

Designing For Social Change

Strategies to help graphic designers become effective social designers

by Andrew Shea

Abstract

Some call it “design for the greater good.” Others call it “design for social change.” Most people skip a few syllables and call it “social design.” Whatever you want to call it, graphic designers flock to it. Some feel they have designed enough dog-food labels and perfume packages and crave a change, while others feel an affinity from the starts of their careers. All designers who are drawn to social design want to use their skills to help people live better lives.

A year ago, I wanted to learn more about how social design differs from the larger practice of graphic design. Who are the social designers? Does social design take different forms for different demographics? How do designers in other countries practice social design? Is social design inherently less profitable? After spending months reading and researching, I focused on a single question: what strategies can help graphic designers become effective social designers?

Many beautiful graphic design books and blogs explore social design, but none emphasize strategies to help designers address complex social problems. So I am writing a book that will do this. Princeton Architectural Press will publish the book, which will be organized around twenty social design case studies. From those case studies, I will extrapolate strategies that can help these projects become more effective. Some of these strategies are included in this paper.

Barbra Levin is a busy woman and in February 2009 she was on a mission. She needed to recruit graphic designers to help NF Mid-Atlantic,¹ a non-profit organization that supports a largely unknown group of people who have neurofibromatosis (NF). This neurological condition was once confused with “Elephant Man Syndrome,”² and those that have it often feel socially isolated by the disfiguring tumors that can grow on any nerve ending.³ As executive director, Barbra has intimate contact with a large group of people who regularly struggle with this condition. She does not have the disease, and is in a unique position to recruit help from people who know nothing about it.

Barbra met with students who were part of the Design Coalition, a course at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. In this class, where graphic design students regularly take the lead to help underserved communities with their skills, she talked about this group of people who have no hope of a medical cure and often have a difficult time integrating with mainstream society. She wanted to raise awareness about the disease and to promote the organization. Her contagious smile and compassionate eyes drew the students to the cause. But how can graphic designers help people who have an incurable physical disorder? More broadly, what can graphic designers do to help any underserved community? The students felt overwhelmed by this daunting challenge and began to rethink their role as designers. As one of their advisors,⁴ I began to research strategies that would help them develop their designs into appropriate and effective solutions that could make an impact to the NF community.

I found some books about universal design principles,⁵ manifestos,⁶ and pledges to do good,⁷ but no detailed methodologies.⁸ The design strategies that I did find are intended for architects, product designers, and organizations that want to build appropriate, technological solutions to problems. While we all understand the inherent value of a structure that gives shelter or an object that gets used repeatedly, the role of graphic design is not as explicit. It is passive and ephemeral, and it is difficult to measure its ability to help cause lasting and meaningful social change. The students working with NF Mid-Atlantic worried that their efforts would not be relevant to the NF community, and feared that their designs would make no impact.

So I organized my readings, field research, and writing, and I identified eight strategies that are especially helpful to graphic designers as they work with communities. These can help graphic designers focus on the nuances of the process and might help to guide design to become more relevant to the specific

communities they it needs to reach. They are premised on my belief that if our intentions are sincerely focused on the process, the final design can positively impact the intended audience. Use them to frame the problem, guide the design process, or to double-check the design direction.

IMMERSE YOURSELF

Spend time with the people who you are trying to help. Work with them to understand their problems and the design challenges.

Some communities watch do-gooders dash in and out of their neighborhoods. They want their efforts to make an impact though they often skip the important step of including stakeholders in the design process. Spend time with the people that you are trying to help. It is not enough to have a few conversations with community leaders. Develop close relationships with a range of people who your designs are meant to help in order to understand their problems and needs. Sometimes this means fading into the background and observing. Other times you may need to work side-by-side with them before you understand their problems. The time you spend in the community will lead to new discoveries and will bring other opportunities that can inform your decision. Your design solution has a better chance of creating change if you prioritize the community's expert knowledge.

The students who worked with NF Mid-Atlantic knew that they would need to invest their time to build relationships with community members. They freed up their weekend schedules to visit people in their homes, on campus, and at NF events. These interviews formed the basis of the student's research. They wanted to know what it is like to live with NF and how people cope with the social isolation that it often causes. They amassed nearly fifteen hour-long interviews over a three-month period. They also visited clinics and attended a conference to learn more about the disease.

Immersive experiences like this will help you to understand and define your design challenges. You will also learn what other questions need to be asked.

BUILD TRUST

Create partnerships with the people you are trying to help. Prove to them that you are serious about using design to improve their lives.

An underserved or exploited group will immediately question the motives of energetic outsiders who are trying to help. This skepticism may prevent them from trusting you, which could undermine your design initiative. For this reason, focus on building a design partnership rather than imposing a design intervention.

The students working with NF Mid-Atlantic won the community's trust by making video recordings of each interview and posting the interviews on the web for anyone to see.⁹ Processing these hour-long interviews was laborious, but the student's efforts led to new, unexpected opportunities to interview other members of the community. These initial efforts also reinforced some of their assumptions about the generousness of the NF community and gave them the knowledge base to proceed with confidence.

