

Ethics within the New Media Industry

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Ethics is often described as moral philosophy; ethics are often something that individuals believe strongly in, a code of conduct that often defines their beliefs of right and wrong.

Some ethics are impressed upon us through religious and social teaching as guides to leading a successful, productive and fulfilling life.

These are the things that lead us to make certain decisions in our lives dependent upon our beliefs. Ethical judgments are often based upon our belief systems but there are occasions in which they can contradict with each other, a good example of this is that I believe abortion is wrong but if a woman is raped and becomes pregnant as a result I also believe that she should not have to carry a child created within these circumstances. This is what is known as a moral dilemma.

Professional ethics are often an extension of personal morals but these are more in depth and specific to business. In the professional world there is an ethical and social responsibility to act within a certain way.

During my research I found this guide to Ethical Design Practices on the American Design Awards website:

1. Do not display your pricing on your website

Creativity is not a tangible product, rather an extraordinary gift. The design process isn't a pre-defined series of events and timelines, rather a collaborative series of calculated and creative steps based on the client's specific needs and objectives.

By displaying your price on your website, you are not only locking yourself into a project without first knowing what is involved, but you give clients and visitors the impression that the entire design community abides by these standards and pricing structures.

2. Do not take part in Speculative / Contest work

"Speculative Work" is the unfortunate practice in today's society by certain companies or organizations that put on a "contest", asking hundreds of graphic designers to participate by designing, and sharing their ideas or work specific to the project, and promising the "winner" a meagre payoff if their work is selected or used by the company.

Often hundreds of younger, inexperienced designers put in countless hours of work and creativity designing logos, web sites, or marketing collateral for these types of contests, without knowing if they will ever be compensated fairly for their time and efforts; 99% of these contestants never will.

3. Do not undervalue your time and break your prices

There are a set of standard pricing guidelines in the graphic and web design industry (whether you are a beginner or professional), and it is expected that designers charge at least near the minimum amount relevant to their experience for their time and services.

Those with ridiculously inexpensive fees, as well as those who undercut the rest of the designers by a substantial amount are truly doing a great disservice to not only themselves and their future as graphic designers, but the design industry as a whole by throwing off the pricing curve.

4. Do not copy someone else's design work

Do we really need to say more?

5. Do not use template sites for a quick and easy fix

Templates are pre-designed web sites, logos, and even brochures that have been created by businesses who make a profit selling the same half-finished work to scores of unimaginative wannabe "designers". What is wrong with this notion? If a client cannot place a value on imagination, brainstorming, creativity, market research, and actual design work, then thousands of designers would have to look for other means to make a living.

Those "designers" who do think they have gotten away with using a template, cannot comprehend the consequences of their actions beyond a quick profit. What will happen if the same client found out that his or her website or corporate identity was created through unethical means? How much recurring business will these "designers" expect from a client who is now furious, because the same website and logo they paid for is being replicated for their competitors?

6. Do not work without a working agreement

A well written, executable working agreement not only protects you as a designer and minimizes the chances of unknowingly participating in speculative work, but at the same time dictates your responsibilities in black and white. Having a bulletproof agreement ensures you are getting fair compensation for your time and efforts, and eliminates any misunderstandings and legal issues which may arise from working without a mutually agreeable set of circumstances.

Discussing all your terms and fees with the client before diving into a project portrays your professionalism and business ethics, and almost always drives off those clients who would have wanted to take advantage of you.

7. Do not "steal" your competitors clients

With the competitive nature of graphic design (or any business for that matter), it is one thing to market your services to expand clientele, but it is immoral and unethical to target another design firms' clients specifically. As graphic designers, we build long lasting relationships with our clients, know their company inside and out, understand their taste, objectives, and budgetary constraints.

Designers work hard to maintain business relationships, and for a new graphic designer to contact another designers' client and offer them a better deal without knowing the intricacies of an-already established relationship, is unacceptable and unethical business. It leads to cutting prices, and eventually cutting corners; something that does not boast well for the design industry as a whole.

8. Say 'No' to unethical clients

Often times an unethical client relies on a young designer's inability to turn down a paying project, and in the process takes advantage of the circumstances. Designers are encouraged to say NO at the very first sign of problems with these types of clients.

Warning signs include those who ask the designer to work for free just to gauge his or her abilities prior to making a decision about a designer; those who refuse or "forget" to sign a working agreement or do not provide a monetary down payment. Others include those who ask the designer to use templates, or stock photography without the intent to pay for them, or simply ask the designer to "borrow" photos or designs from other sources. Sometimes clients have been reported to offer bogus shares in a start up company as form of payment, even though they know the chances of those shares actually being worth something is slim to none.

9. Be fair and punctual with your paying clients

Your clients are your lifeline - which means you should always have their best interest in mind. Stand by your deliverables and timeline agreement; even go slightly above and beyond the call of duty to make sure they are more than satisfied with the results. But whatever you do, do not hold hostage an artwork which has been paid for in full, or any other unethical practices which may ruin your reputation. Ethical business and design conduct will not only win you more projects in the future, but you will gain the utmost respect in the design community.

<http://www.americandesignawards.com/ethics.html>

These guidelines seem quite good on the face of things but let's pose some ethical dilemmas:

"Do not "steal" your competitors clients"

What constitutes stealing your competitors clients? If your work is recognised by a client and you are requested to provide a piece of work for them should you say no if you know they usually work with another designer? If this is the case how do you get work from established clients, surely they have all used a designer in the past? Can you afford to turn work down? Some people are not in a financial position to be able to turn work down.

Say 'No" to unethical clients

If an unethical client that holds a different belief system to yourself approaches you with paid work to promote their beliefs, even if it offends you and may offend other people can you afford to say no? I am not saying whether or not I would react to a situation like this in one way or another but sometimes in life ethical values may be tested.

The above guidelines are based upon being ethical in terms of you and your clients but there is a growing feeling that designers have an ethical responsibility to the users of their creations. Areas such as accessibility, usability, consumer safety and environmental practices are becoming more prevalent.

Products and services should be universally accessible to all people of all ages, abilities, and physical conditions.

There are guidelines being put in place to try and make designers consider users as much as they consider clients, some of these are best practices where as some are becoming law.

Different people will always hold different ethical values that apply to large variations of different topics and situations but they all believe that the guidelines they place on their own lives will help them to be better people. If we all adhere to be better then hopefully there will be a convergence of ethical values leading towards a better way of business and life in general.