

Beware Of Tools Vs. Talent

As a graphic designer/creative director who has been “in the biz” since 1983 and on my own since 1985, I’ve seen the entire panorama of commercial art change dramatically...particularly when it comes to the “tools of the trade.”

TOOLS OF ANCIENT TIMES:

When I went to college, professors taught us how to perform archaic tasks like “spec type” and “cut rubylith overlays” for printed separations. The most important technical skill we were taught was how to perfect our skills with exacto knives, t-squares, and triangles. The main object in our workstations was our drafting table, and boy, it’d better be totally square and solid!

If we wanted to trace something, we used these weird machines that projected the images, and we’d belly up to them with our tracing pads and pencils and go to town tracing. Then, in order to get the images onto our illustration boards, we’d spend time covering the back of the tracing paper with soft leaded pencil graphite so it would transfer to the board. Pretty sloppy mess.

Our best friends in the production department were the hot waxer and the photostat machine, which was used to duplicate black and white art and half-tone photos.

When we wanted to use a special type face for a headline, we’d select from our collection of Press Type transfer letters, and use our t-square and triangle to position them.

For straight line rules and rounded corners, we also had transfers, and it was a very arduous task.

When we approached clients with design ideas, they were done with Design markers, and were painstakingly time consuming. If you wanted to see a comp in a different color, you had to recreate from scratch...no “fill” buttons to press to change it.

Using textures wasn’t easy either...again, transfer papers with textures that had to be cut with our old faithful exacto knives and placed on the appropriate color overlay.

If you accidentally cut into a line of type or a word or a letter, you either had to Photostat another letter and paste it in place, or go the expensive route and call the typesetter to have another galley couriered to your studio as soon as possible (because the deadlines were always immediate)!

I could go on and on about those old days...and I'm glad I experienced them, because they gave me a much greater appreciation of the modern day tools: computer software.

TODAY'S TOOLS:

Starting around 1985, and becoming much more prevalent around 1990, the drafting table was slowly but surely replaced by the computer as the defining object of one's workstation.

On the Mac side, we began with the tiny little black & white 1-piece machines. How we could ever see anything on those screens still remains a mystery to me.

On the PC side, we had larger color screens, but a much more archaic Windows operating system that was trying to imitate the Mac at the time, and not succeeding so well.

The main software was Pagemaker, as I recall. Quark may have been around too, but I didn't have it at the time.

As computers have evolved, and the PC's and Macs have become pretty comparable, the software has really surged forward for both platforms.

In the graphic design industry (excluding film and 3D animation and modeling), the main tools of the trade are Adobe Photoshop for photo-related manipulation, Adobe InDesign, Quark (although in some circles it seems to be getting phased out by InDesign) for publication design and layout, and Adobe Illustrator for brochures, ads, etc. In the website design arena, the heavy hitters (for me, at least) are Macromedia (now Adobe) Dreamweaver, Fireworks, and Flash. (I've never been a huge fan of Adobe ImageReady or GoLive, and Adobe LiveMotion was pretty much a joke compared to Flash).

I'm also a bit unique in that I really love Corel Draw. It began as the only really good illustration software for the PC, and it STILL boasts features that neither Illustrator nor Macromedia Freehand have been able to touch. But that's neither here nor there....

SO, WHAT ABOUT TALENT?

Yes, whatABOUT talent?

I've gone through many of the tools of old times, and many of the modern day software tools. But that'sALL these items are...TOOLS.

Back when graphic artists did everything by hand the old fashioned way, the

people who were the BEST at using the TOOLS were NOT graphic designers...they were called PRODUCTION ARTISTS. These production artists fell into one of two categories: they were either Graphic Design college majors getting their “foot in the door” and doing production until they could garner a design job (the group I fell into), or they were simply non-creative folks happy to be production artists and go no further.

True, many graphic designers, including myself, had no choice but to muddle through the production process. I worked for small agencies, and wore all the design hats, and then went out on my own and wore ALL the hats. So, doing production was a necessity for me. BUT IT WAS NOT MY STRENGTH... DESIGN WAS ALWAYS MY STRENGTH.

