

Moving graphic design forward with service design methods: Diversifying the role of graphic design among small local industry projects

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Abstract

The field of graphic design has continually evolved to encompass a wide scope of skills. From designing graphics to designing business strategies, graphic designers can be incorporated into all stages of industry projects. For some graphic designers around the world, broad uses of design practices are recognised as significant and are being applied to a breadth of large-scale business and community sector frameworks. However, these skills are frequently under-utilised and their value overlooked among small business projects. Perth-based design jobs, for example, are commonly outcome-driven and graphic designers are typically hired by clients at the end stage of business projects to only make project artefacts such as websites, business cards or brochures. Gjoko Muratovski, Director of The Myron E. Ullman, Jr. School of Design at DAAP, University of Cincinnati, puts forth that big businesses has benefitted greatly from integrating design's intrinsic methods into all aspects of product and service development. In his paper titled *Paradigm Shift: Report on the New Role of Design in Business and Society* he states that "With the growing reputation of design as a catalyst for business innovation, designers are being invited to take on executive roles. Jonathan Ive (Apple, Inc.), Mark Parker (Nike, Inc.), David Butler (The Coca-Cola Company), and Todd Simmons (IBM Corporation) are perhaps the most notable examples of this emerging trend" (2015, p. 121). Literary statements such as this one, depict the rise of design using corporate giants as example. A discussion about the expansion of design amongst smaller business sectors, however, appears to be lacking. This report looks to explore this as the broad idea of my PhD. My paper views that there is gap in Perth local graphic design profession – graphic designers are not engaging with broader and more holistic design strategies such as those employed in service design. As part of my PhD project, this paper will discuss the literature review, research methods and design philosophy relevant to design strategies and processes used in graphic designers in Perth.

Keywords

Graphic Design, Service Design, Small Business, Holistic, Community-focused, Innovation

Introduction

Design theorists, such as Tim Brown and Barry Katz (2011) claim in their article, “Change by Design”, that “the inherent scalability of design thinking has led us to invent new and radical forms of collaboration that blur the boundaries between creators and consumers” (p. 382). This statement alone depicts the extreme upheaval of existing graphic design practices already occurring among globally established design firms. There is little evidence to suggest, however, that the graphic design industry in Perth, Western Australia, is engaging in a similarly dramatic shift in design practice. Therefore, the need for inquiry into the potential effects of this upon design practices within the local design community is timely. Service design methods, which are commonly applied to expansive community-focused service systems via a holistic interdisciplinary approach, are one way to diversify graphic design skills beyond the production of ephemeral objects. My research looks to explore how service design methods might expand roles for graphic designers and their significance within smaller industry frameworks. The literature review for this paper will be incorporated into the body of this document.

My PhD study looks to incorporate case studies, practice-based and practice-led research methods to investigate two small graphic design firms who offer differing design services in Perth, Western Australia. The aim of this research is to investigate the responses of graphic designers and also local industry following the introduction of service design approaches to small commercial graphic design projects in Perth, Western Australia. Service design, unlike traditional graphic design practices which are still typical in Perth, is not focused on artefacts. Stickdorn & Schneider (2011) assert that, “The approach of service design refers to the process of design rather than its outcome” (p. 14). They state that design needs to consider the larger picture when considering design issues (which are predominantly presented as client requests for artefacts) and propose that “the outcome of service design process can have various forms: rather abstract organisational structures, operation processes, service experiences and even concrete physical objects” (p. 14).

The Complexities of the Significance of Design

Graphic designers have contributed to some of the most significant design outcomes in history, books being just one example. Graphic design is in almost every moment of every day for people living in modern societies around the world. It is in the traffic signage systems which allow for safe travel on busy roads or in the instructions on drug packaging helping patients safely take medicines, and in more recent times, constantly to hand as we operate applications on our mobile phones. Williams (2010) notes that, “Never before has graphic design been so prominent in our everyday activities. People rely on good graphics regularly to select navigation on web sites, create support for their presentations, validate their investments via charts, etc. The significance of what we do is at the very center of many people’s daily lives” (p. 179). The skills used to create these graphic design outcomes are however often overlooked, and acknowledgement of the value and authenticity of graphic design concepts has been lost. The specialised skills used to make original graphic designs can extend to all aspects of community-based problems. This approach can bring unique design results to broad societal issues but an extension of graphic design services in this way is often under-utilised. The reasons for graphic design’s loss of recognition for wider uses of its unique skill-set are

complex. Graphic designers today therefore are faced with the following complexities:

- Discrete problems to complex social problems: Graphic designers used to tackle discrete branding problems such as designing corporate identities. However, the current situation requires designers to engage in all stages of the development of multifaceted design strategies to innovate organisational operations for corporate or social institutions.
- Graphic designers are no longer paid for technical skills alone: Complex social problems require designers to think beyond operating design softwares that are currently more intuitive for non-designers to operate. Designers' roles are now to explore complex problems using broader design skills such as design thinking to reach holistic, community-focused outcomes.

