

Web Design

Art or Science?

Part 2 of a series



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Ok, if you read the first part of this white paper you know that we worked through the first two essential questions that must be asked by the designer to begin thinking correctly about a design: Who is the client and what are the goals? If you didn't you should stop reading this now and read the first part or you will be lost. Now I move forward to thinking about the audience...

A lot of (marketing) people would say that when I move to the question – “who is the audience?” I am jumping the gun a bit and should better ask – “who is the competition?” but they would be wrong. The idea of knowing your competitors in order to inform your marketing approach is only for the very large and, I might add, old companies. **These days, competitors can sprout up anytime from anywhere and to think about them is simply counter productive.** In a very informative book about how the new media has changed the way we do business- “Rework” by Jason Fried & co. the authors describe the problem so well I must quote them here:

“THE COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE CHANGES ALL THE TIME. YOUR COMPETITOR TOMORROW MAY BE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM YOUR COMPETITOR TODAY. IT’S OUT OF CONTROL. WHAT’S THE POINT OF WORRYING ABOUT THINGS YOU CAN’T CONTROL?”

Jason Fried

So for now we have put the idea of competitive analysis to rest, but your audience.... now that's another matter. Not only do you want to know your audience but eventually you will want to LEARN FROM THEM. Their way of thinking and behavior are something that, while you observe it and if you do so correctly, you will eventually be able to control. Now, when we discuss the target audience (I'm not talking about demographics here or profiling, that's also for the old and the rich), I'm talking about specifics. At Glimworm we like to be as specific as possible because it informs us in the most authentic way because it creates the possibility for a meaningful dialogue. The simplest way to do this is to think very specifically about who you want to be your audience first by asking the question; “Whom do I want to speak to?” and after you first ask this question to yourself and you get the normal and overly general answer (something useless like: “everybody”) ask the question I put forward earlier on: “If you could only sell one product or service to one person one day a week and make enough money to spend the rest of your time playing golf, what would it be and to whom?”. **Get very, very specific and the web will do the generalizing for you.** “How's that?!?”, you might ask, and the answer has to do with this simple secret that I will share with you: Everybody knows that you shouldn't try to be too many things to too many people and that you can't make everybody happy, etc., BUT, if you can make only one person really, really happy with your website (or these days a mobile app as well) it is possible to make many oth-



ers happy as well. It all starts with that one person; always, every time; and delivering what they want with a “wow factor” so, knowing that person is very, very important indeed.

As a designer, after you find out who your client wants to speak to then you must remember your exclusions as well. You will be able to make design decisions much more effectively when you know what person it is that you are communicating to. The best way to do this is to gather the information from your client and then find someone with whom you are well acquainted to serve as the person you should speak to and then keep them in mind when you have to make decisions. Something like- well the person I am supposed to be appealing to is just like Mike, would Mike like this or that? Sounds stupid I know but it clarifies many, many decisions and also retains your voice and again creates an environment for an authentic dialogue. A great teacher of Philosophy, whom I studied under, Alfonso Lingis, told me that when I write I should do so as if I were speaking to my best friend. His advice is very good and can be adapted and applied to designers who are trying to communicate in a very complex way to people they have never met. Familiarity, even if imagined, breeds confidence and we all know this is very important.

Another trick to doing this effectively is to identify the person you want to speak to and then define a specific personality type for that person (remember, when I say speaking I also mean communicating visually). For the purpose of decision making and in a generally accepted model, there are four basic personality types and they can be defined as follows:



Now, messages and how you deliver these messages will be different for each personality because each personality is searching for different types of information. At Glimworm, when we talk about semiotics and get into the relationship between signifier and signified, **we find that the same symbol might mean different things to people from different cultures but even more subtly, the design choice you make will appeal differently to different personality types.** How our clients choose to write their content should also be tailored for a personality type but much of the time we cannot really control how that is done and that is a topic for much further discussion.

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What we do is focus on design and so we let the client deal with copy and only advise on copy (for the most part- we do write copy from time to time) because, in our opinion, our clients know their business better than we do and should also know not only what they want to say but to whom. Regardless, the audience aspect of effective website design can be very scientific and the application of it can be achieved in these six steps:

- 1 Find out who the client really wants to speak to.
- 2 Ask him or her if they know a person who fits that description perfectly
- 3 Define that person's personality type
- 4 Think about someone you know that fits that personality type as closely as possible
- 5 Design with that person's sensibilities in mind
- 6 EXCLUDE all others INCLUDING yours and your client's

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The last step is a bit difficult and takes a lot of practice because it means you must exercise a great amount of creativity, empathy and objectivity and all at the same time. In order to remove ego from the creative process is more than just difficult and takes time, a lot of experience and discipline but, as difficult as it is, it will equally benefit. If you get stuck, at least you will know who to turn to for an opinion that matters and remember EXCLUDE all others.

