Connecting Creatives With Causes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find the most effective way to encourage designers, developers, marketers and the graphic communication industry at large with to engage with social causes including nonprofits, awareness campaigns and socially responsible companies. Given the power that graphic communication has to command the attention of an audience and provide visibility for a company, corporations are often willing to spend a great deal of money to obtain precious visual real estate in our visual culture. However, there are countless social causes in need of creative assistance who lack the funding to obtain these skills. To address this problem, this research focuses on discovering effective ways to persuade creatives to donate their skills and time, understanding the real needs of nonprofits to discover how to best serve those needs, and uncovering solutions to bridge the gap between creatives and causes, whether that be via an online platform and/or at an educational level.

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Introduction

Statement of Problem

In our current state of information overload, the use of graphic communication is crucial to stand out among the chaos of images in our society. Graphic Communication is a powerful tool for companies and organizations to gain visibility, credibility, and attention through effectively transmitting messages via print and digital technologies. However, those who can afford to pay for graphic communication services tend to hold the dominant space, taking up precious visual real-estate within our image-overloaded society. Yet, there are so many organizations (non-profits, social awareness groups, campaigns) that are working hard to contribute positively to society and need these kinds of resources in order to gain visibility and be successful in their humanitarian efforts. My objective is to urge designers, developers, creatives, and the graphic communication industry at large to be aware of how capable we are of creating change through visually illuminating important stories, ideas, messages and causes. To ultimately accomplish this objective, I want to gain insight into what drives creatives to connect with social causes to put their skills towards and understand how to best engage this audience; what the needs of non-profits and social organizations are in terms of creative skills; and determine the viability of creating a platform that connects creatives with causes.

Interest in Research

Throughout my experience as a Graphic Communications major, I have felt as though I have been on a well-lit path toward a career involving consumerism. The Graphic Communication industry does a very successful job in serving those who want to promote, advertise, and better their business.

As my education has progressed and I have come to see just how powerful graphic communication can be, I have realized the ways in which I can use my skills and passion for design to serve the other passions in my life. I have long identified as an activist, and with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies, I have gained a more intellectual grasp on how to create social change. A huge aspect of this involves creating space for people to be heard, specifically those who do not hold the dominant space or perspective in our society. Graphic Communication can be very effective in providing visibility by holding the attention of a targeted audience through print or digital media. It has the power to tell people's stories, to evoke emotion, and to lead someone to empathize and take action. This project lies at the intersection of my passions for design and social justice.

Significance of Research

In my preliminary research, I have been thrilled to discover that there is a large community of designers who feel the same way I do. In addition, the Internet has proven to be a powerful agent of social change, with revolutions and campaigns having the ability to spread rapidly. Creating an online platform for this kind of engagement has the potential to provide much needed assistance to the organizations who need it. Educators of graphic communication can provide opportunities for their student's to build their portfolios and contribute positively to society while doing so. Introducing this kind of social awareness at an educational level can inform students of the possibilities for work outside of consumerism. Through uncovering effective ways to engage creatives with causes via an online platform or on an educational level, we can collectively contribute to moving the graphic communication industry "away from profit-over-people business models and the placing of corporations before individuals, toward the exploration and production of humble, meaningful work, and beneficial cultural impact," (Peters, 2014).

Literature Review

The ability to communicate messages visually is becoming increasingly important to stand out among the milieu of mass-imagery in our society. Graphic Communication is a powerful force for corporations and organizations to gain visibility, credibility and attention through effectively transmitting messages via print and digital technologies. This industry "has the ability to communicate a message with impact and purpose through a well thought out solution. These solutions can be used to persuade or inform an audience and they have the potential to influence human behavior through their effectiveness," (Clements, 2009). In today's world, visual real-estate in both print and digital platforms is precious, and commanding attention is difficult. Those who hold the dominant visual space, and therefore more attention and influence, are mostly the corporations with the money to do so. As a result, designers, and those within the graphic communication industry, have come to define "good design" as "that which sells," (Ewen, 2003). Graphics are used to persuade and inform, but on the extreme end, can mislead and manipulate. With such power comes a need for designers, developers, creatives, and the graphic communication industry at large to think critically about social responsibility and the impact that it has.

Social Impact of Graphic Communication: The Power of Aesthetics

Today, the graphic communication industry serves the role of "[mediating], [translating], and [amplifying] the visualized environment, giving tangible form to the objects and experiences that inform, persuade, and entertain us," (McCarthy, 2002). The power of the industry is evident in the vast amount

of products, packaging, advertisements and brands we are exposed to every day, because "increasingly, information–or disinformation–is graphically communicated," (Riley, 2003).

 With so much visual stimuli, our society has placed a powerful significance on aesthetics, which heavily impacts the perception we have of products we interact with. Norman explains that when a consumer engages with a product, their reaction is not only based on it's ability to work, but also on how good it looks and the way it makes them feel (as cited in Clements, 2009). In addition, there is a strong, often subconscious, level of emotion gathered through experience and social context that leads consumers to form a social judgement of a product that relates to it's perceived design quality. The judgements that are cast "include blame and credit…If the product caused the user to feel pleasure then credit is given…If dissatisfaction is felt, then blame is given to the product…Expectations are born out of these experiences, as users build upon previous interactions with products," (Clements, 2009). This emotional response parallels the experience of a user when engaging with a graphically communicated message, whether that be via a printed product, a website, or other forms of digital media:

> For example, in viewing promotional messages, the audience may assign credit or blame
> to the [graphic design solution] after reflecting on the message it is communicating…
> Promotional messages are intentionally created to evoke complex, strong emotions…
> within the viewer…to cause [them] to act in a specific way. The actions may include buying
> a specific product or service or aiding in the promotion of a particular social or political
> cause. In addition, trust must be established between the viewer and the solution in order
> for a promotional message to be effective. (Clements, 2009).

