

IN-HOUSE ISSUES

INSIDE THE CIA

In-house design director Glenn John Arnowitz recently got a rare look inside the Central Intelligence Agency's design department. Here's the scoop on this top-secret institution.

When I received an e-mail last March from Mark Hernandez, who said he was with the CIA, I became concerned:

"Dear Mr. Arnowitz,

We've been following you for some time ..."

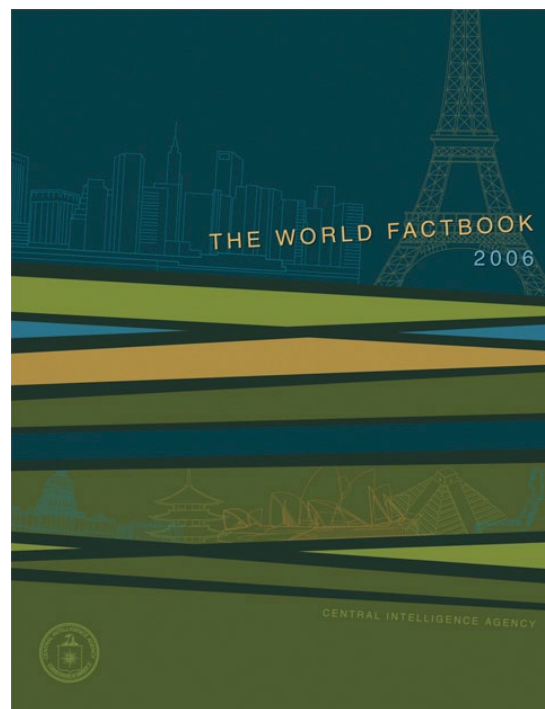
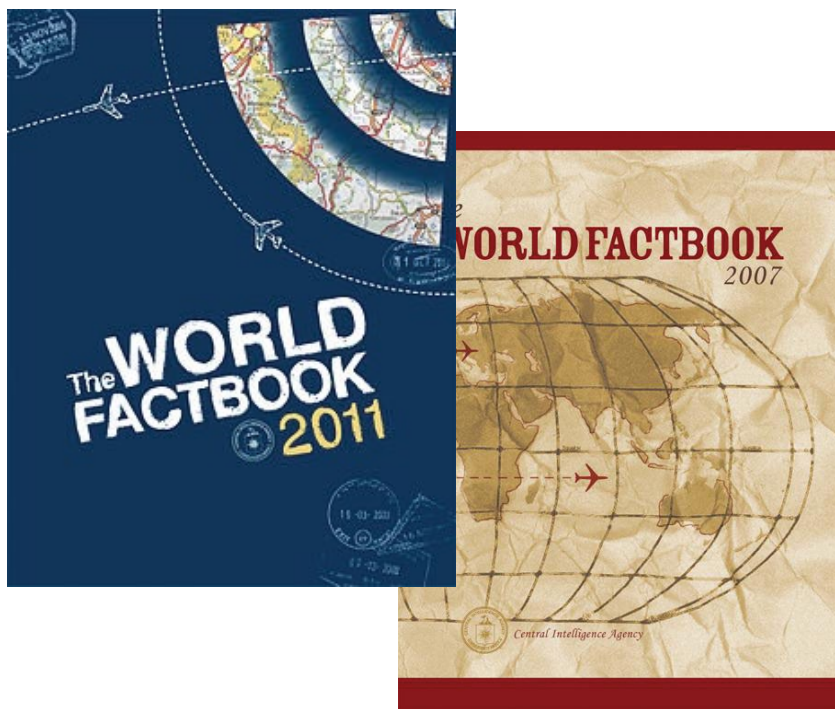
Hmmm. I've never cheated on my taxes, I've never been arrested and, as far as I know, I'm not wanted in any of the 50 states. As I continued to read on, my fears and paranoia subsided. I soon discovered that Hernandez is the art director of the Central Intelligence Agency's Office of Policy Support, where for the past 23 years he's been a key member of this elite team that handles design projects for the Directorate of Intelligence. These intelligence deliverables are destined for policy makers in the U.S. government, ranging from the Oval Office to Congress to the Pentagon.

As it turns out, Hernandez *had* been following me—mostly my editorial work for graphic design

books and magazines—and was inviting me to the CIA headquarters in Washington, DC, to speak to his department of designers, cartographers and web and interactive specialists on inspiration, motivation and creativity. I was both flattered and honored to receive this offer and immediately accepted it. But I have to admit, during the months leading up to the visit, my paranoia reared its ugly head again as my wife and I became convinced our phones were being tapped and we were being watched. "Did you notice that man sitting in the car parked across the street?" I asked my wife. Fortunately, the only bugs we found in our 1890 Victorian farmhouse were the kind with 16 legs.

