



Photo courtesy of Mad Dog Graphx

Internal reports, annual reports, letters to shareholders, and more all benefit from the eye of a professional graphic designer; the examples above were designed by Mad Dog Graphx, celebrating its 20th anniversary this year.

Business Needs Good Design

And good design requires professionals

By Tasha Anderson

Note: This is part two of a three part series exploring the graphic design industry in Alaska. Part one was published in April.

Graphic design is a skill which means business and professional organizations should expect to pay for quality design services. Plaid Agency Creative Director George Meyer says it is sometimes a battle within the graphic design industry

to assert the value of an experienced and talented graphic designer. “There’s a mindset that graphic design can be done by anyone because of the availability of stock imagery online, and you can pay to subscribe to all the Adobe software at home, and there’s access to as many fonts and faces as you want,” Meyer says. The problem is amplified in situations where people or organizations simply don’t see the difference between bad, mediocre, or excellent design. “If someone just wants to do something very cheaply, it’s hard to fight against that and convince them to pay a premium [for good design].” Meyer uses flying a plane as an analogy for why this can be a

problem: “Nobody would go play a lot of flight simulator games and then, when they walk on Alaska Airlines, take a left when boarding the plane and say, ‘Hey, I’m going to fly today because I’ve been practicing online.’”

David Taylor, creative director for Element Agency, likens the situation to a doctor and layperson examining the same X-ray; they may have differing opinions on what it means, but generally the common sense course is to allow the doctor’s opinion to guide a plan for medical care. Graphic design may not have the same life-threatening consequences as a bad landing or botched medical procedure, but graphic designers are

trained professionals, and how a company presents itself through marketing, internal and external documentation, reports, and website design can absolutely contribute to that business's ability to thrive or die.

Designing with Purpose

Mad Dog Graphx Owner Michael Ardaiz says, "If you're doing everything right, a graphic designer worth their salt will tell you you're doing everything right; if you're doing something that can be improved on, why wouldn't you want to improve on it, especially if it means your bottom line is improved." Mad Dog is known for their logo designs, but in addition to services often attributed to graphic design—websites, branding, posters, advertising campaigns, environmental graphics, trade show displays—they also provide design services for projects that have more targeted audiences, such as annual reports, newsletters, internal corporate communications, or brochures. "We do a lot of annual reports, especially for nonprofits. Because they're generally tight budget projects, we like to enter them into competitions to show our clients that their money is being well-spent, or at least the final product is well reflected on by the design community," Ardaiz says.

He says the most fundamental step in the beginning of a design process is to understand the final product/design's purpose. "If you don't know the purpose up front, then how do you gauge its effectiveness at the end?" He says one service that Mad Dog Graphx provides to their customers is helping them pinpoint or refine a project's purpose. "Some clients will come in and say they'd like a rack card, but they don't really know why they would use one, they just know that they need to put something out; those are the sorts of projects that might end up as a rack card or might end up as a brochure, or a poster, or a postcard, because we talk to them and find out what they're really trying to achieve," Ardaiz says.

Design Is a Process

Spawn Ideas Associate Creative Director Amanda Strickland says that for design projects, the design phase isn't the beginning or the end of the process. "It definitely starts with strategy first." The end of the project, she says, is "measuring the results and coming back and applying those to the metrics that we've set for ourselves." Spawn Ideas provides the gamut of marketing services, from creating web banners, television spots, and digital, print, or radio advertisements to planning and buying media, "and then we track all of it and we see the whole picture; we handle all of our clients' marketing needs," Strickland says. Among all that work, she says design falls somewhere in the middle. "It's incredibly important because if you can't visually get someone's attention, then it doesn't matter what your message is."

Spawn has forty-two employees, nine of whom are graphic designers, though Strickland says many of them have specialized skill sets. For instance, "we have some designers that we call art directors; [Spawn Ideas Creative Director and VP] Mike Weeds' line



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Associate Creative Director, Spawn Ideas

about art directors is that their job is to protect the idea. While they may not be the one doing the editing on a TV spot, for example, they are the one overseeing it to make sure the idea is coming to life.” Strickland continues that art directors are the people “coming up with ideas, and then designing, and then executing, and then overseeing the process,” although others may have hands on the project at various times.

