

Is the customer always right?

Can doing what the customer wants hurt your business?

By Dan Antonelli, President and Creative Director, Graphic D-Signs, Inc. and SignShopMarketing.com

The old saying goes “The customer is always right.” And I suppose, generally, in certain businesses, that might be good advice—to a degree. But how do you handle the customer who is clearly wrong?

What are they usually “wrong” about? Most of the times, their art direction for designing their sign, logo or vehicle runs contrary to what you, as the professional, should know is right.

So this begs the age-old question: Do you do the job as directed—giving them exactly what they asked for—even though you know it to be a bad investment of their hard-earned dollars, ultimately a poor advertising piece that is destined to fail?

Do you happily collect the check, do the job, and move on? Or, are you like me—one who obsesses over every detail of my clients image and will not allow myself to be pushed into a corner that I know is not in their best interest?

I suppose this obsession with my clients’ image could be a fatal character

flaw of mine. I’m fond of telling my clients as we tackle their logo design that no one will probably care as much about their image as I will. No one else is going to be as upset as I am if I see them suddenly substituting something else for the secondary font I chose for their tagline in a Yellow Page ad, or having someone in their office squish their logo horizontally in an e-mail signature graphic.

Clearly, at times it would be much easier to take their strange, doodled ideas, give them exactly what they want—and move on with my life. But most of the time, what they want is not actually what they need. They’ve come to us because we’re the professionals. And as such, we have an obligation to educate them about how and why our design solutions will meet their marketing objectives better than their well-meaning, but often amateur, approaches.

Too often, on Internet message boards I see photos of sign work and vehicle wraps jobs that have almost no real benefit to the



This is our 16-page sales brochure. It's printed on 100# uncoated stock, spiral bound, with a Velcro flap to close the piece. Each section is tabbed across. At a cost of about \$11 each, it's quite expensive. However, the amount of sales it has helped close make it one of my most worthwhile marketing expenses. None of my competitors has a piece like this. It really helps set us apart.





This 44-by-44-in. framed, mounted print hangs in our reception area. Along with several awards and plaques in the waiting room, it immediately helps establish our expertise in branding. It's hard not to trust us as a company with a lot of experience in logos when you see a poster that features 125 of them.

WINNING NATIONAL DESIGN AWARDS IS A BIG DEAL.



**[WINNING OUR CLIENTS' FAITH,
TRUST, AND SATISFACTION
IS AN EVEN BIGGER DEAL.]**

Winning coveted design awards is no small matter. We should know, as we have earned every one on our boardroom wall with serious blood, sweat and effort. But at GDS, our greatest reward comes when clients tell us how our websites, branding, ad campaigns and collateral have invited unprecedented visibility and profit. Led by nationally acclaimed author Dan Antonelli, our award-winning work has earned the respect and envy of our industry - as well as the faith, trust, and repeat business of more than 300 happy clients.



FIVE TIMES ON THE FRONT COVER IS PRETTY COOL.



**[THE MARKET SHARE CAPTURED
FOR 300+ CLIENTS IS EVEN COOLER.]**

At GDS, we love being featured on national magazine covers and winning multiple awards. But we're even happier when clients tell us how our vehicle branding, design and implementation has boosted their visibility and increased sales. Whether you have one truck or an entire fleet, our outstanding vehicle branding grabs attention and boosts market share, 24/7/365. Led by nationally acclaimed author Dan Antonelli, the GDS vehicle design team may very well be the finest on the planet. It doesn't get much cooler than that.



These 20-by-28-in. framed, mounted prints hang in our conference room. As we meet with clients, they can't help but read about our accomplishments. There are 4 posters all together (see facing page), each speaking about a specific area of expertise. They were designed and written not only to tout our accomplishments, but also to show how those accomplishments benefit our clients. After all, the client's main concern is what you can do for them.

customer. And after the design flaws are pointed out, the signmaker will stand behind his work by stating "That's what the client wanted. I collected my check, and everyone's happy..." I'm not too sure how happy the client will be six months from now when his expensive wrap has garnered nothing but the quizzical glances of other motorists struggling to understand the message.

For me the "I did what the client wanted" excuse is nothing more than a crutch for not setting the bar higher for ourselves and our clients. It's an easy excuse for putting poor work out on the street.

Where it goes wrong So how does this happen? How does the client relationship

digress into the professional letting the layperson dictate design decisions? More often, the breakdown begins the minute they walk into your shop, visit your Web site, or maybe even look at your business card.

What your own image portrays, instinctively, is a representation of your company's own capabilities, or lack thereof. While this may seem obvious, your clients have no reason to believe you are the professional if your own brand is not professional. If your image is a hodgepodge of disjointed logos and inconsistent color schemes, how do you think the client will expect you to treat their image?

For those clients shopping via the Web, what does your Web site communicate about your company? While it's nice that you may

know a little bit about Web design, most sign designers are not qualified web designers. That fact is often clearly and sadly apparent to clients who visit poorly-designed sites. Their nephew, niece or guy they know “who does it on the side” is not qualified, either.

With all these things working against a shop, it’s no wonder they put more and more work out the door in which the “art direction” came from the clients. They’ve given the client no real reason to believe they are dealing with a professional, therefore the sign maker is not in any position to tell the client otherwise.

The simple solution To put yourself in the position of being treated and respected as the professional, you need to take all the necessary steps to be professional in all areas: your truck, sign, waiting area, marketing materials, Web site, stationery etc. Even the way you dress is important. If you make the investment in those areas I can assure you it will pay significant dividends.

It doesn’t have to be extravagant, dramatic or fancy. It does have to be professional and consistent. It must clearly show that image is important to you—starting with your own.

You can then at least be assumed to be the professional. After all, this is what you do for a living. You’ll be on firmer footing to stand your ground when advocating your design solutions—and you’ll stand a much better chance of your clients accepting your ideas.

The detriments of having “bad work” out there

It’s important to remember that the more “bad work” that leaves your shop, the more likely your shop will be known for that type of work. While it may appear harmless to collect the check and move on, in the long run this is probably a flawed strategy.

Obviously, given the economics of today, some shops are going to need to take what they can get. But be careful about garnering a reputation for that work. My wise friend Rich Dombey once said, “If you don’t want to make any red Helvetica-on-white-corrugated-plastic signs, then don’t make any red Helvetica-on-white-corrugated-plastic signs.” ☺



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MORE THAN 300 WEBSITES SOUNDS LIKE A LOT.

[MORE THAN 300 BREATHTAKING, HIT-GRABBING, GOOGLE-RANKING, SALES PRODUCING WEBSITES SOUNDS LIKE A WHOLE LOT MORE!]

GD&S has given 300+ small and medium sized companies bigger, bolder, more beautiful web presences that most Fortune 500's would envy. Led by nationally acclaimed author Dan Antonelli, the GD&S web development team provides custom design, cutting-edge programming and savvy market positioning that have catapulted our clients to global recognition and exponentially increased sales - some almost overnight. Sure, GD&S has won lots of awards. But our greatest reward is when 300 clients tell us how much we've done for them. One click at a time.

WHEN IT COMES TO LOGO DESIGN WE WROTE THE BOOK.

[TWO BOOKS, ACTUALLY, BUT WHO'S COUNTING?]

Whether you're launching a new business or re-branding an existing one, you need the right logo to really stand out. Trust acclaimed author Dan Antonelli and the GD&S team to design the right logo and branding package for you. With more than 350 successful branding projects to our credit, we not only wrote the book. We wrote the rules.