Understanding and Communicating the Value of Design

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Five or six months ago Sabaa Quao and I spoke at one of the RGD Ontario forums, and similar to today we had two separate topics and at the end there were a lot of similarities between our two talks. We are the big bad dose of business reality after two days of free thinking. Hillman Curtis started us off on the note that we need to be artists. Sabaa Quao and I are unfortunately here to tell the story that we are also business people and we are professionals who have to communicate and do all these things.

This is my third day in a row in this room. I was here Thursday night for a Gala black tie for the TSX. It was the 150th anniversary of the Exchange. I looked around the room, on Thursday night, realized everyone was white, almost everyone was male, most of them didn't have hair. Those who did have hair, it was white. So, I was the odd man out. Looking around the room for the last two days, this is a completely different audience. The scary part was, I knew probably as many people on the Thursday night as I know here over the last day or two.

We at Ove Design work with large corporations in Ontario and Canada and even some in the US. So understanding that audience, understanding what makes that audience tick is really important to us. So, I am here really to talk about communicating the value of design.

So where do we really start? I think understanding where the value comes from. We need to do three big things. It is really understanding this challenge. Understanding the challenge of any assignment: what is it we need to do? As somebody had in their presentation yesterday, it is not the what, it is the why. Many designers when they look at a design project, they see the what, they see a brochure, a logo, a website, a thing which is going to look great. And we'll communicate and do these things but they see the thing, the what. The biggest message we have is, step back, look at the why and look at what the client's challenge is. So, once we have done that, we need to understand the environment and, then, it is about making that stew, coming from the top and coming from the bottom and understanding both sides, understanding where the organization is and what it feels and looking at the top, understanding what it is that people who are trying to articulate the vision of the organization, what it is they need to do. And then lastly, after you have done those two things, let's put it all together, let's demonstrate the possibilities that show them what this new world can look like. Because really that's what they are paying us to do. If they could do it, they would try. A lot of places have in house design departments and

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desktoppers. If they were really that visual they would do it. So it is not about just moving a few things around on a piece of paper or on screen. It is about really unlocking an idea and making an idea to come to life in a way that designers have that unique talent of seeing something that's not yet real.

I got a few quotes, and I don't know if there is anybody from my firm in the audience here, you probably recognize many of these because we have heard them all in meetings. Some of the things we can here is:

"We've got it all figured out for you, just make it look nice." Here is perception problem number one. Again, it comes back to the days when we were called commercial artists because what we did was decorate. We made it look nice. We made it look beautiful. So, if all we are doing is making it look nice, what happens if you and the other person don't agree on what nice is? So move on from discussion of nice.

My personal favourite: "Let me get back to you. I just want to check with my sister, my partner, my child, they are really good with colours, they really know fashion, they really know trends." This comment most often, comes from men. Very rarely do I ever have women saying let me check with my partner first. But in this exclusive tone I wasn't going to write I am going to check with my wife. That wouldn't go over well. But we get this quiet a bit. Again this is an issue

This one I had a year and a half ago. "Let's open it up to the local grade 12's and see what they can do!" This was said to me by a brain surgeon at a very contentious board meeting at a hospital for which we were doing an identity. It was not University Health Network just up the street. They are a very smart group. But this brain surgeon was trashing everything we were doing. And he kept on doing this. Well, maybe let's take that approach to medical treatment. When we are not happy with the answer they give us, well, let's open it up to the local grade 12, you know. They may know some first aid. See where they are taking it. This is a big problem.

Another one. "I know what I like when I see it. It is your job to figure it out." If somebody says that in their initial brief, you need to evaluate what clients to work with: "You need to stop and say do I really want to work with them?" If you hear this, the first thing out of their mouth, this may be a good stopping point.

Also, "I saw something I liked and I brought it with me. Just do it like this, change the name, logo and contact information." My wife worked for a small design firm for a number of years, and it was just her and her boss. She had the strangest little set of clients. But they would often come in with a little ad they had seen or a brochure and say: "Just do it like this." Again, there is no value.

So, there is a quote that I always use as my own personal inspiration as a starting point and it is from William Morris. And he was talking about it when it related to the concept of interior furniture but we can adapt it to where we are moving in design today. "If you want to have a golden rule that will fit everything, this is it: have nothing that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful." I would argue that for successful communication of the value of design,

things need to be useful and beautiful. And for anybody who says something can't be useful and beautiful, I would really, that's something I would spend a lot of time arguing about.

