

THE
IN-HOUSE
DESIGN
HANDBOOK

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THE IN-HOUSE DESIGN HANDBOOK

REAL-WORLD SOLUTIONS FOR GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

CATHY FISHEL



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Preface

“Dad, there’s a spider in my room!” That would be my oldest daughter. It’s 11 pm and I’m laying in bed reading when she comes in with a tissue and her crippling fear. I get up, go to her room, stand on a chair, and squish the offending eight-legged predatory arachnid. She makes me flush it down the toilet. Twice. She is 19.

My kids squeeze me for everything: time, money, food, cars, cellphones, and they know how to push all the right buttons too. My hair has been falling out from wearing so many hats: father, provider, disciplinarian, ATM, friend, and protector. There are no instruction booklets for parents. No manuals. Just on-the-job training. And it’s all tremendously rewarding.

The same goes for in-house creatives. When I’m not killing spiders, I spend my days as a creative director for an in-house design department, which I built from the ground up. And there were no instruction booklets there either. No manuals. Just in-the-house training. I wear many hats there as well: creative director, manager, designer, coordinator, and therapist. But there is one difference, though. After providing creative support for a wide variety of projects over the years, my team and I are beginning to receive recognition for our work and, above all else, Respect (that’s right: with a capital R)!

Trends come and go, but there has been a steady growth of in-house creative departments in recent years. In-house design departments like mine are finally starting to get some respect because many companies are now recognizing the benefits of having a strong internal creative team and are leveraging those talents for profit, growth, and success. In-house creatives have complained in the past that they can’t get a seat at the table. Well, a few seats just opened up down in front.

Internal creative departments have the potential for being *the* resource for all things design. Design touches every department in a corporation, giving in-house designers a broader range of projects and interactions with a wider range of employees than anyone else in their company. Designers also have access to information and resources that are unavailable to an outside agency, with more opportunities to foster new relationships with colleagues through informal meetings that often take place in the hall or at a coffee station.

In addition, many companies are now providing a boatload of incentives to lure designers to the other side so they can thrive creatively and be happy, productive employees. Regular hours, health benefits, a certain level of security, stock options, onsite conveniences (such as a child development center, health and fitness center, banking, and catering) and more creative workspaces are just a few of the things that have made life on the inside more appealing.

The AIGA, the Design Management Institute (DMI), and other leading trade organizations are realizing that the in-house population is a lot larger than originally believed and are beginning to address in-house issues more than ever. Industry publications such as *HOW*, *Graphic Design:USA*, and *Dynamic Graphics* now feature many articles devoted to in-house design. Design conferences are also including an in-house track and specialized conferences such as the InHOWse Designer Conference are pulling more in-house creatives out of the closet each year.

That’s the upside of in-house. On the downside is downsizing, which is impacting a large number of corporate creative departments that don’t have the opportunity to grow (that is, add headcount) and who are being squeezed to do more work with less. Outsourcing is also seriously affecting many corporations that have off-loaded service departments to specialized vendors and companies in other countries.

Early in my career as a design manager, I didn’t understand how my department fit in with the rest of the organization because back then we had a lack of focus and a weak business strategy. I had to find out what we wanted to be when we grew up. By taking a few steps back, I was able to identify areas where my department could be most effective. Then we implemented processes and workflows that would leverage our strengths and channel our resources to benefit the company’s core business groups, which ultimately resulted in financial and service improvements for the company.

But during my in-house tenure I became more and more isolated from the mainstream design culture and was at a loss as to where I could find support for some of the challenges I faced as an in-house design director. Then, in 2002 I was introduced to a creative director who was feeling the same pain that I was feeling. Andy Epstein—then Creative Director at Gund and currently a consultant at Johnson & Johnson—and I spent a lot of time sharing war stories and comparing notes. We found that despite the differences in our companies, we both faced similar challenges. We decided to do something about it and formed InSource (www.in-source.org), an industry trade organization that enhances the understanding, impact, and value of in-house design within the corporate environment. This was an attempt to attract other like-minded people, promote best practices, and build a community. In our early conversations, I realized that the ideas that we tossed around would be of value to other in-house creatives. Again, we did all this by the seat of our pants, with no instruction booklet.

