

Web Design

Art or Science?

Part 1 of a series

By Paul Manwaring Co-founder and Creative Director at Glimworm IT BV in Amsterdam.

In this first installment, Paul lays out a clear approach to achieving a balance between the creative and the critical



Paul Manwaring founded Glimworm IT BV in 2001 with partners Jonathan Carter, Marten Hoekstra and Colin Williams. A former Hollywood Art Director, he shifted his focus from traditional to new media bringing unique insight into the creative process of web development and design. He holds degrees in Art and Philosophy from Penn State University and is an adjunct professor at Webster University Leiden where he has taught media studies for nearly 10 years.

Contact Paul at:
paul@glimworm.com

Recently, I sat down with one of my designers, Naser Mutawi, who has been working with us at Glimworm for over 4 years now and it really made me think about the nature of web design today and how much it has changed over the last ten years.

Naser has been concentrating mainly on design implementation rather than web design itself but more and more we are giving him design projects. He was struggling with a certain design for a marketing research firm and came to me for help.

Now as the creative director of Glimworm I spend a lot of time sitting down with the designers, helping them get the most out of their work; giving them feedback and pushing this direction or that so we can achieve the goals of the client as well as create an attractive website. But I don't spend a lot of time teaching how to approach a project these days.

Naser needed me to help him with the process more than anything else and when I was working with him on this I was reminded of how different it has become due to external factors such as technological developments and user's expectations and sensibilities but also how I comprehend and communicate it as a sort of a teacher.

I have been making web designs for over ten years now have taught numerous students, interns, and professionals what makes web designs work and how to approach the process effectively both as a creative professional (i.e. Artist) and as a critical thinker (i.e. Scientist).

I am happy to say that over the years I have built a great team and have kept the cream of the crop, we have stayed busy and now I have three full time and two part time designers under my charge.



WHAT MAKES WEB DESIGNS WORK AND HOW DO WE APPROACH THE PROCESS EFFECTIVELY BOTH AS CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS AND AS CRITICAL THINKERS?

One came to us through personal contacts but the rest came from either being students of mine or interns with the company; so I can truly say that I have seen these people learn and grow along with the technological developments and aesthetic sensibilities that have evolved in this pioneering age since the turn of the century.



Typically, when I sit down with a designer and look at his or her work I ask the same question every time- What is the brief? In other words- who is the client and what do they want? to put it as simply as possible. Whenever I teach (I have been an adjunct professor with the Media Dept. of Webster University Leiden since 2002, teaching, art direction, film appreciation and film history), I always begin with a bit of background on art and explain as a firm foundation that art is not a thing it is a movement and all art takes place in context; with web design that context is achieving communication goals in a landscape of technological anarchy.

ALL ART TAKES PLACE IN CONTEXT; WITH WEB DESIGN THAT CONTEXT IS ACHIEVING COMMUNICATION GOALS IN A LANDSCAPE OF TECHNOLOGICAL ANARCHY.

At the same time no art exists without an audience; without an audience art is only object.

In the more complex models we talk about semiotics and the dynamic between the signifier and the signified, there are so many elements of web design that are informed by the complexities of message and transmission but I will have to dedicate another paper exclusively to that subject some day in the not too distant future. For the time being we need only emphasize that web design is nothing without interaction and to facilitate this we must avoid confusion and be very, very clear.

This leads me to the next question that must be asked: Who is the target audience? With whom do you want to interact? Now this is always a tricky one because normally clients will be very vague and overly general; they will want to be too many things to too many people and communicate too much (in other words unclear); but our job as web designers is to achieve and maintain a focus throughout the process which will inform our decision making every step of the way and this is very similar to the scientific process of testing a hypothesis. One way I get people to focus comes from



a question asked me by a brilliant man who is now a partner at Cap Gemini and that question goes something like this: 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? Of course I have amended the question a bit over time but it still seems to work fairly well and get the client to

focus on a very narrow audience and can, in a nutshell, provide the most stable foundation for a communication strategy. We can simplify it even further by saying as we do sometimes: Who is your favorite client? NOT who is your most important client, that can be entirely different from favorite and the idea behind websites should be more about developing opportunities rather than maintaining the status quo. If the website we are designing is not business related but informational or organizational in nature the same questions apply, just a bit different because there is no profit motive but the goals are the same: To interact with the most specific audience while delivering the most specific message possible.