How do we define value? This goes back to the why. The value comes out of solving the why for the client. So, I think one of the big things is, that the solution is just as important for a small organization. We just finished this week doing the annual report for the YMCA for Greater Toronto. Probably one of the projects I felt the most attachment to. Our design director, did an unbelievable job. We had so many constraints but we really got into the issues that the Y was communicating. It was so important for us to understand it, to be able to give them something of real value. We heard that back from the president already that it really deals with their issues. It is not just about selling things, it is about communicating what is really, really important.

Another thing we are talking about in design is it is not about repetition, it is not just about following trends. A design based solution that provides value is one that really makes a difference. And this difference changes perception, on how we look at something, how we thought about something. And designers have this great ability to be able to change perceptions through a simple image, through one or two words. It is a really, really powerful tool.

You can trigger actions. Look at the posters that they had for the 1968 student riots in Paris. There was triggering an action. Or provoke some thought. Again, one of the things we want to do with the why was to make people think, was to add to the discussion of what the role of public and private organizations are in an urban environment. There is an awful lot of discussion going around on the future of Toronto. It is really, really important. And we want to make sure that all sides are heard, not just those with access to the media.

So, how do we find this out? We know we need a solution and we know we need a solution as to differentiate. Where do we find it? So, let's ask the difficult questions, let's ask the stupid questions, ask the weird questions. It is ok not to know the answers to these things. I think many designers are a bit afraid to reveal our lack of understanding about a particular issue, for fear we won't look like we are smart enough. I think one of the best things a designer can do is come in from the outside and ask the really hard questions. Do your background research ahead of time so you're not asking a question that is insultingly stupid. But sometimes you may want to ask something that seems so blatantly obvious you wonder why nobody has asked it. And sometimes the political environment in a place will prevent anybody to ask questions in the first place. If as an outsider you ask it, it could be very, very strong.

Listen to everyone but only hear what is important. You need to listen, but filter. Filtering is key because there is so much information out there, And I think designers often will rush to a solution but the more you listen the more you know what to hear for. Because you are not listening for every piece of information, you are looking for trends, you are looking for core ideas, you are looking for that moment of truth. Many of our clients will say to us: "Where do you come up with a theme, where do you come up with the idea?" And often I say, "The idea is already in your organization." What you have done, you have hired us to help you find it." And we listen to people and they talk and somewhere buried in thirty-five minutes of rambling will be a sentence

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and that sentence may be the big idea. And that big idea out of that sentence may be something that, if in a case of an organization like Loblaws, 50,000, 60,000 people have to understand. And it is all buried in there. So it is just a matter of listening and hearing the right thing.

And very importantly, never stop your own personal learning. There is no standardized test, just because you are an R.G.D., you passed your test to be an accredited designer, doesn't mean that you know everything there is about design. Learn things that are important to you, learn things that have nothing to do with the field of design. They will all help you broaden your education and help you understand how to talk to people from a different environment. If you are able to talk to people in a language that they are familiar with, it makes communication so much easier.

We have figured out what we need to do. We have gone through the process of uncovering it. Now what we have to do is communicate it. One of the first things that we need to realize is that our most valuable asset is our ability to connect with people. It is to bridge connections, connect an idea, connect two different people together. There are so many different things we can do. First of all, it is not to beautify, it is to make a connection. This is not to say that it shouldn't be beautiful but the connection is the main thing, then beauty follows.

Turning images into ideas. We had a discussion with one our designers the other day. We were talking about a strategic paper we are going to be giving to a client. And they weren't getting it. We were talking to the client on the phone: "well, we want to do this, this and this." The client said: "Well, we can't see it." And I think when talking to the designer afterwards: well, how come they can't see it? It is so simple. Simple for you, you are a designer. You are blessed with the ability to see something, to see a world in your head, to hear a word and immediately imagine a picture, a picture that is not driven by something else but that is new and unique. We can't expect nor should we except our clients to do that. People who can take ideas and turn them into images, that's what we are getting paid for by the client, that's when you see a real value, when they say: "I had no idea what it looked like, nobody conceived ideas, but somehow in the back of my mind you have captured what it is I had in there."

People connect with the tangible not with the abstract. It was interesting looking through some of Michael's pieces, a lot of them historical. There is a lot of stuff that if you did not take it in fourth year philosophy in university you kind of miss some of those references. This is not to say that you have to dumb it down and I am definitely not a promoter of dumbing stuff down. But provide people with a clue. If you are going to lay in an obscure Greek mythological reference, give them something else to grab on to as well. If you don't make them fight for it, otherwise it will be wasted on 99% of the audience. And in-jokes, talking about weddings. The friend of the bride is up there and they are telling in-jokes and they are all laughing and everyone else is standing around thinking that is really stupid. That is what in-jokes in design are like. It is funny to the two or three people who have done them. It is not really funny to anybody else.

