Design for content

Roger Black

ROGER BLACK STUDIO, INC.

DESIGN FOR CONTENT

E VERY magazine, newspaper or web site shares the problem of getting through to readers and users—past all the clutter and noise of their daily lives. Over the past 35 years, working with magazines like *Rolling Stone*, for newspapers like *The New York Time*s and web sites like msnbc.com, I've been developing answers. But, as the media changes, old answers don't always work. Simply trying harder doesn't guarantee success. Culture changes, society is more diverse, the Internet has affected communications everywhere.

Media design projects must start at the beginning—with the basic idea behind the publication or web. Why do people come to it? What do they want out of it? What unique content—text, pictures, community interaction—can make the time they spend spent worth their while, and get them to come back?

How does the business proposition connect with this content and this relationship with the audience?

Only when you answer these questions can you start thinking about such things as typefaces and photo styles, and whether to do a radical redesign or start in motion a more gradual evolution.

Media design is not just window-dressing. A redesign is not a "face lift." Design is the structural link between the customers and the product. Magazines, must be easy to read. Web sites, easy to use. Content must be brought to the surface.

And when a design is completed, it should seem natural and obvious. It should look like it is always been this way. And it should last.

Working with three chief editors over six years, I've been helping the Los Angeles Times develop its design style and typography. In the last two Society for News Design competitions, they've won more awards than any other newspaper.

Roger Black Studio is a near-virtual media design firm. For each assignment I assemble a team of designers, typographers, programmers editors and other specialists. I personally direct every project. With overhead budgeted exactly for the job, fees are remarkably competitive.

35 YEARS LATER

SINCE 1970, I've been involved in the design of the content-based media (as distinguished from entertainment or advertising). I've lead redesigns at *Rolling Stone, Newsweek, Esquire* and even *Reader's Digest.* Some still bear evidence of that effort. Others have moved on. As Lloyd Ziff once put it,"a design is like the sifting sands of the Sahara."

For the first 15 years I was a staffer, and had the great fortune to work for the best and smartest people in the business—Jann Wenner, Lou Silverstein, Abe Rosenthal and Rick Smith.

Since going out on my own in 1989, I've been hired by a number of stimultating clients—Terry McDonell, John Carroll, and Matt Winkler, among them. I was able to work on early important web sites, like *msnbc.com, Discovery.com*, and *@Home*. I've designed newspapers in Houston, Zurich and Singapore, and was present at the launch at *El Sol, Reforma* and *Rumbo*.
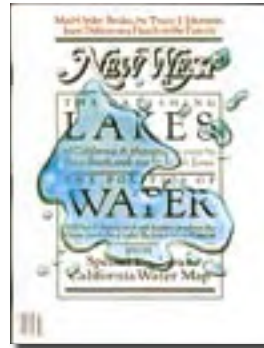
This experience has provided some exhilerating cross-pollination for me. I've learned something about what works, and which direction things are going. Right at the moment, it seems to be attracting a number of very interesting assignments, and my work has never been challenging or more fun.

I went to work for the New York Times Magzine in 1982, later moving to newsroom.

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In 1970, I helped start Amerika, a college newspaper supplement.

At the end of the '70s I was designing both New York and New West.

Smart, launched in 1989, got readers, but not enough investors.

The Houston Chronicle redesign came in 2004, followed by chron.com

In 1976 I became art director of Rolling Stone and for the 10th anniversary, introduced a new logo.

Newsweek hired me in 1985 to undertaking a major redesign.

Esquire, which I redesigned twice in '90s, may have overshot its market

The Baltimore Sun,in the mid-90s, got on the SND best designed list.

HOW IT WORKS

A fellow on the airplane once said to me, "If you have a good idea, and put it through a tested process, you can produce a predictably successful result." Of course this assumes that we start with a good idea, and we may not know that in advance. But, over the years, I've tested a process for media design development, and have had considerable success with it—and problems if I diverge.

The process has five stages:

- **Brief:** Goals of the project, business proposition, audience, competitors, schedule and budget
- **Design:** Two sets of sketches, defining the poles of the design space described in the brief. Revisions and green light.
- **Prototype:** Every key page (the templates) with real text and pictures. Go/no-go launch decision.
- **Implementation:** Style guide, training, staff "shadow pages", dry-runs, leading up to launch
- **Assessment:** Some 90 days after launch, we meet again to review progress toward the goals of the brief, and to set the future design direction.

In 2005 Danilo Black redesigned Poz and Poz.com for the HIV community.

The zero-based fee schedule in this new offering is made possible by two things: a tested process, and project management that keeps everyone on track.

THE NEW WORLD: In the '90s most of my projects were major contracts, with a dozen, sometimes a score of designers and programmers working for fees in six and seven figures. A business transformation, in part caused by the web sites that we were helping to build, made this kind of consulting seem old-fashioned. Now media companies do most editorial and programming services in-house—or send them abroad.

At the beginning of 2005 I restructured my practice to adapt to this new era. The first step was to reduce overhead in New York. Now teams are assembled project-by-project.
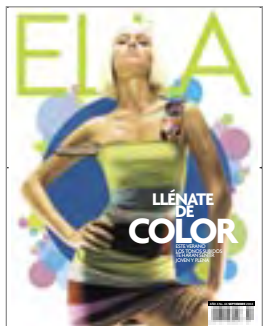
ONE CLIENT AT A TIME

Where a client has a tight budget for redesigns and launches, my colleagues at Danilo Black in Monterrey, Mexico, takes on the assignment. (See: DaniloBlack.com) With 50 professionals, designers, editors, programmers and strategists, the Monterrey staff can produce work that I am proud of. And the fees are competitive with firms with a fraction of Danilo Black's experience. My role is to make sure we get brief right, and then to "top edit" the project as creative director.

Danilo Black designed Es Mas, Televisa's portal in Mexico

We've successfully completed a number of projects this way, including Poz magazine and Poz.com. Two newspaper projects are getting ready for a spring launch, in Denver and Aarhus, Denmark.

Espansion, the leading Latin business magazine is a long-time DB client.

A TEAM OF ONE: Some clients simply want *me*, as a strategic design consultant. Their designers can do much of the work. So, I help guide the process, and at key points contribute page design, typography and branding that help gel the team's thinking. This is how I've been working with the *Los Angeles Times,* and we've redesigned one section after another, most recently "Current," the Sunday opinion section.

Without the overhead of a big agency (at one time in the late '90s at Circle.com, there were 200 creatives indirectly reporting to me), the day rate fees are cut in half.

PROVEN RESOURCES: For other commissions, I bring in key specialists, assembling a swat team. A current example is under way for Bloomberg.com. Theo Fels, now in his own firm, Richardson & Fels, is the chief designer. Fels, was responsible for the early, influential MSNBC.com and the recent Chron.com. Steve Krug, author of *Don't Make Me Think,* is our usability expert on the job. And David Berlow, my partner at the Font Bureau, is helping us with fonts for the next-generation web. Each client has different needs, and each project is different.

The Monterrey studio is known for its work in the news media, but increasing the firm has been creating successful lifestyle and even fashion products

After 35 years of working on big teams, some of the most enjoyable work I am doing today is running a one-man band. A good example are the covers I have been doing for Foreign Affairs. (See page 8.)

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