

The Redesign Process

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AT THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE PUBLICATIONS, redesign is never necessary. A perfect magazine or newspaper constantly adapts to the forces swirling around it. In the real world, this is impossible. There are too many fast-moving variables for publications to adjust constantly. Inertia sets in. Redesign is inevitable.

A publication changes its design under a variety of circumstances, none of them particularly peaceful. The event is most often spurred by the arrival of a new editor or art director, a new publisher or owner, or a major shift in market focus. Change is always the impetus for redesign; but the process itself *causes* upheaval. Few executives would go through it for fun. Let's face it: a redesign is hard on the staff and it's hard on the readers.

The question is how to make the process a constructive, positive endeavor. At Danilo Black, we have an accomplished team of designers with substantial experience in the redesign process. Each publication is, of course, unique, but it is possible to generalize about what makes a redesign project successful.

To get off on the right foot, the publication's management must take three steps before getting started:

Put one person in charge. This is usually the editor, who serves as the client project team leader and our firm's lead contact.

Assemble a project team. Each constituency affected by the redesign should be represented. A team of four is ideal: the editor, art director, production manager, and the publisher or marketing director.

Agree on the goals of the project. Figure out the aims and roles of each department—editorial, design, marketing, production.

Content

A new design automatically signals an editorial change to readers and advertisers, so it is imperative that the editorial focus go through the same intense reexamination as the design and art. In fact, a redesign offers a rare opportunity to overhaul the entire editorial format.

Publication design is simply the way content—both written and visual—is conveyed to the readers. To put it another way, publication designers must be journalists.

By the first working session, the editor and project committee should have prepared:

Structure. Initial proposals for pagination and sequence of editorial material and ads, including new sections and departments. (This may of course be changed a number of times, as the redesign is developed.)

Priorities. What are the most urgent needs? Which parts of the publication should be tackled first?

The redesign process is a scenario with no assumptions. Even in the most conservative environment everything must be open. No cow should be so sacred that it cannot be challenged. For example, it may be a “given” that the existing logo will remain, but only by developing potential new logos can you *prove* that assumption. Until you have considered and rejected the alternatives, you can never be sure that anything should be a “given.”

The overall goal is to develop and refine the basic identity of the publication. New visual ideas and collaborative editorial efforts create the unique design philosophy of the publication

Ultimately, a new format takes on a life of its own, released from the individual egos of the designers and editors. It acquires its own personality, with its own logic. It is extremely exciting to see this personality emerge and the revamped magazine take off.

Here is how we get there:

Engagement

At the beginning, it is important to clearly state the expectations on both sides, including projected deadlines, meetings and fees. So, we like to draft a clear agreement between the client and our firm.

We have a record of consistently meeting deadlines. Yet, by nature, a redesign project is unpredictable, and it is dangerous to schedule implementation too early. If the time-line is too tight, it may force decisions before all alternatives have been considered, reducing the quality of the final design. Generally, a magazine project takes three to six months—a newspaper at least a year. We schedule each point at which presentations are made and client approval is needed.

Typically, Danilo Black, bills half the design fee at the time of the agreement, with the balance spread over three or more months. Expenses are billed on a monthly basis, following guidelines included in the letter of agreement. (The client may cancel the project at any time, owing only fees invoiced and expenses incurred to date.)

Changes in a publication's hierarchy happen at even the most stable companies. When a redesign is considered, restaffings and changes in responsibilities are often close behind. With this in mind, DBI reserves the right to renegotiate the terms of our agreement should a new project leader or editorial team decide to alter the established direction of the redesign.

Brief

The first contact between the consultants and the publication's project team sets the pace for the whole project. A coherent editorial vision must be developed. During this initial meeting we like to review:

Structure. If the client has prepared a map (or thumbnail dummy), this conversation is more concrete.

Goals. The priorities the new design.

Inventory. We need to understand production methodology, how page imaging is done, available fonts, and implications of the change.

On every project, Roger Black personally serves as architect. But the redesign is a group effort. At this meeting, the client project team meets the assignment art director, who is, essentially, the contractor, ensuring the design gets built. During the redesign process, this art director is available at any time for progress reports, and to discuss new ideas with the client project team.

Finally, at this meeting we review the schedule and budget for the project. We also run through expectations for implementation, and set dates to present the Book and the Prototype.

Design

Thirty to sixty days after the briefing and receipt of the advance fee, we present what we call the Book. This is a loose-leaf binder filled with comprehensive layouts. Included are new logo and cover treatments—we design as many as ten of each. Next there are about 20 sample pages including highlights of each standing department and feature style.

Virtually all the work at Danilo Black, Incorporated, is done on computers, so these comps are set in type, and printed in color. A high-resolution proof (1270 dpi) of key pages shows the typography.

