

DIALOGUES WITH DESIGNERS ©

A simple format to understand complex problems regarding management in design studios.

CHAPTER 5

Where we start discovering that clients don't buy design, despite our desire to sell design.

I studied design, I want to sell design.

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Note: this is a fictitious conversation since I never record meetings with clients. However, they represent doubts present on a daily basis in the professional practice of designers that manage their own Design Studio, as well as those who work independently.

How can I sell design?¹

This is one of the first questions any designer asks himself, or asks me when we start working in these assessment processes.

However, many take conscience - when they start treating clients with a wider perspective - that selling design is difficult, because clients have a different idea on what design is. And in many cases, designers themselves don't know how to define design. There are many debates on the subject, and we are not starting another one here.

Generally, **what the clients buy is very different from what the designer thinks he is selling or proposing.**

What can remain clear is that **if the clients don't know what design is, it is possible they're not buying design.** That way, finding out what the client wants, in terms of a problem to be resolved by our skills, is an effective way to start thinking of the profession from a different perspective from the traditional one.

Pablo and Soledad are graphic designers and have decided to form a partnership to start a design studio.

They have been working together for almost three months and have started to realize some difficulties they did not have before, when they worked independently or in a dependant relationship on a studio.

The design studio offices are located in Pablo's house, since - for the actual income level they have - it has been impossible for them to rent a different work space.

Soledad: - Great news!

¹ You can read my article in ForoAlfa, with the title being that same question. Available on http://foroalfa.org/es/articulo/197/Como_vender_diseno

Pablo: - Let me apologize for her... it seems that she does not understand the importance of greeting before start screaming because of good news (laughter).

Soledad: - (laughter) Somebody woke up with some sarcastic attitude!

Pablo: - Come in... and good morning...

Fernando: - Good morning... Not a problem, really... What happened? Why the happy face?

Soledad: - Actually, nothing too important, although it is important due to what we discussed in the last meeting.

Fernando: - What do you mean? Getting new clients, understanding the financial and economical state of the studio... what exactly?

Soledad: - Turns out as we arrived at Pablo's place... I'm sorry, the studio, we had a message in the answering machine. It was someone asking for a call back, because he wanted to request a task from me.

Fernando: - Now I understand... well, I'm glad you got that potential Project. Because in the last meeting we saw that the economical situation on a short term basis was complicated.

Pablo: - Well, actually, she hasn't gotten the job yet.

Fernando: - She "hasn't gotten" the job yet?

Pablo: - No, it is only a call for a consult...

Fernando: - What I mean is the project is the studio's. In that case, it would be "we haven't gotten it".

Pablo: - That's right... it's just that we're so used to work separately that...

Fernando: - I can see that.

Soledad: - But I think receiving that call is good news, right?

Fernando: - Of course it is. I must also say, without trying to bring you down, that last week's situation hasn't changed at all. We're on the same place, with the difference of a possibility of getting this project. What is it about?

Soledad: - Well, actually it's about someone who is calling me by recommendation of one of my current clients. Sorry, our current clients. I have to send him an estimate budget for a web site. So this afternoon I will prepare it and send it to him.

Fernando: - Is that all the information you have?

Soledad: - Yes. Why do you ask?

Fernando: - I'm just curious. I mean, let me see if I understand correctly: a potential client calls you to request a budget for a web site and you're sending him the cost of that work. Is that it?

Soledad: - Yes, it is. Well, in this case, it is only to provide an estimate for a web site, so I am sending him the cost by email and we will wait for him to say yes. I have a slight idea of what he is expecting, so I don't see sending him the estimate being too complicated.

Fernando: - Pablo, What is it that you sell?

Pablo: - In this case, design...

Soledad: - Obviously! design...

Fernando: - Pardon my lack of understanding on the matter, but: does the client buy design?

Both: - ...

Soledad: - And if he is not buying design, why is he calling a designer? Or a design studio?

Fernando: - Maybe he only knows you two do web sites. Is that how you present yourselves? Are you two individuals that make web sites?

Pablo: - We do more than just web sites, everybody knows that. Well, our current clients that request all kinds of work from us, mainly web.

Fernando: - Who is everybody?

Soledad: - All of our clients.

Fernando: - All your clients... the clients that hire you with fixed fees monthly.

Pablo: - Correct. It is a lot of work for the amount of money they pay, but I like to work that way because it provides security.

Soledad: - Although the amount of work we have is too much, sometimes...

Fernando: - And who are these clients?

Pablo: - Other design studios that work for bigger clients... agencies or manufacturers, I believe. For our next meeting I will bring you this information in detail, so you can see we are working for big brands.

