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DESIGN IS A JOB

FOREWORD BY Erik Spiekermann
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A designer who does not present his or her own work is not a designer. Presenting the work, explaining the rationale, answering questions, and eliciting feedback are part of the design toolkit. If you sit at your desk while someone else presents work to the client, you don’t get to complain about the feedback. The failure was yours.

I’ve been presenting design to clients and internal teams for a long time (Bush, Sr., was in the White House when I started), and I still get anxious about it. It may have been a while since I’ve thrown up in a client’s bathroom and washed off next to the person I’d eventually be presenting to, sure, but I still get nerves.

The fact that I’m sitting here telling you how to present design isn’t a testament that I was born with some great skill—it’s a testament that anyone can present design if they’re willing to pick themselves up off the floor and just keep at it.

There is no substitute for learning how to present design other than presenting design. Be nervous. No one ever died
from a poor presentation. At some point you’ll realize that your nerves are lying to you. The evidence that you can present design will grow too large to ignore. You’ll do it again and again, and one day you’ll realize that you’re not as terrified as you used to be. Stay there. You’re actually designing from that point forward.

IT’S NOT GOING TO SELL ITSELF

The biggest myth ever perpetuated in the design field is that good design sells itself. (The second is that Copperplate is a legitimate typeface.) Design can’t speak for itself any more than a tamale can take off its own husk. You’re presenting a solution to a business problem, and you’re presenting it as an advocate for the end users. The client needs to know that you’ve studied the problem, understood its complexities, and that you’re working from that understanding.

Stop trying to get your clients to “understand design” and instead show them that you understand what they hired you to do. Explain how the choices you’ve made lead to a successful project. This isn’t magic, it’s math. Show your work. Don’t hope someone “gets it,” and don’t blame them if they don’t—convince them.

If you’re confident enough that you’re putting the right solution in front of a client, which you better be, you need to pass that confidence along to the client. Ultimately, your job is to make the client feel confident in the design. Confidence is as much of a deliverable as anything you’re handing over in the project.

WHY YOU NEED TO PRESENT YOUR OWN WORK

It bears repeating.

Being able to present your own work is a core design skill. It helps build rapport with the client. It puts the person directly responsible for the work in front of them. It shows them that you’re presenting that work with confidence. And it gives
them an opportunity to ask questions directly of the person who did the work.

When I was a kid we played a game called telephone. All the kids form a circle, and the lead kid whispers a word in the ear of the kid next to them. That kid whispers the word to the kid next to him, and so on, until the word gets whispered in your ear. (Shut up. The Xbox hadn’t been invented yet.) Without fail, the word that got whispered in your ear was different than the word you started with. “Chocolate” would become “chick lit,” “baseball” would become “base board,” and “let’s go to church” would become “let’s go smoke in the alley.” You get the idea.

When clients are speaking to you through an intermediary you’re not hearing directly from them. You can’t see their face. That’s important. Quite often the look on their face will tell you much more than the words out of their mouth.

Things that were posed as questions, such as, “Why is the logo that size?” get reported back to you as statements like, “Make the logo bigger.” You weren’t there to answer the question. In fact, you didn’t even know it was posed as a question.

As a designer, you need to become adept at interpreting what a client actually means. You need to be there to ask clarifying questions. You need to manage the presentation process as carefully as you make the work.

This also applies to work that’s not being presented in person. If you’re working with a long-distance client, set up a phone call so that you can present the work and the rationale. And don’t send the work in advance. Reveal it during the call, after you’ve had the opportunity to set the stage properly. The last thing you want is clients getting ahead of you and starting a call with their list of proposed changes before you’ve had a chance to present.

If you’re working at an agency that won’t let you present your own work, make the case for how it benefits everyone. It helps you, it helps the client, it helps the project get done correctly. If they still won’t let you present your own work, get the hell out. They’re not letting you do your job. Don’t work at a place that doesn’t let you do your job correctly.
HAVE AN AGENDA
Before you ever get in a room with a client, let them know why you’re getting in that room. (If you’re not sure why you’re meeting, then maybe there’s no reason to meet.) Make sure everyone is walking in with the same expectations and knows what’s expected of them. Also, let them know how long the presentation is scheduled for, and give them the desired outcome.