Gain the community's trust to make headway into the community. Help them in their daily operations, making a meal for them or even fulfilling one of their basic design needs quickly. These gestures demonstrate that you are serious about working to solve their problems with them, not for them.

EMPATHIZE

Find ways to emotionally connect with your client and their problems.

The more that you know about a problem, the more you will care. Designers play the role of anthropologists when they work with communities in need. Your initial research might yield a factual understanding of the problem, but the time that you spend with people who live with the problem will help you to care about finding a solution. You will learn to understand their needs and you will become an invested partner as you grow to trust each other.

The students knew from their research that NF is a neurological disease that can cause tumors to grow on any nerve ending. They had seen some photos and they could see why it was often confused with "Elephant Man Syndrome." They were afraid that the interviews would be awkward and unproductive but found these people to be intelligent and endearing. Barbra said that people with NF rarely socialize but the students thought that they are affable and optimistic,

despite being wary about people's reactions to their appearance. The rapport that the students built with the community was an emotional catalyst that propelled their efforts throughout the project.

Approach each situation with an open mind and assume that your opinions will change as you work. Build friendships with community members and let their experiences guide your research. This will help you to become affected by their dilemma and it will make your designs reflect the personality and ethos of your partner.

BE PREPARED TO DENY THE CLIENT WHAT THEY WANT

Avoid giving your client what they think they need. Generate numerous ideas that can be thought through and prototyped before coming to a final, informed strategy.

Your client might think that the solution to their problems is a logo or website, but your job as a designer is to assess how valuable these will be to a group of people that have complex socio-economic and cultural problems. The designs that they initially want may not be what they need. Be open to new ideas, willing to be uncomfortable with the uncertainty of the problem, and enthusiastic as you explore, prototype and propose many possible designs, before coming to final design. This process dedicates much-needed time to the problem.

When Barbra introduced NF Mid-Atlantic to the students, she told them that anything would be an improvement, even if it were just a squiggle on a piece of paper. The students were excited by the open-endedness of the project and devised a range of initiatives, from an interactive online forum to beanbag toys that educate people about different kinds of tumors. The students felt passionate about what they were learning from the NF community and wanted to focus on helping them integrate and gain confidence in mainstream society while also raising awareness about the disease. It quickly became clear that the squiggle Barbra had in mind was a new logo and a redesigned website, but the students were not convinced that a logo or a new website would do much for people with NF. They continued to work on all of the initiatives that they had proposed.

The people you work with may not be familiar with the design process. As a designer with a fresh perspective, you bring new skills to the table that helps to address the root of their problem. For this reason, propose designs only after you understand the community's needs.

PROMISE ONLY WHAT YOU CAN DELIVER

Avoid trying to solve all of your client's needs. Your client might need a lot but it is up to you to figure out how much time and resources you can contribute. Be efficient by working with existing designs with which the community is familiar.

As a graphic designer, you are a problem solver. You are used to doing more with less. You stuff pages with more words than they should hold and tackle problems with grand solutions that deserve a design army. This tendency increases as you immerse yourself in a community and experience their needs up close. It may be difficult to hold back from doing everything possible to help them, especially when your efforts have the potential to benefit people you now know personally. Avoid trying to solve all of their needs. You may become emotionally vulnerable and it might be hard to deny any of their needs. Complex social problems often deserve realistic design solutions. Avoid trying to invent grand solutions. Be effective by working with existing vehicles with which the community is familiar.

Barbra wanted a web site and logo but the students wanted to address the dilemma directly. They saw so much need and wanted to do something that would help people live a better life. They tried to do it all. Two members of the group decided to work on a redesigned website that integrated a chat room so people could talk about their struggles and give advice about how to live with the disease. Another group decided to work on a new logo and a third group started to design a 20-page tabloid to tell the story of NF Mid-Atlantic members and educate a broader audience about the disease. They also continued to conduct interviews during this time. The student's enthusiasm was noble but their scope was too large. They had only two months to finish these projects but, most importantly, neglected to discuss their plans with Barbra. They rushed to finish their goals and incorrectly assumed that the NF Mid-Atlantic would be thrilled with their designs.

Hold back your promises and be guided by the research phase of your process. The community that you are working with might need a lot but you should decide how much time and resources you can contribute. Map out the problems and identify what already exists in the community that you can build upon. Knowing your constraints and what you have to work with will help you to determine what you can promise and how you can actually be helpful.

CONFRONT CONTROVERSY

Bring up aspects of your client's problem that nobody else will talk about.

The students wanted to use design to start a conversation within the NF community, but felt fearful that they would offend people in the process. This was largely because of the subject matter. NF is a physically disfiguring disease. Most of them were leery of crossing the line and talking about the most noticeable feature of the disease: the tumors. However, one student came up with a solution that bridged the gap between controversy and playfulness. Instead of showing photos of someone with tumors, she transformed old t-shirts, yarn and rice into irregularly shaped toys. She called them “bean bag tumors.” Some of these colorful, palm-sized toys had googly eyes and tags that described different kinds of tumors accompanied them. The bean bags toys tangibly acknowledge NF and start a conversation about tumors, which is the source of NF’s social stigma.

