

# What if what they want isn't what they need?

*Your job is to create advertising that appeals to your client's target audience*

By Dan Antonelli, President and Creative Director, Graphic D-Signs, Inc.

**W**e've all worked with clients who have a very distinct idea of what they want you to do for them. Sometimes their input is a useful starting point. Perhaps they've seen a sign or truck they'd like you to emulate. Or maybe it's a style of lettering or a genre that they like.

As designers, listening to what a client wants is a critical component to building a successful relationship. In order to help them, you have to hear what they are really asking for. Sometimes that involves trying to interpret what their challenges are, and then assessing how you can best arrive at a solution that meets their goals. In a nutshell, that's what good designers and sign artists do—they help solve a marketing problem with a creative advertising solution.

Using your portfolio as a reference point, you can learn a lot about what a client likes. By their responses, you can assess aspects of each design which may help build the framework for an approach that they might agree on.

All these discussions are useful in gauging their specific interests, but now the real challenge and hard questions have to be asked.

Is what they're asking you for actually what they need and appropriate for their stated objectives?

This is where you have to put on your marketing hat. You begin to think about demographics, audiences, and who the advertising you're being asked to create is really for. The audience whom you are designing the art for—and what they like—really should supersede all else. They are who will ultimately be calling your client or visiting their store.

Part of your discussions needs to include laying out this reality, and helping the client understand what our mission is: designing for our audience first.

**It's all about the brand** The second part of the discussion has to revolve around the brand you're being asked to work with. Is it even possible to build a successful piece of advertising with their current brand? Will it even work for the medium? Will it deliver a positive brand promise and help meet the client's stated objectives?

Unfortunately, for many small businesses,





they're fighting a battle they don't even realize they are facing. They have no idea how their current brand is holding them back and hindering their chances for even greater success.

Again, educating them about their brand's challenges is your job and your responsibility. You are either their advocate, or you're not. You can't be half in it. If you're not vested in their success, then you're simply a guy selling ink on a substrate.

And I suppose there's nothing wrong with that. But as such, you'll find yourself on a race to the bottom, selling everything based on square footage calculations. And you'll probably find that what you sell can be replicated by anyone else down the street or on the Internet—and probably for less.

Instead, we do our best to have a frank discussion with clients whose brands are holding them back. And we couple it with sound rationale and reason. Concepts like distance legibility, brand promise and emotional connections are all things we discuss.

Do they all listen to me? Nope. But many do—and they appreciate the honesty.

And sometimes they already have a good foundation to build from. They may have some brand equity worth leveraging for something even better.

Often, I'm the first to try to take the time to explain the brand's shortcomings—which often leads them to wonder, "How come no one else took the time and told me this before?" I also try to share what has happened with others who have followed our strategies, and what has happened to their businesses.

**Can you be all things to all people**—and do you want to try? A big mistake many sign companies make is in trying to be all things to all people. Sometimes, just saying no will serve you better in the long run, rather than saying yes to things which you know in your heart aren't right. For me, I can't cash checks for things that I know won't serve my clients well.

It's taken some time to get to a point where I can do that, but I believe that putting the interest of my clients first, ahead of my own, has helped get us to that point. At our agency, we try to carefully balance if what a client wants is not, in our experience, actually what





they need. Our job is to bridge that divide with passion, expertise and most importantly, honesty.

Be your client's fiercest advocate. Roll up your sleeves and put your heart into the task at hand. Help lead them to success. Choose carefully what you want your business to be known for—and stand for. **SC**



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