We organized events featuring experts in in-house design management, project management, and brand management, and our membership grew. The isolation that Andy and I felt was prevalent: we found that we weren't alone. Today, InSource continues to provide a forum for the in-house community through our events and our website. And as our organization grows, we've been fortunate to build some solid relationships along the way with designers, publishers, writers, academic institutions, and business leaders.

More recently, I had the opportunity to spread the word at the HOW Conference, the In-HOWse Designer Conference, the Parenting Publications of America Conference, and the Thinking Creatively Conference at Kean University, discussing such topics as how to build and maintain an in-house department, organizational structure, staffing,

workflow/project management, keeping your team inspired and motivated, technology and lack of Mac support, rewarding and recognizing good work, charge-backs, promoting your department, playing nice with the agency, department layout, design competitions, onsite convenience, burnout, and, the holy grail, showing the value of design.

And now we have a book on everything in-house. (I wish this book had been around when I was starting out!) This handbook is an invaluable resource for the experienced as well as a primer for the uninitiated. Every corporate creative should have one at their fingertips. Cathy Fishel has organized a comprehensive guide that outlines effective strategies for building, growing, and sustaining a successful in-house creative department. She not only backs it up with theory, but with real-world examples and case studies. So go ahead. Be proud. Working in-house has become a respectable career path.

The phone rings. It's 11:45 pm. "Dad, there's a mouse in my room!" That would be my daughter calling from her dorm at college. Well, gotta go. There are some things you just can't outsource.

Glenn John Arnowitz is Director of Creative Services at Wyeth, a research-based, global pharmaceutical company, where he manages an award-winning team of six designers. He has contributed articles to GD:USA, HOW Magazine, Dynamic Graphics Magazine, The Creative Group's eZine, and In-Spired. His department was featured in the book, Bringing Graphic Design In-House, published by Rockport. As co-founder of InSource (www.in-source.org), Glenn is passionately committed to helping in-house creatives achieve design excellence and recognition within their companies and the business community.

Introduction

What is an in-house designer?

Using the simplest definition, an in-house designer is a professional creative who produces graphic design for, and is an employee of, an organization whose main business is not usually design related.

Using a more jaded definition, an in-house designer is a creative person who finds him- or herself—by choice or circumstance—in an alien world ruled by left-brain-thinkers who undervalue, misunderstand, and in general, do not take full advantage of the benefit design can bring to business.

I say this neither to lull you into this book through empathetic subterfuge nor simply to complain about the unfeeling ways of the corporate world. Both definitions are, in fact, main premises of this book. They are offered here in order to establish our third premise: *any in-house designer who feels undervalued, misunderstood, or in any way ill-treated by an employer needs to take much more responsibility in bettering his lot—that is, prove to the employer, through words and actions that it understands, how design truly benefits business.*

That's what this book is all about. Be ruthlessly proactive. Prove that what you do is valuable. Build on your successes.

As a creative person lodged firmly in a business world, you are a unique character. It can be a lonely post, but you have exactly the same goal as the people who so often disrespect, misunderstand, or step all over your work: you all want the larger organization to succeed.

Chances are, though, no matter how many business magazines publish articles on how accountants or CEOs or warehousing specialists or HR departments can “Learn to be more creative in 10 amazing steps!” you are never going to transform those people into the same kind of creative person that you are. *But you can transform yourself into the kind of businessperson who can very adeptly speak their language.*



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In this book, we offer many more than “10 amazing steps!” toward that end. You will discover the insights of many in-house design professionals who struggle every day, like you do, to demonstrate to business the extraordinary value of design. We share their successes as well as their failures and hope they teach and inspire you to build a more design-centric organization.