Tangible, tangible is more than making it look good. This was an ad by a consulting firm in the UK. I think it is great: "You spend 18 months on your business strategy and all that has changed its the logo." I think that is what sums up, just changing a logo, just printing a report,

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just launching website is not success in and of itself. And again, by understanding that, what drives the client to do the project in the first place, we can help them on their way. We won't solve the problem, we won't change the rule of how the whole organization works but we want to look at what we do as being a catalyst and having impact along the way and not just window dressing. So, how do we make it tangible again? Use references, ones that people understand. We often find that if we go back to our childhood, go back to things that people find common.

Be comparative without being derivative. I think by our nature as we get older we like to compare and somebody says, "well have you heard this new group, have you seen this television show?" Most often, when they refer to it, there is some sort of comparative. It is like this. It sounds like this. It has influences of that. Design in many ways does that. Some of the best designers use common and understood elements. They will call back on different movements within design, within culture so that people can reference against it. So they will make a quicker hit for them when they look at it, they will get the message right away. As they look longer they may understand deeper meaning but they'll get the quick message.

Don't stimulate the eyes, engage the brain. Pictures are interesting but the words are unbelievable. They really draw you in, and they get you not just to do the thirty seconds annual report flip which we all do. You pick it up from the back cover, flip backwards, looks nice. But the words will capture you and they will draw you deeper and deeper. You engage more of the senses.

And then lastly, I've got a bit of eye candy so you not only hear me talk. We want to create an environment that solutions can live in. When you are proposing a new logo or a new signature for a client, one of the worst things you can do is just come up and go "Tada." Stunned silence, just as right now. That's typically the response I got. So you are waiting for this magical "ah" to happen. People like to be taken on a story, to explain the story of the concept, how did you get there. Four or five years ago, we started doing work with 7.24 Solutions. The CEO and founder of the company said: "I won't change my logo. I like the logo the way it is." He was an entrepreneur, he was single-minded, he was well on his way to becoming a billionaire with an ego. So what we had to do for him was paint a picture of a different world that's according to his business. So before we showed him the logo, we did these cards, to get people thinking.

Slide 1: Where do you go from here?
Slide 2: Wherever your customers are.
Slide 3: Everyone knows there is more than one way to get from A to B.
Slide 4: The problem is there is more then one B.
Slide 5: Imagine each dot is a customer, now connect the dots.
Slide 6: 7.24 solutions logo

So when we showed him the identity, and there is a lot more material that went with this, it made sense, it supports the story of what it is we are trying to do. It supports the story of the fact that mobile commerce is changing the way that people will work, people will transact with or-

ganizations. So the story of the logo became more powerful. I think it is a nice looking logo but obviously the story behind it is excellent. And you can tell quickly and simply and use some neat little visual tools to help communicate it.

Sometimes it takes more than a simple visual tool. Creating worlds, which is one thing that we do. People ask: "where is the value in the design?" When we first met with Classwave Wireless, they were a company developing Bluetooth Servers. The explanation of what the technology did took three and a half hours, with no breaks. And our job in an eight-week period of time was to get down from three and a half hours to one piece of paper. And that was a huge job. When we are able to distil ideas down that quickly, it was very, very effective. We did many things that I've talked about, by doing the research, we understood what the opportunity was. We sketched out this world. We were able to use visuals that were tangible for them and we were able to use words that made the connections with people. So this was just one piece of a whole variety of material that ended up being a very strong visual identity system. But we needed to go here first, for them to be able to see the possibilities in design. They were a start-up, they didn't have a lot of money but in the end invested a considerable amount of money in their design and communications. Because they could see the value, that we could make it clear for them the way that nobody else has been able to what it was they are offering, what it was they needed to be saying to the rest of the world.