The Evolving Field of Graphic Design: Expanding Graphic Design Beyond Ephemera

The term 'graphic design' was first used in 1922 by American type designer, William Addison Dwiggins (Meggs, 1998). Since then this design field has continuously adapted the way in which it has worked. The gradual refinement of graphic design practices and incorporation of new skills was necessary to successfully transition through major changes within this discipline over time. During the 1980's for example, advances in technology among media communications thrust game-changing production tools upon graphic designers in the form of computers and software platforms. "Technology transformed the era of mass communications aimed toward mass audiences into a period of decentralised media offering hundreds of options" (Meggs, 1998, p. 455). This radical new way of working resulted in graphic design absorbing additional media practices into its field, such as typesetting, photographic manipulation and even video editing. The results of which, are an expansion of communication skills and creative methods, which can be applied to myriad design projects across a wide range of industries.

The discipline of graphic design however, particularly in recent times, has struggled to vocalize how integral its creative methodology is and how wide ranging its use can be. From my viewpoint, one of the key issues underpinning why graphic designers are not employed to serve in broader creative roles is that their design practices, particularly in Perth, seem to be limited to ephemera. Graphic design has assisted in forming iconic global identities for fast food giant, McDonalds, or computer heavyweight, Apple Inc. These companies fiercely protect their graphic emblems through trademarks, patents and swift legal action. Yet significant value in the graphic design methods, which brought universal recognition to these large company identities, is often overlooked. The pinnacle of graphic design appears to be about establishing and protecting corporate identity in order to gain brand recognition and subsequently push product units. In Perth, from my experience, this is often what happens in most graphic design contexts. However, in other parts of the world, it is becoming apparent that graphic design has a larger role to play.

Urban designers, in Perth for example, are connected with creating interactive human spaces within our cities and towns promoting designers, instead, seem to be linked only with artefacts

for commercial uses. Examples include graphics for promotional needs such as flyers, websites, brochures and logos or graphics for sellable items such as “cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste, aftershave lotion, before shave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorant fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons” (Garland, 1964, p. 159). Some graphic designers within the commercial sector of Perth, however, are aligned with the perspective that graphic designers are too focused only on the design of ephemera. They consider that the local industry is behind in current international trends with regards to its artefact driven view of graphic design. Perth is a small to medium sized, affluent western city, but geographically isolated. It can be a late adopter of business and design methods. Perth design authors, Kueh, Medley & Price (2013), declare that “while this focus is already a norm in many countries, the current design direction in Western Australia is still very much focusing on aesthetic, retail and object outcomes” (p. 2).

Tim Brown (2009) of IDEO presented a TED Talk at Oxford University in England in 2009 to discuss the evolution of design and stated, “this small view of design is a relatively recent phenomena and in fact only really emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as design became a tool of consumerism”. He envisages “that if we take a different view of design and focus less on the object and more on design thinking as an approach that we actually might see the result in a bigger impact”. Brown (2009) expanded on this idea during his presentation to declare that design used to be big, it then became small and it is now becoming big again thanks to an unfolding of design fields such as design thinking and service design. He has since put forth that businesses will benefit greatly from integrating graphic design’s intrinsic methods into all aspects of product and service development instead of enlisting “designers to make an already developed idea more attractive” (Brown & Katz, 2011, p. 381).

An Evaluation of Design in Varying Contexts

Design within a global context is already being used extensively for broad applications. Design methods typical of design fields such as Graphic Design, Product Design, Service Design, Social Design, UX Design and even emerging design fields, such as Circular Design are being used by big business to assist in generating large-scale project innovations. Over the past twenty years, corporate giants such as Coca-Cola, Apple, Nike and IBM, to name just a few, have rapidly expanded their uses for design beyond the development of products and communications. Archetypical international companies such as these have integrated design into all aspects of their business and other large corporations are following suit:

More and more designers are now getting involved with business development and growth. This entrepreneurial spirit marks a new era for both design and business. Going beyond design of products, spaces and communications, designers have ventured into a new field - design of businesses. With the growing reputation of design as a catalyst for business innovation, designers are being invited to take on executive roles. (Muratovski, 2015, p. 121)

