I am designer anthropologist

By Sebastian Guerrini

My job, to design brands for clients who have an international projection, led me to do a different activity from the one of the traditional designer.

Nowadays, organizations and companies demand to reach other countries and widen their markets, which leads inevitably to link their communications to different and unknown cultures. Following that need, I had the luck to work in 26 countries and I am sure that I can design brands for clients from any part of the world. Why? Because I consider myself as a "designer anthropologist". I wonder when did I stop being a conventional designer.

What is that about being a "designer anthropologist"?

Design that uses anthropological methods tries to understand determined communities from the very deep of their particular and differential structures, so it can interact from there, communicating with them, crossing frontiers between cultures.

Just like an anthropologist does, the designer builds a map of social significance for each case. Just like a designer does, draws on this map the path to the desired destination. In other words, the "designer anthropologist" is a designer who uses his or her job field to interpret the other and from there, creates precise communication and image strategies for each given context, global or local, before any design act.

The anthropological design is a profession that carries a special *karma* because the professionals:

- **Can't look back to rejoice over the past.** When they do this, they sink in their dreams. It doesn't matter if they built a fortress around them, this will erode with time and will dry out if they don't come out every day to build a presence in a limitless market to attract new business. The past is just an experience and an extra attribute: credibility that shines on potential clients. It is hard to build a worldwide known name, so the relation with the international market must be proactive.

- **Can't avoid paying attention.** Few things are crystallized in their world: their clients come from different nations where the political and economic situations, as well as the relations between them, vary. In this sense, the knowledge of the area, the dialogue, and consensus are the most important facts to be a successful brand, rather than a plain aesthetical beauty. For this, one must see and hear. Even reading the

newspapers becomes a professional action.

- **Can't believe they are the owners of the truth,** because the truth is held by the other. It must be recognized that things cannot be seen the way they are, but we can see things the way WE are. This is a challenge for international communications because it forces us to go beyond ourselves: it triggers us to fully acknowledge the humanity and the essence of every social group, even if their criteria, thoughts, and habits are different to ours. This happens because our own prejudice doesn't matter, the reaction of the receiver of our work is the one that counts. The emotional memory of the designer is limited. To travel, to see, to talk, to know and to understand the people involved gives more certainty than the own previous concepts. The clash with somebody else's material life reality is the best way to learn.

- **Can't forget that brand designers are just narrators.** That's why their designs must always wake up a story in their audience's mind. A story that must come from the individuals', companies' and organizations' deepest desires. In this way, it's only a matter of having clear what has to be narrated through the brand. And the base of the brand's history foundation should always be a communication strategy because the brand is what makes the strategy visible itself. Nevertheless, for the "designer anthropologist", the device to be used to tell the story can be strange. It's a complex topic because to be capable of creating the exact brand, the context of the implicated cultures must be learned, and especially about the ways they express; therefore:

- **Can't stop studying.** Every piece of work leads them to learn about the new community they will be stepping in. Every job will lead the to learn about the new community he will have intervention in. In this learning process, they must realize the optimal way to act, develop, interpret and influence the context which they are working for now. It is not an excuse to not know the cultural codes and contents of their new client. They must understand what do the objects of the clients mean, how they say and express their things, how to write in their language or how the images are meant to be represented. For example, once, to find the appropriate symbolisms, I had to study Arabic calligraphy and for another time, Japanese Kanji. I had to understand the interaction in Turkey that is opposite to the one in Iceland, or up to which point a person from Catalonia is willing to be exposed by the media, something completely different to an average U.S. citizen. Only having this knowledge, one can use the best of the own art to create the message.

- **Can't believe they already know how to do their job.** Even though they possess the knowledge, they end up being worn out maps that will try to spot time paths and the included interests will disappear. The demands of each new case will be unique and will always present changing scenarios. Cultures are not static and the communication media along with the international politics create new labyrinths to be explored, as well as new opportunities to build messages.

- **Have no such thing as 'one' work methodology.** Flexibility is their best weapon. Sometimes they must choose between the different anthropological, sociological or psychological analysis techniques while also solving work using tactics that can come from politics, publicity or art. Everything is valid to reach the intended result.

- **Don't need to have "modern" studies.** The brand designers and their laptops can develop most of the task while their collaborators can be distributed around the globe.

Is all of this necessary?

Another methodological option is to think that, all of a sudden, creativity will find the hidden symbol that everybody was looking for, a supposed brand that can be decodified by the immense diversity of individuals in this world. Nevertheless, this method is dangerous. It is easy to find examples of brands that failed.

Finally, the life of those who design brands can also be exciting. An adventure in which one develops oneself completely as a human being. It is a job in which the designer interacts and brings communication and understanding to people. On the other hand, design is a job that is built on top of uncertainty, dynamic and very demanding at the same time, because it does not have a defined ending: one can infinitely investigate a topic, get lost in it and forget that, in the end, it is just a job and not the only opportunity to discover the life we have in common with this world.

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