



Calling all Design Rock Stars!

In a culture of rock-star celebrity, what is the role of the designer?

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

Maybe it's the times we live in, where "stars" seem to be born every minute in some sort of perverse hyperbolic Warholian prophesy. Dancing stars! Singing stars! Hoarding stars! Bad driving stars!

There was a time when I dreamed of being some kind of Philippe Starck figure, hired for my reputation and sheer genius, waving my arms in the air as I pontificate design solutions with minions at my disposal. I would see these figures speak (generally poorly) at conferences. I would see their work celebrated in magazines. I would see them win awards from Cannes to the Grammys.

But I realized that my true design heroes ran businesses that were counter to this cult of personality. And that the culture of "rock star" is exactly the last thing that I aim for.

The Designer Rock Star is the wrong person in the spotlight.

We tell our clients that we are there to solve their problems. That we will undertake a deep process that will help them gain competitive advantage in the market, and do so with groundbreaking, creative design and communications. That our solutions will be unique, relevant and memorable for their audience, and that, in an age of marketplace clutter and noise, we will help break through and form meaningful connections between their brands and their audience.

And then the Designer Rock Star pulls out their default style, recycles the same old joke they have used for every other client and, essentially, sells their own brand not the clients.

The client and their brands are the ones that deserve the attention, not you. They are the star, you are the producer, the songwriter or the AR rep, at best. Help your clients shine, don't hog the spotlight.

Designer Rock Stars are, inevitably, more artist than designer.

I know this is a terrible generalization, but while the artist generally operates from within and has a limited stylistic range, the designer is more adaptive and operates with the client as locus. The designer-as-problem-solver is more art director than artist, and is able to adapt their style and voice to suit the client.

Like any artist, illustrator or photographer, the Designer Rock Star is hired for their particular style and voice. They are brought in either because their style is well-suited for the task at hand or, sadly, brought on board merely for their celebrity regardless of any suitability to the current project. The Designer Rock Star's projects blur together – the fashion brand, the retirement home, the bank, the video game – all speak with the same voice: the designer's. Even the Designer Rock Star can end up feeling trapped by their own style and the repetition of it all. Sagmeister's several "years off" are his way of attempting a fresh perspective on his rock star celebrity.

The design industry's pleas to be taken seriously are at odds with the Designer Rock Star.

Let's face it, even the most intelligent and responsible rock stars have trouble being taken seriously. But when you wear sunglasses to meet the Pope, you might have it coming.

The design industry has long lamented its absence at the boardroom table. The fact that we aren't taken as seriously as doctors and lawyers. That our true role in business, commerce and culture is being denied.

Yet we continue to hold up Designer Rock Stars as paragons of our industry and then wonder why the business world still regards us as a bunch of self-interested, obsessed-with-



awards, surface-decorating, stylistic designer wankers. Our whole system rewards the Designer Rock Star: we shower them with awards, invite them to speak at conferences, publish biographies, and emulate their work the world over.

When Marian Bantjes refers to herself as a "lapsed designer", I am right with her. She is deeply aware of how her evolution has taken her down an exciting and unique path. She is massively talented and deserves all rock star fame that comes her way.

But, like any great artist, I believe that she is an exception. And she has shed her designer past to become something entirely different and something wonderful.

We still need to do knock 'em, sock 'em, mind-blowing design. That's a given. But for the rest of us, and to all those who claim to be problem-solver-designers, I say embrace your non-rock-star self.

Your clients will thank you.



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