

## **ALIGNMENT OF MARKET VALUES THROUGH A COMMUNICATION DESIGN TOOL**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports emerging PhD research findings of an ethnographic study into the role of the graphic designer in small business enterprises. The communication exchange between the small business client and graphic designer in determining a common understanding of market values<sup>1</sup> is the focus of the research.

Accurate representation of small business market values translated through graphic design is difficult to achieve for a variety of reasons: a) The small enterprises financial constraints and their lack of understanding of the graphic design process and the way in which graphic design can influence market share; b) Graphic designers claim that a lack of understanding of the business needs of their client and financial constraints surrounding the design project present additional challenges in providing professional solutions for this market sector (Cooper & Press, 1997).

The paper will present the development of a Communication Design Tool<sup>2</sup> as an alternative approach to the graphic design information gathering process within small business enterprises. The purpose of the tool is to facilitate a process of analyses and evaluation regarding the state of play of the company's core values in relation to graphic design preferences. The tool has been developed in collaboration with the small business community and graphic designers through an intensive iteration process.

The Communication Design Tool serves the small business by identifying their market values, perception of graphic design preferences and visual language of key competitors. This resulting information thereafter enables graphic designers to better understand implicit information difficult to access from the small business client, resulting in a more informed graphic design process.

Key words: Graphic design, small business, market values.

### **Introduction**

This paper argues that design research benefits the small business client and graphic designer. The development of a Communication Design Tool facilitates improved communication of market values and graphic design preferences within the small business sector. Accurate representation of market values improve market competitiveness, impact on growth potential, employment possibilities and economic development.

The scope of the research deals with the small business enterprise sector i.e. businesses employing between 10 and 20 people. This sector represents an interesting growth development

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of the term market value within the context of this paper represents the perceived aspirations of a business in the market place, in relation to reputation.

<sup>2</sup> Communication Design Tool is the name given to the development of a pre-brief analysis facilitation tool to inform the graphic design process (for use in small businesses) by the author.

shift where, according to Atkinson and Meager (Atkinson & Meager in Storey, 1997), managerial appointments are made when firms reach this stage in their development. David Walker (Walker, 1990) states that it is at this stage of development that the small business tends to employ professional graphic design skills.

These are the reasons that the research is focusing specifically on this size of company. In addition, companies that have a degree of maturity in that they have established an identity in the market place is another criteria for focusing the research.

The paper will explain firstly, the surrounding background of the study, and explore the argument developed through literature and empirical multiple case study research. Secondly, the research methodology is presented. The iterative stages of development of the Communication Design Tool, carried out within a predetermined selection of nine small businesses and three independent graphic designers are also explained. A discussion follows, offering emerging results of the research. Lastly, the paper suggests implications of the study relative to an alternative approach to the information gathering design process.

## **Background**

The small business enterprise has little experience of the graphic design process (Walker, 1990). This is due to either financial constraints or a lack of understanding of how design can improve market competitiveness, or a combination of both. Graphic design is subsequently low priority for many small enterprises. Given this situation, the graphic designer, in dealing with the small business client, requires to work within tight budgetary constraints. At the same time, the designer must educate the inexperienced small business client in the graphic design process. One general problem cited by designers as a main contributing factor leading to unsatisfactory design solutions is a lack of understanding of the client's business (Cooper & Press, 1997).

In general, the small business market sector is not experienced at communicating the market values of its business. Also, small companies do not always document information regarding their business. These factors contribute to a situation where insufficient information is communicated to the graphic designer from the outset, often resulting in unsatisfactory and inappropriate design solutions.

## **The brief**

The design brief is a document that identifies specific project information between client and designer. The brief can apply to a range of projects, resulting in different designers working on different projects offering different solutions. This can also result in a fragmented representation of any business. According to Phillips (Phillips, 2002), the briefing process is a hugely varied and individual process. Phillips states that:

*“There is no single, off-the-shelf format for a design brief. The actual format that you will develop on your own will vary depending upon your company's standards, practices, and culture, as well as the type of design project itself”.*

Specific information required by the small business client to inform the graphic design process is sparse. Little in the way of literature is available to the small business when seeking to understand the process. Generally, enterprise organisations such as Scottish Enterprise (Grampian) and Small

Business Gateway are the main sources of information available to the small business. Accessing information to better understand graphic design requirements is clearly difficult for the small business, particularly when the business is new to the graphic design process.

### **Pre-brief analysis**

Individual graphic design projects therefore often result in disjointed solutions. This research offers an alternative approach. The small business client may benefit from approaching the information gathering process from a more holistic perspective. The Communication Design Tool through an evolving process of information gathering, supplied by the client to the designer, a pre-brief analysis of business values, design preferences and market sector visual language is provided, giving a more comprehensive perspective of the business. This information can then be included within the briefing process, as and when required.

