

Synergistic Design

by Lauren Smith

Synergism [fr. Gk *synergos* working together]: *cooperative action of discreet agencies such that the total effect is greater than the sum of the effects taken independently.*

Most creative professionals would agree that it is difficult to create in a vacuum and it is a well established fact that the creative process can be made more productive by putting the right combination of creative people together to work on a problem. While this is common practice in the design and advertising communities it is generally limited to designers, art directors, writers and other creative practitioners. While this time honored approach is certainly effective, I believe creative professionals could be even more effective if we open up this concept to include more involvement on the part of the client as well.

This is important for a number of reasons:

First, the creative pump must be primed with information. This includes strategic objectives, product details, markets, audiences, and information about the company. Who is more qualified than the client to provide this information?

Second, the client is often in a better position to evaluate a design's effectiveness in terms of how it resonates with corporate culture and how it is likely to be received in the marketplace. No matter how talented the designer, he can't expect to develop the same

intuitive perspective as someone who is immersed in the culture on a daily basis. Also, there is often a great deal of information that doesn't find its way to the creative brief—important details about the company and its business that must come from the client.

Third, since the client will ultimately have the responsibility of selling the concept internally, he is more likely to be effective if he feels a sense of ownership in the process.

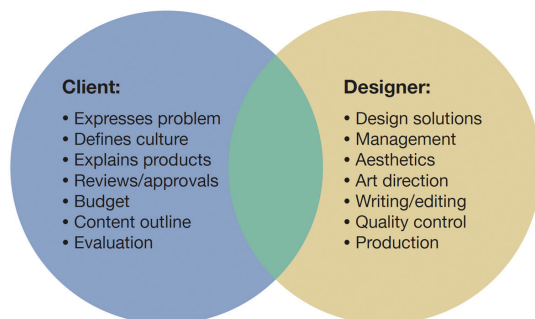
Synergistic Design is a method that fosters a high degree of interaction between client, designer, and other creative team members to define and solve communications problems and execute them effectively. It is made possible by careful project management (not only inviting but requiring the client to be involved at key points in the process) and careful delineation of responsibilities.

The heart of the *Synergistic Design* method, however, lies less in procedure than in attitude. It is important that the client see the design firm not as a vendor but as a strategic partner—an ally that shares the same goals. And the designer must see the client as his alter ego in the creative process. I believe this is especially true in corporate identity development where the goal is to capture the intangible essence of a company. In this setting it's the designer's task to find a way to not only become knowledgeable about the client company but to immerse himself in its culture and become sensitive to every nuance of character. How can this be achieved without the active participation of the client?

It should be made clear that this is not just some touchy-feely artistic exercise. There are solid business reasons for utilizing this method. It is of profound strategic importance that this work is done correctly and accurately. Corporate identity is the foundation upon which the company's reputation, brands and products are built. If a company's identity does not reflect its true essence or if it is not clearly communicated it can weaken the entire communication structure and put millions of dollars at risk. What's more, if there are problems with a company's identity, the problem doesn't resolve itself over time. On the contrary it becomes larger and more insoluble as the company grows.

When working efficiently, and when all parties have respect for the expertise of others, I believe the synergistic method to be the ideal. It is not, however, free of risk. It is possible, for example, for the designer to take too much responsibility for communicating the client's message or to assume too much knowledge about his client's company and market. Conversely, the client may enjoy dabbling in the visual arts but in so doing wander outside of his expertise and weaken the end product. It's very important that each party recognize and respect the other's knowledge and expertise and allow them the freedom to do what they do best. With this in mind, it is important to establish a clear separation of responsibilities from the outset.

Division of Responsibility



Setting the division of responsibilities is important to a good working relationship but even more important is an agreement to work together to a common end and a commitment to resolve conflicts as they arise in the spirit of cooperation.

This collaborative method not only works effectively with clients but contractors as well. My design practice is small—by design. I enjoy the flexibility a small office affords. Being small, however, requires me to rely on other skilled professionals to which I apply the same *Synergistic Design* principals I use in my client relationships. I do this by forging alliances with other firms that complement my skills and experience thereby allowing me to provide a wider service offering to my clients, but more importantly provide opportunities for exciting creative interaction. These companies are closely affiliated with my firm and enjoy a much larger role in creative development than the typical vendor. They are chosen based on skill and talent and in many cases are invisible to the client, functioning as if they were part of my organization. These affiliates are often full collaborators in the design process.

I believe this collaborative approach to creative problem solving results in communications that not only serve the creative interests of the designer but also better represent the client. It's a win-win. Collaboration creates a synergy resulting in better quality information, more effective design strategy and a higher level of creative thinking. I believe *Synergistic Design* to be the key to effective creative communications.