Fernando: - No. If I understand correctly, you work for other design studios that are hired by producers, that are hired by agencies, that are hired by those clients who you refer to as "big brands".

Pablo: - The way you mention it... it looks strange.

Fernando: - You can tell me you work for a first line company of cleaning products and their web site, - when you have it - to say it that way, but reality is different. Anyways, let's stay with what we were looking at. How many tasks have you done that are not exclusively a "web site" or web design?

Soledad: - This year, none. But last year I did an institutional identity job.

Fernando: - Just one...

Soledad: - And it was for a friend that works at an ONG²... meaning I didn't get paid. But it was a very satisfactory work for me.

Fernando: - Of course... I just hope you don't have that excuse when you go to the supermarket... that you do very important things, that can change the world, but for free... I think that the cashier won't mind much. Her, nor the electricity company that provides you service to do the work you can't be paid for.

Soledad: - Looks like somebody didn't wake up very happy... (laughter).

² Non Governmental Organization, non profitable.

Fernando: - We already talked about the fact that if the client can't afford the task, it is a commercial decision of the designer or the studio to accept it. But if it is accepted, you need to assume all the responsibilities. Even the fact that the client wants a perfect work, in the least available time possible. But if it makes you happy, go ahead.

Pablo: - In my case, I did to tasks last year that weren't related to web design. Of course, in reality most of my recent tasks are sites... or web site related.

Fernando: - Meaning that the market knows you that way. You are designers - now a design studio - that make web sites.

Soledad: - We might say that. We need a business card, don't you think?

Fernando: - Sometimes I think you make those questions to provoke me...

Pablo: - (laughter).

Fernando: - As far as you don't worry to tell the market what you are and what it is that you do, the market will have their own idea of you and your work, parting from what they think it is. And that surely will be different than what you want it to be. That is why some meetings back I reminded you that I hadn't seen the studio's web site yet. You don't have a business card either. Have you named the studio yet?

Pablo: - We've thought about it, but...

Fernando: - Which way do you think is better to communicate what you do, than having a website explaining what you are and what you do? Even more, if the market thinks you do web sites, how is it possible that you don't even have your own web site?

Pablo: - That happens to most designers...

Fernando: - Frankly, I couldn't care less. What I care is for you to have your web site; the behavior of all the other designers is their own responsibility.

Soledad: - Well, we came with good news and the first thing you do is pull us down from our cloud³.

Pablo: - Right, let us dream a little (laughter)

Fernando: - What happens is that time passes, and you don't assume some important responsibilities. I understand the joy of receiving that work request, but that same joy is an unequivocal sign of your incapacity to choose the kind of client you want to have, parting from the kind of service you want to work with.

Soledad: - Here come the recriminations... (laughter).

Pablo: - I don't know... I think what Fernando says is true. I mean, if someone would ask me what I do for a living, the only thing I can say for the moment is "I do web sites". And the truth is that not only I don't like that kind of work, but also it bores me a lot.

Soledad: - What would you like to do, then?

Pablo: - I don't know, but I can't keep on like this. It's true that if we think in the amount of hours we work, we have a lot of work. But remember the numbers we saw last week. They are not good, and if we keep on going like this, we are going to end up fighting... I know that because I have seen it before, with other designer friends.

Fernando: - It can happen...

³ Expression that means "bringing them to reality".

Pablo: - Actually, now I realize that one of the things I thought could happen by starting this studio with you, was changing a little bit the kind of work I have been doing for such a long time...

Fernando: - What about you, Soledad, what ideas or expectations did you have on the moment you started working together?

Soledad: - Well... a Little bit of what he said. I wanted to see if I could change the way I get clients, that don't call me only to make web sites... and earn more money.

Pablo: - Yes, earn more money too.

Fernando: - And what have you gotten out of all that?

Both: - ...

Pablo: - And...

Soledad: - But what are we doing wrong?

Fernando: Actually, you're doing what you think you should be doing. I think you're doing what you can, parting from how you understand your profession, the market and the service you provide.

Pablo: - Can you be a little bit clearer?

Fernando: - For example, a while ago you told me - or at least I understood it that way - that a client buys design.

Soledad: - Of course. Or at least in this case, I am called to present a budget for a web site.

Fernando: - Ok. I'm going to set an example. I'm licensed in administration. I work as a trainer in management skills development for companies in the design field...

Soledad: - I forgot you're not a designer... (laughter)

Fernando: - ... correct, and I wish to have my own website. So, I call you, because a friend has recommended you, and ask you how much is a web site worth. Do you think I am buying design?

Soledad: - Well, I have to design the web site... and such...