### **Data research question**

The problem is perceived as one of poor communication of market values and lack of experience of the design process between the small business client and graphic designer. The improvement of communication between the small business client and graphic designer is an underpinning factor of the research. The research posits that: if a tool was created to support pre-brief analysis, this would result in the small business client's better understanding of the brief and the design process and outcomes, and how graphic design meets the small business client's context and needs.

### **Research Methodology**

This study is based on a participant observation approach within case study research (Yin, 1994). This approach was chosen because it was necessary to follow an ethnographic study due, mainly, to direct observation. The work of Clifford Geertz influenced the need to experience in-the-field observations. Geertz (Geertz, 1983) describes his work with the Balinese people as:

*“To grasp concepts that, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else's skin... The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to”.*

This method of gathering information is particularly relevant during the first case study, where practice based participant observation was essential to experience in-the-field situations and elucidate the research proposition. During the first case study the need for a facilitation tool was established.

The tool was then developed in collaboration with potential end users i.e. small business clients and graphic designers. Action research became necessary as a methodology during this process, due to the iterative nature of the development of the tool. Authors such as Denzin and Lincoln, (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) and Colin Robson (Robson, 1993) have informed the development of action research as a design methodology. Robson explains that:

*“The emphasis on a specific situation, of looking at practice in a particular context and trying to produce change in that context, puts action research firmly within the case study strategy...”*

### **Communication Design Tool**

The Communication Design Tool operates as a facilitation mechanism to source implicit information. The aim of the tool is to enable the implicit to be made explicit within the information gathering process between the small business client and graphic designer. The four areas of the tool are categorised within a questionnaire. The main focus of the questionnaire involves four core questions. These are:

1. *What does the company do?*
2. *What visual language do competitors use?*
3. *What are the market values of the company?*
4. *What are the company's graphic design preferences?*

The Communication Design Tool, as questionnaire, is distributed to all members of the business and ideally several customers, for completion. Question 1: *What does the company do?* requires to be completed only once. All other information is to be completed by all members of the business and ideally several customers.

In its present form the Communication Design Tool is distributed as a traditional paper based questionnaire. The ultimate format of the tool will be an interactive, on-line facility. In this way the database of information will draw from the World Wide Web resources. This will enable an excellent visual communicational aspect of this tool, specifically in relation to the graphic design preferences and visual language section, where visual examples can support ideologies.

The purpose of the tool is to better inform the graphic design process. This should not be misconstrued as a prescriptive process. Rather, the information presented by the client, through the Communication Design Tool to the designer offers a platform for a deeper level of communication between client and designer.

### **Development of the Communication Design Tool**

An initial study was set up to clarify the research proposition (Table 1., Company A). Over a four-month period, the researcher as graphic designer/participant observer carried out various graphic design projects for two SMEs during a merger situation. Communication of business values and the design brief are identified through content analysis as two problematic areas, which impacted on the graphic design process. The designer was fully familiar with the values of the first company, due to previous projects undertaken, but new to working with the second company. Poor communication of business values from the second company to the graphic designer was experienced on several occasions, resulting in re-design and additional development work carried out by the designer. The briefing process initially involved a brief drawn up by the designer, distributed to three key members within the two merging companies, for written approval prior to any design work carried out. The brief was signed off by all three members but was subsequently disregarded by both members of the second company, and thereafter bore very little resemblance to the final design solution.

This study clarified the need for a mechanism, which would attempt to address the problem identified i.e. poor communication of market values and an inconclusive briefing process.

TABLE 1. Development of CDT

Company	Sector	Evaluation from graphic designer	Emerging Results
A	Property Consultants		Communication & Design Brief
B	Financial Advisors	1 <sup>st</sup> graphic designer evaluation	Development of 4 stages within tool
C	Management Consultants	1 <sup>st</sup> graphic designer evaluation	Inclusion of personality qualities
D	Soft Furnishing Manufacturer	2 <sup>nd</sup> graphic designer evaluation	Owner selection of data input
E	Physiotherapy	2 <sup>nd</sup> graphic designer evaluation	Development of market values and Graphic design preferences sections
F	Oilfield Cataloguing	2 <sup>nd</sup> graphic designer evaluation	Owner selection of data input
G	Florist	3 <sup>rd</sup> graphic designer evaluation	Understanding of graphic design process
H	Freight Forwarding	3 <sup>rd</sup> graphic designer evaluation	Understanding of core market values
I	Plant Hire	3 <sup>rd</sup> graphic designer evaluation	Understanding of visual language

A second study was carried out within a management buy-out (MBO) company who required an understanding of graphic design direction for the new business (Table 1., Company B). The researcher, in collaboration with this company, began the early stages of developing a mechanism or analysis tool from which to attain pertinent information regarding key values of the MBO breakaway business. Various facilitation models covering marketing, management, communication and education were reviewed. Models that provided particular aspects of adaptation included:

- Bernstein’s Cobweb method (1986) - Communication
- Lux’s Star method (1986) - Communication
- SWOT (Strength, weakness opportunity and threat) Analysis (1993) - Management
- PEST (Political, environmental, social and technical) Analysis (1993) - Management
- Porter’s Five Forces (1993) - Management
- 4 x P’s (Product, price, promotion and place) in the Marketing Mix (1995) - Marketing
- Fishbein and Ajzen model (1995) - Marketing
- Design Mix (1990) - Environment, communication material, product or service - Design Management
- Honey and Mumford (1982) - Activist, reflector, theorist and pragmatist - Education

In collaboration with the MBO company and input from an independent graphic designer who had experience of small business clients, the tool was evaluated and tested by the three key members of the MBO company and an independent graphic designer. Comments from the company were positive regarding the accuracy of the analysis of values relevant to the three key members’ perspective. Stating that:

*“...exactly right. There is nothing that I or anyone would change”.*

The first independent graphic designer offered suggestions to further develop of the tool. These included inclusion of categories within the market value section. In reviewing the documentation the designer stated that:

*“It’s every designer’s dream to get such valid and structured information out of their clients”.*

It became apparent that a complete package of information required by a graphic designer should include not only market values but also graphic design preferences. The graphic design preferences section encourages the client to understand elements considered by the graphic designer during the design process. By making a selection, the client provides the designer with an understanding of visual business preferences.

The term graphic design preference is given to the six basic elements that combine to make up any graphic design solution. These are: symbolism, layout, colour, visuals, font and copy. In this way an initial double-check can be made by the designer to establish client understanding of the connection between a graphic design solution representative of an intangible quality e.g. the values of a business. The tool provides an underlying educational environment for the client relative to graphic design processes and theories. The designer has the opportunity, at this stage, to address any inconsistencies, before any design work is carried out. Therefore, the generic elements that make up any graphic design solution are an integral aspect of this analysis process.

An additional two sections of the analysis were felt necessary to include, ensuring completion of a full package of information sourced by the small business for communication to the designer. The first obvious requirement was the need for general information on the business. Basic information regarding the nature of the business i.e. name, type of business and where it is located. The second section of additional information involved visual information on key competitors. Information provided by the client regarding visual language of competitors serves two purposes: a) The client directs the designer’s focus to his or her implicit understanding known only by the client; b) The visual language of competitors provides a contextual cross-check, clarification and a greater understanding of the information supplied within the graphic design preferences section.

A second study was undertaken to evaluate the analysis tool with a new business venture and a second independent graphic designer (Table 1., Company C). Alternative methods of determining identity in terms of personality qualities were offered. This resulted in a new category within the graphic design section, identified as personality qualities. This category has been adapted from a known association model where a personality trait is identified through the attributes of an object e.g. a sophisticated, elegant, human personality is associated with a Jaguar car. It was felt appropriate within the development of the analysis tool to associate the personality qualities of a business with the perceived personalities within the wild animal kingdom.

The analysis tool has been distributed to a further three small businesses and a third independent graphic designer (Table 1., Company D, E and F). Evaluation and further refinement of the value section and graphic design preference section resulted in the tool remaining more or less unchanged. The main input at this stage involved the clarification of terminology within the Communication Design Tool.

A further three businesses have “tested” the tool at this final stage of development (Table 1., Company G, H and I).

Reports have been distributed to the respondents and initial discussions regarding contents and emerging findings within each business are emerging as positive. The main data collected refers to how the respondents reviewed the tool in terms of usefulness and level of understanding of the graphic design process.

### **Results of the Case Studies**

Data content analysis provided initial emerging results. Early results of the case studies reveal various implications. These are summarised as:

- A mechanism to improve the communication process between small business client and graphic designer is welcomed by both the small business client and graphic designer.
- Shifting the focus of the information gathering process away from the graphic designer and on to the small business itself engenders a sense of empowerment within the small business client.
- Providing the small business client with a more informed introduction to the graphic design process, better reflects the wider design profession as a whole. In contrast to an ad hoc, disparate, poorly informed, graphic design process, the introduction of a diagnostic tool engenders a more informed professional image.

### **Discussion**

The emerging findings of the study influence design practice theory. Existing graphic design practice dictates that the designer takes responsibility for the information gathering process, specifically when working with the small business client. The research identifies that eliciting information from the small business client is problematic for various reasons as previously described. In this respect, by investigating existing graphic design practices and offering a change of focus from designer to client, in relation to the information gathering process, a more informed design process results within the small business market sector. The Communication Design Tool provides an alternative approach to design theory by re-thinking the way in which existing graphic design processes operate within this market sector. Communication between the small business client and graphic designer, the information gathering and briefing process are all better informed as a result of the outcome of this research.

This paper acknowledges that through this design research, the development of a mechanism to enhance the design process improves the possibility of more accurate visual representation of business values, therefore increasing market competitiveness within the small business enterprise.

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