> *"Look for different ways of presenting your information. Unconventional ideas call for innovative presentation materials."*

Two sets of final thoughts before I take questions. Prepare your presentation like a really keen MBA grad. We are no MBA grads but are all keeners. Look for different ways of presenting your information. Unconventional ideas call for innovative presentation materials. Several years ago, we were asked by a real estate company to look for a new way of branding their value-itemed services. There is a sidebar story to the end of this, for those of you who have seen Eric Swetsky's presentation on copyright. So what we have done, it was a paid pitch, that's the sidebar story. We decided we needed to create a character. And this was something really different, it was not just having a logo, it was creating a full-size character. So we got to the meeting room a few minutes early, found a closet. We had a six-foot high character created and mounted and stuffed it in the closet. We went along to the logical place in the presentation, explained the strategy, the reasoning of what we needed to do. And we said, we want to introduce you to the newest member of your team. Opened the closet, brought it out and here was the identity. I think many of you have seen the Max character that Oxford Realty has used and it is around the city. Max was developed by another firm, but Max was based on Oxi, the character we developed. Just on the sidebar note, never do a paid pitch unless copyright is decided ahead of time. We learned that one. Paid pitches are different than spec work but it is a grey area.

The next think, create and populate a new world. If you are thinking of a new world, if you are looking at creating an identity, do more than just showing the logo. How is the logo going to live in a new environment? We call it "adiations," it is a made-up word, they aren't real ads but people identify, they connect with these ads and it makes it really tangible for them. They are able to see, what are the images, what are the words look like that live and support this identity.

Another very important thing: control the presentation. Set out your criteria. One of the things we do is we do write an agenda. And we write review criteria and we submit that to the client prior to the presentation because the last thing you want is to lose control over your presentation. I've been there and I know that Jean-Pierre has presented to Peter Monk before. And Mr. Monk can walk into the room, pick up a board and toss it and then you have kind of lost control. There is not much you can do with Mr. Mnk, he has a lot of respect and he is treated that way. But for many people, control your presentation, set up reasonable expectations ahead of time of what it is you want to accomplish. Set up criteria with which to review materials. And then have some way of delineating that you have come to a conclusion at the end of the meeting. Just shrugging your shoulders and saying: "well, maybe we go back and move on." That is not a solution. There is no value in that. Outline all the things that the client has seen as worthy in the work and if there is still work to do put those down as well.

And then last year there was a presentation, Peter Gorb I think it was, he was here last year at Designthinkers. He talked about design as a process, not as an end to itself. I think in the communication of design, in order to communicate its value, we really need to reinforce that design is a process; it is not just an end state. So to the client, you are paying us for the process of discovery, you are not paying us for this piece of the end. Because if they say, I don't like it, at the end, then you don't have an awful lot to stand on but if they agree that this is a process of discovery even if the results that you end up with are not what they thought they end up with. That may not be the fault of anybody that may be the reality of what the business situation demanded. Get them to understand that it is the process they are paying for.

Final thought, connecting to what Sabaa Quao was talking before, people don't like to work very hard in terms of your clients. They don't like to work very hard unless they have to. You will meet the rare client who will go out of his way to understand something that you explained and they don't get. But most of them, if they don't get it, they don't get it. It is your job to make them understand it. So, don't present design as a piece of art. I think this is the challenge. I saw Hillman's presentation yesterday and he came and said "artist," and I thought uh, great. That's obviously not what I am saying. But I understand where he is going. But the issue is with art, when an artist creates a piece of art, they want the viewer to take their own ideas out of it, to draw their own story. Having the viewer understand all the issues in the piece of art is not the primary importance of the piece of art. Design is commissioned to help tell a story, to help communicate. Again, it comes from a different place. So the story-telling aspect is very, very important. Again, yesterday there was a slide; we talked about the theme story, the character. People like stories. If you are presenting, there are a number of ways you can do this. You can tell the story of your creative process. You can take them through how did you get here. Involve them, even a five, ten minute run up, you can do it as a quick little show in Flash, PowerPoint or Director. Just take them through, how did we got here. Then people feel more connection with the material before it is even presented. Or you can take them on a story, as we did with 7.24. We developed a story of the world first. People like that.

Again, I keep coming back to this: making connections for people. You don't get bonus points for showing that you are smarter than the client. I watched designers do this at times. It may give your ego the biggest boost but it certainly doesn't help your design profession.

Lastly, the right cheat sheets to follow up with your presentation. Very often, once the material leaves you, somebody else has to communicate it: somebody else within the organization who is presenting it up the line, the organization itself communicating it to the media. The presenting about it never stops. So, giving people simple tools, whether it is just a paragraph of text which they call in business circles "The Elevator Stories," that you can explain it all in thirty seconds. So if somebody says: what kind of name is that? Where does that come from? Well, that name comes from this and this and this is what we want to do. And people go: oh, ok, that doesn't sound so stupid after all. And they move on. Helping people along the way, helping them solve their challenges through vital pieces of communication really is the main driver. Thank you.