3. Entrepreneurship, Small Business and Family Enterprise
Competitive Session

# Branding Design: The role of trust in the relationship between freelance designer and client.

**ABSTRACT:** *Many design publications address the designer–client relationship in freelance designing for product brand, with different perceptions of the relationship and how to manage it. Designers focus on technical and creative aspects while clients are often insecure and confused about the design process, leading to short term relationships, unmet client needs, financial losses, and an undervalued perception of the design industry. This paper explores the trust relationship between these stakeholders through in-depth interviews of industry practitioners. The results find that designers value communication most while clients feel that trust is more important. Stakeholder theory is used to address this dichotomy to the benefit of designers, clients, and perceptions of the design industry. Implications are the potential for maximising the value of the design product for the client and improving the efficiency of design management.*

**Keywords:** branding projects, designer-client relationship, freelance design

Design is a creative process that has a powerful impact on product development and business success (Martin, 2009). It can be defined as broadly as its many functions, but it is clear that it works in a collaborative context where resources are brought to a problem to deliver solutions (Topalian, 2012). In fact every organisation practices design as a decision making process (Topalian, 2012). In this study design is regarded as those activities carried out during a decision making process to develop solutions that achieve specified objectives (Girard & Robin, 2006; Von Stam, 2003). The process is carried out by a designer. This qualified professional uses information provided by a client to creatively translate ideas into products, services, and concepts that meet the client's expected outcomes.

The conscious decision to use design products and services development is not simply to provide differentiation but importantly to add value (Borja de Mozota, 2003, 2006). In start up businesses for example, design plays the role of organisational identification, values and its raison d'être (Kootstra, 2009). Creating a corporate identity is a design process of four phases; Initiation, Conceptualisation, Design, and Production. These cannot proceed without the engagement and commitment from the most important stakeholders in the project, the designer and the client (Shapiro, 2003). The designer's main role is to deliver a visual and strategic solution to the client that responds to the objectives of the

endeavour. In this study, the designers are those design professionals that engage in projects as freelance agents. They are not employees of design companies or the client's organisation. On the other hand the client is a company employee responsible for the project and the linchpin in providing all the information necessary for the development of the design and the active participation in the design process (Holston, 2011; Shapiro, 2003).

Studies have highlighted the importance of a strong relationship between the two parties but also identified how common it is that it is often ignored (Burstein & Stasiowski, 1991; Holston, 2011; Shapiro, 2003). There is little evidence that the client feels the same but it is known that they often feel insecure about the designer and don't understand design work or the design process (Rutledge, 2012).

Design management is the attempt to make the design process more efficient (Kootstra, 2009). The central theme is that effective design does not happen accidently but the result of particular management practices (Kootstra, 2009).

It is important to understand what the relationship between the client and the designer is, and how it influences the design process and the final result. This understanding can be built by the analysis of the experiences of both parties. Comparing these experiences and analysing the main issues, problems and patterns arisen during any design process can be the answer for the development of a stakeholder's management plan (Freeman & McVea, 2001). By planning the relationship between the designer and the client, the designer could build better rapport and get the client's trust to engage in future works and this way gain recognition within the industry.

This paper explores the perspectives of freelance branding designers and clients through in-depth interviews to understand their point of view and experiences in managing trust and the relationship during corporate identity design projects. This introduction summarises the findings in the literature review carried out for the study focusing this paper in the finding and discussion part of the research. The first section of this paper presents the findings of the study highlighting the difference between what designers and clients believe to be the most important aspects in the relationship. In the second

part the paper explains how the integration of stakeholder theory in the design management process can build and improve the trust relationship between the parties using a cyclical process that includes the main steps in building trust, influencing the perception and value of graphic design and the overall growth of the profession.