This subconscious, emotional engagement with products proves the immense effect graphic communication has on society. It also shows how a user's aesthetic expectations impact the success of

graphic efforts, regardless of the message or function of the product. When graphic communication

products do not keep up with the expectations of users or do not elicit a positive emotional response,

they are likely to be disregarded, regardless of the content. However, when successful, the transmitted

message can be received and absorbed by the audience, even if that message is capitalizing on the

viewers insecurities or ignorance to manipulate them.

Corporate Power and the Role of the Designer

The importance of aesthetics in our environment has much to do with consumerism. From

consumerism came the concept of brands, which Riley defines as "business ideas that have achieved

cultural influence. Big brands influence cultures in big ways, small brands in small ways," (Riley, 2003).

This cultural influence relies largely on the success of graphic communication efforts. Every well known,

culturally influential brand has a strong visual presence. Corporations know that good design sells and

they are willing to spend a great deal of money to achieve it. They, too, know the power of consumers'

subconscious engagement with products, and by "appealing to the emotions, and most often

bypassing critical thinking on the part of the consumer," they are capable of "[aestheticizing], or

[rendering] beautiful, hazardous ideas about the use of environmental resources, about the nature and

concentration of power, and about the ordering of values by which we live." Graphic communication is

the "primary strategy of corporate marketing," in which design "speaks a visual language that

continually reinforces outlook and interests of business," (Ewen, 2003). Obviously, businesses want to

make money, and effective graphic communication can help facilitate this, "but if this attribute becomes

the sole purpose of the business and drives every business decision it has the effect of commoditizing

everything–including people," (Riley, 2003).

This has major implications for designers who are operating within this vast vista of mass-produced images in a polluted consumer market. Designers come to view their work primarily "as a selling device," which leads to "an aestheticism that separates images from social concerns" that dominate "not only the thinking of practicing designers but also the curricula of most design schools," (Ewen, 2003). With the tolerance of such thinking and the "lack of systematic thought about the impact of design on social life," this "is the intrinsic outcome of design having become a corporate profession." Ewen elaborates on how this came to be:

> It is part of a general process by which systems of images, symbols, and meanings have
>
> over the past century become increasingly fused with the priorities of corporate
>
> merchandising and mass marketing. During this period, design has been called upon to
>
> establish corporate identities firmly in the public mind and to motivate the development
>
> of ever-hungry consumer markets. These design imperatives are now embedded within
>
> the routines of the job and thus appear natural: they are rarely thrown into question
>
> (Ewen, 2003).

When graphic communication efforts are primarily going towards "[aestheticizing] colossal institutions," that have little regard for "the needs of the broader human community," there comes a dire need for a discourse on the social responsibility of designers and the graphic communication industry at large.

History of Socially Responsible Design: The First Things First Manifesto (1964-2014)

Socially responsible design is not a new concept. In fact, ever since the 1960's, there has been a community of individuals highly discontent with the saturation of trivial advertisements and the willingness of the vast majority of designers to contribute. The First Things First Manifesto, published in 1964, urged designers, visual artists, art directors, and students to reflect on the social responsibility of

their profession and step away from the mainstream advertising industry which contributes "little or nothing to our national prosperity." The manifesto called for a conversation on the usefulness of design for the betterment of society and was signed by twenty-two in the industry showing their support (First Things First: Design is History). Given the rise of the internet and digital media platforms, the need for this kind of discourse has become even more prevalent. Thus, the manifesto was revisited in both 1999 and 2014 with more socially relevant information and additional signatures. The 2014 manifesto states:

> "We, the undersigned, are designers, developers, creative technologists, and multi-disciplinary communicators. We are troubled by the present state of our industry and its effects on cultures and societies across the world…We are calling for a refocusing of priorities, in favour of more lasting, democratic forms of communication. A mind shift away from profit-over-people business models and the placing of corporations before individuals, toward the exploration and production of humble, meaningful work, and beneficial cultural impact," (Peters, 2014).

With 1,161 signatures as of October 22, 2015, the 2014 First Things First Manifesto has created an online community of designers, developers, creatives, and the the tech industry at large who want to do good and create change within the graphic communication industry and therefore society as a whole.

Redefining "Good Design"

Regardless of the use of design for corporate glorification and manipulation, visual communication remains a powerful tool for any message to be heard; socially conscious businesses, non-profit organizations, campaigns, and social causes are still operating within the same milieu. Good design is critical for social influence. On a superficial level, there are many agreeable principles that constitute good design:

1. Visual Style or aesthetics is important to communication design–particularly in regard to attracting the attention of users in order to make them linger to read information and extract meaning.

2. Readability and Legibility are essential to clear communication.

3. Hierarchy and Spatial Organization (including the use of white space) do indeed improve the readability of the communication design layout.

4. Accessibility is indeed an important consideration to include in the design of an interface that will mediate communication with users with impairments (Bennett, 2012).

However, expanding our idea of what good design looks like can provide us with a framework to grapple with the social consciousness of visual communication. Graphic designer Milton Glaser once said, "Good design is good citizenship," implying "the designer plays an important role in effecting good design through high moral and ethical values married to an awareness and concern for social impact." (Bennet, 2012). It is clear that while "design is a source of remedies," it is also "a source for 'the most destructive tools of deception," as David Berman comments in his book, *Do Good Design* (as cited in Bennet, 2012). Because of this, the concept of good design must expand beyond design principles (Bennet, 2012).