In today's world, anyone who learns the software tools tends to call themselves “designer,” and that sets up a very scary precedent.

I've seen an inordinate amount of people selling themselves as graphic designers who have absolutely NO design talent or skills whatsoever. The only thing they have is a computer and a copy of Quark (or the like). They produce shoddy work, and consequently, their clients suffer as a result with an unprofessional and sloppy image. And, we all know that image IS everything.

The moral of the story:
BUYER BEWARE...

Beware the “expert” designer who, in fact, only knows the nuts and bolts of their software. Like the guy (or gal) or claims to be a master carpenter because he/she can work a power saw, they may know the TOOLS, but they don't necessarily have the TALENT.

Perhaps that's the one thing I miss about the days gone by...Joe Blow off the street couldn't just come in to your business and announce that he was a professional graphic artist just because he had a t-square, triangle, and a decent drafting table. The proof was in the output...and that's where it should remain.

How Can You Tell If Someone Just Has The Tools Or If They Have Talent?

Both the talented graphic designer and the “production” person will have the same software, so the best way to tell whether or not they are truly qualified designers is to ask some questions and look at their portfolio.

Here are some guidelines:

Education: While you don't NEED to be a college graduate to be a qualified designer, it sure does help. The graphic “wannabes” won't have much schooling, if any.

Experience: Sure, someone out of college won't have much (or any), and you really should wait to use them till they are proven performers. But at LEAST they will have a portfolio of designs that you can view and see if you like their work. The lackluster desktop publishers may have work experience, but they may or may not have a portfolio to show for it. If they have a portfolio, chances are, it will be pretty bland, with mostly straight typesetting or usage of templates that come with many software programs. Or worse, it will be so busy and covered with starbursts, you'll think you've just entered "bargain basement hell." If they don't have a portfolio, ask to see samples of what they've done in the past. If they are hesitant to show you their work, run like H___! In summation, whether the person you are speaking to about graphic design is a true designer or a desktop publisher, look for someone with at LEAST a few years of solid work experience.

Fee: You don't have to pay TOP dollar for a decent graphic designer. BUT on the other hand, don't be fooled by a high hourly rate...after many years in the field, a higher rate translates to faster performance, and you may be surprised to find that those who command the highest salaries do not necessarily give you the highest bills! Look out for the "low-ballers" who just want the work. Chances are, you're not going to get a product that projects your company to your expectations.

Software: Ask how proficient they are with various kinds of software. The more software they can use, the better, because each program has its own limitations, and a well-rounded designer will often use several of the programs together to achieve a superior design. Avoid anybody who uses software like Microsoft Publisher for design work! Not only is this amateur software in a big way, but most professional printing houses won't be able to read the files.

Portfolio: I mentioned this in our section "experience," but this is SO important, I'm going to spend a bit more time on it. Viewing the individual's portfolio is the most important part of the decision making process when hiring a graphic designer. Their work should exude that certain "something" that sets them apart from the rest. If a designer doesn't have a good, innate "eye for design," they won't ever have one, and it will show in their work. Look at their portfolio carefully...see if their work projects the image you are seeking for your company. Is it clean? Does it evoke professionalism? Is it creative? Try to look past the genre of companies they have represented (your type of business may or may not be present), and ask them what they might do for YOUR type of vocation.

Here are a couple other things to look for, which don't really relate to whether or not someone has the talent, but definitely are worth a mention:

Marketing Savvy: Look for a designer that asks questions about your business, and works toward providing a style for **you** that targets **your** ideal mar-

ket! Look out for red flags in their style...i.e. many designers only work in one or two styles. You want someone who can adapt and change their style as warranted for your target market, not force YOU to adapt to THEIR style.

Dependability: If the person you choose doesn't produce your work in a timely fashion, it won't make any difference whether they are talented or not!
Check references and past performance! There are a lot of flakey people out there!!

I hope this helps in your quest for a talented and effective graphic designer who can take your business to the next level of success and beyond!