Design is proving to be a powerful force among big business and the positive results are being assessed; “The Design Value Index (DVI), a market capitalization-weighted index comprised of design-driven companies” (Rae, 2015), estimates that “the value of design beat the S&P, an American stock market index, by 228% over the past 10 years” (Rae, 2014):

The 2014 Design Value Index shows us for a second year that corporations that put an emphasis on design as a strategic asset perform significantly better than those that do not. As corporate design capabilities mature, executives are able to direct this power towards their companies’ most challenging problems. This, in turn, allows design-driven companies to grow faster, and often with higher margins, due to the exceptional customer experiences they are uniquely positioned to create. (2015, Rae)

Coca-Cola, Apple, Nike and IBM are all listed on the Design Value Index. These companies have taken on design methods such as design thinking, design strategy, customer journey mapping, prototyping, co-design and the visualisation of data to better understand their customers and streamline their internal and also external business operations. These methods are all common to service designers who incorporate them to develop projects from a holistic, grass roots approach to design issues. Internationally, graphic designers are adopting these practices to expand their roles and merge with big business. Graphic designers, for example, are not just creating ‘good looking’ products at the end of the project process anymore. They are instead demonstrating an extension of their skills throughout the duration of projects; visualisation of project data is just one example of this. Graphic designers can use visual methods such as simple drawings to map out project data and clarify project problems long before end products have been decided upon. The global conversation about design and its growth in value has been ongoing for at least thirty years with companies like Apple Inc. seeing the merits of utilising design to expand its business operations during the 1980’s. A further escalation, however, in the prominence of design and its powerful uses has occurred over the past decade and the successes of this design evolution are usually demonstrated via large corporate examples.

Graphic designers work among all sectors of society. This is because graphic design is needed in varying capacities. We see the common, well-known products of graphic design everyday in iconic globally recognised graphic symbols like the McDonalds brand but we also see it as standardised basic communications in the menu of our local family restaurant. Documentation of design’s expansion is often delivered in terms of climbing up the ranks of big business but other fields are sharing how they are expanding roles for designers within large but also small project frameworks. Jeneanne Rae (2014), CEO of Motiv Strategies, an innovation strategy firm and author for the Design Management Institute, puts forth that for UX Design, the demand and expanse of design skills is not limited to large scale operations:

Companies across the business landscape, from start-ups to consulting firms to large corporations, all find themselves with digital opportunities for design - even those that historically have not competed in the digital realm. (Rae, 2015)

This statement depicts that designers in the User Experience industry have project opportunities for all sized firms due to the rapid expansion of digital uses. This industry focuses heavily on ‘user experiences’, the people who use their products, and they incorporate designers across all stages of project development to assist with product innovations so ensure they are customer focused. My research looks to explore the potential gap in the global dialogue about the shift in graphic design practice. I am looking specifically at graphic designers in smaller practices to explore the impacts of adopting new methods, such as those of service design, to expand their roles among small business projects.

Conclusion

The outcomes of my study are yet to be evaluated. However, further discussion about broader applications for smaller design scopes seems long overdue. There is opportunity to investigate the impacts of graphic design practice from many perspectives and not just through a large corporate lens. Research into varied design capacities could be considered a grass roots analysis of design process, instead of the seemingly top down approach to design review that appears to be most common amongst current design literature. Further studies into diverse design applications across broader industry types could reveal possible ways to generate a more extensive shift towards holistic driven practice for all areas of design. For future research in my PhD, I am incorporating the study of two studios to establish an overview of current graphic design methods being used among local industry projects and whether creative practices alter substantially after the introduction of service design processes. If local design practices do change, I will investigate whether this broadens graphic design roles among small commercial projects, and then explore the significance of these expanded positions. The findings from this study will be made available to the graphic design and small business communities of Perth and beyond.

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Erica Ormsby

Erica Ormsby is a course coordinator and lecturer for graphic design at Murdoch University and a lecturer at Edith Cowan University for over 12 years. Erica has worked as a freelance Graphic Designer in Perth, Western Australia for over 15 years and worked among the print industry for over 20 years. Current projects include a doctorate in Philosophy. This study is an examination of graphic design practices in Perth, WA to determine the significance and value of design in broader contexts. The research looks to introduce holistic community focussed methods such as those of service design to graphic designers in Perth in an effort to expand their roles and relevance among small business projects. Others areas of research include critical design practice and theory, graphic design theory, service design and design thinking. Other practical roles have included art director, exhibition curator, project manager and small business owner. Erica holds a BA in Graphic Design and Multimedia from Curtin University of Technology and Honours First Class from Edith Cowan University.