## METHODOLOGY

Understanding the relationship between the designer and client requires getting into the field and exploring prevailing views and experiences. As an exploratory study this research found much literature addressing the management of clients for designers, but little from the client's perspective. (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Ticehurst & Veal, 2005). Therefore the relationship between client and designer was studied through the individual experiences of four (4) freelance designers that had worked in the development of corporate identity design (branding) projects, and to four (4) clients, that had appointed freelance designers but who were responsible for branding project. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and based on stakeholder theory to explore the respondents' experiences and beliefs (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Protocols followed ethical principles of disclosure and understanding of participants and had approval from the University's Ethics Committee. Stakeholder Theory on trust and trust building provided the conceptual framework for the trust and communication relationship between designers and clients on branding projects. This is shown in figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 - Conceptual framework for a corporate branding project

The ideal relationship between the designer and the client is achieved when different elements involved in the design project come together in the achievement of expectations, commitment and objectives to obtain a successful design. Holston (2011) identifies trust as the most important aspect in the designer client relationship.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1.  To what extent does trust in the designer – client relationship affect the processes and product development in a corporate identity design project?

**2.** What are the roles of design project management and stakeholder theory in building trust between the parties of a corporate identity project?

**FINDINGS**

The findings are presented in four parts. Firstly the overall results addressing the relationship between the designer and client are addressed then the importance of trust in the relationship, followed by the roles of stakeholder theory and design management in the relationship, and finally how to improve the trust relationship.

Corporate identity design projects begin with the development of a design brief which documents the objectives and scope of the project (Maus & Herrera, 2010; Stone, 2010). For stakeholders this brief implies that designers understand client's needs and project objectives and clients understand that designers can use their creative skills in achieving these goals. This process is cemented in ongoing dialogue between the stakeholders: *"I've had a positive experience with designers but I obviously think that as a client you need to spend a lot of time with the designer so that they get to know you and understand what you need, of course this applies with any kind of consultant, they need to spend time to know what you're looking for."* (Client, personal communication, May 26, 2013)

Designers believe they need to contextualise client needs:

> *"...to read the client's mind and use a little bit of psychology. That will help you understand how he is going to react and respond to your work and ideas."* (Freelance Designer, personal communication, April 16, 2013)

Most client respondents expressed concern when they experienced negative situations with a lack of flexibility, adaptability and understanding from the designer of their working needs. This led clients to feel insecure about the designer´s ability to deliver the work and results expected.

> *"I would definitively would have appreciated more flexibility but I also think that wasn't a bad thing from them, just that it didn't adapted well with my form of working, so was also my fault.".* (Client, personal communication, May 3, 2013)

The relationship is also marked constant feeling by designers that clients want to take control and sometimes even interfere with the technical and creative aspects. However clients disagree claiming that designers could better mark their creative limits by using information provided by the client to support their ideas graphically.

The success of design resides in the balanced collaboration of designer and client (Holston, 2011) but it is often blurred by the lack of a good relationship that balances communication, accountability, engagement, respect and trust. The differences in effort that designers and clients give to building good relationships is shown in the disparity between the two, Designers believe that communication is most important in the relationship, while clients believe it is trust. See Table 1.

> *"I believe the main elements in the relationship... are clear communication, mutual respect, and the importance of getting more appreciation from client's when doing a good job."* (Freelance Designer, personal communication, April 30, 2013)

Only one of four designers mentioned that the most important is trust which is mutual respect and honesty between the two parties and a belief that each party will do what has to be done and in the best way possible (Holston, 2011). It is also seen as how the expectations of one individual responds to an agreement in which morality, rights and interests are protected (Hosmer, 1995). *"I believe that in corporate identity and branding, trust is especially important because you're working together* (with the designer) *to create this new identity that often you're stuck with quite a few years so you need to trust those processes."* (Client, personal communication, May 25, 2013)

*"If the designer is a trusted advisor that means they will be able to cater my needs."* (Client, personal communication, April 9, 2013)

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Insert Table 1 – **Importance of elements in the designer-client relationship about here**

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Table 1 shows the most common answers to the important elements in the designer-client relationship during a corporate identity design project. Designers often analyse the individuals they are presenting to and adapt their presentations and communication strategies in order to better transmit their ideas.

*"If the designer has a client which doesn´t have a notion of design, is their first time being part of a design project, they won't know exactly what they want. So the designer will need to be more didactic and teach them what you have been doing, showing and explaining them step by step"* and *"when they understand more about design or have a notion of what is needed, as a designer you will briefly explain the concept and how it has come to this solution, skipping the obvious steps of the design process that the client might not be interested in."* (Freelance Designer, personal communication, April 16, 2013)

Some designers also neglect in building relationships because of work deadlines or working multiple clients.

