



Commercial viability and design industry trends

Brief 5—Graphic Design

June 2014

2014 Semi-Permanent Conference: Commercial Viability of Speakers

THIS YEAR'S SEMI-PERMANENT CONFERENCE VARIED GREATLY FROM THE 2013 conference. The 2013 conference featured a variety of artists and designers with varying degrees of commercial viability but who were, and continue to be, influential in their respective fields of endeavour.

The 2014 conference had a very different feel and, in my opinion, provided a higher calibre of commercially 'successful' designers as speakers, with a focus more on digital, multi-media and in particular video content. Of the thirteen speakers featured on Thursday 22nd and Friday 23rd May, all were 'successful' in their professions. Success, for the purposes of this report, is defined in terms of commercial viability (i.e. monetary reward substantial enough to sustain design practice and to retain and win more clients) and in terms of having gained respect and recognition from the design community.

Interestingly, two of the major themes of the conference were:

- Staying relevant in a constantly changing environment—evolution of design practice and content to meet consumer and client needs and expectations, and
- The inevitability of making mistakes and the determination and resilience required to keep going in spite of mistakes.

Of the thirteen speakers, the two that stood out in my mind, were Billy Sorrentino,

Creative Director for WIRED Magazine and Kate Moross, Art Director and owner of Studio Moross. The qualities that both designers demonstrated through their work and talks was their adaptability and versatility. Both designers are extremely hard-working confident people, excited about change and trying and learning new techniques and tools. Both creatives also had a particular interest in new media and creating digital content.

Billy Sorrentino, now a Creative Director for *WIRED* (one of the Condé Nast magazines), is a very experienced designer and now Creative Director. In summary, Sorrentino started out as a designer for *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine. Following a full immersion in the magazine industry Sorrentino took the lead in creating digital subscriptions (including iPad and mobile) for many of the Condé Nast magazines. Following this transitional role, Sorrentino moved into the role of Creative Director for *WIRED*.

Sorrentino has his own philosophy about what makes a commercially viable magazine publication which focuses on design, story telling and experiences that give more to the viewer/reader/participant. He believes that design is about the viewers experience rather than a focus on the medium used. Sorrentino aims to create *WIRED* issues that are more engaging, compelling and wondrous than his competitors. His way of doing this has involved:

- Employing ‘out of the box’ techniques to maintain readership and gain new readership (for example, getting Bill Gates to be the guest editor for a December issue of *WIRED*, who in turn gained an interview with Bill Clinton for the issue),
- Adapting content for mobile, tablet and social media,
- Creating digital video trailers for every issue,
- ‘Pulling stunts’ at events (for example, taking a giant robot to the San Diego Comic-Con in 2013 where it met Stan Lee),
- Clever selection of media partners (for example, the Art Train which is touring the US),
- Theming magazines to cover current trending fads (for example, music, food, Star Wars)
- Having constantly evolving and innovative covers for each issue.

The impression I gained from Sorrentino during his talk is that he appears to undertake proactive, deliberate and strategic actions to ensure *WIRED* magazine’s commercial viability and therefore his own. In contrast to this, Kate Moross, an equally commercially viable, designer, illustrator, art director and owner of Studio Moross, has a freer, more organic approach.

Some of Moross' better-known work has been:

- Design work for Nike, Adidas, Nokia, Topshop, Google, Ray Ban and Cadbury,
- A typographic commission for *WIRED*,
- Developing collateral (print, product and digital video) for recording artists in the London music scene.

Moross describes herself as a 'jack of all trades,' and when she doesn't know how to do something she goes out of her way to learn how or collaborate with those who do know. Moross describes herself as a 'hacker' (someone who will have a go at anything) and has a definite fearless approach to her work.

Moross' style is unique, vibrant, playful, and organic, with much of her work involving pattern, multiple bright colours and hand-rendered graphic typographic treatments.

From listening to her speak and examining her work it would appear that it is her fearlessness, consistently playful style, and willingness to 'hack' that ensures Moross remains a highly sort-after designer and therefore commercially viable. That being said, she is a 'one-of-a-kind' individual with a unique style, so attempts to gain similar commercial success through mimicking her specific style too closely would be unlikely to succeed.

Design Industry—Future Trends & Design Disciplines

I PERCEIVE THAT THE ONLY THING CERTAIN ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE GRAPHIC design industry over the next five years is its constant evolution and the requirement for those in the industry to be flexible in adapting to fast and ever changing information communication needs. I base this perception on what I witnessed during studio visits and on information garnered at the 2014 Semi-Permanent conference.

As part of a student group I visited Ice Lab Studio and individually undertook work experience at Zoo and I have also spoken with a representative of Coordinate. Based on my observations and experiences it would appear that agencies are being asked to deliver a more diverse range of products. For example a promotional campaign no longer involves simply a print poster a promotional product, advertisements in the paper and a static website. Now a campaign involves, printed posters, various promotional products, facebook advertisements and collateral, web banners and spotlights for website, tweets, campaign images posted to Pinterest accounts, YouTube video ads, digital posters at bus

stops and in shopping centres, collaboration with visual/sound/lighting/music artists for promotional events, web email mail-outs, an interactive touchscreen display, an app, etc. Each of these components may then be designed several times over to ensure they are customized to appeal to different target markets. In short, it seems that there is a need to come at design from all angles using the gamut of communication tools available to capture attention in a world saturated with communication messages.

These observations are also supported by an AIGA and Adobe article entitled *Designer of 2015 Trends*, which outlines the challenges facing the design profession into the future. AIGA purports that these six challenges include the need for designers to:

- ‘draw on experience and knowledge from a broad range of disciplines, including social sciences and humanities, in order to solve problems in a global, competitive market of products and ideas’ (AIGA and Adobe, 2014). The designer of the future needs to have broad meta-disciplinary understandings and specific design skills sets. In other words, a designer not only needs to be good at design but also have the ability to ‘hack’ and be a jack-of-all-trades.
- ‘address scale and complexity at the systems level, even when designing individual components to meet the growing need for anticipation of problem and solution rather than solving known problems (AIGA and Adobe, 2014). This means that designers need to create flexible designs that can be tailored for different media and easily updated in a world of constant change.
- adjust to the shift from ‘mass communication to more narrow definitions of audiences, requiring designers to understand both differences and likenesses in audiences and the growing need for reconciliation of tension between globalization and cultural identity’ (AIGA and Adobe, 2014). Communication messages will need to be more targeted/customised to specific audiences, which means designers will need to have the ability to understand and appeal to a variety of cultures and consumer groups.
- be able to capture and retain attention of audiences by being skilled in ‘communication design, information design, experience design and service design...’ all in a market that values the ‘short-term grab’. (AIGA and Adobe, 2014).
- have a shift in thinking around provision of designs/products that are defined by service providers to design thinking that enables users to be co-contributors or even co-creators (AIGA and Adobe, 2014).
- ‘focus on human-centred design in an era of increasingly limited resources’ (AIGA and Adobe, 2014). In other words, designers will increasingly be called on to ensure that their practices are sustainable in relation to the environment, people, culture and

economies (*The Living Principles*, 2014).

In summary, the design industry is becoming more complex. Designers are currently in the midst of an era that is constantly evolving, requiring flexibility and broader skill sets for designs to be successful. Given this premise it is clear that design disciplines such as digital, web, print, video, and other design disciplines will merge.

References

- AIGA and Adobe, 2014, *Designer of 2015 Trends*, aiga.org/designer-of-2015-trends/, accessed 30 May 2014.
- The Living Principles, 2014, *Framework: introduction*, www.livingprinciples.org/framework/introduction/, accessed 26 February 2014.