Why writers and designers should work together more

The creative director of Reed Words reminds us why successful branding relies on great copywriting as much as visuals.

If I say ‘brand design’, the chances are you think about something visual. Probably not words.

Which isn’t that surprising. Design is primarily a visual field, after all.

But the truth is, every brand is shaped by its language as much as its visual design. The strongest visual identity can be undermined by bad copy, just as brilliant copy can be hamstrung by poor design.

Ironically, the words themselves don’t help. ‘Design’ sounds conceptual and creative. ‘Copywriting’ has come to stand for a more functional craft skill. Design feels strategic – copywriting feels tactical.

Stronger together

A new name, messaging and identity for UpCircle, by Reed Words and Studio More.
The best brand design work is produced when writers and visual designers work closely and equally together from the outset.

Ten or 15 years ago, it was routine for a writer to be called in once the visual work was complete, to ‘add the words’. That always struck me as like building a house, plastering the walls, painting everything – and then getting the plumber in.

This still happens, of course. But these days, there’s far greater understanding of how much strategic insight and

conceptual depth a writer can add to a brand design project.

Getting it wrong

It’s usually obvious when words are ill-chosen. If an established bank attempts some sort of chummy, Innocent-inflected voice (as Barclays did a few years back), the reaction is fairly universal: it’s seen as inauthentic, hollow – even deceptive. The damage can be considerable.

Luxury brands, too, often seem to struggle. They’re often either wildly florid and hyperbolic, or stiffly formal and corporate. In that world, poor language can break the spell in an instant.

I remember staying at a beautiful five-star spa hotel once, and among all the finery was a coffee-table book with a sticker on it saying: ‘NOT TO BE REMOVED FROM THE HOTEL.’ It felt massively jarring. Instead of settling happily into the soft cushion of the brand, I bumped up hard against the rigid corporate structure underneath.

The new Public Rec brand in action, by Reed Words and Studio.Build.

Getting it right

Given how powerful words can be to build (or undermine) a brand, how can designers and writers collaborate most fruitfully? Here are three suggestions.

Together from the off

Advertising has a long tradition of art directors and copywriters working together from first scamp to final product – sharing ideas and building on each other’s skills to create something richer and more effective than either could alone.

Why not in design?

This doesn’t just apply to classic brand identity. I remember when we worked on the voice and interface for YouView, the connected TV platform, one of the developers explained a specific function to me over about 15 minutes.

When I summarised it back to him in a simple sentence, his eyes lit up. ‘Now I know why you’re here!’ he said. Our skills were different, but complementary. And working together from the start meant YouView launched with a coherent, considered voice across the entire product – that connected with its comms too.

Working in sprints

Collaborating doesn’t have to mean living in each other’s pockets. Once a project is up and running, and the direction set, a lot of what we do can be done separately. The answer is to adopt a sprint model, where the team regularly gets together to discuss what needs to be done, then each member goes away to carry out their tasks, before meeting again to discuss progress and reconsider the big picture.

This helps avoid what we call the ‘cat/cat’ problem – where visuals and words simply duplicate each other. (Imagine the image of a cat with the caption, ‘Cat’.) By starting the project together, and then checking in regularly, you ensure that verbal and visual continually enhance each other – rather than just doing the same thing in different ways.

The Roundhouse brand, by Reed Words and Magpie Studio.

Don’t be precious

Creativity is collaborative. Why shouldn’t a writer come up with a great visual idea, or a designer think of a brilliant headline? I remember working with a designer on an invitation to a fundraising film premiere and drinks party. It struck me that the cone of light from a projector could look like a cocktail glass on its side. The designer took that thought a lot further, and we ended up with something lovely. Staying open, and dropping any defensiveness about your own discipline, is critical.

Writers and designers can also be ‘intelligent idiots’ about each other’s disciplines. We understand each other’s work to a

degree, but we’re also outside their bubble. It’s an ideal vantage point to ask ‘stupid questions’ or raise potential objections the other might not spot.

In short, by working together openly, generously, and ideally from the start, we’ll end up with a lot less cat/cat, and a lot more win/win.

https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/creative-business/why-writers-designers-should-work-together-more/