All participants made suggestions on how to improve relationships in a corporate identity design project so that it would be more efficient and enjoyable. Table 2 shows how participants view changes in their opposite stakeholder could improve the project.

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Insert Table 2 – The ideal relationship according to stakeholders about here

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The first column in Table 2 shows those parts from the conceptual framework stakeholders believe to be the best approach to strengthening the relationship.

The stakeholders believe trust is important at different levels. Designers responded that they believe it is important and comes with time, especially when they do not feel a connection with the client or are under too much pressure. On the other hand clients believe, trust is vital for the success of the projects but they too agree that it comes with time by when it shows commitment, professionalism and the designer's management skills. Thus both groups believe trust is a function of time and results as shown in figure 2.

*"To build a strong relationship with the client begins with the understanding of the individual and then by educating them in the process and engaging them so that they feel their ownership with the project and understand the solutions but without trespassing your professionalism as a designer."* (Freelance Designer, personal communication, April 16, 2013)

*"Building that trust is given by time. After some time of delivering projects to the client and knowing that is going to be what is expected and that is aligned with the strategy for the designs"* (Client, personal communication, May 26, 2013)

Insert Figure 2 – The process of building trust according to designers and clients

*"Building those* (strong trust) *relationships with clients, goes a long, long way into helping industry, helping businesses and understanding the value of design... all of the processes that we go through holding the client's hand and guiding them through the process, and that why trust is very important during the process because people will start to see value. If people are aware of that they can appreciate it more."* (Freelance Designer, personal communication, May 23, 2013)

*"Obviously* (if there was trust) *the products, the designs, would be aligned to the specific strategy of the organisation, saving money to the client, because you wouldn't need to be spending time getting to know and understanding each other, and at the end I think it would*

*bring more sales and revenues and better reach to the market you're targeting."* (Client,

personal communication, May 26, 2013)

Some designers and all of the clients interviewed mentioned how all the processes of improving that

relationship should be part of the management strategy of the designer.

## DISCUSSION

In branding design projects designers and clients are the most important stakeholder, engaging in

constant dialogue for the development of a graphic solution product. Many experts and the design

industry practitioners have paid attention to this relationship but this study shows that a main aspect of

the relationship, trust, has been neglected in one way or another.

The main finding of this research is the marked difference in the importance of trust afforded by each

stakeholder. Trust should occupy a better place in the design management approach of every designer

(Holston, 2011). The given attention by designers to communications, is supported by the literature on

design communication is seen as the focal aspect of the relationship (Best, 2006, 2010; Pacey, 2009;

Ramroth, 2006; Shapiro, 2003).  However, from this research communication is viewed as one of the

key elements, but not all, that builds trust between two individuals so that to obtain the objectives are

achieved (Maister, Green, & Galford, 2000).

By not awarding trust the importance it deserves are losing the opportunity to develop stronger

relationships with their clients. The design process therefore misses on the attention to detail that adds

value to design. As a result, client mistrust in the designer or the design process compounds existing

perceptions of design and its value to the industry. It is also clear that both sides believe the trust in

the designer and client relationship comes only from one side: the client trusting the designer. Trust,

however, should be viewed as a two-sided relationship (Maister et al., 2000).  The designer's trust

towards the client and that they will be engaged in the process the client's trust that the designer will

deliver value to the process and the final product, should be a vital part of the relationship (Holston

2011). Holston (2011, 2013) believes that trust is the most important element within this relationship, because it greatly influences and affects the design process and as a consequence the final product.

The exploration of the relationship between designers and clients shows that trust is often fragile or non-existent. In contrast to what the participants believe, stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2010; Freeman & Harris, 2009; Freeman & McVea, 2001; Freeman, Wicks, & Parmar, 2004) trust can be built by both parties (Freeman & McVea 2001, Freeman, Wicks & Parma 2004, Freeman & Harris 2009, Freeman 2010). Maister et al. (2009) state that trust requires conscious actions and behaviours from the start of the project. It is here where stakeholder's management and design management come to complement each other.

