Certification for Graphic Designers? Another Look

by Gunnar Swanson

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With the advent of personal computers, more people are able to deal with the mechanical basics of graphic design. Work that might have been given to graphic designers in the past can be done by clerical workers with a Mac. Because the physical process of assembling graphic materials is less mysterious than it was in the past (coupled with a boom in design education), the small fraternity of graphic design is overcrowded. Untrained newcomers are increasingly seen as threats to "real" graphic designers.

In the last few years graphic designers have gone from complaining that nobody has ever heard of graphic design to complaining that everyone claims to do graphic design. We got over having to explain that we weren't "commercial artists" (debased small time painters selling their souls to the bourgeoisie) but "graphic designers" (manipulators of type and image, communicators, problem solvers) just in time to say "but these manipulators of type and image aren't real graphic designers."

We would love to have "graphic designer" be more than a job description. It should be an honorific, a recognition of our central position in commerce and culture. This is, of course, impossible if we cannot distinguish ourselves from the great PageMaker unwashed—that growing legion of design wanabees calling themselves graphic designers. The changed business climate—lower budgets, new

demands, more competition—is nearly all a graphic designer can take. Insult is added to injury by our collective good name being usurped by every clown with some stolen software and the price of a Macintosh lease.

Enter certification of graphic designers. What better way to distinguish "Us" from "Them"? As certified graphic designers we might be able to regain our honor and the business that is rightfully ours. What could be wrong with that?

Although talk of certification for graphic designers has been around for some time, it was always vague mumblings until Ellen Shapiro wrote about the subject in the *AIGA Journal* (*AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* volume 10 #1, 1992) and in *Communication Arts* ("Certification for Graphic Designers? A Hypothetical Proposal" July 1993). In subsequent talks and articles, Shapiro has become the major spokesman for certification. The theory behind certification is that it would be individual and voluntary and would be granted on the basis of a combination of education, experience, and testing. Taste and style would, we are told, have nothing to do with it. Certification would be assurance of a designer's ability to serve a client independently. It would not depend on membership in any organization and the test would be administered by a neutral organization.

Even though Shapiro's articles bounce back and forth between certification and school accreditation, sometimes mentioning licensing, these are not the same thing. Certification would be a voluntary measure of an individual designer's skills. (There is presently no large scale certification of graphic designers in the USA.) School accreditation is the approval of a school, its staff, and its curriculum. (Schools are accredited by a variety of agencies. The most common for graphic design programs is NASCAD—the National Association of Schools of Art and Design.) Licensing is state approval of practitioners. Licensing laws make it illegal to practice without such state approval. (Licensing is reserved for those who affect the public safety and well being such as architects, engineers, doctors, contractors, and barbers.)

Certification of designers would give potential clients a way to know that a graphic designer is qualified. It would allow a designer to distinguish herself from desktop publishers and other less qualified graphics practitioners. Again, what could be wrong with that?

My Mystic Problem With Certification

(I might as well get this one out of the way first since a lot of people are going to dismiss this as the result of too many years in Southern California.) If there is one thing I've learned in fifteen years of running a design business (and a few more years of living), it's that doing something out of fear or greed almost always dooms whatever you are doing. If certification of graphic designers is to have any chance

of working, it must be done with worthy motives and clarity of purpose. When a major article in favor of certification (Shapiro's July 1993 Communication Arts article) begins by showing us a design pretender and revealing that his date has a lousy accent ("What d'ya do?" "J'learn that in school?"), we may not be basing the desire for certification on rationality and good will.

The Practical Problems With Certification

Okay, enough with the cosmic stuff. Interior designer certification is held up as comparable to graphic designer certification. Certified interior designers I have talked to complain that their certification test doesn't reflect abilities, hasn't improved business, and is necessary only because of the threat that licensing is just around the corner. (Certified interior designers would be grandfathered into the licensing system.) Certified business communicators say they don't get paid any more for being certified. We hear reports about what a success certification is for "similar" fields, but those reports seem to come from the people administering the test, not the people who have taken it.

But graphic design isn't necessarily very much like interior design or business communication. Let's look at graphic design. Certification, we are assured, would be based largely on an objective test. What is it about graphic design that can be tested objectively? Certainly Shapiro's "whole list of technical material"—postal regulations and production information. Are these the things that distinguish "Us" from the mere desktop publishers? The assumption is that "real" designers will do better on an objective test than someone who buys a Mac and religiously reads Publish magazine. My suspicion is that the opposite is true.

