to support the infrastructure. It also means that there are many levels of management and it's very rare that the client will be in direct contact with the designer on hand, resulting in a line of communication where things can get lost or misunderstood.

Small Studios

Small studios are better suited to adapt to the whims of an ever changing client brief, as they are free from the many levels of management that are required in larger operations to approve changes. Specific projects tend to be given to a single person, or perhaps a small team of people. Often this means that the client is in direct contact with the designer doing the work. However, if said designer becomes unavailable then this could clog up the pipeline and cause problems. When and if this happens there is usually someone else that can jump in to help with the project, but this is not always the case. The advantage of a small studio is that its designers tend to care the most about the work as they have the most at stake and are very close to the client.

Freelancers

Freelance designers are probably the most flexible. They work for themselves and so their reputation is vital to them. The relationship with a freelancer generally depends on the personal qualities of this freelancer — his time management skills, his work routine, his reliability and even his personal life. They maintain a close relationship with a client, however should they become unavailable then the project becomes a standstill.