



Inside Story

Some designers working “inside” feel abused. The fun work is assigned externally and they don’t feel appreciated. The people they work with have unrealistic expectations of them and, since the service they provide is often “free,” their clients can ask for countless iterations because they lack a strategy or a communications plan and instead say, “I’ll know it when I see it.”

Others work for companies like Nike, Capital One, Target and Herman Miller and have many fewer complaints. It may be true that organizations with enviable design functions are that way because of an enlightened CEO, but more often than not, it is because at one point in the organization’s history a designer said: “We have the institutional knowledge, we know the culture, we know the brand, we can do it faster and cheaper and better, and I’m going to prove it,” rather than, “I’m not going to take it any more.” These designers wanted to partner with other functions in their organization and to do that, they had to make a connection between their work and business results to become partners with (not design waiters for) the people who make the big decisions.

Other companies like McDonald’s, Bank of America, Procter & Gamble, IBM and American Express rely heavily on agencies and other outside resources. Companies like this often rely on Procurement to acquire design suppliers, but might also hire designers to coordinate between them and creative suppliers. These designers may or may not participate in selecting or directing the agencies, and may have different issues that irk, such as convincing management to refresh the outside resources they habitually use.

Most companies, such as Colgate, Bed Bath & Beyond, MetLife and Starwood, fall in the middle where some design work is done inside and some out.

If you are interested in changing the status quo in your organization, make the fact that design is finally having its moment work for you. Every business publication in the last five years has either had a cover story about design or devotes regular real estate to it. There cannot be a CEO who is not aware of what design has done for Apple, Bloomberg, Starbucks and Nissan to differentiate them from their competition, define how special they are and how worth-it it is to pay a premium

for their product or service. Capitalize on this. Show and tell them how they can get some.

There are steps to take to improve the reputation of internal design or creative services so it can live up to its potential. You have heard the derisive comments: “things get lost in the shuffle;” “the internal group doesn’t do a good job;” “they are overworked;” “they can only do the simple stuff;” “it should be cheaper and faster internally, but it isn’t;” or “it is easier to work with an agency.”

Of course these critics think that being a strategic partner with design means, “Just do what I say, please.” Some pride themselves on out-of-the-box thinking and attempt to motivate by saying, “Do it exactly the same way we did it last time.” They pride themselves on their operational efficiency, but at the final moment declare, “I have no budget.” They love that creative services is a friendly local resource to use to “Iterate this as many times as I want!” They don’t need a creative brief because, “Creative services has institutional knowledge.” Do any of these great ideas sound familiar?

If you are in a situation where you feel abused, commit yourself to breaking the mold and changing the situation—or get another job. There is nothing worse than a complainer who hangs around, but never does anything constructive. No one is going to come along and wave a magic wand. Make the personal investment in doing an analysis of why the internal group is not meeting expectations of the designers working in it, or the corporate functions that depend on it. Is it lack of funding, poor infrastructure, inappropriate resources or inefficiencies? How can you start to build a better internal capability and establish a vision, inspire your team, sell management and execute flawlessly? None of this is easy, but others have done it. If your organization is not taking advantage of it, step up to the plate and become a hero to your fellow designers and all those depending on the organization to produce products, services, communications and systems that have value and support the business strategy (which we hope is sound).

One of the best ways to begin to make your case is to speak the language of cost. Every business person understands the concept of cost, and so should you. A design group I know is growing in influence in a company where the CEO blanks out when the word ‘design’ is mentioned. But when shown that

business

\$50 million was saved during the first year of a program to standardize the symbols and language used on products and in instructional and promotional material about them, he authorized hiring additional designers. It is in the early days of the relationship and the CEO is not yet a convert. He may never understand the value of design beyond cost, but meanwhile, the vice president of design is realizing his aspirations for design's tentacles to infiltrate the organization and improve its performance.

When developing presentations, be reminded of how Roger Martin, dean of the Joseph L. Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, differentiates how designers and business people think:

Business

- Verbal
- Linear
- Bottom-line
- Problem-focused
- Looking for one right answer

Design

- Visual
- Circular
- Common good
- Solution-focused
- Believe there isn't one right answer

While your clients may be able to live with some ambiguity and move forward with decisions before having all the answers (because they have educated instincts), you will have to bite off a little piece to generate proof, as the above vice president of design did (and you may have to repeat this many times), to build the same kind of trust a CFO gets when he or she makes a recommendation.

How to do it¹

First things first: Take inventory. Whom do you have to work with? Make a list of core design, cognitive, personality attributes and rate each team member against it.

- Who are your friends in the organization?
- What or who are the barriers to developing a successful design or creative services function customized for the organization?
- How are you going to forge a partnership/relationship with key functions in the organization?
- Have you got the right space?
- What kind of budget and other resources will you need to implement your plan?

Don't assume that all the designers and creative staff will understand and buy into your vision. Give them the same presentation you will use to win over management, demonstrating that you:

- Have institutional knowledge

- Understand the brand
- Already have the partner relationships
- Have potential for operational efficiency

Planning will enable the organization to increase reuse, streamline approvals and reduce work—fewer hours will be spent per project. Improving operational efficiency can mean that doing things in-house may cost 60% less than using an agency. Get bids on a few jobs that you want to do inside and record the evidence.

Flawless execution can be achieved by getting excellent inputs, matching skills to tasks, improving partner accountability and measuring output. Keep asking those who know for the measurement of the effectiveness of everything generated by the design or creative services team until you get the results as a matter of course and share the information with the team. Knowing the effectiveness will improve their morale, their understanding of the value they are providing and their ambition of developing design skills that match the needs of the organization.

Matching skills to tasks means understanding the strategic importance of each task. Is it high or low? Is the complexity of the task high or low? Creating local sponsorship materials is a less complex task than creating a transactional addition to the Web site.

Nothing makes clients more accountable than having them pay for your services. Institute a chargeback system. At the very least, make sure they understand the amount of resources they have consumed—time spent by what level of designer, and the number of iterations—even if you can't actually bill them. On the path to transforming clients into partners, make sure your expectations of them are clear—that they know what data or research information you need from them—and what they can expect you to deliver.

Measuring output requires different kinds of metrics. Business objectives (the things management wants your work to achieve) are increased sales, profits and new customers. The results metrics (the measurable results from marketing initiatives they want your work to achieve) are increased impressions and response rates. Process metrics (the controllable inputs) are rounds of revisions, cancelled jobs, use of standards, adherence to file creation standards.

What's in it for you? Being proud of what is being produced by the team, increasing your visibility within the organization and among your peers, becoming an acknowledged partner in building a brand that you care about and understand and going home each night knowing that what you work on each day is important to the organization. **CA**

¹ I am grateful to my colleague Ed Krug, vice president and principal of Aquent Consulting (and his client Jim Hauptman, design director at L.L.Bean), for information about how to align a marketing organization with the work that needs to get done.