



Fake Work = Real Awards?

*A business designer should be solving real problems for real clients.
So how do we justify awarding fake work?*

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

*"Work created solely for the purpose
of entering competitions is not eligible"*
D&AD Awards Rules

Nothing gets designers' collective blood boiling more than discussing spec work, what we should call what we do for a living, and the merits of awards shows in the profession. While the debate rages on about whether awards are purely self-congratulatory beauty pageants or have a real place in attracting business clients, there is one topic that (most) designers agree on: Fake work is a no-no.

Design = Art, or Design = Business?

Your viewpoint on "fake work" is ultimately shaped by your paradigm of art and business. Grotesquely oversimplified: Art is, to a large degree, self-expression, and the artists' clients are buyers and patrons, fuelling the artists' vision (and keeping starvation at bay). But the locus of control, if you will, comes from within the creator. Design-as-business starts from the client-as-origin, and problem solving is paramount to the designer. Without a client and a significant problem to solve, the "business designer" is simply incomplete.

Design is business

Imbued, one hopes, with creative vision, beauty and soul, great design adds business value. And isn't this what we have heard time and time again from the design community: "Why doesn't business take design seriously?" Indeed, if we are to be taken seriously as an industry, doing fake little jobs for fake clients it just not the way to prove that we have a real place in the business world. It just shows that arty people can have cute little ideas for unchallenging projects.

So, how do you ever know when someone is faking it?

For clarification, good old-fashioned pro-bono work is not

fake. It is nice. Honest-to-goodness business cards for your mom or friends is not fake. You probably owe them. The worst kind of fake comes straight from the artist's perspective: Having an inspired "a-ha" moment and then executing that work *sans client*, only to be entered as real work in real awards shows and in the designer's portfolio. It happens more than you think.

Second place: Entering rejected work as real work. Shameful. And a close third (and perhaps the most insidious): hunting down any business that does for a living what your "a-ha" idea was all about, and giving it the creative for free (or massively discounted) so you can enter it in awards.

Jealous rant much?

Truly, honestly, no. I really love awards, albeit less than watching my clients win. I have won enough to covet them, and lost enough to be bruised on occasion. But if design is business, then clientless design has no place in design awards shows. It struck me as particularly incongruent as I listened at the Icograda Vancouver Design Week last year that the conference's theme of "Design Currency" was being contradicted by designers who, themselves, give away their work for free. Nobody will pay for the cow if they get the milk for free. And collectively driving down the value of design, both as a business tool and monetarily, can't be good for any of us.

Fake work for fake clients = real clients?

Can't imagine so. Real clients want to see real work for other clients. And if fake work gets you noticed, are you telling me that the large retail client you just landed should expect the same level of knock-it-out-of-the-park creativity that you showed for a hair salon down the street that had no brief, no goals and no client input?



So what role do awards shows have?

The impetus lies, of course, with individuals and firms to help support honest awards shows. But a number of leading shows have taken this problem to heart. The Design Exchange Awards have long required in-depth case studies and actual client signatures, demonstrating real clients and actual measurable goals and results.

D&AD continues to reinforce its stand on "scam ads" by insisting that "work must have been produced in response to a genuine brief and be approved and paid for by the client." The One Club penalizes fake work by barring the offending agency from entering its awards for five years (three years if you try the runaround of playing the spot once on late night TV or if the agency paid for publishing the ad). Even the Chip Shop Awards, in tongue-in-cheek fashion, rewards fake work openly and enthusiastically. Other awards try to get those "fake" projects into categories such as "best idea never produced" (Summit International Awards).

It is my hope that still more awards shows will take a proactive role and demand that work be real. Of course, some projects are big, some small. Some strenuous and some easy. No two projects can truly be judged with absolute equality. But if awards shows start to demand that "client-less" work be placed in a category by itself (self-promotion comes to mind), then the playing field can be somewhat levelled.

And please, keep being creative! Create groundbreaking, fabulous work. Don't censure yourself, and always keep the ideas flowing. But the next time you have client-less creative epiphany, be patient and wait for the right time. Or go hang it on a gallery wall.

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