

What We Value, Part I

I'm often thinking about integrity, honor, and values. Not only in our personal lives, but in the stance we take in approach to our vocations.

I work in the marketing/communications and graphic design field, and it's a world where straight talk and truth in advertising can give way to concepts involving dubious buzzwords such as "spin", "draws", and "hooks".

"Whatever it takes to make a profit" is an easy mindset to fall into. And with a focus on expediency, it's common to have poorly conceived projects and sloppy work as a result. We also encounter shady contracts, unreliable clients, untrustworthy co-workers, and unethical business practices.

To give every task your best effort, while promoting integrity in all relationships, can be an unpopular path at times.

So with the conviction that we should all have conveyable values in our professional lives, I've decided to set down my own thoughts on what I strive for as well as what I hope to see in the individuals and situations that I encounter in my design career.

Uncompromising standards.

- Commitment to creating a quality product, while meeting deadlines, without cutting corners.
- Attempting to lead by example, and showing appreciation for colleagues who place a similar importance on delivering their best work.
- Solid judgement in determining which projects, clients, causes and goals to become involved with.

Established boundaries and responsibilities.

- Realizing the importance of a well-defined process, which includes effectively communicated obligations.
- Being able to *own* a project or have control over certain aspects, while also having awareness of when collaborating or delegating is appropriate.

Personal integrity.

- **Honesty, directness.**
- **Being trustworthy with information, and dependable: always following through on promises, not making excuses.**
- **Admitting when mistakes have been made.**
- **Properly crediting and acknowledging the contributions of others.**
- **Not always having to be right, being openminded and thoughtful regarding others' viewpoints.**

Balance.

- **Endeavoring to have grace under pressure.**
- **Having the ability to work rapidly and efficiently, but also knowing when to relax and reflect.**
- **A proper sense of priorities. Avoiding procrastination.**
- **No feast-or-famine workflow, and sensible scheduling.**
- **Knowing when to say "no," and being prepared to clarify your stance rationally, preventing negative consequences.**
- **Appreciating the value of communication and fellowship, yet having enough "alone time" and privacy to be absorbed in work or simply engaged in brainstorming of an introverted nature.**

Creativity, imagination, and bravery.

- **Striving to be innovative and achieve new ground.**
- **Being able to translate ideas and concepts into finished results.**
- **Willingness to learn, to grow, to leave the "comfort zone" of familiar skills and proficiencies.**
- **Having the courage to take risks and create something unconventional or to shake up the established procedures.**

Contribution and community.

- **Providing useful, appreciated information and products to the world.**
- **Adding to the knowledge and abilities of others, helping and inspiring colleagues to achieve and learn.**
- **Bringing beauty and objects of value into being.**

What We Value, Part II

There are certain factors that I think have primary value in a design project layout and presentation. Some are quantifiable, and others more subjective.

(Since my focus is on commercial art and advertising, I have chosen to limit this essay to that arena, rather than exploring the impact and value of fine arts such as painting or the professions of architecture and fashion design. I do draw inspiration from those fields, and may explore such related topics in the future.)

So then: What has value in a design presentation? **Usability**, **effectiveness**, **relevance** and **relatability**, **balance**, and **creativity** are the guidelines I use when evaluating both my own work and the creative projects I come across in everyday life, where multimedia design is encountered at every turn.

Usability in design is quantifiable. A test group of website visitors can be a guideline as to how sensible the navigation would be for the average user. Is it easy to locate and view the information you are interested in? Do you immediately comprehend the purpose of the page, the products or services offered, the identity or mission of the company whose web-presence this is?

When a clearly defined “call to action” is directly tied to the presentation itself, the number of individuals who view the design layout and then follow through with the desired response (by perhaps purchasing products on the site or providing an e-mail address to sign up for a newsletter’s mailing list) can be measured as the quantifiable result of an **effective** presentation.

In a print media example, the layout and copy of a magazine ad page is most **user-friendly** when it is highly legible, easily processed and understood. A quantifiable response for a compelling print campaign could be tracking how many customers bring in the coupon included in the ad when making a store purchase.

Therefore, as designers, having insight into the thought process and likely actions of the viewers of our work is crucial in deciding how to present content for maximum **usability** and intended results.

So when starting the work on any project, prior to presenting any stage of the results to other individuals, there should be an exploratory stage which includes forming an understanding of the potential audience. Research and an openminded discovery process is the professional approach to beginning any commercial art endeavor.

Developing a clear idea of what is **relevant** to your target market, what design concepts might resonate, and what copywriting and presentation styles would be approachable, are the keys to creating a workable solution. During this time, many trial concepts might be prepared, reworked, or discarded before a strategy that is truly appropriate is found.

Effective design layouts should serve as a springboard. Once your eyes land on the printed page, the website, the packaging, the billboard: Are you compelled? To go forth and buy the product, or investigate the source of this intriguing presentation? Do you want to read further, and know more? If you can't imagine that what you're offering might be energizing, fascinating, satisfying, or thought-provoking, the approach may be missing the mark. It would then have little value, no matter how appropriate it might seem for your client's brand or their shareholder's preferences. So it's worthy to consider whether the look and feel of the project reflects the company's identity and also **relates** to the interests of the intended audience.

Whether the presentation is eye-catching, appealing, startling, soothing, or has visual impact in any way is highly subjective. We all have different emotional reactions, outlooks and personal tastes. For instance, one individual may value conservative colors used sparingly to highlight important details, combined with well-known fonts and serene landscape photography. Another may see a vividly colored layout with action-oriented images as an exciting invitation to become part of the latest craze.

While these preferences definitely affect our sense of what a **balanced** design layout is, it's fairly universal that people will respond negatively to a crowded, jumbled page. Knowing when to incorporate symbolic elements such as lines or differently textured backgrounds to separate or highlight certain areas are skills of the experienced commercial artist. Providing a few key areas of interest, while keeping layout principles (including well-distributed visual weight, symmetry, and careful use of asymmetry) in mind, will often result in a favorable reception to your work.

So as a designer, I endeavor to strike a **balance**: between dynamic and static, positive (filled) space and negative (white) space, copy and imagery, pleasing and informing, provoking and reassuring, questioning and problem-solving. It's all part of the challenge to create something **useable, relatable**, interesting (and perhaps even innovative) with content and the way it is presented.

As artists, we often long to bring forth something new, different, a twist on the familiar. While it's said that all art is derivative and we learn by copying, design work which is notable usually brings something previously unseen to our attention. **Creativity** has great importance in the field of design, but artistic expression shouldn't be the primary consideration in commercial projects: the focus is on presenting an **effective** solution, our goal more than simply putting the images of our imagination on the page for their own sake. There will be some occasions where it is appropriate to bring your own voice to the project, if it will be in alignment with the brand identity or established guidelines. But it is valuable to remember that in every instance, even when your creations do not reflect your personal preferences or give you a chance to use ideas that long to see fruition, your work will still be a voice (for an idea, a product, a cause). Figuring out what form of **creative** problem-solving and artistry is suitable requires careful contemplation of both the project specifications and your own goals and values as a designer.