Insert Table 3 - Stakeholder's theory and Design Management in the

Designer - Client relationship about here

The alignment of stakeholder theory with design management show a natural response to the lack of a conscious approach to the trust relationship and the real and underlying needs of the parties involved. Stakeholder theory, as shown in Table 3, presents the principles that when collated with the interview responses and design management give a simple, logical and feasible approach to building trust in the development of a branding design project.

Insert Figure 3 - Building a trust relationship with design management about here

Building trust in a branding design project can be understood as a cyclical process in which both, designers and clients play the most important role in the process. Figure 3 presents a proposed model of the building trust  by design management and stakeholder theory  having mutual engagement, commitment and reinforcement of the build relationship during the different phases of the design project (Best, 2010; Freeman, Harrison, & Wicks, 2007; Maister et al., 2000).

The 5 stages of the trust building process are part of the design management strategy that every designer should organise and control during the design process. Maister et al. (2000) explain how

when an advisor, the designer, and a client share a trusting relationship the designer is able to provide more deep and useful skills. They share, reason and engage in decision making processes that flow into better solutions (Maister et al., 2000). Therefore, when trust is present between the two parties, they both can be themselves, and as stated by one of the designers interviewed, showing your true self and being honest is key to obtain the best results (Maister et al., 2000).

The proposed process to build trusting relationship in a branding design project is described as follows:

1. Understanding of each other, client and designer. Maister et al. (2000) describes this stage as the "Engage" part of the process in building trust. Developing the brief together: the most important stages in the design process. This phase includes the listening in an non-judgemental way and the mutual support in the understanding and identification of the main objectives of the design project (Best, 2006, 2010; Maister et al., 2000).

2. Communicating throughout the design process and the mutual engagement in the activities. Deliver results to meet the objectives: is a collaborative process that includes all the decision making activities to respond to the brief agreed by both parties. It represents the envisioning of the concepts to develop the corporate identity (Best, 2006, 2010; Girard & Robin, 2006; Maister et al., 2000).

3. Getting feedback and actively monitoring and reviewing the process will give timely responses to take corrective actions. Maister et al. (2000) regards this as the commitment phase on the development of trust.

## CONCLUSION

The study shows an interesting approach to the relationship between the designer and client by understanding how each value trust. The differences encountered and the fact that trust if one of the most important aspects in this relationship, shows that both parties should engage in the building of trust in every branding design project they develop.

Stakeholder theory aligned with design management in the designer - client relationship, gives the framework for building trust from the beginning of a design project instead

Building trust should be a conscious behaviour adopted by the designer from the beginning of every design project resulting in benefits in the design process and the direct relationship with the clients but in an overall improvement in the perception and value of the design industry and the professional design products.

The exploratory nature of this study suggests that further research is warranted in an area where the potential extends beyond the design field.

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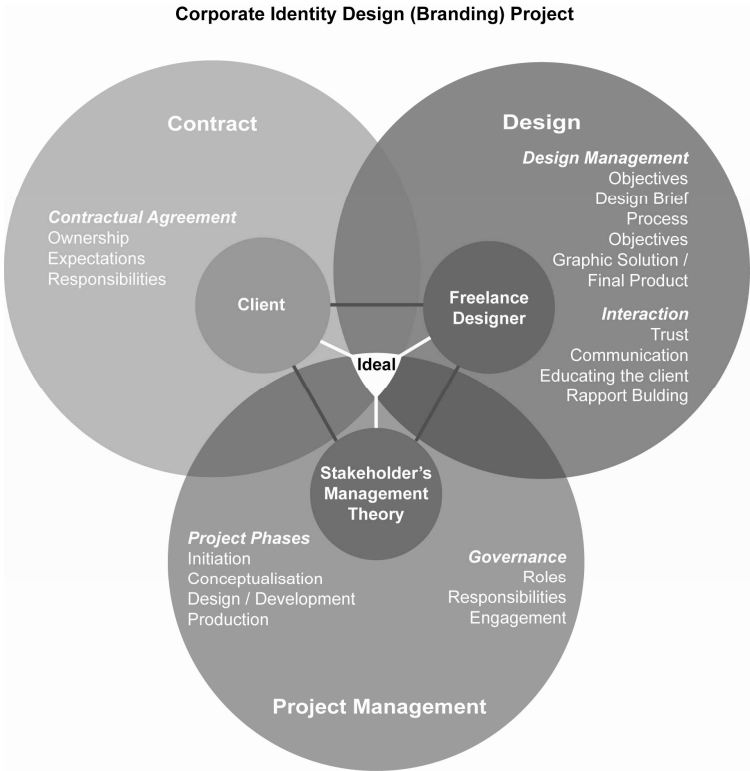
**FIGURES**

