The end of the “briefing” and “the client” in graphic design.

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Abstract: In design teaching, “the client” is a very distant figure, that edits a briefing and stays waiting for the answer that should be delivered before the “deadline”. The problem is: this professional scenario does not exist. So, part of the education of a designer should be in awaken future practitioners to the need to identify possible opportunities matching their skills. The “brief” is not a “to do” job. Is a problem to be solved. According to our study, professional designers acknowledge clients to be a very significant part of the final work produced and see them as co-authors. Students should be enrolled in task with a high degree of complexity. Led to analyze data, understand the environment, discover problems and opportunities. There should be no briefing but an open call for action in a certain area or context.

Keywords: communication design, the client, the commission, communication design education

1. The communication design theory that ignores the commission

1.1 “If the impressionists had been dentists

Dear Theo

Will life never treat me decently? I am wracked by despair! My head is pounding. Mrs Sol Schwimmer is suing me because I made her bridge as I felt it and not to fit her ridiculous mouth. That’s right! I can’t work to order like a common tradesman. I decided her bridge should be enormous and billowing and wild, explosive teeth flaring up in every direction like fire! Now she is upset because it won’t fit in her mouth! She is so bourgeois and stupid, I want to smash her. I tried forcing the false plate in but it sticks out like a star burst chandelier. Still, I find it beautiful. She claims she can’t chew! What do I care whether she can chew or not! Theo, I can’t go on like this much longer! I asked Cezanne if he would share an office with me but he is old and infirm and unable to hold the instruments and they must be tied
to his wrists but then he lacks accuracy and once inside a mouth, he knocks out more teeth than he saves. What to do?

Vincent”
(Allen 1981, p. 153)

Imagine a history and theory of dental medicine focused only on the chemical formula of therapeutics. This history would ignore the illnesses causes, and the social conditions that gave rise to disease; it would also ignore the patient and the way to deal with it to obtain the most useful information for the diagnosis. This medicine theory was focused on the chemical formula that treats scurvy.

This exaggerated scenario serves to represent metaphorically the current design theory. The design student is not asked to read an economic and social context in which he will operate or understand the communication needs of the commissioner. He is given a history of design that is not interested in the process and context in which the creation occurred and does not recognize the commissioner’s role in the work. Communication Design unfolds in a bubble not connected with the history of each country’s economic, cultural and political environment.

A communication designer creates graphic objects that mediate the communication intention between those who need to communicate and the potential addressee(s).

1.2 Communication with images

Image as a tool of negotiation of social life appeared most clearly in the humanistic circles of some Italian cities in the renaissance: portraiture, a superior medium of social affirmation, appears only when society feels this affirmative need, removing the portraiture from where it had settled since thirteen century (from the cult of death and marital presentation at a distance).

The Italian Renaissance settled on political changes creation by the change in the political environment brought by the foundation of the Italian republics and gave rise to several people interested in negotiating their social life, showing power (in the past, in Europe, this was not necessary since it was granted to a very restricted group of monarchs), wealth, their personal achievements, etc. (Delumeau, 1967). Bourgeois and mercenaries - new rich - come to power and seek to equate the old rich (Burke, 2004).

2. What is a visual communication commission?

Until the 14th century, societies had a relatively stable structure: chief (king, emperor, etc.), clergy (shaman, monk, etc.) and people; With the end of this model and the emergence of new players, the visual communication commissioner and visual communication production specialist are seen to
assist in the new social order. The new organization of the Renaissance societies led to a growing specialization of makers, amongst them, the producers of visual communication. Even though it is necessary to recognize that guilds began to settle around 1200 to regulate and defend some crafts, some of them related to production of images, it is from 1500 on that we can observe clearly established experts in creating images and their producing industries, outside the decorative sphere of objects, and often out of the sacred or the spiritual (Wackernagel, 1938).

A fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship. On one side, there was a painter who made the picture, or at least supervised its making. On the other side, there was somebody else who asked him to make it, provided funds for him to make it and, after them made it, reckoned on using it in some way or another. Both parties worked within institutions and conventions – commercial, religious, perceptual, in the widest sense social – that were different from ours and influenced the forms of what they together made. (Baxandall [1972] 1991, p.1)

In the fifteenth, sixteen, seventeen and eighteen centuries it is not possible to talk about visual creation as an individual expression of the artist - as it is understood today, because the concept of “art” that we use today was not in place (Tatarkiewicz, 2001). A painting was subordinated to an order and the negotiation that it required, and for each work there was a certain relation between the commissioner and the its social milieu. Therefore, extending the history of graphic design until the fifteenth century and focus not so much on the final work but in the context of its creation process may be useful to perceive the ways in which some of these practices are maintained or have been discontinued. In the radical change of function of the images we can observe the genesis of what we now call communication design and this is particularly important for us and for the training of designers.

