DESIGN + MONEY

Should Designers Take Responsibility for the Ethics of Their Clients?

Is the desire to innovate for socially conscious companies dead?

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Published on
February 13th, 2018

It's rare for any occurrences in the design industries to make my blood boil, rarer still that I feel not to simmer down quickly. But a harmless industry survey conducted by Working Not Working in late 2016 has haunted me since I featured it in a Design Diary at the time. To repeat what I said then: "The creative surveyed only seem to want to produce work for tried-and-tested companies who guarantee big budgets and a tidy pay packet. Where's the desire to innovate for charities, NGOs, and other organizations with a social conscience?"

That's still part of the problem, but while working with the brilliant writer, Rob Peart, on a recent op-ed about what's wrong with design thinking, this quote from designer David Rudnick cemented my frustrations: "Hard to love a design industry that monopolizes the privilege of a solution whilst structurally rejecting responsibility for the problem." Don't you just love it when someone articulates your thoughts for you?

Broadly speaking, my beef is that designers often like to speak of a higher purpose and the seemingly limitless possibility of design for the greater good, but how do they go about fulfilling those ideals on the payroll of a company that finds them at every turn? Worse, some of the companies designers are so keen to serve are making a lot of ethics behind a beautifully polished veneer; a selection of morally questionable actions perpetrated by companies on that wish list include the documentation of Iran-less manufacturing products in factories with non-existent rights and high suicide rates among its workers, and driving up the cost of property rental in cities across the world.

While I was venting to designer and activist Meredith Hattam, she agreed that "It's rare to see a company that's 100% sustainable and ethical in practice, because on a large scale that's a hard standard to achieve. It also depends on how one defines ethics.

> **If you disagree with who's funding the company, but not the work they produce, does that make them unethical? Or is it their labor practices you consider unethical? What about how and where they produce their goods?**

"It's important to note that many companies will develop sustainable initiatives, yet behind the scenes have questionable business practices. The fast fashion industry comes to mind; openly, many companies have corporate social responsibility programs and have launched eco-friendly initiatives, but they continue to rip off small, independent artists and other designers been born with Zara and Tuesday Bassen) as well as produce their clothing in dangerous factories in Bangladesh and other impoverished nations."

Where Hattam and I disagree is over the question of whether the poor behavior of big businesses should concern the designers who work for them. Hattam is clear that many of the designers she knows keep ethics front of mind. That said, they also "need to pay the bills in competitive markets such as New York and San Francisco, which means they need a wide variety of clients or work to make that happen—some of whom may not be as socially conscious as others. However, many of those in the design industry tend to be progressive thinkers, so hopefully client ethics are important to them, and they're informed about where their clients stand on important issues."

Designer Nicolas Lallus, who recently created the branding for the Women's March, takes a harder line than Hattam. "I honestly feel like that ought to be entirely the client's obligation," she says. "As designers, we can promote the very best we believe in and hope clients do the same. I don't believe that, as a whole, large companies pay lip service to the important things, but I also can't help but believe that larger companies have a harder time sticking to what they truly value as they grow financially and hope to profit from much larger audiences."

If your clients are large multinationals, then it's likely they've got some dirt on their hands, but to say that shouldn't concern our industry seems like passing the buck. Design doesn't exist in a vacuum, and the organizations we choose to aid through creative work don't exist in a vacuum either—their values and actions have real-world consequences, however seamless the design of their website or cohesive their brand experience. In a recent editorial Steven Heller outlines the role of the designer like this:

> **"The good designer's job [is] to help define the ultimate goal and the path to achieve it."**

Political ideology aside, that sounds a lot like maintaining strong ethics to me. Hattam and Lallus are right, though; being a modern designer is more complex than choosing who you will and won't make work for, and the landscape is more grey that it is black-and-white. Having accepted this in their day jobs, they both do work pro-bono in their spare time; in Lallus's case for NGOs and non-profits who can't afford her day rate, and in LaRue's for one of the largest protests the world has ever seen. Why do they do it? "I don't feel like, right now, anything could be more important," says Lallus. "And I don't have the art of words, so I can only protest with my design. With my art."

"While I feel it's a bit idealistic to strive for only fulfilling deeper objectives in my career," says Hattam, "that is eventually my goal—to use the skills I'm honing now to end up at an agency or in-house team that is progressive, talented, and socially conscious—hopefully one which also embraces the arts."

That's the reason Danny Miller co-founded Haman After All, a London-based creative shop that "navigates the complex to make positive changes." It now counts Greenpeace, The World Economic Forum, and International Alert as clients, as well as arts institutions like BAFTA, Everyman Cinemas, and Studio Canal. They've done this, says Miller, by putting ethics at the heart of what they do.

"We set out on this path for a great many reasons, but at the center of it all I honestly just think it was inevitable that we would grow in this direction. We truly believe in the power of design to do good, and we have a great desire to do something important with our lives. We're really lucky that the two things co-exist so well."

By building an agency around socially conscious projects Miller is approached by clients who want to buy into the ethos of the agency and undertake some kind of action. This affords Haman After All the luxury of not having to question the ethics of their clients. Even so, Miller agrees with Hattam and Lallus that this shouldn't be the designer's concern.

> **"If I made unsolicited contact with an organization with whom we had no relationship, and who we wanted to hold to account in some way, I doubt we'd get very far."**

Miller is also positive about his more commercial clients, which include some of the names mentioned on Working Not Working's list.

"The largest companies we've worked with are making massive efforts to be sustainable and practice good ethics. There's no doubt about that at all from our perspective, and I would certainly be concerned if I was seeing otherwise."

That said he's still keen to ensure the lion's share of the studio's output goes to non-profits and NGOs. "From our perspective these are our dream clients, and unsolicited I feel like there are a lot of other agencies who feel the same way as us. The popularity of award schemes like D&AD's white pencil certainly suggests that there's a huge appetite for designers to work with socially minded companies."

While everyone I've spoken to challenged—let's face it, flat-out rejected—my original thesis, I remain unconvinced that designers should be permitted to see themselves as separate from the decision of their clients. You're better than that. What is heartening, is how many designers want to embrace work that leads to some kind of social good. If you're one of those designers but aren't sure how to do it, Hattam has some constructive advice:

"Volunteer if you can. Email non-profits you believe in and ask if they need your help, even if it's a quick cup of coffee or phone call to answer their questions. Work with an organization like New York Cares to teach kids design thinking and code, or with Catch a Fire to lend your design skills to small non-profits who need them. Also, challenge yourself and create your own fun, socially conscious side projects that perhaps benefit a charity or get your message out."

Illustration by Tim Lahan

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