

## **In Search of Ethics in Graphic Design**

*by Paul Nini*

I went looking for evidence of graphic design ethics and didn't find much. Well, that's not entirely true. When I "Googled" the subject I did find the kind of things I expected, such as graduate-level design seminar courses and undergraduate-level professional practices courses that touch on ethical issues. I also found groups of practitioners and educators creating projects where they've used graphic design as an instrument of social change with very positive results. All of these things are worthwhile initiatives, and, by all means, let's keep them going.

I'm also happy to report that I found some other, very positive efforts out there. The "Design Inquiry" symposium recently hosted by the Maine College of Art gave participants a rare opportunity to dig deeply into the issues surrounding our roles as persuasive communicators in consumer culture. There are also many initiatives to educate designers to their effect on the earth's ecosystem, including an excellent publication by the AIGA that clarifies many of the misunderstandings concerning more sustainable production practices.

I also came across the speech delivered by Milton Glaser at the AIGA 2002 Voice Conference (which appears on the Voice website), where he notes that, "In the new AIGA's code of ethics there is a significant amount of useful information about appropriate behaviour towards clients and other designers, but not a word about a designer's relationship to the public." Likewise, in an interview conducted by Martin C. Pedersen, Glaser had this to say in response to a question about the way design is currently taught: "I would change the perception of the purpose of design that is deeply imbedded in design education. Because it's linked to art, design is often taught as a means of expressing yourself. So you see with students, particularly young people, they come out with no idea that there is an audience. The first thing I try to teach them in class is you start with the audience. If you don't know who you're talking to, you can't talk to anybody."

Somewhat tellingly, I didn't find much else that acknowledges our profession's responsibilities to audience members or users, specifically those who experience the work we create on a daily basis. AIGA has embraced the concept of "experience design," which by its very nature requires the involvement of audiences and users in the design process. AIGA has also published the Design Business and Ethics series that addresses a number of topics including "Business and ethical expectations for professional designers," which is referred to above. However, a quick look makes it clear (as Glaser asserts) that our responsibilities to audience members and users has not been substantially addressed in what is otherwise a very well-considered effort.

There is certainly nothing wrong with protecting our professional interests and the interests of our clients, and you'll find content to that effect in most statements of ethical practices created by designer organizations around the world. However, I would argue that our single, most significant contribution to society would be to make sure that the communications we create are actually useful to those for whom they're intended—and that this concern must be elevated to the same level of importance as those previously discussed.

Many of us are quite familiar with the concepts of "audience-centered" or "user-centered" design, but how many of us can honestly claim to routinely include users or audience members in our process of design? While there are clearly segments of our profession that do practice in a more inclusive fashion, the majority of us do not—and that is, to my mind, where our greatest ethical failure as a profession currently lies.

The client's desire for profits, and our desire for visual sophistication (and peer recognition) should come after the needs of our audiences and users have been met. By putting our "constituents" first—and ourselves last—we might be able to create a more significant ethical model for our profession to pursue. Further efforts to promote environmental responsibility and to employ graphic design as a means of social change are certainly desirable, but so are more effective everyday messages that the majority of us create.

So, in an attempt to address the issue raised, I've taken the entirely presumptuous step of creating language that outlines our responsibilities to audience members and users. I envision this text as an addition to the AIGA's existing publication on ethics, which currently includes sections concerning our responsibilities to the profession and our clients. Therefore, I ask the following questions to you, my professional colleagues: What do you think of the sentiments expressed below? Is it necessary for us to have such text included in our code of ethics? Are you willing to join the discussion and help this initiative progress from this point? In the spirit of inclusive design, I personally invite you participate and add your voice to this important topic.

Finally, please note that the fourth and fifth statements below are adapted from the existing Professional Code of Ethics authored by ICSID, the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design. As well, the sixth statement is adapted from the Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators created by IABC, the International Association of Business Communicators. Of the many professional codes of ethics referenced in the process of writing this article, these two groups were among the few to include significant statements concerning their responsibilities to the public.

#### The Designer's Responsibility to Audience Members and Users

-Designers must recognize the need to include audience members and users whenever possible in the process of developing effective communications and to act as an advocate for their concerns to the client.

-The Designer's main concern must be to create communications that are helpful to audiences and users and that meet their needs with dignity and respect. Any communication created by a designer that intentionally misleads or confuses must be viewed as a negative reflection on the profession as a whole.

-Designers must not knowingly use information obtained from audience members or users in an unethical manner so as to produce communications that are unduly manipulative or harmful in their effect.

-Designers must advocate and thoughtfully consider the needs of all potential audiences and users, particularly those with limited abilities such as the elderly and physically challenged.

-Designers must recognize that their work contributes to the well-being of the general public, particularly in regard to health and safety and must not consciously act in a manner contradictory to this well-being.

-Designers uphold the credibility and dignity of their profession by practicing honest, candid and timely communication and by fostering the free flow of essential information in accord with the public interest.

To conclude, just having such a statement that we may agree with is not enough. We must now actually do something to improve the current situation. We must develop a sustained dialogue with those who experience the fruits of our labors, and recognize that their needs are more important than our own.

About the Author. Paul Nini is an Associate Professor in the Department of Design at The Ohio State University, where he also serves as Graduate Studies Chairperson and Coordinator of the undergraduate Visual Communication Design program. His writings have appeared in a variety of publications, and he has presented at numerous national and international design and education conferences.

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