3. What’s a commission?

When Paul Rand is said to be the author of a body of work, these works are isolated from the clients for whom they were made and who certainly influenced their conception, with criticisms, counterproposals, approvals and retreats, to be regrouped under the same designation - by the same author - beginning to fulfil functions very different from those for which they were conceived. (...) One of the most controversial themes has been the author’s role in the history of communication design: whether the historiographic discourse should be based on authors, or whether this conception ends up serving only professional interests, promoting certain practices and certain practitioners, while leaving relevant situations out (Moura, 2011, p. 78, 79).

Authorship, in the case of design, is often shared: the authors are pieces of a social context and a communication process that cannot be ignored and that was deeply negotiated with a commissioner. It cannot be overlooked. It is the history of this process, of this context, that we truly should care about, because from it we can better understand a certain society at a given time.

The communication designer negotiates with the commissioner the best way to show what is intended by this second one. Its role is that of a specialist who diagnoses and evaluates a communication intention and proposes an action plan; which uses the available technologies for the representation and execution (in the sense of the project and not of the production) of a work.

The word project is used in the sense we have found since the renaissance to the word “disegno”, or the idea of something yet to come, which allows the communication intentions of others to be made visible and tried to achieve a certain goal (subjectively interpreted by one and the other).
gain distance from a teaching narrative focused on the production of "gourmet objects" and approaching a practice that is cantered in the relation with the commissioner and in the reading and intuition of the recipients allows students to better understand their role as designers and empowers them to be able to build projects without an initial commissioner input.

What we witness with the development of professional-class consciousness of "graphic artists," "commercial artists," "graphistes," has been a move to a position of experts at the service of a social group that needs to communicate with quality. What is purchased in design is the project; not graphics.

4. case study about the relationship between designer and customer/commissioner

To have a well-funded perspective on the importance of the commissioner and the relationship that is established with him/her – we’ve approached professional communication designers. We’ve made an online inquire of which we extract some answers.

4.1 methodology

For the collection of information about the subjects in question, the recommendations and methodology described in “Design, Evaluation, and Analysis of Questionnaires for Survey” (Saris & Gallhofer, 2007) was used.

We’ve focused on the two structural themes for this study: the relationship between the designer and the commissioner and the response and relationship of the designer with the commission. The option for an online questionnaire proved to be the most appropriate: launched on December 10th 2014, the collection of data occurred on the 20th of January 2015.

The questionnaires were sent to thirty managing partners of design companies still in the market; thirty were sent to designers employed by companies or working on a freelance basis, and finally ten to managing partners of companies and freelancers that had a long professional career but are retired, in a total of seventy inquiries. The sample purposely included some of the most professionally recognized designers in Portugal as well as emerging designers and ateliers and others less known players. Designers from various parts of the country were invited, with the majority being from the two Portuguese main cities: Lisbon and Oporto.

The survey had an average duration of six minutes, with a positive analysis in the fatigue and accessibility tests.

The methodology used for the sampling choice allowed to obtain reliable information: in an extremely unregulated professional context in which anyone can say that it is designer, we’ve chosen a non-probabilistic sample (in which the sample is made for convenience) (Mattar, 2014), and within this typology a sample was constructed by judgment (the researcher uses his criterion to select members of the population that considers sources of accurate information). (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000).

Although probabilistic sampling is, in theory, technically superior, problems occur in its application in practice, which weakens this superiority. (Mattar, 2014, p.187). The literature suggests the use of this option when the size of the population is small and its characteristics known. Kish (1965), Aaker, Kumar, Day, & Leone (1995) argue that the choice of experts is a form of intentional sampling used to choose typical and representative elements for a sample.
Sampling for convenience proved productive and the results (more than 50% of useful answers) attest it. We got answers from 48 of the 70 respondents to whom we sent the electronic questionnaire (68.6% response rate). The following is a summary of some of the most significant questions to support this study.