A meeting without an agenda is an invitation for everyone to bring their pet issues. After all, you can’t really stray off course if no course has been set.

BE CONFIDENT IN WHAT YOU’RE SHOWING
There should be absolutely no doubt that this is your meeting. Stand up. Walk to the head of the room. Announce who you are, what you do, reiterate the goals of the project and tell people how what you’re about to show them will meet those goals.

Put your audience at ease by letting them know that they’re exactly the right people to have in the room, and what you need from them is their expertise with the product or service, not design knowledge.

Steer the discussion away from personal subjectivity by outlining good topics of feedback: how well the proposed solutions meet specific metrics, whether their voice and brand are coming through, etc. Encourage them to stay in their own zone of expertise and they won’t attempt to hop on yours.

Never apologize for what you’re not showing. By the time you’re presenting, you should be focused on presenting what you have, not making excuses for what you don’t. And you need to believe what you’re saying to convince the client of the same. If you think the work is on the way to meeting their goals then say that. Design is an iterative process, done with a client’s proper involvement at key points. The goal isn’t always to present finished work; it’s to present work at the right time.
I’ve met a few designers over the years who feel like selling design is manipulation. Manipulation is convincing someone that the truth is different than what it seems. You’re familiar with the marketing phrase “Sell the sizzle, not the steak”? Well, if the steak sucks, that’s manipulation. If the steak backs up the sizzle’s promise then it’s good salesmanship. If you believe the work is good, and you can stand before a client and make an honest attempt at convincing them of the same by using the research you’ve done, then what you are doing is selling good design.

Don’t be arrogant. Confidence means you believe you’ll succeed because you’ve done the research, you understand the problem, and the work you’re presenting backs that up. Arrogance is believing you’ll succeed despite not having done those things. Don’t be that jerk.

SPEAK TO GOALS, NOT FEATURES

Your review of the work should be goal-driven. And prioritized. The client had major goals with this project. They’ll be anxious to see how those goals are addressed. Go there first, and do it in a way that maps to their goal and not to your manifestation of the goal. For example:

“Here’s a Twitter button!” is bad.

“As you can see, we’ve addressed your social media concerns!” is better.

“We’ve placed social media sharing tools in places alongside the article where testing shows the reader is most likely to interact with them, and designed that space so that it’s flexible enough to add and subtract services as they rise and fall from prominence,” is the best of all.

Remember that every feature is there for a reason. Lead with the reason. And if you don’t have a good reason why it’s there, that’s probably a sign it’s not needed.

DON’T GIVE A REAL ESTATE TOUR

The most obvious sign that a designer is nervous is the real estate tour. You’ve seen this. The presenter will start at the
top left of the page, telling you where the logo is, describing how it “pops,” then move right and down, describing every element along the way, taking you on a guided tour of every element on the page, winding up at the copyright notice in the footer. They’ll make no mention of goals or benefits. In the process they’ll leave themselves totally open to clients pulling up with construction teams and cranes to do some remodeling.

Don’t waste a client’s time walking them through what they can already see. Your job is to explain how what they’re looking at is the best way to achieve their goals.

If you start with the declaration that you’re accommodating the social media strategy, there’s a lot less resistance because you’ll be showing that every visual element is in a particular place for a reason. Otherwise it just sounds like you’re dropping buttons in random spots.

**GIVE THE CLIENT PERMISSION TO GO NEGATIVE**

It can be incredibly difficult for clients to say anything negative about your work. Something about “upsetting the sensitive, talented creatives.” Or just basic, if misguided, decency. This doesn’t help the project. Unspoken expectations lead to seething unspoken frustration, which ultimately bursts forth in a gruesome mess when you’ve run out of budget.

Let them know that negative feedback is an essential part of the process and a part of the client’s job. We prefer constructive and well-reasoned negative feedback, but even an outburst of “Never show me that crap again!” saves everyone a lot of time.

At the beginning of every visual design presentation, particularly in the early stages, we give a little speech, some variation of, “Today, we are going to show you some things that may not be right. If you see something that isn’t working, you need to point it out. If you don’t tell us what you think isn’t working, we will show you the same thing again and again until we are out of time and money and you are stuck with it.”