Fernando: - Of course, you need to budget the work of designing that web site, but that design is a process that you are going to do to deliver, as a result, a product: the web site. And why am I hiring you, or at least why am I calling you for a budget? I have no idea about your designing skills. I was recommended to talk to you, because my intention is to communicate my activities using a tool called web site. And I want that communication to be effective. Am I explaining myself? I am not buying design. I don't know what design is and - honestly - I don't want or have the time to investigate on it. I only want a web site. I am not buying design, I'm buying a communication tool. I'm buying a solution to a problem.

Pablo: - The way you put it I get the feeling that the design itself is a secondary thing, barely important.

Fernando: - If I was the client, I wouldn't be bothered at all if you think of it that way. It could be that for me the design is not important, does that bother you?

Pablo: - ... Yes... a little bit.

Fernando: - Why does it bother you?

Pablo: - Because the design is important.

Fernando: - For who?

Pablo: - For me, for her... for every designer.

Fernando: - I, as a client, can think differently. I can think of design as something “pretty”. Am I wrong?

Pablo: - ... it bothers me.

Fernando: - My intention is for you to see that the client does not buy design. The client can think of the design with a different concept than the one you have. Because he doesn't know. But as much as the client doesn't know is that there are also many designers that don't have the slightest idea on how to explain what design is. But in this case, if you keep talking to that client or potential client thinking he is buying design, there is a communication and a comprehension gap on what he needs or wants... and that gap is very big⁴.

Soledad: - ... he doesn't buy design...

Fernando: - No, he buys the solution to a communication problem he's having. A solution you can offer him, as a web site, using a skill: the ability to design that solution.

Pablo: - But if his need is to communicate, that can be achieved in many ways. Why do they only request budgets for web sites?

Fernando: - Probably because they don't know, or they have understood that is the only thing you do. We have seen this before, when we discussed the way to approach the conversation with a client that requests the budget for a logo. We need to understand the problem behind the explicit request of the client, because that request is the solution the client proposes for a problem that, maybe, he doesn't understand.

Soledad: - So, we would have to start defining what it is that we do, and communicate it efficiently. We have the skill to do it. We should get started as soon as possible.

Pablo: - Next time, we will show you the project for the studio's web site.

Fernando: Just the web site? I thought that from all we discussed, you would start the project of defining the studio's identity, with all the communication tools that implies. You need to define also the studio's proposal... meaning, a large amount of items that determine who you are.

Pablo: - Ok, but don' fill us up with homework either.

Fernando: - It is not homework. I think it is the first step in a work direction. Until now, we were talking about minor issues. It's time for you to start creating a clear work process. For that, we need to review some concepts on business strategy and tactics.

Soledad: - Are we going to see them just now? Because I have to go make that budget for the web site.

Fernando: - No, probably we'll start seeing them on our next meeting... but only as long as it serves our purposes.

Soledad: - Ok. Truth is at the beginning, before our first meeting, I thought you would provide us solutions, and now I see I was totally mistaken...

⁴ Read the article “Hablar el idioma de los clientes” (speak the clients language), by Josefina Ramirez Tuero. Published in ForoAlfa, available in: http://foroalfa.org/es/articulo/202/Hablar_el_idioma_de_los_clientes

Pablo: - You see? I told you I was warned about this...

Soledad: - Well, at least the source is trustworthy (laughter).

Fernando: - Actually, the first steps are the hardest, because we need to modify some behavior patterns that determine the results you are getting today. It's a matter of time, work and - above all things - constancy, or discipline, although I don't use that term too much because a lot of people rejects it.

Pablo: - So... we'll be leaving.

Fernando: - And how are you going to make that project's budget?

Soledad: - Well... I will send him a budget for two thousand five hundred pesos. Does that seem good to you?

Fernando: - No, I think you should meet with the person to know what it is they have in mind. Only from that meeting you will have an idea of the project's magnitude, and the price you could request in consequence.

Soledad: - Shouldn't I keep in mind the issue of costs?

Fernando: - Don't complicate yourself with that... making a budget for a project under the model of "costs plus a benefit" is a way to present that budget. It's very basic, and can be useful for some... we will talk about that.

Soledad: - So what should I keep in mind?

Fernando: - The tool you need to watch all the time and keep updated is the cash flow. When you finish your meeting with that potential client, we will talk on the phone. We don't need you to set the price issue on the meeting. Simply, pay attention to what that client projects, to know if the proposal should include the design of a web site, or something different.

Pablo: - I will go with her. I want them to start seeing us as a work team.

Fernando: - Very well. Let's talk after the meeting with the client, before presenting him the service proposal.