4.2 name/company/ years of practice

Regarding the professional situation, the overwhelming majority of respondents (76%) have design offices (micro-enterprises), with 15% of the respondents presenting themselves as self-employed. It is important to note that 60.4% of the sample has more than 20 years of professional practice, with 35.4% of respondents between 11 and 20 years of practice. This means that this is a sample in which 95.8% of its subjects have a professional experience above 11 years.

4.3 On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is absent and 5 extremely present) what is, from your point of view, the presence of the ideas and the will of the customer (or of different partners) in the body of work produced

Most respondents consider that the presence of the client’s ideas and willingness (or different partners) in the body of work produced is high. On the proposed scale, we noticed that none of the respondents considered that the client’s ideas and wishes were absent from the result. 16.7% considered, on the contrary, that they are extremely present. We can conclude from the answers to this question that, in the opinion of the designers who responded to this survey, the overwhelming majority (91.7%) is between the central point of the survey (3) and the maximum point (5) 56.3% who consider that the client’s presence is very relevant (counts of values 4 and 5) in the body of work to be produced.

4.4 Is customer empathy important for design work?

Empathy is a structural element of a relationship of trust. If the designer opts for the development of solutions that may not exactly match the request and the initial expectations of the customer, he/she needs that link with his/her customer to build confidence in his/her proposal. 21.3% considered that empathy is decisive while 55.3% saw it as one of the main elements, that is, a significant total of 76.6% of respondents assumed empathy with clients as an essential element of successful work. On the other hand, only 2.1% consider it irrelevant and 4.3% minor, with a total of 6.4% that clearly devalues the role of empathy. In a position that can be considered intermediate (it
is one of the elements) are 17% of the respondents. It is thus clear the importance of empathy as an element that facilitates the construction of a dialogue of understanding between the parts.

![Empathy with the client](image.png)

4.5 Please specify what is the approximate percentage of the work of the company / atelier that is generated from scratch by you (a completely different and new idea that was not requested by a customer)

The changes in the market have forced a repositioning of professional practice and today it is no longer possible to sit in the atelier waiting to be consulted by future clients. It was this professional experience of the author that was confirmed by the survey. First and foremost, many designers felt the need to reaffirm what was being asked: "Five years ago, 80% of the work of the company is proposed by us to potential clients ..." or "the paradigm has changed. Today it is fundamental to identify and / or create business opportunities. "50% (2.2% (0); 13% (10%) + 19.6% (20%) + 6.5% (30%) + 8, 7% (40)) of the responses are below 50%. 30% are between (70) and (90), which means that almost 1/3 of the respondents reveal a proactive attitude towards the market.

![Percentage of work generated by the designer's initiative](image.png)

*Figure 4: percentage of work generated by the designer's initiative*
4.6 Please specify what is the approximate percentage of work from the company / atelier which is ordered? (proposals / orders / competitions from the customer)

Only 8.4% of the respondents stated that customer orders ranged from 0 to 50%; 2.1% said that 10% of their work was commissioned, the same percentage stated that 20% of their work was due to orders and 2.1% the designers declare to be 30% and 40% the value of orders by the customers.

14.6% of the respondents assume that 50% of the work done in a year is commissioned, the most relevant being that 71% of respondents stand above (70), that this percentage is above or from customers: 18.8% said to be 100% of their work result of orders; 31.3% say it is 90%, 14.6% say it is 80%, 6.3% say it is 70%. It consolidates the view that 30% of the work on average is proposed by the designer and 70% depends on the customer’s order.

4.7 Considering all the work developed throughout one year at the company / atelier, how much - approximately - was obtained through a competition?

The answers to this question gave particularly interesting results. Our professional experience tells us that to remain in the profession it is impossible to participate in competitions frequently as contests consume a lot of time and money and in small and medium-scale companies have a high impact in terms of costs. Contests are still a perverse work platform: contact with the customer is often impossible (sometimes through electronic platforms) and where the problem is presented in a briefing made by the promoter with no possibility of being challenged or diagnosed. It is curious to note that our individual experience is corroborated by the overwhelming majority of respondents: 25.8% say that they never participate in contests (0); 29% say that only 10% of their work was achieved this way. 25.8% say that 20% of their work comes from competitions and from here the percentage starts on a downward curve that ends up at 60%: 6.5% say that 30% to 40% of the work is the result of competitions, and only 3.2% of respondents use 50% and 60% to quantify. The question of customer contact is mentioned by one of the interviewees in the comments: "They are no longer because I hate the 'platforms' of public tenders .... :-( and others refer to other types of problems:"

This year, for example, we have won a competition that has been cancelled due to the lack of financial availability of the promoter. I do not like competitions in Portugal "or" it has not been a work priority because they are mostly poorly executed in formalization."