Figure 1: The steps to social change: a new metric for measuring good design

Audrey Bennett, Associate Professor of Graphic Design at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute is seeking to expand this concept of good design and inspire change within communication design education by providing a new

matrix with which students can evaluate good design. Figure 1 shows that "attaining good design is like climbing a steep set of steps; the closer their design outcome approaches social change the better its evaluation." (Bennett, 2012). She explains that students learn a certain set of skills to prepare them for the professional world, however, they aren't required to change the world. What we can strive for, she explains, is pushing professional design outcomes toward this model, seen in Figure 1. To do this, "we should evaluate design outcomes on their positive or negative impact on society...and, if we do this collectively on a global scale then we might transition from the present age of social consciousness into a future age of accountability and benefit from the fruits of our labor through a synthesis of our social consciousness and research-driven design advocacy," (Bennett, 2012).

In the current state of image pollution, where attention is placed on those with the money to establish a visual presence, there comes a need for designers to "reflect upon the functions they serve, and on the potential hazardous implications of those functions," (Ewen, 2003). There is a multitude of socially conscious businesses, non-profits, social causes and campaigns who are struggling to maintain space within the chaos of images of our society. It is possible to trade profit for purpose and begin to view design from a different perspective, one that doesn't commodify the audience and exploit emotions to make money. Graphic communication has the power to change the world if designers begin to recognize its social influence and strive to visually illuminate ideas, messages, causes and organizations that benefit society as a whole.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to engage members of the graphic communication industry with social causes. While the original intention was to create a website to be marketed to designers, developers, and creatives and connect them to non-profits in need of their skills, there appears to be a greater complexity of creating this kind of engagement and a need to further understand what drives creatives to want to help non-profits and what the needs of non-profits truly are. Thus, this methodology focuses primarily on understanding the potential for creating a successful platform that connects creatives with causes and understanding the users needs and expectations within our cultural context. The objectives of this research are the following:

- Gather information about the benefits of creative, skill-based volunteering to create a piece of marketing collateral in the form of an infographic that engages and persuades designers to consider creative, skill-based volunteering.

- Understand the willingness of creatives to donate their skills in addition to understanding the needs of nonprofits in terms of creatives skills.

- Determine the viability of creating a platform that connects creatives with causes and look at other potential solutions to facilitate this engagement.

Data Collection Plan

The primary date collection was completed through two surveys: one target towards creatives and the other targeted toward nonprofits and social organizations. Both of these surveys were in-

depth, providing many opportunities for participants to provide insight into their own first-hand experiences.

In addition, two interviews were conducted. The first was with Lorraine Donegan, the Design Reproduction Technology Advisor and Professor at Cal Poly to gain insight into a potential integration of this platform on an educational level. The second was with Kevin McMahon, the creator of Art Heroes, a platform created to connect creatives with causes that is no longer in service and under a reconstruction. This interview was conducted to learn from his experience and understand the challenges he faced in maintaining Art Heroes.

Data Analysis Plan

The information gathered from the survey will help determine the overall needs of nonprofits and how to best cater to them, as well as the willingness of creatives to donate their creative skills. The first-hand experiences shared by both creatives and nonprofits will provide greater insight into understanding the most effective way to serve the needs of nonprofits and get them the high quality work that they need. The interviews will provide additional insight, specifically in regards to the facilitation of engagement on an educational level and will be taken strongly into account. Interviewing someone who has already created a website that connects creatives with causes will provide incredible insight into the viability of such a platform.

CHAPTER 4

Results

The research itself was three-tiered: create a persuasive design piece with the purpose of encouraging those within the graphic communication industry to consider donating their skills and test its effectiveness using the new metric for analyzing "good design"; collect data via two surveys to gauge the willingness of designers to donate their skills in addition to determining the actual needs of social causes in terms of creative skills; obtain empirical data via personal interviews with educators, one of which is a creator of an existing platform that serves the purpose of connecting creatives with causes. All of this was completed with the intention to find the most effective way to encourage designers, developers, creatives, and the graphic communication industry at large to be aware of how capable we are of creating change through visually illuminating important stories, ideas, messages and causes. In addition, the viability of creating a website to help facilitate this connection was analyzed and additional solutions were brought forth.

The two surveys conducted were narrow in their target audience, but detailed and in-depth. The survey explicitly targeting designers, developers, marketers, entrepreneurs, etc. (referred to as "creatives") reached 64 participants, roughly half of which were Graphic Communication students, though many other majors/occupations are included. The survey targeting nonprofits and social organizations (refer to as "causes") received 43 responses, 93 percent of which were nonprofit organizations, in addition to a community group, a grant funded program, and a Benefit Corporation. Many respondents of both surveys provided detailed empirical evidence of their experiences.