BACKGROUND CHECK

To be considered for a position in the creative department of the CIA, candidates must complete an extensive application, a polygraph test and a background



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MARK HERNANDEZ

investigation—the entire process can take up to a year. In fact, I spoke to one senior designer who waited 18 months until she received her formal offer.

So how would I ever make it through security? I imagined CIA employees poring over my tax returns, employment history and medical records in search of just one tiny transgression that would prevent me from being admitted. Or maybe this was all just a setup to get me to CIA headquarters where I would be nabbed and cuffed as soon as I walked through the gates. Well, I obviously passed the inspection because in July 2011, I made it through security as my feet touched down on the 16-foot CIA insignia emblazoned on the lobby floor—that iconic logo seen in so many movies. To my right was the CIA Memorial Wall featuring 102 stars, each one representing a fallen hero who had made the ultimate sacrifice. I was stepping on sacred ground, entering an institution with a rich, complicated and controversial history. I made it in, and I was just praying they would let me out.

During my visit, I was treated to a tour of the facility, which included both the original headquarters built in the 1950s and the more recent building designed in the 1980s. These buildings are seamlessly connected on beautiful grounds that feature a memorial garden, a Berlin wall monument and a sculpture of Nathan Hale. The most striking installation is called “Kryptos,” which begins at the entrance of the new headquarters and continues in the northwest corner of the building’s courtyard. Designed by James Sanborn, this enigmatic sculpture stands tall as an S-shaped copper screen with a series of messages—each written in a different code that CIA employees have been trying to solve for years.

IF I TELL YOU THEN I’LL HAVE TO KILL YOU
The OPS design group has its roots in the CIA going

back to its inception entity—the Office of Strategic Services—primarily through its founding cartographic unit that produced maps and topographic models during World War II. By the 1950s, this group had grown to include artists. In many ways, the OPS design group’s history mirrors the eras of the graphic design industry—moving from 30-by-40-inch hand-painted presentation boards in the 1950s and 1960s, to stats, film and paste-up in the 1970s and 1980s, to today’s multiple electronic formats for print and online dissemination. Like other design organizations with long histories, the department has seen a generation of hand-crafting tradesmen replaced by computer design specialists during the last 20 years. Today, they’re experiencing rapid growth in interactive media.

Hernandez, a Texas native, began his design career working for a variety of advertising agencies, design firms and printers in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. In the mid-1980s, CIA recruiters visited Texas Christian University where he was an undergrad; intrigued with the opportunity, he applied but initially wasn’t hired. Two years later, he reapplied and was hired as a “visual information specialist.” By the late 1990s, the organization recognized the need for creative direction and leadership, and Hernandez was appointed the first art director for the internal design group. As the CIA art director, he not only provides leadership and mentoring, but also drives design innovation and brand stewardship for the Directorate of Intelligence—one of four Directorates—which functions as the robust analytic research arm of the CIA. This Directorate is committed to providing national security decision-makers with analytic insight, anytime, wherever needed.

As you can imagine, most information about the Agency is classified. Hernandez wasn’t at liberty to divulge how many employees work at the headquarters, how many stakeholders his team supports or the



details of his department's capabilities. But he was able to tell me that his group handles print, presentation, web and interactive products for the Directorate of Intelligence.

The "intelligence products" are the official analytic insights representing the CIA perspectives and judgments as deliverables to U.S. policy makers, and they include printed and online reports and personal briefings. Because this material is highly confidential, employees are also prohibited from discussing classified information outside authorized channels.

"It's an environment that relies on a strong partnership between analysts and graphic designers to conceive and create high-quality collateral on important global topics," Hernandez says. "The result, we hope, is an enhanced, informative message that has impact and adds decision-making value for the intelligence consumer."

The CIA has many opportunities for career growth. A graphic designer can move up following an "expert" career path or a "manager" path with options to pursue either their creative skills or leadership abilities. Many designers start with the Agency right out of college and ascend to senior-level roles. They also explore opportunities to pursue growth within a range of design disciplines, such as print, web, 3D animation and interactive multimedia.

"Some designers start their careers here in print and move to web or Flash-based design," Hernandez

says. "And in an organization this large and diverse, some graphic designers have even discovered and pursued their abilities in other careers here, such as analysts, instructors or finance officers."

HAIL TO THE CHIEF

In-house creative departments have an edge over external agencies because they have the institutional knowledge of their company's brand, products, services, culture and history. Colleagues share values, a common purpose and mutual dedication. Because of the onsite convenience, they're very responsive to their stakeholders' immediate needs. One of the major advantages of working in-house as a corporate creative is access to many resources and the ability to partner with stakeholders to establish and maintain mutually valuable strategic relationships.