Shapiro suggests spec'ing type accurately is an important objective skill; she failed to mention examining color progressives or sorting to a California case. Her technical anachronism doesn't just point out the problem of keeping a standardized test current. It points out a problem with standardization. In a field moving as rapidly as ours, standardization favors calcification. Certification might benefit some designers in the short run. It is unhealthy for all designers in the long run if our business becomes even less relevant to a world in technological and sociological flux.

Standardizing graphic design is about like standardizing dance or fishing. It may all go by one name, but it's not the same thing. Please explain to me why anyone thinks Charles Spenser Anderson, Shiela de Brettville, Josef Müller-Brockman, Art Chantry, Ed Fella, Tom Geismar, April Greiman, any senior designer for Walter Landor, Scott Mednick, Paul Rand, Deborah Sussman, Rick Valicente, Rudy Vanderlans, and Massimo Vignelli are all in the same business. The strength of graphic design is in its diversity. A successful certification program

would threaten that diversity.

Proponents of certification tout its beneficial effects for clients. They would be able to instantly discover whether a designer is "qualified." This ignores the fact that our clients and their needs are as diverse as we are. While the vanguard of fashion may be the most vital attribute of a designer for some clients, marketing knowledge may be for another. Especially given technologically induced changes in responsibility, proofreading skills may be vital to some clients. Should there be a spelling errors not caught by a spell checker and grammar section of a graphic design certification test?

If our goal is to show that we are competent to do a particular task, particular certification would be much more reasonable. Some designers might want to collect certifications like merit badges while others would see fit to just become a certified packaging designer, a certified architectural signage designer, a certified financial designer, or what have you.

Collateral Damage

One argument against certification is that it is a collective waste of time. Along with the design business, major design organizations such as the AIGA are going through a period of change and reevaluation. Adjusting to decentralization, broadening our scope, and reaching out to a changing world are formidable tasks for designers, design firms, and design organizations. I don't know about you, but I don't need another thing to do. We risk sinking our design organizations under the weight of a certification bureaucracy, petrifying ourselves and our image with attempts at objective standardization, and generally doing damage to design to prove we are not just desktop publishers. Do we think the desktop publishers are going to say "Oh, sorry. I didn't realize this was holy ground. I'll pack up and leave"?

In the mean time, certification, if successful, would become a standard, a proof that we are "real" designers. (That is why we're doing it, after all.) Even if we claim it's only for design business owners, every senior designer who wants to keep moving ahead will need to be certified. It will become the measure of success.

Even if there is a required year or two or three between school and certification, certification rates of schools' graduates will become a measure of success. Many schools will succumb to the temptation to teach to the test. Since the test will be objective and objective testing favors production skills, printing knowledge, and legal facts, curricula will also tilt that direction. Since technology is rapidly changing production, printing, and the law, schools with certification-adjusted curricula will be increasingly short term training rather than lasting education and we will have dealt another blow to our already troubled system of design education.

The Good News About Certification

The side benefits of graphic design certification promised by its supporters—continuing education, dissemination of information, creation of benchmarks, and going beyond style and fashion—are all worthwhile goals. They might or might not be side effects of the certification process, but they would certainly be easier to reach if addressed directly rather than hoped for as a side effect of a testing scheme.

Another place where direct action would be more efficient is in proving that "We" are not like "Them." If you can do something demonstrably better for a client than a desktop publisher can, show that you can. Then do it. If you can't, certification isn't going to make you rich or gain you respect.

What is it that you do better than the desktop crowd? If you're like most designers I know, your answer primarily concentrates on aesthetic refinement. The secondary answer is some combination of business professionalism and printing experience. I'd love to see an objective test for aesthetic refinement. (Especially one where "taste and style [will] have nothing to do with it.") Clearly that's what some certification supporters expect of the process. Massimo Vignelli says that "real" designers are protecting the culture. When challenged whether an objective test could judge cultural protection, he claimed it was easy. "We'd agree 90% of the time. . . . There's good typography and there's Émigré stuff."

Vignelli is not alone. I think many designers have a fantasy that certification might rid us of whatever we hate in design and would prove that we and those we most admire are objectively better, more qualified, or more real. I suspect that, confronted with a real test and real standards, most of us would see the folly in this. Before we waste any more time on this, proponents should produce a portion of a test. An outline and some typical questions would suffice. Just enough that the "real" designers can see whether it could accomplish any of our fantasies. It's time to get real.

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