

01/2005

Ten Principles on Design Communication



Marketing master Joan Capelin, Hon. AIA, offers 29 principles for communicating architectural achievement to clients in her latest book, *Communication by Design: Marketing Professional Services*. Here are synopses of 10 to get started: just do it, think as your client, follow the Golden Rule, watch your Netiquette, lose well, tell them who you are, nothing of value is free, think before you write, get connected, follow up beyond belief.

People often get tied up in definitions when trying to differentiate the elements of marketing professional services, Capelin says in her chapter “Just Do It.” So she offers definitions and examples in a way that encourages the reader beyond contemplation to action. For example:

Marketing. Research the world around you constantly to keep up with changing opportunities for which you can show unquestionably that you are the superior service provider.

Selling. Pursue your commissions and close the deal based on marketing. And remember, the most successful selling is based on what the client wants, not necessarily on what you have done in the past and are trying to sell again.

Public relations. Do good work, continually position yourself based on marketing research, and let the world know about it (be sure your people know these things, too) through a wide range of media.

Advertising. You are buying the attention of readers, listeners, or viewers of targeted media—hopefully. The most effective advertisements are typically those



reference

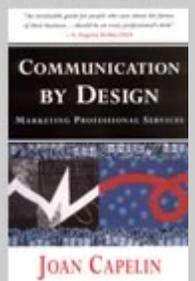
Communication by Design: Marketing Professional Services, published by Greenway Communications and Ostberg,

includes significant portions of Joan Capelin’s earlier

Principles for Principals,

published by SMPS. It is available from the AIA Store, 800-242-3837, option 4.

For more information about Capelin Communications Inc., visit their Web site.



repeated the most often, so this can be a prohibitively expensive tactic.

Branding. A fixed point in a moving world, this concept strives to tie a word, phrase, concept, or even color (think White=Meier) to a strong, positive connection to you. For most design firms, though, it is much easier to explain this to your colleagues as “establishing our reputation.”

Integrated marketing communication

Product (that should actually be “service,” but Capelin was going for four Ps) price, place, and promotion need to be in sync and in sequence. And a central authority within the firm has to stick to the hard work to accomplish that. For example, as graphic designer Doug Akagi says, “Come to me with a problem, and I’ll give you a solution. Come to me with a solution, and I’ve got a problem.”

Think as your client

What might seem like an excellent public-relations coup to you could also be a marketing secret to your client. Be sensitive to your client’s roll-out plan. Get the ground rules clarified at the outset; preferably in writing. And make it clear whether you get prominent design credit for the project.



Follow the Golden Rule

Sometimes, you have to deliver bad news. And how you handle that is remembered. Nobody likes bad surprises: not you; not your client. And, yet, there is a positive side to almost every negative circumstance. The fact is, people like to buy from people who like to sell. Treat your clients as you would have them treat you, and you will build trust, which, in turn, builds business.

Mind your Netiquette

One thing worse than sending a “business-ending” e-mail to a client is also hitting the “Send-to-All” key. When it’s easy and instant, it is also very risky. Think, get review, and think again before you send an e-mail—especially if it’s a mass e-mail in a stressful situation. Also, put yourself in your receivers’ shoes. Are there large attachments? Is it what everybody on your list wants or could use? The precision that is possible with e-mail delivery has likewise upped all of our expectations.

Lose well

When you don’t win a commission, what may be remembered more than anything else is how you conducted yourself accordingly. There is nothing wrong—and probably everything right—about congratulating a competitor on winning a commission.



Tell 'em who you are

"Two inches outside the design professions, no one understands what you do on a daily basis, nor appreciates your impact," Capelin writes. Her advice to overcome that is to be prepared to offer an interesting anecdote or explanation to which people can connect who are more than those two inches away. At your next staff meeting, have everyone describe briefly what they do. See if they talk in terms of the effect of what they do and that their message is in line with your firm's desired reputation. Try your hardest to avoid being like the people described by Garrison Keillor, "having a conversation with [some] people is like dragging an unconscious person up a cliff."

Nothing of value is free

The longer you go without being paid outstanding billings, the less you will be paid, if at all. Too few clients truly understand that your negative cash positions are, in reality, a detriment to themselves when that position renders you unable to deliver your full scope of highest-quality services. (And, incidentally, this is true of your payments to your consultants as well.) "Always do right," advised Samuel Clemens. "This will gratify some people and astonish the rest." Likewise, it's usually best to assume that your clients with outstanding billings also intend to do right. The trick is applying gentle but persistent reminders on the people actually in charge of paying your client's bills. And finding out who those persons are and how their payment system works should be one of the first things you establish when you begin working with a new client.

The other issue here is getting paid for additional services. Beware the client who insists on selecting by bid alone. And whenever a client asks for services beyond the contract, offer back your standard contract-extension form. Furthermore, have you reviewed your increased ability to deliver services lately and equated them to the potential for increasing your fees?

Think before you write

Capelin quotes Friedrich Bohm, FAIA, of NBBJ, who says that if you can't talk about a project coherently, you aren't yet in a position to design it. "The same coherence pertains to a firm's marketing materials," she writes. Capelin then offers an exercise of 20 questions to answer to focus and schedule a basic press release and spin-off communications (including, again, "Do we have the client's permission to tell this story?").



Get connected

"In addition to being personally and professionally responsible, you must also be actively engaged," Capelin advises. Being involved in nonprofit organizations is part of an obligation that brings with it opportunity. It is a demanding second job to take on a leadership role in community and professional organizations, but there are returns, such as sharper skills in presentation, event planning, and organizational management. As in every other investment of your time—and the time of those around you—there is an expectation of some sort of return (usually intangible, in this case). Be sensitive to that. Make assignments clear and recognize efforts generously. Document assignments, accomplishments, and communications. Get people in your firm involved and have them share their lessons learned through your company newsletter or intranet. You might even provide meeting space at your firm at no charge to the organization.

FUBB

This chapter is actually found toward the beginning of *Communication by Design*, but is a good conclusion for this review. FUBB, a term Capelin says she uses daily, means "follow up beyond belief." Capelin notes: "Even in an industry where 'God is in the details' and where an omission from a working drawing affects life and safety, FUBBing does not come naturally."

Are your people—from marketing to accounting—assiduous about following up to see if the right communication showed up on the right desk, on time, every time? Everybody should be remembering to pass any new leads on to the appropriate people; meeting proceedings need to be recorded, shared, and filed; when reporters interview you, supply them with graphics when you can; record clippings; and thank editors and writers for their work. People who refer work to you are golden—thank them, too. And, with follow-up communication, think "interactive." Consider a client exit interview to see what went particularly well and what did not. One firm Capelin works with goes a step further, she says, with a post-occupancy survey. After project completion, but before guarantees expire, this interior-design firm thoroughly examines the materials and functional performance of their work. They learn about satisfaction, reconnect their relationship after contract completion, and learn about new developments in the client's own world. In short, with one well-executed effort, they are doing everything from marketing to FUBBing.

—Douglas E. Gordon, Hon. AIA

Copyright 2005 The American Institute of Architects. All rights reserved.

http://www.aia.org/aiarchitect/thisweek05/tw0128/0128bp_capelin.htm