Why work in house?

There are many advantages to working as an in-house designer:

- The in-house designer is usually provided with increased opportunities and benefits as an employee of a larger organization.
- The values of the organization can be inspirational, offering the designer a real sense of community and fulfillment.
- Working for a larger organization provides a sense of prestige and pride, especially if the designer plays a real part in creating the public face of the group.
- As an employee (as opposed to owning your own company), the in-house designer is likely to enjoy more structure, a regular paycheck, and a more predictable schedule. (Many in-house designers report that this is less and less true today however, as companies downsize and try to squeeze more and more work out of fewer and fewer employees.)
- The in-house designer is able to develop a more focused specialization/subject expertise.
- An in-house designer, if utilized properly, is often more cost-effective for the employer.

① The designer for the ad opposite was given the headline before an image had even been imagined. But when an internal client walked into the design area wearing a retro-style, puffy dress, it inspired the design and the client was eventually photographed in-house for the ad. The combination of her dress, pose, and background created a playful image that was a perfect match for the headline.

Ann Filidoro

② In-house designers have specialized knowledge that greatly aids their organization. An excellent example is this design for the Metro Day Passes, created by the in-house design team for the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Not only do customers keep and collect different color combinations, the passes are also easy for operators to read. The fluorescent inks the designers worked into the palettes also discourage counterfeiting.



1 The undergraduate admissions viewbook for The College of Saint Rose was designed to be cool and slightly alternative to set the college apart from name-brand universities.

Art director, designer, photo-illustrator, writer: Mark Hamilton; designer/photo-illustrator: Chris Parody; writers: Lisa Haley Thomson, Renee Isgro Kelly; project managers: Lisa Haley Thomson, Mary Grondahl; photography: Gary Gold Photography, Paul Castle Photography, Chris Parody, Luigi Benincasa, Benjamin Marvin

- The constant attention provided by an in-house creative or team benefits the larger organization by building and maintaining a consistent message.
- The designer has a vested interest in the long-term success of the organization.
- There is no need to constantly be out beating the bushes for more work, as independent design firms must do to stay afloat.
- The in-house designer is likely to have more long-term friendships and beneficial business relationships as the result of his or her extended contact with the organization.
- Unofficial observations indicate that independent design agencies are hiring fewer full-time employees, given the uncertainties of their trade, preferring to work with freelancers instead on a job-to-

job basis. The choice of in-house design as a career may offer more stability in the future.

- This last perk is perhaps the most inspirational: through a combination of extended attention to, and superior knowledge of, the organization, *the in-house designer has a better chance to affect real and positive change through design.* As the size or influence of the organization increases, so does the scope of that possible change.

Likely, you may think of other advantages that are specific to your situation. But there is no debating that there are many benefits to working as an in-house designer, to you and the organization. Of course, there are cons as well:

- Even though the organization hired you, it may not perceive that it needs help, change, or even design at all. It may confuse simple production issues with actual design.
- The organization's structure often causes the wheels of change to move very slowly.
- The organization's efficiencies often work against creativity—as in, “Just change the date/color/headline and run it again.”
- The in-house designer can outgrow the challenges of the organization and become frustrated or burnt out.
- In-house creatives are often pulled in many different directions simultaneously.
- While you wouldn't dream of storming into the accounting department to suggest a new payroll plan or telling the shipping department about how you think they should package goods, it's likely that everyone in your organization has an opinion about design and is happy to share it with you.
- The organization's product, service, or overall philosophy may be dry, conservative, or otherwise challenging creatively.
- While the in-house designer doesn't have to constantly be out in search of new business, he or she does almost constantly have to “sell” ideas to co-workers. And sometimes, of course, the sale is not made.
- Without a company “angel” or champion for design in the form of a supportive CEO or other official, the in-house department lacks respect or attention.
- The in-house designer's bosses may not have training in, or awareness of, creative issues at all. Also, most company's HR procedures, such as employee

2 ChapStick was the official sponsor of TV channel CBS's *Early Morning Show*. This 6 foot (1.82m) tall spinner was used for about a week during the weather segment. The design was created in-house by Wyeth Corporate Graphics to create buzz around the ChapStick brand.