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Web design is about answering a question and by doing so establishing trust so people will choose to interact

Then comes the next question which is: What do we have to start with? Or let's take a look at the brand. Now sometimes there is absolutely nothing, no logo, no brand, nothing! believe it or not, this is mostly because we focus on small businesses that need help and one of the reasons they need help is because they have never developed a brand. When this happens we are happy. Sometimes the client has a brand along with some imagery like logos, business cards, letter head, brochures etc. but sometimes that is worse than starting with nothing because they are not good or good enough and they may not work in the medium we are working in- the web as displayed on screens. Paper as a medium and screens as a medium are very, very different and a lot of people (especially graphic designers) will argue with me about this but the fact is that graphic design is about getting people's attention so they will read or look at branding images, create associations and comprehend a specific message; while web design is about answering a question and by doing so establishing trust so people will choose to interact with the medium and find what they want. Sorry but this is simply the way it is so I re-iterate my statement with some emphasis- Graphic design is not web design and the two disciplines are moving further and further away from each other every single day.

GRAPHIC DESIGN IS NOT WEB DESIGN!

More often than not, most clients will have something graphic, even if only a font type, but it will need to be adapted for the web and that is the nature of translating from one medium to another.

So there you have it- no (good) web design can start without the brief and you must answer these questions:

- ▶ **Who is the client?**
- ▶ **What are the goals?**
- ▶ **Who is the audience?**
- ▶ **What do we have to start with?**

Sounds simple doesn't it? You might be saying- "Everybody knows that! What kind of idiot does this guy think I am?" Well maybe so, but let me show you how slippery the slope might be and how quickly focus gets lost along the way IF YOUR APPROACH IS NOT DISCIPLINED.



I have to venture off on a bit of a tangent here in order to prove a point, so please bear with me. I am reminded of when I teach film history classes, at a certain point (and after we have discussed art and established that film is an art medium) I will ask: "What makes film different from other forms of art?" And the simple answer to that question is camera movement and editing. Now one is fairly obvious but the other is deceptively elusive (at least to the normal student) because one takes place in terms of inclusion and the other in terms of exclusion- Anyway, food for thought.

If you ask the question: Who is the client? (again, sounds simple) the answer could be simple and straight forward something like- "They are a market research firm that specializes in the consumer food industry." Sounds like a clear enough answer but what has it shown us? Has it revealed enough about the client for us to make informed decisions? You should ask yourself this question again and again throughout the process to insure you are getting the most out of your research stage; so I will repeat it: Does the answer enable us to make informed decisions? You can ask a million questions and every time not get the right information or not enough information; this requires knowing the answers that you need and do not need. I will take the above example to demonstrate and then will propose a short and simple guideline.



First of all, The client is not an organization, the client is always a person and that person has a personal history and personality. What a person has that an organization can't have is wants and desires.

THE CLIENT IS NOT AN ORGANIZATION, THE CLIENT IS ALWAYS A PERSON

A person has an ego and can be happy or disappointed but an organization has no feelings, it only knows process and output; profit or loss; mission fulfillment or failure. So the right answer to the question is not "a marketing research firm" but a persons name and who that person is; what they want; what they do; what they are proud of or passionate about; what kind of personality they have; what their roles and responsibilities are; what they want to accomplish; what their expectations are, etc. What we already know about them is not interesting or informative. Things like; Mr. So and So is the owner of a Marketing firm that specializes in the food industry. But what is not known, such as: why he got into market research and how the firm he built got to specialize in the food industry; the fact that he comes from three generations of brick layers but was the first in his family to get an education; how he loves to visit France and how he fell in love with the food there.

