

THE
ART
SEDUCT





DEVILISH RUSES.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRICKS.

RED HERRINGS AND POKER FACES.

DESIGNERS REVEAL HOW THEY

GET CLIENTS TO SAY "YES."

BY [PETER MENDELSUND](#) AND [PETER TERZIAN](#)

ILLUSTRATIONS BY [JASON FULFORD](#) AND [TAMARA SHOPSIN](#)

CALL IT THE DESIGN WORLD'S

DIRTY LITTLE SECRET:

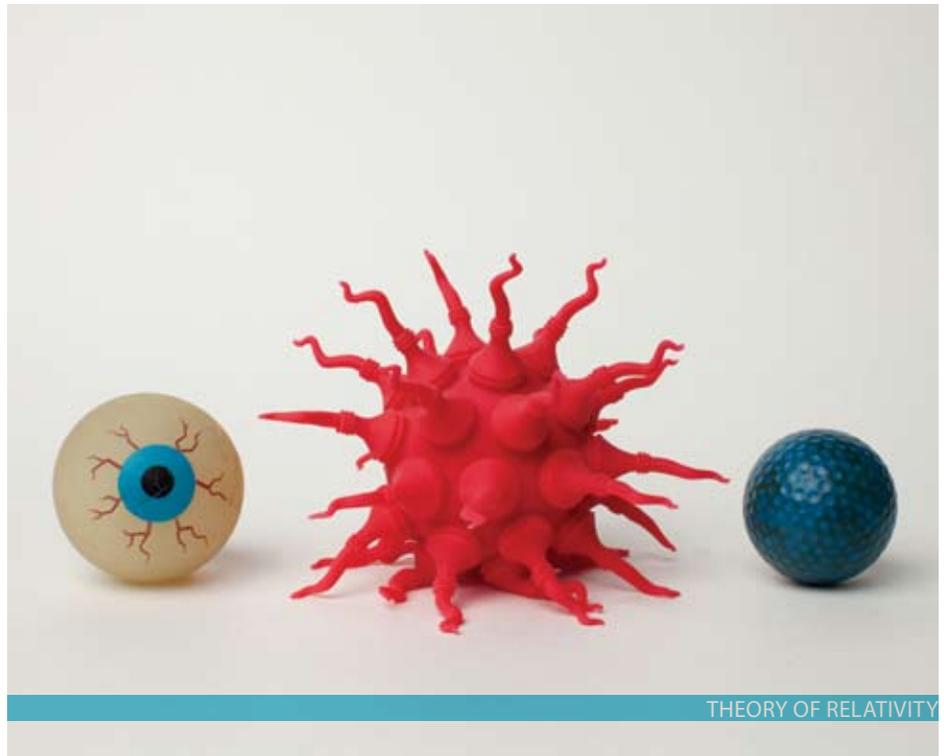
GETTING A CLIENT'S APPROVAL

SOMETIMES MEANS RELYING

ON MORE THAN BRILLIANTLY

CONCEIVED AND FLAWLESSLY

EXECUTED COMPS.



THEORY OF RELATIVITY

IN DESPERATE TIMES (and aren't they all, these days?), when faced with the objections of intractable, unimaginative, chronically contrarian, color-blind, or just plain grumpy clients, designers may resort to more nuanced methodologies.

Yes, a good design should speak for itself—but what if the client isn't listening? Well, that's when designers employ methods that are not taught in design school. Psychological methods. Machiavellian methods. Used-car-dealer methods. Manipulation. Intimidation. Seduction.

We canvassed a cross-section of the design community, asking designers to share their favorite and most effective approval-garnering techniques. We thought they might be sheepish about lifting the curtain on such a sensitive (and occasionally unsavory) aspect of

the designer-client relationship. On the contrary, they were eager to recount stories of hard sells and cunning ploys. Some of these were too outlandish or risqué to share (see "Seduction," left), but suffice it to say that each method our sources described generated the necessary approval.

Learning the art of persuasion, it turns out, is an essential part of the designer's job description. "If I considered a particular cover design worth the effort," former Penguin U.K. art director David Pelham tells us, "I would take the 'all's fair in love and war' approach to getting it past the editorial board. As the game progressed, I would frequently have to employ fresh gambits, sometimes even having to descend into a web of deceit, distraction, lies, and tall stories in order to get my way. A good art director has no shame."