Figure 2: Infographic titled "Graphic Communication Can
Change the World: a call for more purpose-driven design"
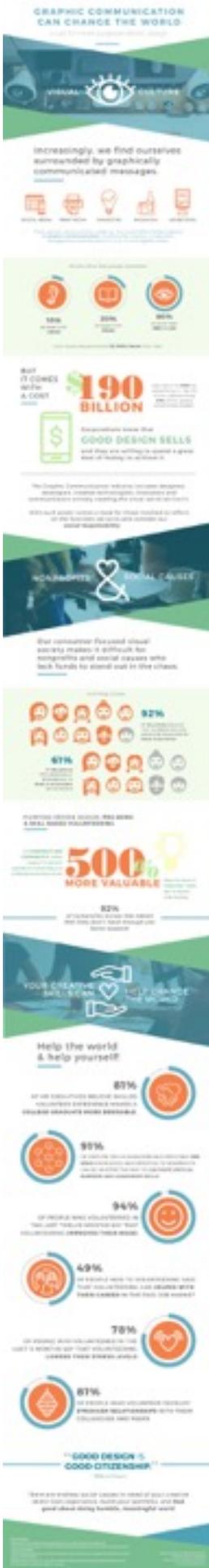
Infographic: Engaging the Creative

      Before the surveys were to be completed, an important question that had to be asked was the "why?" Why should creatives donate their spare time and skills to a nonprofit organization in need? Outside of the obvious "it's good for the world" answer, research had to be gathered that could make a stronger case to persuade creatives to do good in this way. Before data collection via surveys began, research was conducted through existing resources to uncover some persuasive reasons why creative, skill-based volunteering is important for designers (et al.) to engage in, especially given our visual culture. To compile and present this information to the creatives to gauge their response, an infographic was created using the new metric for measuring "good design" based on taking steps toward social change as proposed in Chapter 2 (Figure 1).

      The use of an infographic to visually present this information resonates with much of what this research project is about—in order to draw in the attention of an audience, graphic communication is essential. The objective of this infographic was to urge creatives to be aware of how capable they are of creating change by donating their skills to causes in need. The infographic was created in InDesign with strong consideration for high quality visual style; readability and legibility; and hierarchy and spacial organization. In doing so, the hopes were to establish credibility with the reader, stimulate ease of use, and consider the user through the design process. The information used was meticulously organized and presented in such a way with hopes to resonate with the culture of the readers most effectively. The goal of this infographic—and ultimately of this project as a whole—is to improve humanity by encouraging creatives to

engage with and donate their skills to social causes. If the creation of a platform is the most effective solution–though it certainly is not the only solution–marketing collateral for this platform would have to be created. Therefore, the creation and analysis of this infographic provides a starting point to uncover some effective ways to engage creatives and persuade them to donate their skills. This infographic titled "Graphic Communication can change the world: a call for more purpose-driven design," was included in the creatives' survey.

Based on the data, this infographic appears to be a persuasive way to engage the reader and make them consider volunteering their time. Creatives were asked to analyze the infographic on the basis of "good design" and the steps toward social change (Figure 1). The data shows that creatives believe this infographic is credible (97 percent); is easy to understand (95 percent); appears to have considered the reader in the design process (98 percent); resonates with the culture of its readers (97 percent); and has the potential to improve humanity (82 percent). In addition, 94 percent learned something new, and 76 percent strongly agree that the infographic demonstrates good design (with 97 percent agreeing in total). Most importantly, 44 percent strongly agree that the data presented in this infographic had persuaded them to consider volunteering their creative skills. Another 37 percent agreed with this statement. Based on this data, this infographic effectively gained credibility and engagement from the user, and ultimately accomplished it's intended goal of persuading creatives to consider volunteering their creative skills. This information will be beneficial when establishing a marketing direction if a platform that connects creatives with causes was created.

While this infographic clearly provided persuasive evidence regarding why creatives *should* volunteer their skills, there is no way to test if they actually *will*. Many creatives may say they are interested in helping social causes, however, actually getting them to take action is an far greater feat. The surveys and interviews conducted provided insight into this dilemma.

The Socially Responsibly Creative and the Power of Good Design

Before being presented with the infographic in the creative's survey, questions were asked to gauge their involvement with and perceived value for social causes and social responsibility. Based on the data collected, it appears a majority of creatives have experience with skill-based volunteering and are generally interested in opportunities to help nonprofits and social causes. When asked if they believe the success of a business should be attributed to more than just profit, 99 percent agreed or strongly agreed. A large majority of respondents feel a personal obligation to make a difference in the world. A total of 72 percent of respondents would also be willing to take less money in a job if they knew they would be doing meaningful work that impacted society in a positive way. Of the 31 Graphic Communication students who responded, 90 percent of them would rather be assigned projects in school that help fulfill the needs of nonprofits or social organizations. It is clear that these creatives place an importance on social causes.

Furthermore, the social causes surveyed also expressed their understanding of the importance of good design. The causes' survey results show that nonprofits are certainly aware how powerful good design can be in allowing them to gain visibility and credibility in our visual culture. Of the 43 respondents, 83 percent believe maintaining a strong visual presence is very important for their organization, and 14 percent find it important. These organizations are aware of the critical impact good design can have on the success of their businesses, and strongly believe that good design can improve their organization's credibility (88 percent); can contribute to the success of their organization (76 percent); can help increase funding/donations (76 percent); and can help tell their organization's story (88 percent).