**Figure 1**



**Corporate Identity Design (Branding) Project**

- Contract
  - *Contractual Agreement*
    Ownership
    Expectations
    Responsibilities
  - Client
- Design
  - *Design Management*
    Objectives
    Design Brief
    Process
    Objectives
    Graphic Solution /
    Final Product
  - *Interaction*
    Trust
    Communication
    Educating the client
    Rapport Bulding
  - Freelance Designer
- Ideal
- Stakeholder's Management Theory
- Project Management
  - *Project Phases*
    Initiation
    Conceptualisation
    Design / Development
    Production
  - *Governance*
    Roles
    Responsibilities
    Engagement

Figure 1 - Conceptual framework for a corporate branding project

**Figure 2**



Understanding the client's needs → Delivering good results → Gaining trust from the clients

Figure 2 – The process of building trust according to designers and clients
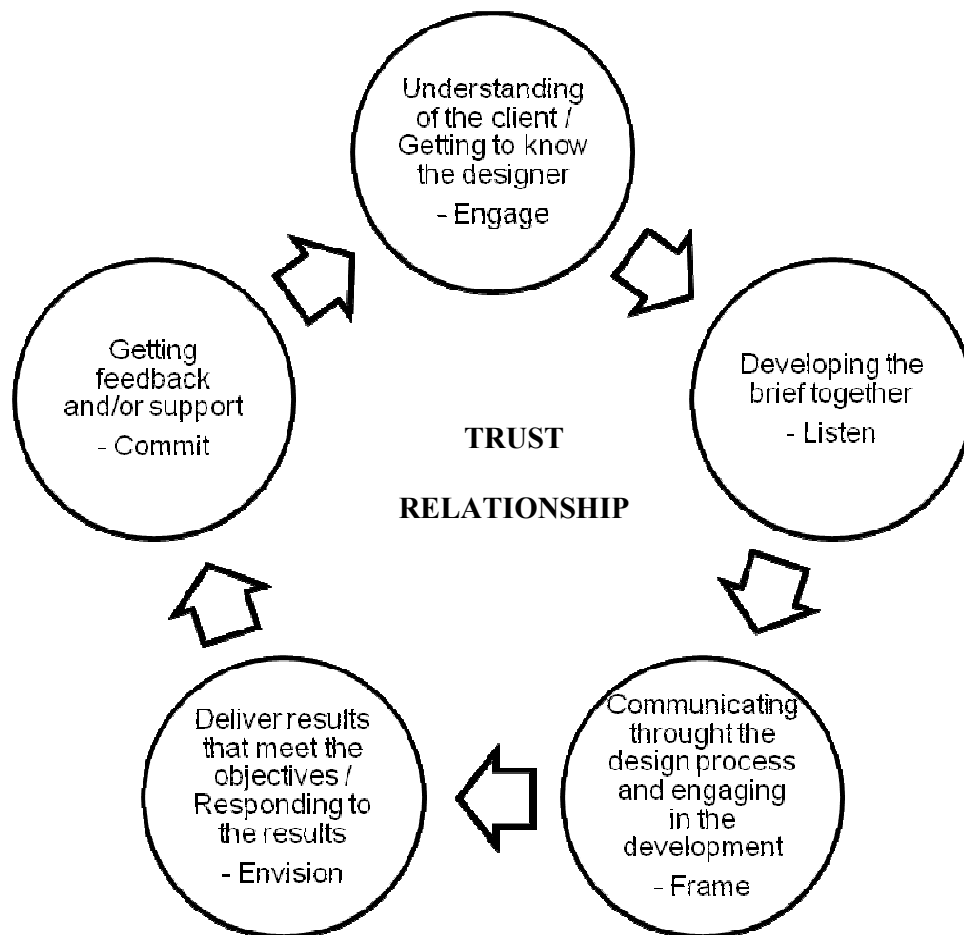
**Figure 3**



