

GOOD CLIENT/BAD CLIENT

In reflective moments I imagine a riverside studio with large walk around balcony up top, workshop and meeting room underfoot, with as much time as it takes to hone a goodly selection of interesting design ideas, whilst being appreciated and paid, on time, in full.

My personal reality is a studio alongside my home and a workshop in a WW2 bomb shelter under my lawn. It lacks only water; and clients? As schizophrenic as a teenager at exam time - good client, a trusted friend, not so good, a school bully.

Why the difference? We all have the same end in mind, a well designed product that sells. Unfortunately clients imitate life in all its forms and managing relationships is a subject deserving of an entire module to itself at college, but the reality is learning by the seat of your pants.

A good relationship is mood enhancing and product improving. A good client has an instinct for their market which belies any amount of market research. They have the patience to develop and refine a solution and recognise the value of the cost incurred (within reason). Unerringly, they have an instinctive eye for detail and quality. At a designers so far we have worked with 60 odd clients cast from many different moulds. Entrepreneurs, proprietors, senior executives, design managers, product managers, time wasters and combinations of all those.

Successful relationships require the personal involvement of the man at the top. It

doesn't matter if he delegates operational detail, but it certainly does require that he participates. If he's nowhere to be seen start worrying; no matter how good the "delegatee", decisions have to be made and approved. In all organisations this has to be done by the person with whom the buck stops. That way there are no regrets. Believe me a poor decision can be the source of a working lifetime of regret and hair loss; which cuts neatly to the dynamics of a working relationship.

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My first experience of a good client in operation (from my then awe struck standpoint) was the chief executive of an international luggage brand. Following the first presentation (I played the part of spectator), I sat next to him at lunch and he talked to me. He talked to everyone else as well and listened to their two penn'orth. At the end of lunch on our return to the meeting room, his mind was made up and we had three directions, each with some adjustments to take further before we met again. His involvement was total, then and subsequently, his questioning direct and thoughtful, his reasoning logical and his feel spot on. We all

agreed. The resultant product is still for sale 23 years on. No market research, no prescriptive steering, only airing the issues and suggesting that we might like to look over there for an answer.

Trust is not a freebie, it's hard won and easily compromised. As any one who's experienced the pleasure of a relationship that works will relate, the foundations of trust need certain key constituents; mutual appreciation, mutual respect, understanding, and honesty (that's almost all).....and from the early experiments it will quickly become apparent if there's chemistry. The designer provides a service and it's a heart and soul affair. I've never wanted to occupy the shoes of any of my clients (even if I'd had it in me) but I suspect they might not say the same. A good friend of mine refers to designers as "trade", but I find any imbalance is countered by the slightly respectful awe clients have for our artiness; we both stand to gain from the association and need each other, not just because one wants something doing and the other wants something to do. A good relationship is a meeting of likely minds with the same goal in sight approaching from different positions....a Beckham cross onto a Rooney head, did I say Beckham... you get the drift. It should be a great goal and a perfect example of intuitive understanding. Without that selfless attitude we're into blame and counter blame and so trust; from trust follows appreciation, respect, understanding, honesty, chemical bonding and

SUCCESS it's so simple.

My second "good client" experience was an entrepreneur. Successful, slightly glamorous, instinctive, and possessing exactly the same insights as the corporate leader I'd first encountered. The difference being that I was assigned to him, his designer. The chemical bond was immediate and despite myself I loved to be around the whiff of rakish unpredictability that he brought through the door. He believed in me and we worked together for four years or more on his project. He was not conventionally creative but he could sniff out flaws in an argument, or a solution, give clues as to the answer and recognise a correct one in a minute. This was all done without threat or fear in the creative partnership that defines the best working relationships. Good minds, minded to co-operate, will move swiftly around previously insurmountable problems, to solutions that individually would have been missed or taken a large slice of the budget to resolve. The key point is simply that co-operation works.

Before moving on, a short financial

detour; if your want is to win, develop, survive and benefit from a relationship NEVER, free pitch (bloody nerve), under quote (you fool), work to a fixed fee without proviso's (a brief is a fluid thing) and deal with doubts before they keep you awake at three in the morning. Designers are not naturally argumentative and often hope a job well done will pour oil on any lumpy waters; but for a moment put yourself on the receiving end..... enough said.

For many studios commercial life is a series of project one off's each to be won and done. It is horribly difficult to maintain continuity let alone a good living in those circumstances. So the development of a relationship to the point where its value is witnessed on the bottom line and is seen as the

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essential forerunner of future success is something to covet. These are relationship grails (and I'm not religious) and so I hope you've been paying attention. If the roster includes you, then there is usually a beauty contest, followed by creative writing (I hate proposals) and then if you are anointed you should produce outstanding work that customers love and will buy. Only then is there potential for things to move onto an entirely different footing. Certainly there will have been chemistry, followed, during the course of the first piece of work by the emergence of trust; the point at which your client is listening to your words as well as looking at your pictures. If at this point you have not been spoken to by someone from the top floor, it will be difficult to progress. However if a local success has gone national and even international it is likely your card will have been marked and the dynamics will have shifted; you may even be considered a potential asset.

I've been fortunate enough to be a potential asset on a number of occasions.

These have been and are relationships in which my role is that of the rock 'n roll first cousin. One particular instance had it all; small beginnings, success, excess, a change of hands and family breakdown.

The early years were very similar to my earlier tales; an ambitious inspiring individual at the helm of a wonderful English institution. From a small trial project we became retained design consultants responsible for all aspects of their design culture, from products, to showrooms and exhibitions bringing in other designers to work on graphics and fabrics, but fully involved with the briefing and appraisal process to ensure the company built and maintained a reputation for innovation and good design. It was a dreamlike relationship. At all levels our role was embraced. The chief executive groomed a design manager who managed in the truest sense and was a fantastic facilitator (today he runs his own very successful company on exactly the same design led lines); but all good things come to an end. The success of the company attract

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ed predatory overseas interest and after five truly great years the company became a subsidiary of a huge global manufacturer. Things changed and a design led, product policy with a single guiding light was replaced by a grey heavily prescriptive, method based approach.

Recently I heard a writer and educator offering Martin Amis advice in advance of his taking up a post as Professor of creative writing at Manchester University. To paraphrase she said never ask students for a synopsis you will receive only blinkered offerings.

In the next two years, whilst still retained, the guiding lights were replaced by fairy lights, that clueless breed, the product manager. Sharp and humour less, managing branded food stuffs one day and complex

products the next, with ease... oh boy. Those last two years taught me not to take anything for granted, the previous five had taught me that this can be the best job in the world if you practice in the company of those individuals who have the intelligence, creativity, and the management nous to combine their gifts with yours; I think it's called alchemy and the feeling when it works is pure magic. **Adrian Stokes is principal of asa designers**