



IN-HOUSE ISSUES

ODD JOBS

Not only are in-house designers' roles misunderstood, they're often misused, too. Following are stories of odd project requests—some unethical, others just plain weird—and tips for dealing with your own sticky situations.

As someone who was born and raised in New Jersey, I've become a big fan of *Weird NJ*, the magazine that explores the bizarre myths and suburban legends of the Garden State (www.weirdnj.com). My favorite stories tour the abandoned towns, vacant psychiatric hospitals and former landmarks that have been left for dead. Weird stuff.

And as a fan of weird stuff, I've also enjoyed hearing about the bizarre project requests my fellow in-house designers have received throughout the years. Weird requests. Personally, I've encountered everything from typesetting Braille to finding balloons that match our custom corporate colors to creating National Enquirer-worthy images of employees who have been surgically altered in Photoshop.

If you're a member of an in-house creative department, you've probably received some surprising

requests of your own. Recently, I asked a few of my colleagues to anonymously share some of the more unorthodox assignments they've received. I then provided some strategies for managing those requests and the demanding clients behind them. Here, in their own words, are their stories:

NO EARLY BIRDS

"I've designed—are you ready—garage sale signs for the CEO's wife. She was having her annual garage sale and hoped to build awareness and incremental sales through the use of a properly designed outdoor campaign. Sales goals were high: +30% over the previous year's earnings. Industry insiders were agog when she announced her ambitious growth plan. 'GARAGE SALE HERE' was her primary communication message. The use of large red arrows added visual impact

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and directed customers appropriately. I used Helvetica Black, condensed 10% and tracked -20, and PMS 186 for maximum impact to alert passing motorists. No, we didn't have to actually install the signs. I had to draw the line somewhere."

CHEERS!

"I was asked once to produce imprinted beer glasses for a former CEO's 40th birthday party. The party was in Sweden, and some of the U.S. marketing staff were attending (I guess that justifies the glasses as a marketing expense). They insisted on producing them here in the U.S. in order to keep them a surprise, and checked them on the flight over. Needless to say, not all of them made it in one piece. Why they didn't get them produced over there, I have no clue."

THE COLOR BLUE MAKES ME SAD

"This story comes from many years ago when I worked for a huge communications company. It isn't really about a request, but a response from a segment marketing manager to a presentation for a creative campaign. Our team had gone through weeks of work, culminating in a long, involved presentation of marketing strategies, research results, target audiences and budget expenses, with full creative comps on ads, brochures, mailers, etc. After our exhaustive efforts to be comprehensive and think of all the angles for the department's campaign, the head of the department pondered a while on what she had seen and heard, then came forth with these insightful words:

"I know you have done a good deal of work, and I think you have probably covered everything we asked for, but honestly, I really can't even look at what you have here. I can't finish reading it or looking at the images. The main colors you used remind me exactly of my ex-fiance's living room and I so don't like him—and so I can't get myself to like this campaign!"

"When asked to try to see through the colors and just focus on the concept and words, I was told she 'couldn't do that' and we needed to 'come up with a whole new campaign starting with new colors and working from there.'

"I was totally dumbfounded. To be totally shot down by this line of reasoning by a marketing professional at a major corporation seemed inconceivable. The hairs on my neck still stand up just thinking about the encounter."

CAN YOU SEE ME NOW?

"I had to paint the company's logo on the roof of our building so the president could see it when flying over from Newark Airport."

SOCK IT TO ME

"Sock puppets! I'm not kidding. The in-house creative department I work for had to design and create a series of sock puppets."

And from another designer: "I was asked to create a 'Flat Stanley' with the company logo on it, so that it could be passed around from office to office and have stories collected about it. Sure, it might build recog-

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nition and morale, but it was a complete waste of a designer's time."

SORRY, WE DON'T DO GARDENS

"I was asked to design a garden for the company president's house in Long Island. Even though I told the president that it was not only outside of my job description, but also beyond my scope, his response was, 'Sure you can do it! You can do anything!' So I did. The following day he introduced me to his gardener as a 'landscape designer' and the gardener and I worked together for a week completing the job. It actually came out quite nice, and the gardener asked me to call him if I had any more jobs like that."

E-I-E-I-OHHHH

"The president of the company I worked for asked that I create a book with photographs of all the horses, cows, goats and lambs he had on his farm in New Jersey. I literally had to photograph every animal on the farm, design a 50-page book and print 2,000 copies. I have no idea what they eventually did with the book."