Therefore, since 93.6% of the respondents place this form of order as having a weight below 50%, it is possible to conclude that this is a low-adherence work process on the part of designers.

4.8 In your opinion, when the work started from an idea of the company / atelier and was after proposed and accepted by a client, can it be considered a commission (since the customer continues to have a decisive role) or should it not be considered a commission since the client acknowledged the idea, but he did not initiate it?

The penultimate question seeks to perceive the reading of the interviewees on the question of authorship of the projects. It tries to confront the results obtained previously about the participation of the client in the authorship of the work in situations where the idea starts from the designer and arrives at the client as a solution to a problem that he did not ask for. The aim is trying to perceive the perception about the participation of the client in the final solution, not being the agent of the request.
Only 13% consider that in these cases there is no order (assuming the customer does not participate in the proposal). 19.6% assume a position where the client's intervention weight is low. The same percentage is closer to the 26.1% that see the customer as maintaining its important role, but not decisive, considering that despite the initiative being the designer's presence the customer is decisive. It can be said then that 32.6% of the designers, in these cases, see the client as a figure with low decision-making power. We therefore have a uniform distribution of opinions, which does not allow us to carry out a clear position on this issue by the sample (Author, 2015).

5. Conclusions

We have thought to review the relationships between designers and commissioners, from the perspective of the current professional practitioners. We concluded that:

1. Most respondents consider that the presence of the ideas and willingness of the client (or of different partners) in the body of work produced is high;
2. Designers work primarily with clients (public and private) and they are their primary source of income.
3. The focus of designers is to integrate the concerns of the clients and to fulfil their objectives.
4. Part of the work done professionally is propositional: part of the designer’s identification of an opportunity / problem.

The designer must be able to interpret and shape the communicative intentions of his/her client and predict the perception and reception of contents by the audience, planning the communication. The work is not unidirectional at the same time (from the commissioner to the target) because there is a great dynamism in the relation established with the commissioner. It is up to the designer to perceive and drive the communication process and to create a method of co-production with the commissioner.

A significant part of this research assumes that it is essential to History to recognize this reality and to re-think its current dominant narrative to better serve pedagogy. We cannot keep trying to teach our students to think as designers as history keeps telling them how to do as designers; a deformed historiography (even without wanting to be), focused on the form and handling of the formal elements, has several negative consequences for the project because it excludes the fundamental elements of the negotiation of the profession: context and process.

The responsibility the designer assumes requires, as with all other professionals, specialized knowledge on the one hand, and openness to the whole - what we usually call culture, society and politics. Such a consciousness (or rather, the absence of it) of history translates into a difficulty in communication design learning: students have a superficial knowledge of the past, based on objects selected by historians, thus having a pale and distorted idea of the profession.

This proposed change enables students to be proactive, anticipating needs, and linking them more deeply to society (and politics); also, the third sector can be a useful partner to help and be helped, where students learn where and when not work for free and immerse themselves in real life situations.

The client is a co-author that participates and guides a lot of the process decisions. The “brief” is not a “to do” job. It is a problem to be solved. Graphics are just the end of a long story and sometimes not the most glamorous one. Students should be enrolled in tasks with a high degree of complexity. Led to analyse data, understand the environment, discover problems and opportunities. There
should be no briefing but an open call for action in a certain area or context. Understanding the framework and gathering information is crucial before any further development.

By assuming its function in creating a social narrative process, the communication design student realizes that the core of his/her concern is the recipient and the creation of a communicational process, not the formalization of this process, making more able to recognise working possibilities, that do not derive from a client’s or teacher assignment.

The world of design companies and advertising agencies has seen major changes in the last years, particularly in countries like Portugal that don’t have major multinational industries. There’s not so much money as it used to be in the 80’s and companies have shrunked. The idea of preparing designers to enter this professional market does not make much sense, because there are no jobs. Designers must be able to read their social/economical/political environment and act as their own commissioners. Thinking as a designer is much more useful now then just doing as a designer and, we should teach both.

Competitions are seldom a solution (everybody loses except one). The development of relational skills is fundamental so a designer can interact with his/her potential commissioners. Part of the education of a designer should be in awaken future practitioners to the need to identify possible opportunities matching his/her skills.

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