She says the creative process is like a funnel, in that you “throw out all the ideas you have and you refine, refine, refine until you come to one.” Strickland loves the strategy around designing. Especially at an agency like Spawn Ideas, which often works with large corpora-

tions with already established branding, the creative process often takes place within certain limits, but she enjoys that challenge. “The cool part of graphic design for business... is that it’s interesting how much you can put a personality forward through design,” she explains. “I love that graphic design kind of gives businesses a face, a character almost, and a personality that people can respond to.” That, she says, is branding in a nutshell.

Using Design for Success

Spawn Ideas provides services to a range of industries in Alaska, including telecommunications, education, oil and gas, nonprofit, and finance. She says while it may be unique in the Lower 48 to have such a diversity of clients, it’s necessary in Alaska.

Taylor of Element agrees: “In Anchorage, you have to do a little bit of everything.” He explains that Element is not a “straight-up advertising [or graphic design] agency.” Element doesn’t generally buy media or have a media buyer; typically Element’s clients are focused on brand development. He says that other media companies are profitable operating more traditionally, but Element focuses differently on how to stay profitable. For example, “We keep our overhead down, which is why we operate out of The Boardroom instead of having our own building,” Taylor says.

Additionally, Element has a different strategy when approaching clients: “Our process is a little bit different from a lot of agencies—we vet our clients for what we want to

work on.” Specifically, since their clients are looking for quality design, the Element team in turn requires that the client respect their education, experience, and expertise.

Taylor says that for their clients, the design is just one part of the whole picture. “Graphic design is the process of creating something useful using design elements; brand development is the process of making that symbol meaningful,” he explains, and creating and explaining that meaning is also a skill. Taylor taught at the University of Alaska Anchorage for a time, and he says he would instruct his students that a good, or even fantastic, design isn’t always enough to make a project successful. “I can show you sketch book after sketch book of really great graphic designers, and some of the best work they ever did never saw the light of day because they didn’t know how to get someone to understand why it needed to be used, how it needed to be used.”

Ardaiz of Mad Dog Graphx says that regardless of what the project is, how it’s used is significant. “We’ve had many, many clients who feel like they’ve hired us to design a logo—and they love the logo—but they walk out the door and never use it and wonder why customers aren’t knocking down their door. The logo is just a foundation, it’s a visual foundation of your brand, and you have to have an entire brand in place; there has to be marketing. You have to let people know you exist.” In essence, a logo is not a marketing strategy. “And that’s true of any piece that comes in the door,” he explains.



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Mad Dog Graphx wants their designs to be successful, and they want their clients to be successful. "The client is happier in the end if their project is successful: if their lecture is well attended or if their product is selling well," which is why Mad Dog Graphx focuses on helping clients develop the right end deliverable.

One Good Design Is All You Need

In terms of the deliverables, Taylor of Element and Meyer of Plaid both say they have a policy of presenting just one final proposal. Taylor says, "We design tons of options, but when we get to the end and my whole team is looking at it and says, 'That's the one,' well, then that's the one we present."

Meyer explains, "When I started in this industry, I would create three distinct designs and then pitch those three. [An annual report, for example] would be a cover and a one-page spread. Over time, it became apparent that I was spending a lot of the design time that I had for the overall project just working up these three unique designs, so I started trusting my artistic gut." Sticking to a strict three-design policy meant that he ended up just throwing things together for one or two of the designs instead of focusing energy on the design he found the most promising. "And, if they hate it, I always have other designs in my head that I can easily tap into," he says.

Meyer says that his current clients are predominantly in the retail industry, though he also does a lot of work for Alaska Native Corporations and is capable and willing to perform work for any of Alaska's industries. For new projects, "The first thing I do is have a conversation," Meyer says. He says that he's old school in that the majority of his work starts on paper. "I think some young artists will jump right on the computer, and that can be successful, but I think you get a better product when you work out a lot of the kinks on paper and then get it solid when you get on the computer."

Meyer works regularly with local print shop GraphicWorks to create environmental graphics, which in the graphic design industry refers to designed projects that exist in an environment, such as a display or sign. Environmental graphics can be an opportunity to combine design, building, engineering, and unique materials. "I don't often get to do a ton of them, but they can be fun." He cites a current project he's working on that will provide a company's history and other information through the use of multi-layered, floor-to-ceiling columns that will utilize wood and acrylic as materials.

Meyer advises, for businesses that want a good outcome for a design or branding project, "come in understanding that it is a professional service, and that there isn't some magic buttons we push on our computer that makes it happen. Also, come in with as much information as you can give to the artist or the agency; share all you can and then trust what the artist is telling you." ❄️

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