The Problem with Problem Solving

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I know a designer whose working habits were shaped by years at a daily newspaper. "I can't get out of the habit of just solving the problem and moving on to the next thing," she once confided. Though she has weeks, not hours, to do layouts now, she is panicked by the thought of lingering experimentally over her designs. To her, "solving the problem" means arranging words and images so that they are reasonably visible, reasonably legible. She doesn't feel she has the luxury to dally with process. She doesn't take delight in running the obstacle course of size, budgetary, or time constraints. She doesn't think of decision making as a smorgasbord of possibilities, each imparting its own subtle flavor. Instead, she reaches for a layout scheme the way one reaches for the first container at hand to collect water from a leaky roof: a stainless-steel bowl, a mixing bowl, a pitcher, the aquarium tank you put away after the tropical fish died—no, not the Ming vase; that's inappropriate. Any of the others can do the job, though. The problem's solved, move on.

I think of this woman whenever I encounter those well-worn graphic design metaphors "problem" and "solution." They're legacies of the days when designers needed to persuade clients that their work was scientific and required special skill. This analytical language has been useful for design educators too; classroom problems are intellectual training wheels before students tackle problems in the real world. Out there, the goal-directed arrow of problem/solution suggests that design produces results. From the client's point of view, results are what really matter. Clients aren't much interested in the road between problem and solution. But are designers also running the danger of losing sight of process? Do the ideas of problem and solution help the end overshadow the means?

When I first encountered the term "problem" applied to graphic design, I was a staff editor for a publisher of professional books. My background had been in English literature and academic publishing. I circled the word and stuck a gummed flag to the manuscript with a question mark, just in case the author had made a mistake.

It was jarring because "problem" carries two associations, and neither seemed to fit. The first is a puzzle. There may be different means of getting to the solution, but ultimately every square must be filled in with the right letter, every jigsaw piece locked into

the right place, or a physical law or formula must be derived correctly. Only one right solution. Hardly an appropriate metaphor for design.

Second is "problem" in the sense of problem child—something troublesome. It's the leaky faucet keeping us awake at night. If we can solve the problem, we can put the world back in order, and it hardly matters whether we replace the washer on the faucet or wrap a rubber band around the spigot and tap, so long as the infernal thing stops dripping. There is a goal here. It is very simple and clear. Stop that obnoxious sound. I don't care how you do it, just do it. Designers care very much how they solve problems, however, and they're not often troubled by the conditions that gave rise to them.

Here's the funny thing. Problem solving is basically what any person with a social security number does, from a waiter figuring out how to balance a dozen trays on his arm, to a biologist trying to understand why a cancer cell divides uncontrollably. Yet designers are alone in claiming it as a job description. Isn't the surgeon in the operating theater solving a problem? Of course she is, but the problematic nature of her profession is taken for granted, and it seems foolish to mention it. Years ago, a friend announced that she planned to enroll in law school because she "liked solving problems." "You could always hang wallpaper," I offered. "We've got a problem, Houston," means that something is wrong, not that a cosmonaut has punched the time clock.

Designers need not insist so much on the intellectual rigor of their work. Design is analytical. It doesn't have laws, exactly, but a lot of rules and limitations narrowing the creative pyramid from infinite possible ways of completing an assignment to, say, only a few hundred thousand. Problem: Design, on a budget of $18,000, a brochure that will be distributed to 30,000 tree surgeons at a convention. Solution: Could you predict one in your wildest dreams? Winnowing down the possibilities through the sifters of finance, audience, materials, suppliers' capabilities, time, appropriateness, and personal taste, one arrives at something that is probably not printed on virgin paper. But who knows? Maybe it is. In the meantime, the effective designer has put a great deal of thought into the matter.

My problem with the publication designer's use of the word "problem" is that she doesn't have a problem. There is no negative situation that requires redressing through any possible means. Careful trial and deliberation may be called for, but a layout isn't a puzzle. The "problem" is filling up the page with words and images that elucidate the content and complement one another and inspire readers to continue reading. Now tell me, when will we know that those conditions have been met? Define, if you will, "elucidate," "complement," and "inspire." Or for that matter, define "words," "images," and "read"? Does skimming count?

I am not a total relativist. I agree that it is possible to say when pages are well designed and when they are not. It is even possible to reach a consensus. But to cast this elusive scheme, with its many opportunities and outcomes, into the language of problem/ solution is to risk defining the problem too broadly or narrowly and solving it too hastily. When one is facing a problem, constraints are roadblocks that must be knocked down, rather than a kind of gentle pressure fostering creativity. One is, almost by definition, in a

negative state that needs solving, though it might be better to think of it as an indeterminate state that needs resolving. It's fine to be goal oriented in our description of what designers do, but there are so many goals. Can't we also say, "exercise taste," "flaunt imagination," "organize data," "leave a mark," "take a stand," "raise curiosity," "heighten senses"?

Does anyone see a problem in that?