This brings us to the last question in our all important brief: **"What do we have to start with?"** Again, though it sounds simple, this can turn into a very slippery slope and will also have it's inclusions and exclusions. For instance when I posed this question to Naser he said "Well, we have their old website". So would that be something to include or exclude? Exclude, right! Forget the old and in with the new! That is what we designers do. As discussed before, web design and graphic design are different and are growing further apart each day so do yourself a favor and clean your slate, except for the bare essentials and even those you will probably have to adapt. When we start a new web design, **we want as few preconceived notations as possible because we have to make this simple deduction: They need our help because what they have does not work.** Regardless, part of what we have to start out with is a brand and brand, in the majority of cases, has already been developed. Now, we cannot completely dismiss how much some of our clients have invested in their brand and how important it has become to their communication strategy and marketing and distribution channels but we absolutely must make them aware how different the web is from traditional media.



In light of the difficulty of migrating from traditional media to the web, most of our clients are receptive to the following important considerations:

- **The computer monitor as opposed to print media is luminous and projects light instead of reflects light**
- **There is no way to directly translate colors in print (Pantone, CMYK) to the screen or the web (normally RGB) not to mention complications with hue, saturation and color temperatures.**
- **The way line, line weight, space, composition, field and depth of field are perceived and therefore communicated on a monitor is different from print.**
- **While subtlety and attention to minutia can be beautiful in print, excessive detail and/or colors does not communicate well on a monitor; it will confuse and thus be counterproductive.**
- **Objects, symbols, pictures, icons, fonts, shapes, buttons, text, etc., in short, every bit of space on the monitor can be interactive and some have to be interactive meaning they have different states, two colors, two sizes, etc.**
- **And last but not least: A website is about providing a positive user experience. It is interactive and engages the audience by changing and helping them to move forward to an answer or a solution, NOT by remaining static.**

You must remember that this is a discovery process and **all the information you have gathered before will inform the decisions as to what to include and what to exclude for your initial design.** As far as what you have to work with initially, what is valuable and not, what is worth working with and adapting and what really needs to be dismissed is determined not by subjective opinion but through the discovery process and the valuable information it provides. The client may furnish an attractive logo, brochures, print ads, an old website and then give you ideas about what direction he or she wants to go. They may show you examples of other websites and what they like and dislike and so on and so on; but when you examine the information which you have already gathered

(up to this point), a lot of what the client is providing is, simply put, wrong for the web and may have to be dismissed.

You must not only share your client's vision; you must have the skill, information and tools to shape it so it can be effective. Again, just keep the bare minimum, because that will provide you with the first building blocks of your design and you want that to be as simple and uncluttered as possible so your initial vision can be clear, have impact and can be strong.

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Let's go back to Naser... in the end; he came up with a preliminary concept/design that the client liked very much. It was difficult (or sometimes we like to say a challenge) in the beginning; he had to struggle. After he asked for my help and after going over what we call "the start up document" which includes the basics of the "brief" as I have described it, he still lacked inspiration. Ah, inspiration, that initial spark... So, to help him get in touch with his muse, I asked him to completely ignore everything in his design except for that one element he really, really liked. After a bit of closing one eye and then another and covering section by section of the screen with our hands, it ended up being the menu style he had made that really got him excited. I got him to focus on why that made him excited about what he was doing and then I asked him to build on that and only that- step by step. Each design decision is built on the last, we must move one element at a time and each element is a step taken, is a commitment and a decision and informs the next until what we achieve is clear, strong, focused and (ultimately) effective.

Looking back at my experience with Naser that made me reflect and inspired me to write all this down, I see clearly that for all the work that we can put into getting the right information and taking a scientific approach to inclusions and exclusions and creating criteria etc.; for all the processes we can put in place; nothing can compensate for that inexplicable, initial spark of inspiration that achieves and motivates vision and expression. So, if I go back to the original question: Is web design Art or Science? The answer is now quite clear: Both... First science and then art, and specifically in that order.

At this point and in conclusion, I feel obligated to review the essential questions that are put forward in "the brief" and initiate the discovery process, namely:

- 1 **Who is the client?**
- 2 **What are the goals?**
- 3 **Who is the audience?**
- 4 **What do I have to start with?**

Hopefully, what I have written here will help us ask these questions correctly; think of the answers and information we gather critically so they may inform the decisions we have to make as effective designers and inform us well.



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Schrijf je in voor de nieuwsbrief