Designer: Cathy Bepalko



① Metro's in-house designers work hard to establish and maintain a friendly relationship with customers of the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority. These conversation bubbles are part of that effort: they appear here and there throughout the system to deliver safety and marketing messages. The decals are inexpensive and can be sited and replaced as needed.

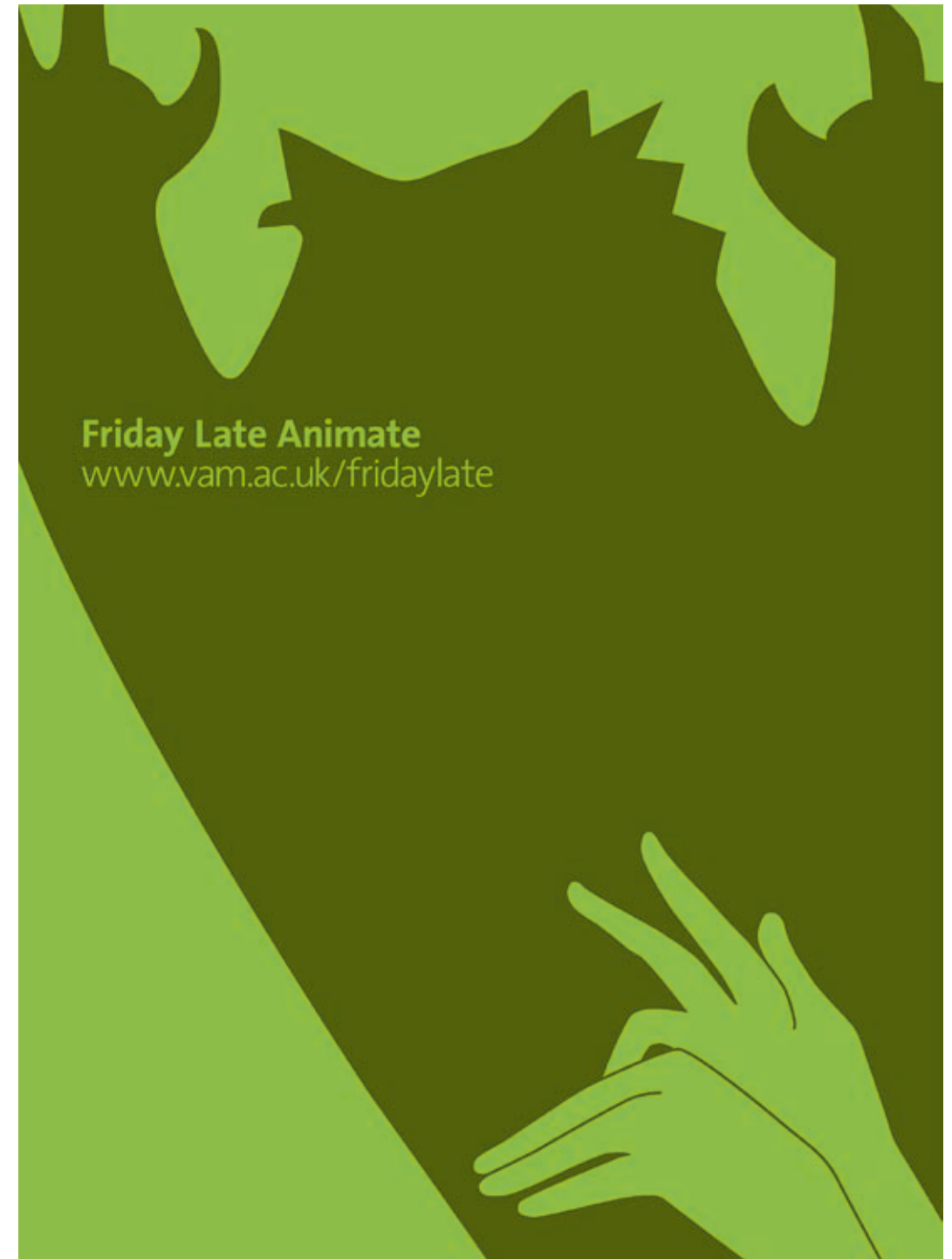
② This postcard for a museum event was designed quickly and inexpensively by the in-house team at the Victoria & Albert Museum.
V&A Design © V&A