Bring up issues that nobody else will talk about. The community members might be ashamed by the nature of their problems and many of them may even be in denial. Use design to break through these social barriers so that other communities start to care about this problem. This does not mean that you should expose a sensitive issue without constraint. Let your solutions be playful and surprising while emphasizing outcomes that are needed in the community.

HIGHLIGHT COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

Locate your client's unique qualities and find ways to create an emotional tie between them and outside audiences by emphasizing these strengths.

Janet Miller was the first person that the students talked to during the initial research phase of their project. Miller has been living with the symptoms of NF since she was a child. Most people who have NF do not show symptoms of the disease until they are in their early 20’s. Miller was not so fortunate. She was diagnosed with the disease when she was treated for scoliosis as a child. She spent over a year in a body cast though tumors did not appear until later. The ripple of tumors on her skin has triggered her search for genuine friends, rather than people who spend time with her out of pity. She compared such people to Jerry Lewis, who is known for holding crippled children in front of the TV camera and asking for money. The students returned to their conversation with Miller many times throughout the semester and made it a goal to celebrate the NF

community by focusing on their overlooked strengths rather than their apparent weaknesses.

CAPTURE THE COMMUNITY'S VOICE

Relate the final design to your client's style rather than your own to ensure that it speaks to the people it needs to reach.

Graphic designers who want to become more marketable are always on the prowl for unique and challenging projects. This can be a problem for communities in need because the best solutions to their problems may not be ideal for a designer's portfolio. The visual aesthetic of an underserved community may be different from a personal design aesthetic. Designing for them requires solutions that are based on your research as a cultural outsider. Whatever assessments you make will either speak their language or it will be lost in translation.

The students were juniors and seniors and most of them were interested in adding their creative touch to the project. The time that they spent interviewing people who have NF was focused on understanding the disease but they forgot to meet with focus groups that could give them valuable feedback. Many of their final designs suffered because of this oversight and never made it past the prototype phase.

Craft the design to relate to the community that you are trying to reach. This process can be liberating. It takes off the pressure to create something that is widely understood and has timeless appeal in favor of something that speaks to the particular group of people for whom the design is meant to reach.

CONCLUSION

The students made important inroads into the community throughout the semester. They learned a lot about NF and saw what it is like to live with the disease but neglected to consult NF Mid-Atlantic throughout the design process. They should have presented their ideas, sketches and prototypes to focus groups for reactions and comments. NF Mid-Atlantic felt alienated from the student's work and, in the end, the interactive website never went live, NF Mid-Atlantic approved the logo and then rejected it, the tabloid never got printed,¹⁰ and only prototypes of the beanbag toys were made. What could have been a suite of compelling initiatives turned out to be a hard lesson to learn for a group of

talented design students. But they are not alone. Most of us can probably think of a graphic design project that we wish we could do over. What did we learn from these experiences? More importantly, what lessons can we teach our fellow designers?

Bibliography

¹ NF Mid-Atlantic, Inc. NF Mid-Atlantic, Inc. <http://www.nfmidatlantic.org> (accessed January 23-May 18, 2009).

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proteus_syndrome

³There are many signs and symptoms of Neurofibromatosis, including: benign tumors that develop on the skin, under the skin, and in connective nerve tissue, dizziness, enlargement and deformity of the bones, hearing loss, learning disabilities, tumors of the optic nerve, or optic gliomas (may cause blurry vision or vision loss). NFInc. *What*, NFInc. <http://www.nfinc.org/what> (accessed February 10- July 15, 2009)

⁴ The course instructor was Bernard Canniffe, then co-chair of MICA's Graphic Design department. I was his Teaching Assistant and was asked to teach this group of students during this project, which was one of five projects that different groups of students were working on.

⁵ Universal Design Principles, by William Lidwell, Kritina Holden and Jill Butler
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1592530079?ie=UTF8&tag=drob-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1592530079>

⁶ Social Design Notes, <http://backspace.com/notes/2009/07/design-manifestos.php>

⁷ The books "Design Revolution," by Emily Pilloton, and "Do Good Design," by David Berman, both ask readers to take a social design pledge. Pilloton calls it a "Designer's Handshake."

⁸ IDEO released their "Human-Centered Design Toolkit," a few months after this class ended. This field research guide that organizations can use to solve design problems in any culture. Along with their "Design for Social Impact" guide and workbook, IDEO has contributed some of the most practical resources help solve design problems.

⁹ Over 25 videos are currently online and the number continues to grow as more people want to tell their story. Andrew Shea. Neurofibromatosis, Vimeo. <http://vimeo.com/channels/neurofibromatosis> (accessed February 10-July 29, 2009).

¹⁰ Read the tabloid online. Andrew Shea. Neurofibromatosis Tabloid, ISSUU.
http://issuu.com/andrewshea/docs/neurofibromatosis_tabloid (accessed May 1-July 14, 2009).