It may be necessary to show the Book to the editor (or project team leader) first, but the full team should be at the presentation and will receive a copy for feedback from each department. The reaction of the client is extremely important at this point. It is the first chance to see the original goals in place on paper, yet, it is too much to expect that we will get everything right immediately. Hearing criticism is the best way for us to understand what the client really need. The analysis of this hard copy often sparks a round of new ideas.

Design cannot be heard or read, it must be seen. Even if the Book is “off course” in the view of the project team, the meeting can be very productive. It may be necessary to go back quickly to the drawing boards, but in our experience the project stays on schedule.

Prototype

The Prototype is a complete dummy issue, with full text and photographs. The most successful prototype is one based on an actual issue for a dramatic “before” and “after” comparison. It is also economical, since the editorial material has already been acquired. (Also, the “after” quickly indicates how the new design will affect word count, a key concern to all editors!)

We try to build the Prototype realistically, using real text, real headlines and real photos as much as possible—dummy type and pictures may create misleading expectations. The Prototype may be based on one regular issue, which we simply *redesign*. Or it may be a composite drawn from several issues, with new material added. Before starting, we need:

Dummy. A complete map, showing all editorial space and advertising

Text. All articles—or summaries if final pieces are not available. Plus all headlines and display copy, such as captions and pullquotes, preferably on disc.

Art. Photographs and illustrations, where available.

When breaking new ground editorially, the client may want to go ahead and assign new stories and pictures for the Prototype. These can be “inventoried,” and used after the new format is introduced.

The Prototype is presented 30 to 60 days after the presentation of the Book. It is a fully-executed dummy of the new format, with examples of every kind of editorial page—and advertising. The dummy is full-color, 300-line proofs, usually produced on a QMS color PostScript printer. The pages are bound, so the Prototype feels like a real magazine or newspaper (albeit a thick one).

Next, the decision is made on how to use and adapt The Prototype. Feedback is needed from every area—editorial, advertising, circulation —and perhaps top corporate management.

Everyone affected by the change should now be brought into the process. This can be a simple matter of passing around the Prototype, or, at larger organizations, more formal meetings with slide presentations for larger organizations. While the client project team may consider the format a *fait accompli* at this point, these sessions should have a consultative, collegial atmosphere. Real feedback is valuable, and it is not too late to incorporate good ideas from whatever source. A redesign cannot be accomplished in a democratic commune, but destructive resentments and misunderstandings can arise if all bases are not covered and consulted. The complete success of the effort depends on the whole staff feeling some “ownership” of the new design.

This extends to the market: to advertisers and readers. Sales people can use the Prototype to give their customers an inside, behind the scenes, look at the

new design. Special space configurations that will appeal to the ad market can be designed into the format.

This is also the time to check in with “end-users”, at least informally. Readers seldom welcome a new design uncritically. After all, they pay for every issue, and come to think of themselves as the owners, (or at least part of the community). Sadly, there is no way you can get the readers’ reactions in advance. But there are some survey techniques, such as focus groups which can ensure a marketing disaster won’t happen when the design is launched.

If possible, it’s valuable to put a few key pages through the entire production process—including the press. Major consumer magazines often decide to print the Prototype (or part of it) on the same paper and possibly the same press as the real magazine. This is the only way to get the real “look and feel” of the new product. At the basic level of communication with the reader—the body type—a press test is absolutely necessary as a check for legibility. Adjustments can be made, and any other production problems corrected.

Implementation

Now the action is transferred to the client's editorial office and art department. Each department of the publication starts making pages using the actual art and text of the page or section, redesigned in the new format.

These "shadows"—while a lot of work—are the only way to test the editorial practicality of the format before launch. It is a kind of shake-down cruise.

The art director from our firm is assigned to the client's office for a period of time leading up to the launch. Usually this is about two weeks. It is at this crucial time that all information, style, and structure is transferred to the client.

Two to four weeks after the Prototype, we provide a brief but comprehensive Style Book which details specifications and rules of usage for the format.

The overall design philosophy is explained in a short essay; general guidelines for art direction are set down, with clear style recommendations and caveats for photography and illustrations. We usually try to include a good list of appropriate photographers and artists.

If the publication is using desktop publishing technology, the Style Book is accompanied by software templates. These are particularly useful for regular features with unchanging formats; columns, table of contents, etc. Text is simply flowed into the template and then small changes are quickly made to customize the form.

Then, after intensive effort on all sides, the new design is launched.

Assessment

A successful redesign project does not end with the launch. We need to assess the results. Are the newsstand, readership, and advertising goals being met? We meet for one or two debriefing sessions, analyzing any remaining problems, and setting out recommendations for continued design development.

The success of the new format cannot be fully realized in the first issue, but rather over the longer haul when it adapts to editorial growth.