



THE CORPORATE CREATIVE

tips and tactics for thriving as an in-house designer

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HERDING CATS

Cats are great companions and they can add joy to your life, but try putting a bunch of them in a field and getting them all to move in the same direction. Clients, like cats, can be great to partner with and can add to your professional fulfillment. Beyond these similarities to the feline species, though, is the even more important point that they are critical to the success of your projects. To take the analogy a step further, like cats, clients have a mind of their own and resist being controlled to meet your ends. As much as you may not like this fact, it is this temperament that actually makes the creative-marketing dynamic work. It creates a push-pull process, with the client constantly focused on the marketing needs and you as designer pushing for aesthetic and emotional impact. If your relationship with your clients is healthy and there is mutual respect and a shared goal of producing the best work possible, then the resulting design will successfully integrate the marketing, aesthetic and emotional priorities of the project.

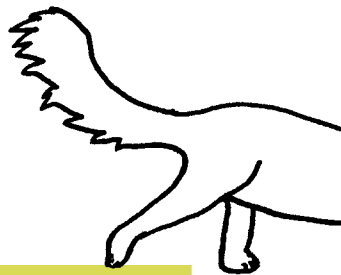
The kicker is that because they're the ones controlling the project (and on whose shoulders the success of the project rests), it usually falls on you to go the extra mile and make the relationship work. It's no secret that clients often try to expand their influence on their projects beyond the marketing goals and attempt to design their projects as well. Again, it's primarily your responsibility to manage that. As much as you'd like it to be different, the fact is that it's a lot easier for them to find

a new designer than for you, as an in-house designer, to find a new client.

Just to get it out of your system, here's a list of complaints (some valid, some not) that you may have about your clients:

- They're control freaks.
- They don't understand design.
- They don't understand me.
- They don't respect me.
- They abuse me with unreasonable deadlines and poor direction.
- They're incompetent.
- They only care about their careers.

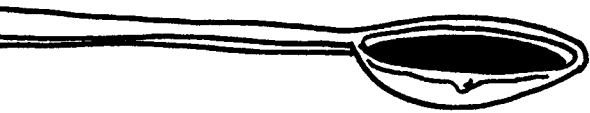
Boo-hoo-hoo. You can sit around and complain about this state of affairs or you can take action—they certainly won't. Just like a cat is totally fine with being a cat, a client has no problem being a client. What follows are a number of ways to lasso in your client relationships while avoiding cat-scratch fever. Yee-ha!



RM IS THE RX: CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

RM, relationship management, is the cure for many of your most intractable challenges to achieving creative nirvana. It will also allow you to more effectively support your company in its marketing efforts. There is precious little coverage of this topic in design school curriculums, yet it is one of the single biggest factors that contribute to a design project's success. It's also the area that designers have the fewest innate skills (or least desire) to manage. We go into design because we like to wrestle with problems on our own or with like-minded colleagues—not because we like dealing with others telling us what to do in areas where they have no expertise.

As an in-house designer, you're in a very different position when it comes to working with clients than your agency and design studio peers. Your in-house relationship with them presents you with unique opportunities and challenges. On the downside, your clients might tend to take you and your team for granted, assume that you aren't as talented as your peers on the outside and resent the fact that they may be forced to use you. On the upside, you have nine-to-five (or -six or -seven) access to them and have excellent opportunities to bond with them in ways that designers outside of the company cannot.



One of the most powerful ways your team can support your clients is in training the new hires joining your clients' departments. You can school them, most obviously, in the creative processes and procedures that exist within your company. You have a depth and breadth of valuable institutional branding and marketing knowledge to share with them as well. It's been my experience that often new marketing staff is thrown into assignments with little or no training in a sink-or-swim situation where they're expected to succeed in spite of these challenges.

Because your group has worked on similar past projects and knows the review processes, the staff needed to implement the project, the timing and the branding history of the product, you and your team are able to support these clients in ways well beyond just providing them with the final deliverables. You become consultants, mentors and peers guiding your neophyte clients through the convoluted waters of the creative and marketing processes and procedures of your company. As such, you contribute to the success of your company's marketing efforts and build strong client relationships while doing so. Don't ever be stingy in providing this type of support just because it falls outside of your suite of responsibilities. Not only are you obligated by your overall commitment to the success of your company, but these efforts establish you as an invaluable part of your company and ensure your long-term stature and viability.