Of the 43 respondents, 23 provided detailed experiences when good design mattered for their organization. For example, Big Brothers Big Sisters of San Luis Obispo have found that "donations increase when [they] provide donors with professional level materials." Woods Human Society explains that the use of social media has helped many of their animals find homes. The Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo County finds importance in good design of their annual report, which "visually communicates the impact of donations and what [their] mission is in the community." Rising Tide Capital also finds value in their annual report, claiming that it "makes an impact wherever [they] go." In addition, when they relaunched their website, they "received an increase in stakeholder engagement" from all of their various stakeholders. The organization Wilshire Health and Community Services has found great benefit in video production, which "has been able to raise serious funds for [their] underserved programs." When RISE San Luis Obispo County underwent a merge between 2 organizations and full rebrand, they expressed that "good design was extremely important in creating
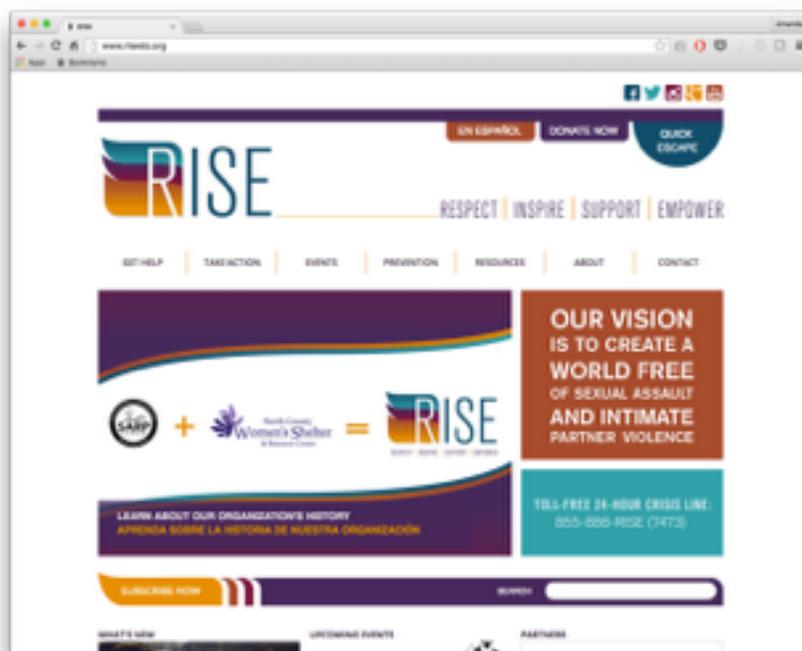

Figure 3: Example of RISE rebranding.

the new unified organization and communicating the changes to the public." One respondent designed

a hospital fundraising campaign after a re-brand of their logo. This campaign brought in 275 percent

more money, which they attribute partially to good design. It is clear that nonprofit organizations

understand the positive impact good design can have on their organization.

To parallel, the creatives also shared their experiences and frequency of volunteering for social

causes. The data shows that 44 percent of creatives are volunteering once a month or more and 38

percent are volunteering once every few months. In addition, 53 percent of creatives have participated

Have you ever done skill-based volunteering, where you donate your time by contributing skills from your field of study (for example, if you are a designer, doing graphic design work for an organization)?
(64 responses)

- Yes
- No

46.9%

53.1%
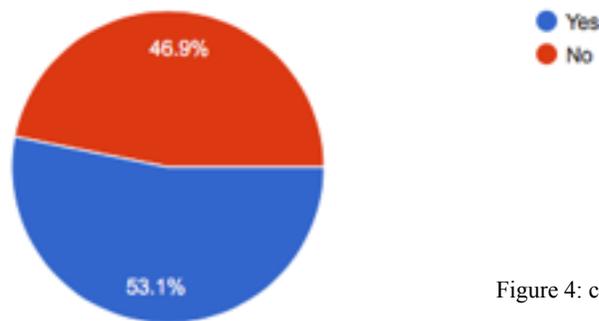
Figure 4: creatives' survey response data

How often do you volunteer your time? (64 responses)

- At least once a week
- Once a month
- A few times a month
- Once every few months
- Once a year
- Once every few years
- I have never volunteered
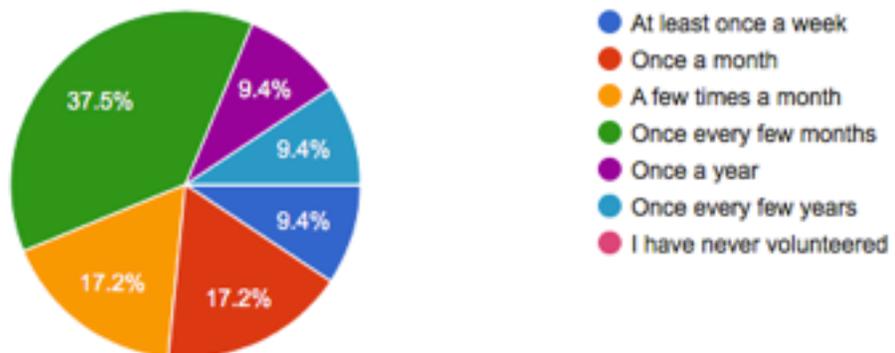
37.5% 9.4%

9.4%

9.4%

17.2% 17.2%

Figure 5: creatives' survey response data (2)

in skill-based volunteering and 24 participants supplied detailed accounts of their experiences with skill-based volunteering.

For example, one creative painted a logo for the Orangevale Food Bank, in which they "gained self-esteem" and "helped the company with their brand awareness." A female software engineer taught children about coding and circuitry. Another creative shared her experience volunteering as a photographer for the ALS walk in Downtown San Luis Obispo:

"I was excited to offer my photography experience to capture the day dedicated to raising

money for ALS research. Even though I felt my contribution was small, everyone at the event was

so appreciative of my work. I was able to spend the day doing something I love (shooting

photos), while connecting with a ton of people from my community."