evaluations, aren't built to effectively gauge the performance of an in-house designer, whose output can sometimes be intangible.

- The ongoing training opportunities a company offers or will pay for sometimes don't match up with an in-house designer's needs.
- In-house designers can feel isolated, from others in the organization and from outside creatives.

Again, you are likely to be thinking of your own cons, even as you read. But it's good to know that there are many thousands of in-house creative people in the field today, fighting the same battles as you and even winning a few from time to time.

With more and more corporations around the world awakening to the value of design and creativity, it's a field that's ripe for growth.



Tim Hale, Fossil, Inc.

It seems fitting to end this introduction and begin the book with an interview with Fossil Creative Director Tim Hale, an in-house designer who began his present career track sitting at a drawing table in the corner of a warehouse. But his story since has been an inspirational one.

① After 17 years and over 1,000 designs, Fossil self-published a retrospective book celebrating the history, philosophy, and inspiration behind their tin packaging. The book *Tinspiration* was an exciting project for the in-house team. General guidelines were given and a broad team from across the 40-plus design staff were allowed to sign up for and submit ideas for spreads based on tin sets that had been preselected. The project strongly encouraged interaction across established design teams within the studio while providing the net benefit of a well designed, historical, and brand-building artifact for the company that could be used for sales or promotion.

Tim Hale didn't set out to be an in-house designer: in the beginning, he was just helping out a start-up company that made cool watches. But before he knew it, an entire corporation with \$2 billion in annual sales grew up around him.

Because he has been at the helm of Fossil, Inc. almost since its very beginning, he has been able to provide the constant leadership that it takes to grow a design-centric organization from the ground up—certainly, an enviable position. Today, he is directly responsible for 75 designers who create everything from print materials and packaging to websites and actual product. Fossil employs more than 200 designers. But remember: he started as a department of one.