FREE PARKING

"I was asked to scan in a parking permit in the Hamptons and Photoshop the permit number. Completely illegal, unethical and surprising, coming from someone who can easily afford a parking permit. Of course, I declined, for risk of repercussion. However, I did receive an apology. Believe or not, it was for a high-level executive, since retired."

IT'S MY POTTY

"I think my favorite is, 'Can you design a poster directing participants to the restrooms?' We now refer to it as the 'Potty Poster.' I'm happy to say that we didn't follow through with this request. One less piece for the portfolio. Oh well."

And from another colleague: "Although the restrooms were just around the corner from their meeting room, we were asked to design directional signage so a group of high-level executives and scientists could find their way. I guess our signs were successful, as there were no accidents."

SHIP AHOY!

Here's another fun request (notice the keywords "quick," "simple" and "nothing fancy:") "You guys do

such great work and I was wondering if you could do a quick personal job for me? I just need to have a simple logo created. It's going on my boat. Nothing fancy though, just some sort of logo incorporating a blue diamond, since that was what we named her. The logo will go on the side of the boat. Oh, and I need that actual size. And in the next couple of days would be good."

WE'RE COASTING NOW

"Our department's most bizarre request was to design coasters with the company president's face on them. They were supposed to be a congratulatory premium item on a job well done. Guess they thought 'a toast to our employees' and someone said, 'Hey, I know—coasters!' I don't think they ever considered how degrading it might be for the president to have people putting their three-day-old coffee mug on his face each morning. Weird."

SIZE DOES MATTER

"I once produced a campaign to be installed on billboards in Manhattan. When we had all the billboards up at the appropriate locations, I was asked by the president to have them all taken down and reinstalled so they would be visible on his morning commute to work. A few million dollars later, everything was facing the right side of the street, and the president, needless to say, was thrilled."

NAUGHTY BITS

"For an off-site event, we were asked to create square labels with our corporate logo that were going to be used to cover mildly erotic framed artwork that was displayed throughout the venue to avoid offending any of the corporate executives."

DESIGN INTERVENTION

Some of the requests here may be a little out of the ordinary, but for the most part they're harmless. But what about those requests that cross ethical or legal boundaries, like being asked to create a counterfeit parking permit?

If you're an in-house design director, it's your responsibility to set an example and act with integrity at all times. Don't put yourself in a precarious position and compromise your principles or your reputation if someone is asking you to do something that you believe is unethical or against company policy. As a leader, it's important to communicate to your staff that you need to be aware of any unorthodox requests that they receive from their stakeholders. That would include design requests for anything that may be considered offensive, illegal, immoral, suspicious or pornographic, or work that isn't business-critical, such as Photoshopping the CEO's head onto a donkey.

In general, most requests for the in-house designer fall into three buckets: business-related, business/personal or personal. Most of your time should be devoted to business-related requests, doing what you were hired to do: conceptualizing, designing and providing creative solutions to your stakeholders in support of their business needs and objectives.

But along the way, you'll be asked to do those business/personal projects—the cards, posters, banners and invitations that are often created for in-house use, mainly celebrations of milestones such as birthdays or retirements. These usually require minimal time, effort and materials, and since your work is seen as enhancing employee morale and corporate culture, there shouldn't be a problem.

But then there are the dreaded personal requests—wedding invitations, birthday banners, event flyers and garage sale signs. These should only be considered once you receive approval from your boss and only after your real work is done. And that goes not only for design, but for printing as well. Many times clients will ask for multiple copies of personal material that may be questionable; although you might not have created the original artwork, by duplicating it, you could be held accountable.

You also may find that, although many of these personal requests are scary at first, they can develop into fun projects that push you far beyond your comfort zone and use talents you didn't even know you had. Like garden designer. Or roof painter. I know some of my designers have added interior designer to their job description after providing creative suggestions for decorating office environments.

But if you receive a request that you believe crosses the line of decency, then alert your boss. And if the request is coming from your boss, then it would be wise to have a candid conversation with him and discuss how the project violates your personal principles as well as company values. Be firm. Hopefully, your boss will ultimately have more respect for you if you stand by your principles.

As in-house creatives, we have the opportunity to tackle a wide range of project types—some of which may not only be weird, but also not business-appropriate. So, it's up to all of us to act like professionals and avoid anything that would put our jobs, reputations or companies at risk. **HOW**

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» WEB EXTRA

Have you received a weird request of your own while working in-house? If so, visit the HOW Forum to share your story. And for more weird tales, check out Arnowitz's article in WeirdNJ issue No. 34.

HOWdesign.com/weirdrequests
www.weirdnj.com