A Graphic Communication student is helping a sustainability coordinator with marketing collateral, which is pushing her skills in the Adobe Creative Suite. Another Graphic Communication student who volunteers at the Central Coast Aquarium shared her experience volunteering for this small organization that has only a handful of staff members:

"[Central Coast Aquarium] doesn't have a marketing employee, so when I [started volunteering],

they didn't know what to expect from a [Graphic Communication] student…I've been there for

over a year now and their faces still light up when I come in…They're a competent, strong,

passionate and friendly group of people who just don't have the resources to pay someone for

quality services. I've been able to experiment with and practice so many aspects of [Graphic

Communication] through them, including: t-shirt design, print collateral and flyers, large signage,

email design, event planning for their major annual fundraiser, and currently, I'm helping them

collaborate with the Sign Place to have a donor wall built inside the facility. They also want an

app, which I am creating designs and prototypes for… Since I've been there, I've been able to do

small changes that they don't have to pay for and they really appreciate that. Most of their

volunteers are biology majors, who, as you can imagine, aren't the most skilled at creating great

flyers in Microsoft Word."

One designer who works for the organization AIESEC as their social media manager expressed that

"designing for a cause is 1000x more rewarding than merely doing it to make a living." These examples

provide great evidence of the benefits of volunteering and the positive impact that can be made on

both the designer and the organization when creatives donate their time and skills.

Overall, it appears creatives are very interested in helping social causes and even have some

experience doing so. It is also quite clear that nonprofits have a strong need for creative assistance,

especially based on their understanding of the impact good design can have on their organization.

What must be uncovered, then, are the real needs of nonprofits and social causes in order for creatives

to best serve these needs.

Tending to the Creative Needs of Social Causes

Though social causes are aware of how important good design is, there is a general lack of

satisfaction or neutrality among these organizations regarding their visual presence: 33 percent are

neutral in terms of their opinion on their visual presence; 17 percent find their visual presence weak, and

7 percent find it very weak. Furthermore, when asked how they feel about their current visual brand and

designed elements, only 21 percent of these organizations believe their brand allows them to stand out.

Moreover, 31 percent believe their visual brand needs improvement, and 26 percent merely find their

visual brand "sufficient."

In terms of who is currently in charge of serving their creative needs, the responses had an

underlying theme: most of those who responded to this question with the option "Other" explained

How do you feel about your current visual brand and designed elements?
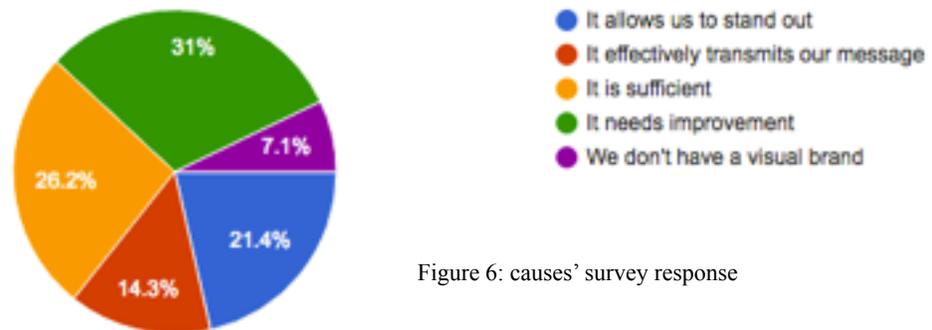(42 responses)

Figure 6: causes' survey response

that no single person is assigned to these tasks. There tends to be a combination of employees or volunteers with "non-creative" job descriptions doing creative work and/or freelancers/contractors being hired for certain projects. As mentioned before, the marketing volunteer at Central Coast Aquarium shared that if she weren't there, Biology student volunteers would most likely be doing a lot of her projects in Microsoft Word as opposed to the Adobe Creative Suit that most designers are trained in. This sort of delegation of creative projects to "non-creative" employees or volunteers appears to be common among nonprofits. In terms of skill-based creative volunteers, 86 percent believe a skilled designer working on their organizations design needs would improve the visibility of their organization and 93 percent see a greater benefit from having skill-based volunteers as opposed to traditional, "extra-pair-of-hands" volunteering. However, 88 percent are in need of more skill-based volunteers.

From a long list of creative services, organization selected all of the current skills they are in need of. The greatest needs include photography (67 percent), social media (62 percent), video and animation (62 percent), web design (57 percent), print design (50 percent) and email blast design (50 percent). They are also in need of these skills quite frequently. For example, 84 percent are in need of

What creative skills is your company currently in need of? (42 responses)
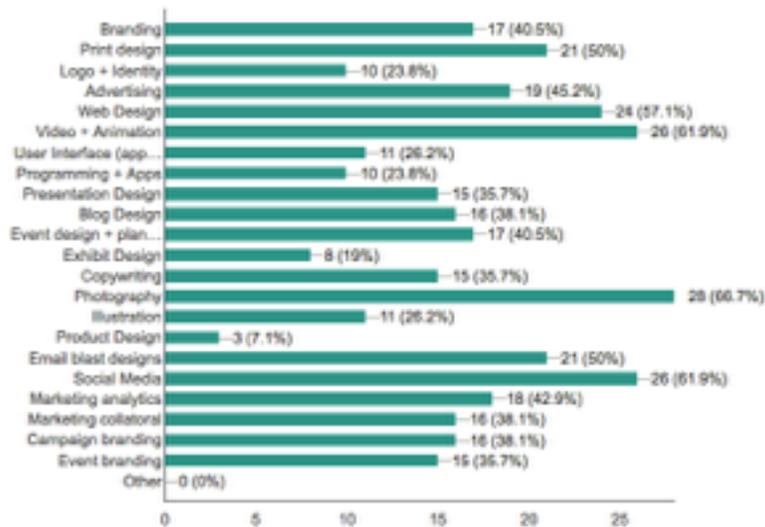

Figure 7: cause's survey response (2)

creative skills once a month or more, with 41 percent in need of these skills multiple times a week.