We’ve found this exercise makes everyone a lot more comfortable with the process and saves a lot of time wasted by
clients saying, “Yeah, that seems fine” when they’re thinking, “That is a pile of noxious crap for our customers to poop on. I hope they can read my mind so I don’t have to say it.”

HELP YOUR CLIENT GIVE YOU THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

More often than not the designers who complain that clients give them subjective feedback are the ones most prone to asking for subjective feedback. Everyone gets the feedback they deserve.

Stay away from questions like “Do you like it?” You weren’t hired to make something they liked. Ask your clients to comment specifically about the things you want them to address. Avoid talking about things you don’t want them to go into. “What do you guys think of the size of the logo?” for example.

They will, of course, still give you feedback about things you may not want feedback about. Most of it you just need to hear and acknowledge. But if they’re persistent, ask them to map what they are asking for to a goal, and follow up with clarifying questions. Oftentimes a client’s prescriptive feedback needs to be unpacked to get to the real issue.

WHEN PRESENTING WITH A TEAM

If you’re presenting with a team, you and everyone else has a role to play. Your job is to take the responsibility for selling the design work. But you may not be the only designer on the project. If you’ve been working collaboratively, present collaboratively. Just make sure that you’ve clearly outlined who’s taking charge where.

You may also have a project manager on your side who does the initial project recap. They should also keep track of time management and the agenda.

And while everyone should have a set role, be flexible enough to let everyone play to their strengths. If your interaction designer has been championing the faceted navigation
model you’re proposing, let her pitch it. Weave other people into the presentation as seamlessly as possible.

Cover your teammates’ backs during the presentation. If they’re looking lost or confused, jump in, finish their sentence, and let them jump back in when they recover. Don’t throw to another member of the team when they aren’t expecting it (“...and now Jason will explain our take on the advertising model to you...

Always present with a united front. No matter how much arguing there might have been back at the office, by the time you’re in front of a client, every solution you’re presenting is a team solution. Should a client propose something similar to what had been shot down internally earlier in the week, anyone who screams, “That’s what I wanted!” gets punched in the neck then and there.

Of course I’m kidding. No punching until you’re back in the office.

BE OPEN TO BEING WRONG

Confidence also means you can handle being wrong. And you will be. Many times. The goal of a presentation isn’t to shove your decisions down a client’s throat—it’s to present what you believe to be right in a manner that also persuades others that it’s right. And it also means allowing them to convince you that you’re wrong. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve walked into a presentation totally confident that what I was presenting was rock solid, only to have a client come up with an obvious use case that I’d overlooked and which brought the whole thing to a crashing halt. And that’s good. Because part of the design process is finding those holes. Be glad you’re working with a smart client. Don’t keep trying to sell something that’s broken. Acknowledge you were wrong, and be thankful for the new insight.

NEVER EMBARRASS YOUR CLIENT

Chances are your main client contact reports to someone. Someone who may be meeting you for the first time during
this presentation. (Make sure you know this in advance!) Whether this is the CEO, or one of thirty-two “Executive” VPs, not only is your work under scrutiny, but so is your client’s judgment in hiring you. Do them a favor and make them look good. Be prepared. Be honest. Engage them in the conversation and listen to their feedback. This person is your ally, and helping his stock rise within the organization can only help you in this project and future ones.

END STRONG

End on time. Respect your client’s time and show them that yours is valuable as well.

Make sure everyone’s questions have been answered. And make sure they have an avenue for feedback, which we’ll discuss in the next chapter, as well as a deadline. Thank them for their time. Shake hands and offer to take your glass to the sink. They’ll tell you to leave it, but offer anyway. Your mother raised you well.

Which reminds me of a fabulous story from the pre-Mule days. I was working with another studio and we’d just gone through a particularly difficult presentation. Couldn’t wait to get out of the client’s office. We said our goodbyes, packed up our stuff, and headed to the elevator. While we’re waiting for the elevator our creative director turns to me and says, “God, she was a bitch!” just as said bitch came walking around the corner.

The rest of the project was awkward.

My advice to you when you finish the presentation is to thank everyone for their time. Shut your mouth. Pack up your laptop. Head out of the building. Walk out the front door. Around the corner. In the car. Across the bridge. Okay, now you can talk.

Or, just make it a habit never to speak ill of your clients. They’re paying your bills. And putting their livelihood in your hands. They’re good people.