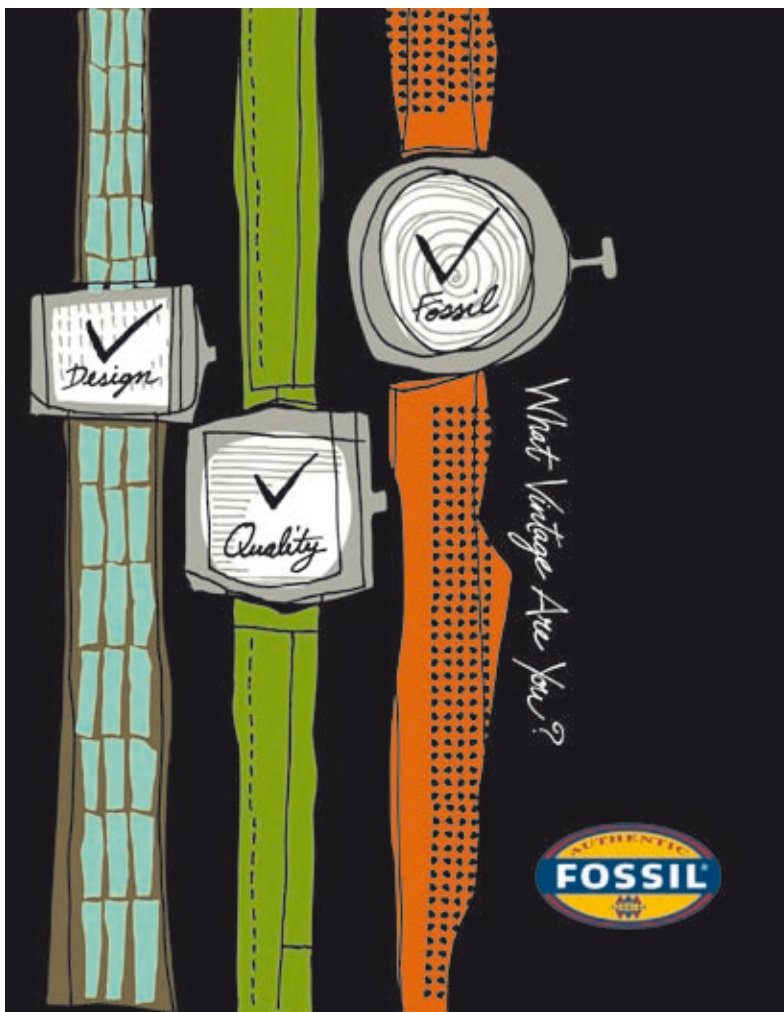
Hale also has the benefit of a unique perspective: he was employed by a boutique-type agency prior to coming on board at Fossil in 1987. While he was still at this earlier job, a particular aspect of the in-house groups with whom he worked always puzzled him: their employers didn't seem to take the best advantage of the creative people they hired.

"Why would a company invest in the resource of an in-house design group and not manage that resource better? The work these groups produced was not as good as it could be. That means the company is not challenging them, not managing them, or it hired the wrong people. In my view, there should be little differentiation in quality from what an in-house group or an outside shop would



① & ② Design not directly related to product/service sales is rare. But design with such remarkable creativity, that articulates the brand value and has entertainment value is a very important branding vehicle for Fossil. These signed and numbered, limited-edition silkscreen posters (two in a set of four) are sold through Fossil's catalog and retail stores.

Design and art direction:
Greg Wolverton.



1

produce. When I came to Fossil, my agenda was to prove this model," he says.

In-house design groups, he knows, are sometimes regarded disparagingly by outside groups and—sadly—even by their employers' management. But Hale believes there is sometimes just

cause: those in-house groups simply have not proven the value of their work. Designers working inside of an organization have an even greater responsibility to show the power of design and how it can benefit business: in the twenty-first century, it seems like the entire business culture has jumped onto a creative jet stream.

"There has always been an undercurrent of businesses who have used creativity and who have had great success—Target, Starbucks, and so on. But it is now just bubbling to the surface for everyone else. *Fast Company*, *Business Week*, and other publications are giving a lot more lip service to design as a profession as well as a design catalyst," Hale says. "Now, success is geared around how creative people can be with what is already out there and available to everyone else—information, technology, and such. Companies who have an in-house design group have a real advantage over those who don't."

Hale acknowledges that in-house designers are often not given the opportunity by their employers to make that kind of difference. Because of this lack of regard, he believes in-house creatives must adopt a more proactive stance and become much more analytical in how they approach management. Over time, he says, designers can establish more of a partnership, as opposed to a "helper" model. It's the difference between a company having design in its DNA or just having a quick coat of paint.

The desired partnership is also a moving target, he notes, making it even harder to achieve. When he started with Fossil, his drawing table and all of his supplies were literally tucked into the corner of

"Companies who have an in-house design group have a real advantage over those who don't."

the company's warehouse. Fossil has grown from being a very small, privately owned company to an enormous, publicly traded company: nothing is the same as it was when he started. But one philosophy has continued to drive his success.

"As your company grows and changes, just to preserve yourself, you can't personalize everything that comes to you. It's too debilitating. You have to remove yourself from the comments and actions of others, and begin to understand what is driving these business decisions, whether you like them or not. That's how you learn to make the kind of decisions that make design work in your company."



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