And in an organization such as the CIA, where security and confidentiality are imbedded in the culture's DNA, Hernandez's team is an invaluable asset as his cross-discipline media designers partner with the highest level officials at the Agency on a broad range of global projects, giving them a unique view of world events, often as they unfold. "Probably the most distinct privilege of working at CIA is seeing your work—representing the voice of this organization—end up in the hands of the President," Hernandez says.

The visuals developed for CIA analytic products can span a range of styles depending on the message,

the audience and the medium, including traditional statistical charts and tables or technical drawings, as well as highly stylized infographics and summary visuals. From the grittiness of international crime to the high-tech style of cyber security, Hernandez's team has a lot of opportunity to flex its creative muscle with innovative design. "Creatively speaking, our work is of the highest quality and very competitive with our peers," he says.

MISSION POSSIBLE

The purpose of my visit was to lead Hernandez's team through a presentation that addresses many of the challenges that often plague in-house creative departments—isolation, abusive clients, burnout, repetitive work, limited opportunities, always justifying your existence—and offer real-world strategies to keep everyone motivated and inspired, which leads to eventually improving team morale and client relationships.

"Producing work in a secure environment presents challenges of making the product look good and making sure it's marked properly for secure handling—sometimes a visual conflict," Hernandez says. Classified products use text labels and various markings to indicate the products' level of classification. These are required by regulation, and the designers must work magic to balance the aesthetics of a cover design with these required elements. "Although the security requirements can be limiting, we simply integrate the required elements into every design and make the best of it," he says.

In general, corporate in-house creatives are usually spared the long hours of overtime, but the CIA is a 24/7 organization that requires colleagues to be on the job any time and any day of the week—including holidays and during major snowstorms. This can often lead to designer burnout. To address these challenges, Hernandez encourages expanded creative license on appropriate ad hoc or in-house projects to stretch his team's creative muscles.

"Our creative ad hoc items can include an unclassified historical publication, promotional campaigns for internal events or design work for our recruiting briefing," Hernandez says. In fact, Hernandez and his team developed the exhibit and display materials for the CIA Museum, which houses a collection that includes clothing, equipment, weapons, insignia and other memorabilia that were designed, manufactured and used specifically for intelligence operations. Located on the CIA compound, the museum serves as tangible testimony to the Agency's history. Although the CIA Museum isn't open to the general public, I was given a personal tour featuring cryptography machines (decoders), glass cases filled with camera ties, Presidential documents, maps and many historical relics from the world of espionage that seem straight out of a James Bond movie.

SPIES LIKE US

Networking is a necessary ingredient to building community and can also alleviate the isolation that many corporate in-house creatives feel, as well as help strengthen their standing in the creative community.

And Hernandez recognizes the importance of connecting with peers in the world of creative professionals.

"We network primarily with other graphic design shops in the intelligence community," Hernandez says. "This is mainly because of similar clearances and common product types. We've also been able to exchange personnel on an interim basis among our agencies in an effort to gain from information-sharing and learn from best practices. And we've been able to engage on a limited basis with private sector design shops to set up tours and benchmark our work practices."

Hernandez and his team belong to national organizations such as the AIGA, InSource and Design Management Institute, and attend many of the top design conferences each year to stay connected. Several intelligence agencies in the Washington, DC, area have formed the Interagency Visual Media Group—a volunteer organization that includes members from the CIA, National Reconnaissance Office, Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency—to encourage networking and collaboration among like-missioned shops, providing additional opportunities to intersect with other creatives. The IVMG sponsors an annual conference that includes a media excellence awards event to recognize classified products from these agencies in print, web, video and multimedia.

BURN NOTICE

After the campus tour, Hernandez escorted me through security, out the front gates and to the train station in DC, where I caught a train back to New York. During the ride home I thought about the differences in our work environment, culture, projects and especially our client base—mine, mostly over-the-counter pharmaceutical brand managers, and his, CIA directors and the President. And I wondered if I had the right stuff to handle the commitment, discretion and responsibility required to become a member of such an elite creative organization. I'm not sure.

My wife picked me up at the train station and we drove home. As we pulled into our driveway, I noticed that something was different—the car parked across the street from our house was no longer there. **HOW**

Glenn John Arnowitz is director of Global Creative Services at Pfizer. He is a contributing editor to many design magazines and publications, including the books "Bringing Design In-House" and "In-House Design In Practice." Arnowitz is speaking at the HOW Design Conference in Boston in June (HOWdesignlive.com). As co-founder of InSource (www.in-source.org), Arnowitz is passionately committed to helping in-house creatives achieve design excellence and recognition within their companies and the business community. www.bigcowstudio.com; gjainsource@gmail.com



WEB EXTRA

Interested in a corporate gig? Check out "The Upside of In-House: 11 Perks to Consider" by Glenn John Arnowitz.

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