Each respondent provided more detail into specific examples of creative assistance their organization is currently in need of. Some responded with smaller-scale print projects such as flyers, brochures, advertisements or fundraising material design. These projects could be relatively straight forward and easy to assign to a designer looking to donate their skills, as long as the organization could provide appropriate content, images, and specs for the project. Many responded with more large-scale, multi-media projects such as a complete rebrand, event/campaign branding, photography and promotional videos, or a revamp of all print collateral and a strategic development plan. These projects would be most successfully completed with more than one person and over a longer period of time. Another portion of organizations responded with more long-term projects, such as blog post writing, frequent website updates, cohesive storytelling throughout organization, and social media management. A total of 16 respondents want to expand their social media presence in some way. One respondent explained they would like a more cohesive brand design across web, print and email. Right now, it's a little "hodgepodge," because "for some tasks [they] use a volunteer and sometimes outside paid designers," which has created inconsistencies in their branding.

What stands out in this data is that, specifically, Graphic Communication students are equipped to accomplish every single one of these needs, especially at the senior level. However, the needs are

also complex. Though there are some small-scale projects that could easily be accomplished by, for example, a student looking to build their portfolio in their free time, a lot of the needs these organizations have may take more than one person or a longer timeline to achieve in order to assure the nonprofit is receiving the high quality work that they need and deserve. If creating a platform that connects creatives with causes is going to be sustainable and diligent in addressing the true needs of nonprofits, these issues must be addressed.

The Viability of a Platform Connecting Creatives With Causes

What is very clear based on these results is that creatives are interested in helping social causes and social causes are in need of creative assistance. The question then becomes, what is the most effective way to bridge this gap? If an online platform is the solution, though it certainly is not the only solution, this platform would have to, first and foremost, understand the needs of its users. There are already numerous platforms that connect volunteers with organizations, so creating one to cater specifically to creative needs of nonprofits will have to differentiate itself and make it as easy as possible for both parties to participate.

Based on the results of the survey, both creatives and causes see value in a platform that would connect connect those with creatives skills with causes in need of them. In the cause's survey, 64 percent believe a platform that connects creatives with social causes would be very valuable to their organization, and 20 percent would find it valuable. In the creatives' survey, 50 percent of creatives would be inclined to use this platform, and 38 percent would be very inclined. Only three respondents would not use such a platform. The vast majority of the causes (76 percent) would be willing to receive free creative services from students who are trying to build their portfolios and 84 percent of creatives say they would be willing to do free work for a social cause in need of creative skills in order to build

their portfolios. The most important circumstance in which a creative would be willing to do free work for a social cause is if it was a cause they were interested in (98 percent). One cause respondent spoke to this value alignment when they explained that it would be important for this platform to have "summaries of the creatives passions/causes," which "would be helpful in aligning the right people with the right passions for the right projects."

Indeed, finding the right creatives, with the right passions, for the right projects must be a priority in order for this platform to be successful. Many other nonprofits spoke to this need when asked if there were features they would like to see in a platform such as this. One nonprofit explained that "it takes time as an employee to manage a volunteer in a project. If a project doesn't go well, then that is time that the employee has wasted." Another organization explained that they have worked with student groups before, "some with great success and some with very limited success. It depends on how invested they are in the process." Given that nonprofits often have multiple people managing different creative projects, this platform would have to address this issue, not make it worse.

Another feature nonprofits would like to see is the ability to view the creative's portfolios or samples of their work– nine nonprofits who provided suggestions find this feature important. Other recommendations include professional references for creatives, list of creative's interests, and assurance of little to no fees for nonprofits. In addition, there was one organization that suggested not creating another platform due to there already being "many useless platforms" out there. Indeed, when asked how causes currently find their volunteers, some responded that they use current platforms available, such as VolunteerSLO, Volunteer Match, CatchaFire, Idealist, Mustang Jobs and Craigslist. The populated market should certainly be taken into account when designing a new platform in order to create differentiation and convincing reasons for nonprofits to invest time in such a platform.

All of these suggestions from the potential users should be considered in the creation a

platform that serves this purpose. However, though there appears to be support for such a platform, the

issues and concerns that were raised in the surveys led to deeper exploration to discover a more

impactful way to engage creatives with causes.

Incorporating Engagement at a University Level

Given that most students, specifically Graphic Communication students, would rather be

assigned projects in school that help fulfill the needs of nonprofits or social organizations (as opposed

to creating fictitious projects for the sake of gaining experience), there is a great opportunity for design

educators to address this desire of their students and connect them with projects assisting social causes.

To gain more insight from a creative educator, Lorraine Donegan of the Graphic Communication

Department at California Polytechnic State University was interviewed. She is a professor and advisor of

the Design Reproduction Technology concentration and teaches classes such as Digital Typography and

Magazine Design. About two to three times a quarter, Donegan receives inquiries from local nonprofits

seeking to utilize the talent pool of Graphic Communication students. When asked how willing she

would be to engage with a website that connected creatives with causes, she responded that she would

certainly provide students with extra credit, but incorporating real projects into the class curriculum

would be more complex. She explains that in Digital Typography, an introductory typography class

where there may be about 45 students, "you have maybe 15 who are interested in doing design, and

the rest of them get by but are not really passionate about it." In order for a student to be successful in

doing a project for an organization, she believes, "you have to connect the cause with the person,

because that's when it blossoms," (Donegan).

