



Three Cheers for Ignorance

Sometimes, less really is more.

By Matthew Clark / *Applied Arts Magazine* "By Design"

Anyone who knows me, even a little, would find this an oxymoronic statement for me to make. Maybe even moronic. But in the pursuit of intelligence and expertise, I have learned the bliss and freedom in ignorance. And the bravery of wielding it as a competitive advantage.

Your first answer should probably be, "I have absolutely no idea".

Initial client meetings about reasonably challenging projects inevitably get to the "so, what do you think we should do?" part of the conversation. And my answer is invariably the same: "I have absolutely no idea". This may at first be a frightening answer when pitching for new business, but it is the honest one. Without some serious conversations, discovery and planning, I don't even know the question to ask, let alone the right answer. That what's so wrong about the formal RFP process: the RFP response typically demands not only a process proposal, but the beginning of a "solution" proposal. RFPs that demand "creative" proposals are ultimately doomed from the outset. And any firm that answers an RFP or initial client question with "I know exactly what you should do!" is either delusional or a bold-faced liar.

But isn't there intelligence in category knowledge and specialization?

A recent trend in "specialization" really gets it wrong as I see it. Trying to specialize in a "client category" (retail, credit unions, hi-tech) rather than in your own services (branding, online, pr, advertising) is putting the cart before the horse in two ways. First, just because you are working on your fifth credit union project does not really help you understand the nuances of the client who has just engaged you. If anything, it can actually make you lazy in doing your due diligence and intelligence-gathering. I have just completed the third "pet industry" project in my career:

first, by launching Petcetera in the late '90s; next a boutique pet brand called "Spike"; and now, Petcurean, a local pet food company with 3 food brands and over 100 skus of packaging. I can assure you, the projects were as different as if they were completely different industries.

The second reason "client specialization" is so dangerous is that it attracts lazy clients. From my experience, the client who is looking for "someone who has worked in the diamond industry before" is exactly the kind to run away from – fast. Any client looking for your category specialization, instead of your expertise in design and branding, for example, is doing so because they are either deplorably lazy or because they want you to make up for their own ignorance about their business. If you know their market, then they don't have to. And client ignorance is definitely not the kind I am celebrating in this article.

Admitting your ignorance is the first step. Stopping the BS is the next.

If you truly believe that you know, in advance, every answer a new or existing client needs to uncover, well then – all power to you. For the rest of us, design is a fantastic journey from ignorance to intelligence; from questions to answers; and from problems to solutions. It is both logical and creative; left and right brained. But it starts with an admission that we don't have a clue. Even a junior designer who pitches an idea to his Creative Director should have "I don't know" at the ready, and then endeavor to "know". BS should have no place with that junior designer trying to impress his CD, or the Managing Director who is trying to win new business. You don't know the answer – admit it.

We have found, time after time, that our honesty with clients actually wins us business. The trick, I suppose, is that something follows the "I don't know". It is usually,



“but I know how to find out”. Having a deep knowledge about a process to bring a client out of the darkness and into the light is exactly what (good) clients are looking for.

And if they are honest, intelligent, informed clients who have a solid understanding of their own business and are ready and willing to work hard and come along with you on the, often long, journey of discovery – then they will appreciate and admire your ignorance. And they will consider it the highest form of intelligence there is.

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