

# INSPIRATION OR THEFT?

When is browsing around a healthy part of the design process, and when is it downright laziness?

by Matthew Clark

I guess it's no wonder that the new designer is often confused. Her creative director commands her to be original, to create unique design solutions for clients, to be innovative. And yet she is bombarded with curated galleries of inspirational design, from online blogs to feature editorials to design awards.

Some designers believe they are doing "research" when they are really just ripping off work. Others actively shun or ban their staff from looking at the market or at design "inspiration," and only end up embracing competitive ignorance.

The thing is, there is a difference between diligent audits and lazy appropriation. And there is, especially, a right and a wrong time to surf the design galleries.

## **A Time for True Competitive Audits**

A lazy stroll through online blogs or design sites is not a competitive audit. A true competitive audit chooses the top 10 to 15 competitors, direct and indirect, and looks at them through several lenses. From a communications standpoint, what is their brand positioning, their mission, their products and services? How do they speak? What technologies do they use? How are their communications elements organized and presented? What is the brand's overall concept or POV?

From a visual perspective, how are their materials designed? What are their brand identity systems? What kinds of images do they use? What typefaces and design principles do they embrace? How are their environments designed, from bricks-and-mortar to online?

And don't forget the "Best Practice Audit." What examples, in the same or adjacent markets, have really stood out? And why? And what results have they achieved?

The result, most importantly, is a strategy that embraces noteworthy market trends but simultaneously carves out a one-of-a-kind brand positioning for the client. Unique message. Unique tone. Unique visual identity.

Without thorough audits, the designer is simply embracing ignorance and developing a strategy only from the inside out. She is not taking into consideration the market and how to best stand out.

## **A Time for Sequestered Concepts**

I am a brooder. Sometimes, a very solitary one, especially when it comes to concept time. For me, and for designers I direct, this stage is one of furrowing brows and pacing. This is the hardest task: to solve the client's problem with a highly unique, memorable and relevant design and communications solution.

This is not the time to be considering style or colour or type or layout. This is the time for big ideas. For big risks. For bold leaps.

So I never look at design blogs, magazines or what the competition is doing during this time. Instead, I hunker down and try to solve the big problem at hand. I don't want anything "polluting" my creative vision.

The designer who spends as much time surfing the net, flipping through back issues of Lürzer's *Archive* and working up pretty layouts in Illustrator is totally missing the boat.

## **A Time for Design Inspiration**

You nailed the idea. Your client loves it. It satisfies the brief and offers a unique vision for the brand. Now it's time for design refinement and implementation. So, go ahead, and take a little peek around.

For me, design inspiration is best utilized for the design details: layout innovation, hot new photographers and illustrators, print techniques and typography. When it comes to the craft of design, there is a wealth of examples, good and bad, that can help guide you toward spectacular solutions. It's also an opportunity make sure you haven't inadvertently reproduced something already in the market (via your subconscious). I find online sources like LogoLounge and Lovely Package to be great sources for disaster checks.

Of course, the lazy designer at any one of these three stages will simply mimic the inspiration, viewing them as "effects" to be copied. The diligent designer knows how to take her inspiration and inspiration found elsewhere and meld them into something new.

And that should always be the goal of any designer: Orient yourself in the market, develop unique ideas, and use inspiration as—well—inspiration.



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