THEORY OF RELATIVITY

Working at Penguin U.K. in the 1960s and '70s, David Pelham pushed his trippy and sometimes risqué ideas through by presenting them in the context of even more extreme comps. "You show something totally out of order and maintain that you are mad about it. 'Over our dead body,' they cry. So you drag out your second choice, which is still pretty tacky, and they tug their bottom lips. 'Then there's this, my third choice,' I say, producing my first choice. They are so relieved to see an image which is diagrammatic and not actually pornographic that they fall upon it, nodding and smiling at each other and saying, 'Oh yes, yes, that's far more like it.'" But one has to be careful with this stratagem. As Tim Goodman, a designer at Apple, reminds us, "Sometimes, just sometimes, they actually go for the crazy stuff."

OPERATION OVERWHELM

Chris Dixon, the creative director of New York magazine, often provides his client with a surfeit of options. "I present a gallery of amazing variety. While they bask in this sea of visuals, I confidently indicate which I feel is best and get a quick approval." Rob Giampietro, a principal at Project Projects, has gone so far as to fill a conference room with comps of all shapes and sizes. "It's a way of getting home-field advantage when you're playing an away game—you've got them surrounded. Invariably, the overwhelmed clients ask for my opinion of the room's contents, at which point I'm more than happy to direct their attention to the appropriate solution."

THE PEDANT

"I tend to discuss the typography in a ridiculous amount of detail," says

THE WAKE-UP CALL



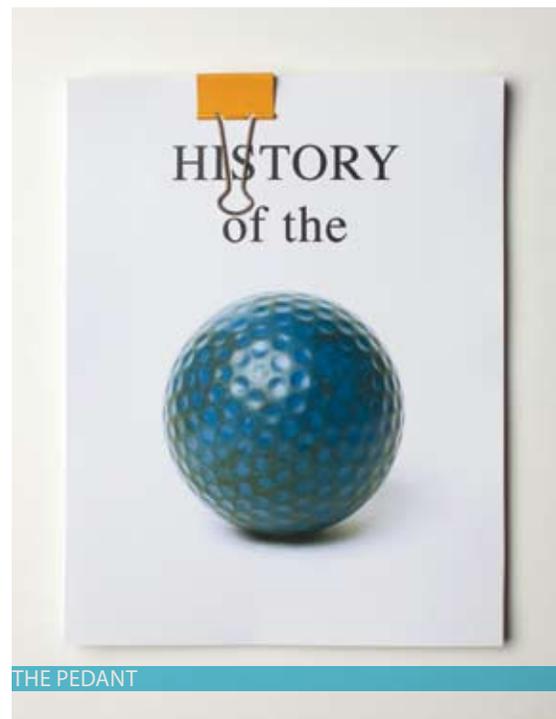
freelance book designer David Pearson, "underlining its relevance based on its historical and geographical origin. In hyper-justifying its use I make it very difficult for the cover to be rejected or even questioned. What are they going to say—I'd like the type to be bolder?' To which I would reply, 'But it was sourced from the walls of an ancient Hindu temple. How dare you.'"

THE WAKE-UP CALL

Vintage Books art director John Gall admits to applying this technique: "I go into a meeting and before I show anything, I announce, 'What you are about to see is not at all what we've been talking about. In fact, it's probably the polar opposite of what you're expecting and you're probably not going to like it.' This automatically focuses everyone's attention, issues a challenge, and forces everyone to drop, at least temporarily, whatever frames of reference they had been using for the project."

THE REVERSE PSYCHOLOGIST

Paul Kepple, art director of Headcase Design, cites an instance of this timeless



THE PEDANT

THE DOUBLE-WIDE



original size. “Not enough to make it too obvious,” he says, “but enough so that author names and quotes were nice and easy to read.” (The finished, approved piece would be printed actual size.)

THE PREEMPTIVE STRIKE

“I’ll comp up multiple bad versions of the project design that represent what the other guys would do,” says Barbara de Wilde, a book jacket designer for Knopf and former Martha Stewart Living art director. “I show these first, and remark disparagingly on them. ‘Isn’t this misguided?’ I say. ‘I know you, and this isn’t you.’ Then I show them what is them. And they feel affirmed.”