Figure 3 – Building a trust relationship with design management (Best, 2010; Freeman, Harrison, & Wicks, 2007; Maister et al., 2000)

**TABLES**

**Table 1**

| Communication | **Trust** |
|---|---|
| Ability of the client to accept advise | Communication |
| Respect | Ability of the designer to provide advice |
| Appreciation for the work | Designer adapting to their way of working |

Table 1 – Importance of elements in the designer-client relationship

**Table 2**

| | The Client's ideal Designer | The Designer's ideal Client |
|---|---|---|
| **Briefing** | Guides and supports in the development of the brief by making the right questions. Understands the client's expectations and objectives, but also helps them build them | Has a clear brief with stated objectives, budget, timeframe and expectations |
| **Design** | Is creative and with great technical capabilities and knowledge. Develops fresh ideas and adds value | Values design has an understanding of the work its takes to the work. Encourages creativity and welcomes innovative solutions |
| **Communication** | Adapts to the client's way of working. Communicates regularly on progress. Communicates decision criteria using evidence based argumentation and graphically explains the process | Is easy going, flexible and responds to the information demands when asked. Is not demanding on constant reports or progress status |
| **Engagement** | Listens and responds to client's recommendations and ideas | Accepts advice and doesn't interfere. Values the work of the designer |
| **Trust** | Makes the client feel comfortable and unique. Adds value to the solution and will manage the relationship in an effective way. | Believes in the designer's capabilities. Doesn't control the process and believes in the criteria used for the design solutions |

Table 2– The ideal relationship according to stakeholders

**Table 3**

| Stakeholder's Management Theory (Freeman, Harrison & Wicks 2007) | Design Management Theory (Literature and Interview Results) |
| --- | --- |
| Interests of stakeholders are different | Understanding the client's needs and analysing the way of working in order to adapt the presentation, communications and working strategy (Holston 2011; Shapiro, 2003 ) |
| The solution needs to cater the needs of various stakeholders | Have in mind all the different stakeholders involved or influences by the design project and how to respond to their needs and helping the client to understand those other needs (Best, 2010) |
| Every action taken will influence or impact stakeholders | Understand that every client reacts differently and that everything done needs to be explained and supported by a conscious decision making process that includes evaluating the impact of the solution in every level (Best, 2006) |
| Practical and emotional commitment | Communicate with non-technical language, be professional at all times but friendly and accessible (Shapiro, 2003) |
| Communication is vital | Communicate often, engage the other in the process, advise, respond to advice and suggestions, use evidence based arguments (Best 2006, 2010; Holston, 2011) |
| Stakeholders are human | Be empathic to the designer or client and other stakeholders with professionalism and touch (Holston, 2011) |

| | |
|---|---|
| Use marketing strategies to understand the stakeholders needs and wants | Develop a design management plan including the briefing process engaging directly with the client and engaging them so that there is mutual acknowledgement and understanding (Von Stamm, 2003) |
| Identity the primary and secondary stakeholders | Understand deeply who the client is, its target market, and all the stakeholders in which the final result will impact. Identity the level of impact, power and influence of each stakeholder (Best, 2006) |
| Constantly evaluate the relationship with the stakeholder and take timely corrective actions | Be responsive to feedback, suggestions and advice without judgment or irrational reactions (Shapiro, 2003) |

**Table 3 – Stakeholder's Management Theory and Design Management in the Designer and Client relationship**

3. Entrepreneurship, Small Business and Family Enterprise
Competitive Session

**Branding Design: The role of trust in the relationship between freelance
designer and client.**

Dr. Alex Manzoni

Higher Education and Research Department, William Angliss Institute, Melbourne, Australia

Email: alexm@angliss.edu.au

Vinayaga Sarma

Master of Project Management Course Coordinator, College of Engineering & Science,
Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

Email: vinayaga.sarma@vu.edu.au

Tatiana Florez

Master of Project Management, College of Engineering & Science, Victoria University,
Melbourne, Australia

Email: design@tatianaflorez.com