At Glimworm we achieve this sort of valuable information in the research stage when our sales manager Sander Vriens asks prospects what he calls "background probes". This is a complicated process but is very effective in getting people to talk about not only about some informative history but also what they really care about. We can go on and on with this one but

it can easily be summarized by looking at what we need in an answer to inform us as critically thinking designers:



The answers we need must include and exclude the following:

YOU MUST INCLUDE:

What people generally don't know and do care about.

YOU MUST EXCLUDE:

What everybody knows or doesn't care about.

The reason why this sort of information is valuable for us as designers is because it has less to do with facts and more to do with abstract thought process, that same process that leads to inspiration and it will help us to share our client's vision.

We can move forward now and go to the next question but at this moment I am reminded of a little matrix about communicating and it goes something like this:



Now, traditionally, the most effective communication takes place in the last box but this has more to do with writing effective copy for traditional media and coming up with messages for ad campaigns and has less to do with how people communicate on the web today; so I would adapt it to reflect today's multimedia communication mentality. The essential shift takes place in the change from a traditional strategy- that of providing information - to a new media approach which is about stimulating interaction and ultimately sharing.



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Did you notice above that I included a new element - share? This is significant because, recently, it has become not enough just to stimulate interaction and search behavior but now we really need to incorporate share (as in social media such as Facebook and Twitter). So when we talk about providing a positive user experience we, from this point forward, recognize that stimulating search, click-throughs and providing fast positive results is not enough; the environment must include easy social media sharing options as well. But this is just the tip of the iceberg and I will have to come back to it either later on in this paper or maybe even dedicate an entirely different paper to the questions the above pose in the discovery process for good web design.

Also what the above matrix illustrates is more like a step by step information building process where each bit of information is a sort of discovery process that informs the next question to ask to get to the meat of the next answer.

/// When we have converted our client's goals to a specific call to action; at that point, we are ready to get to work. ///

So, let's take the next question: What are the goals? Again simple, they are always to increase conversion rates or get more people on the website or to increase sales but they are also too general. Again think of the inclusions and exclusions. First of all, we need to look at what can and should be accomplished without a website and exclude all that stuff but include the most interesting communication aspects that only a website can employ; then what we want to do is get more and more specific so we can begin designing in order to achieve these goals step by step. This will be very valuable if we get useful information and apply it in an effective way because first it will tell us what NOT to design so we won't waste our time and then it will tell us what we need to start with that will be a good, solid foundation for the design.

Let's take the example of Naser's market research firm: In his brief he stated that it was the clients express wish to "have a less confusing website, to make things easier to find". Hmmm, what can I say to this? Typically, I

will ask more and more questions until I get to the meat. To make a long story short: I eventually got Naser to boil it down to "have a clear architecture and get people to log in" and something there is what we need to grab on to- that which cannot be achieved in any other medium! We then focus on the single goal of getting people to log in and understand that having a clear architecture is not a specific goal but a means to an end and that end always needs to be a CALL TO ACTION. Just like the essential shift in communication described above from traditional models to new models, what web design has to achieve with goals is essentially different because of the interactive nature of the medium. Also, we have to make things crystal clear so we boil it down to the last step; that is, simply, "log in". When we have converted our client's goals to a specific call to action; at that point, we are ready to get to work.



TO BE CONTINUED!

The next two questions - Who is the audience? and What do we have to start with?- will have to be covered in the next installment.



Glimworm IT BV
Eerste Weteringplantsoen 8
1017 SK, Amsterdam
Nederland

Tel: +31 (0)20 - 616 56 40
Fax: +31 (0)20 - 240 13 57
E-mail: paul@glimworm.com



Schrijf je in voor de nieuwsbrief