



When Inhouse and Agency Designers Collaborate

TIM LARSEN

There are numerous benefits to collaboration between inhouse and agency designers. Inhouse designers benefit from the broad perspective that agency designers bring, having worked across a range of industries — retail, tech, financial, healthcare, medical, professional services, you name it. Agency designers benefit by tapping the deep expertise that inhouse designers possess about their brand.

In March, we completed a major product launch for a client — meeting a nearly impossible deadline. Our client decided to change everything about the brand at once — from the corporate logo to the product names to individual consumer brochures to the website. We achieved our goal by bringing together the best resources of our agency with our client's inhouse design team.

To make the collaboration work, we followed some simple guidelines I've developed in my 30 years of running a design firm and working with in-house design departments —both big and small, experienced and not so experienced:

Get to Know Your Client — and Your Client's Customers

Value the insight of the inhouse design team. They have expertise about the problem you're helping solve, as well as day-to-day knowledge about how to get things done. And don't make the mistake of designing before you know your client's customers. Immerse yourself in the brand, attend trade shows, speak with customers, experience the product.

Engage the CEO

Any brand is ultimately a reflection of the CEO. Make every effort to meet with the CEO, and align your design effort with the CEO's vision. Most CEOs are direct, and time spent with them is invaluable.

Be Sensitive to Internal Clients

Recognize that your client-side design colleagues have their own internal clients to serve, and these internal clients can be demanding and powerful. "The

CEO is asking me to make the logo bigger. What do you recommend I do?" This is a question we've heard countless times. As the objective design expert, you will be asked to voice an opinion on difficult or unpopular issues. Be diplomatic and decisive.

Capitalize on a Strong Inhouse Leader

Having a decisive client side advocate to orchestrate all the players makes a tremendous difference. In our recent product launch, our client coordinated the work of the inhouse design team, our design firm, a video production firm, an exhibit house, a PR firm and a large committee of reviewers. She recognized everyone's strengths, clarified roles and kept the ball rolling.

Build Mutual Respect

Collaborations work best when everyone is respected. Avoid separating team members into clients and vendors; instead, treat everyone as a partner. We've had printers produce work in four days instead of two weeks, because we treat them as partners.

Share Resources — Generously

Help the client be successful; don't hoard resources. Share writers, printers, photographers, trademark attorneys, architects, exhibit houses, PR firms. Some of our best contacts today have come from client referrals. We appreciate that, and we return the favor.

Celebrate Successes

Big collaborative projects can last months or years. It's important to acknowledge milestones as you achieve them. We've wrapped press sheets around bottles of champagne, won awards entered jointly with clients, participated together in speaking engagements. Remember: recognition matters.

Over the years, some of our best clients have been inhouse design groups. The key is speak the same language and share the same values about what design can bring to business.

TIM LARSEN is president and founder of Larsen (www.larsen.com), a communications design agency of 55 professionals in Minneapolis and the San Francisco Bay area, serving over 140 clients nationwide. Clients include Best Buy, Buffalo Wild Wings, Guthrie Theater, Medtronic, Microsoft, Starkey Laboratories and U.S. Bancorp. Larsen has served on the national board of the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) and was a founding member of the Minnesota Chapter of AIGA. Larsen currently serves on the board of directors for The College of Visual Arts in St. Paul and on the design advisory board for the University of Wisconsin-Stout.