THE DECOY

Chip Kidd admits to sometimes leaving the phrase “a novel” off the front of a fiction book jacket sketch in hopes that the editor will focus on the missing detail but nevertheless approve the cover. “He or she will say, ‘Hmmm. Should it have “a novel” on it?’ To which I will reply, ‘Oh, yes, it probably should.’ At which point, hopefully, his or her phone will ring and it will be an agent making some sort of hideous demand, and I will then slowly back out of his or her office and dart down the hallway.”

THE BIG PICTURE

“When I’m presenting a client with a new branding language” says John Fulbrook, creative director of Collins, “and several people sitting around a conference table with wilting Caesar salads want to critique my work, I stand no chance of survival unless I eliminate the ability for anyone to judge any single aspect of the design.” This is accomplished, he says, by pointing out to the clients that whatever objections they may have—say, disliking a color, or

method of persuasion with a difficult client. “No matter what option I pushed for or what suggestions I made, they would always go for the exact opposite on every last detail. I thought I’d take a risk: I pretended that my favorite option was the one I liked least and presented my least favorite as the best choice. They went with the one I recommended they not go with—my secret favorite.”

THE NITPICK

“Some non-visual clients only feel valuable when they’re able to point out and correct textual mistakes,” says Rob Giampietro. “For these clients, I have, on occasion, left typos in my comps for them to find so they can feel they’re contributing in a positive way. Typically, after having sent me a list of text corrections, the design proceeds to the next round unscathed.” This was one of the most commonly practiced techniques among the designers we canvassed.

THE DOUBLE-WIDE

Exploiting the age-old desire of clients to see their copy writ large, Jamie Keenan went through a phase of printing out comps at 115 percent of their



THE SILENT TREATMENT

THE AMNESIAC

wanting different typography—are, in fact, quibbles over insignificant details, and that they have to “keep the larger picture in mind.” At this point Fulbrook will hastily conclude the presentation with the vague but persuasive question, “Do you feel we have the tools needed to create your identity?” Because the question is so general, he says, and the word “tools” is so nebulous, “the client has no place to go but to say, ‘yes.’” Later, when the precise details of the design are being discussed, he reminds the clients that “the system has already been approved.” Then, Fulbrook concludes, “I am victorious.”

THE AMNESIAC

When freelance designer Jamie Keenan was working at Random House U.K., he was frequently asked to make changes to his comps. “At the cover meeting the next week, I’d show the exact same thing, usually with a sort of begrudging demeanor—‘Here’s what you asked for’—and it would sail through.” Designer Megan Wilson of Vintage Books is another proponent of this gambit: “Sometimes things develop an urgency during a cover meeting that won’t seem very important to the editors several weeks later,” she explains. “Context is everything.”

THE SILENT TREATMENT

Sometimes the best tactic is to say nothing at all. “An art director I work with simply holds up his comps without comment,” says Megan Wilson. “The editors start to weigh in with criticisms, to which he remains mute, holding the comp in the same position with the same expression on his face. The longer he stays silent and immobile, the more the editors start coming back around towards acceptance and approval, some-

times even proffering counter-arguments to their own initial arguments.”

THE RED HERRING

“If I’m concerned that any of the ideas I’m submitting are a little obtuse,” says Matt Dorfman, “I’ll sometimes include a very brief explanation. Counter-intuitively, I won’t provide an explanation for the idea I think is best. The art director would like a rationale for the piece I didn’t explain. Then we’ve got a serious conversation going as to that piece’s fine, fine merits.”

BIRTH ORDER

Where a comp is placed in the order of presentation sometimes makes all the difference. “My favorite ones are typically presented in the middle,” says Matt Dorfman. “They run the risk of being overlooked at first, but if the weaker ideas are frontloaded and backloaded, the middle sticks out.” Oliver Munday shows his best comps last. “It becomes about pacing. If you can show a bunch of ideas with the same lack of excitement, and then—bam!—hit them with a great one at the end, the daring idea becomes ‘the savior,’ and they love it.”

THE CHOSEN ONE

“If I’m feeling uncommonly confident and believe I’ve landed on a supreme concept and won’t come up with anything else that hits remotely close to the mark, I will breathe deeply and submit exactly one idea,” says Matt Dorfman, who co-manages Universal/Motown’s art department. Freelance designer/illustrator Oliver Munday has also been known to take the single-minded approach. “There’s something about showing one idea on its own that makes it become ‘special,’” he says, “as if rays of light are shining from behind it.”



THE CHOSEN ONE