Though she has connected some students with nonprofit projects, she has found that students are busy and the projects that nonprofits come to her with are sometimes more than they seem. She explains, "It's rarely just a brochure design…An organization may say 'I need this designed' and the designer will say 'Okay, I need this, this and this from you,' [such as content, logo, high resolution photos] then, often times, there will be a delay where [the organization] realizes they don't have that stuff and they aren't as ready as they thought they were," (Donegan). If this platform is going to solve this problem, she suggests a checklist on the website to assure the nonprofit has everything the designer will need before they even make the connection. However, this also brought up the issue of the disconnect in education regarding important design factors such as image resolution and file formatting. To address this problem, she suggested training and education be offered on the platform. For example, the website could provide easily accessible resources explaining the differences of various file formats and when to use them.

When considering the complexity of some of the projects that nonprofits have come to her with, Donegan sees potential in having students work in multidisciplinary groups for an upper-division, project-based course. Then, for an entire quarter, the team could tackle a large project for a local nonprofit, such as a re-brand and in-depth, multi-media marketing plan. She sees great potential with the Integrated Marketing Communications minor at Cal Poly, which lies at the intersections of Graphic Communication, Business, Journalism and Marketing. These students would have their own specific strengths that they could contribute to the project to assure high quality work for the nonprofits. While a platform connecting creatives with causes could serve as a resource for educators who desire to accomplish this, a more localized approach as well as more work on the part of the educators and institutions is necessary.

To gain more insight into the role educators can have in connecting creatives with causes, Kevin McMahon, founder and creator of Art Heroes, a website created with the intention to connect creatives with causes, was interviewed. McMahon is also a design educator at Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose. He was getting an increasing number of students coming to him needing work for their portfolios, and an increasing number of emails and phone calls from nonprofits in need of assistance. Art Heroes was created to bridge this gap, with a strong focus on engaging colleges and high schools. He believes there's far more "benefit of having a real client and being able to say you didn't just do this
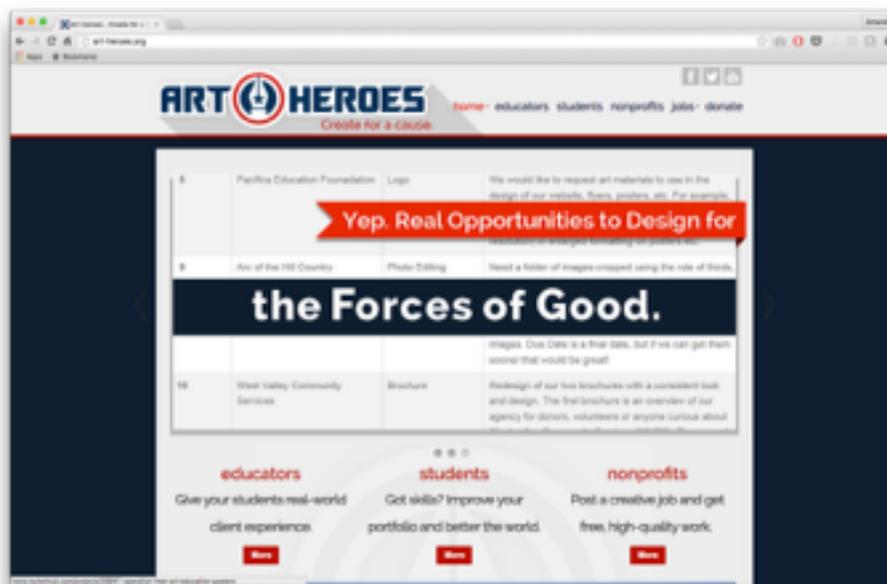

Figure 8: Art Heroes website

theoretically, but worked with someone and had to go through the entire process," (McMahon). Once Art Heroes was launched, after support from members of the Adobe Educational Leadership Group, McMahon learned a lot of lessons early on about the difficulty of running a website like this, especially all by himself.

In the time Art Heroes was running, about 20 months, they completed well over 100 jobs for nonprofits. Essentially, the website worked, but there were a lot of variables that were difficult to

manage. One issue he ran into was related to liability. While he had intended to provide photographic

and video services, he had to cut this service because "it becomes a liability on Art Heroes to connect

people that are going to meet face to face. If I were to connect a minor with an adult either online, or

worse, in person and something bad were to go down, I'd become the third party to that." In addition,

the concept of doing free work is of debate within the design community, but for McMahon, he was

adamant about providing these nonprofits with free work. He explains, "We're talking about a homeless

shelter that literally has no money. And you can ask them for money, but that's going to be taken away

from a homeless person, and I'm just not willing to do that," (McMahon). Some recommend Art Heroes

started charging nonprofits to create a more sustainable model, but this didn't align with his vision and

simply wasn't an option. Another major issue was the amount of work McMahon had to do by himself in

addition to having a full time job. Accounting, fundraising, project management, and quality assurance

were all things McMahon had to grapple with. The amount of work that has to go into creating a

successful and sustainable platform like this simply requires more people. More people, however, most

likely means more money that is needed, and fundraising was an additional issue. Although there was

initial support to get started, Art Heroes was unable to obtain a long-term corporate sponsor even after

meetings with companies such as Microsoft and Adobe, who liked the idea but wouldn't commit.

     In general, it appears a lot of people liked the idea, but fell short in terms of actual

engagement. McMahon explains that, initially, when he "launched this [website] from nothing, [he] had

1000 people sign up, all whom meant well but maybe ten percent of them were actually really

involved." This became his first level of concern. He asked himself, "How do I engage this community

better? To not just get them to say they want to do the work, but to actually do the work," (McMahon).

Though McMahon was ultimately very proud of the work Art Heroes was accomplishing, the lack of

large-scale engagement, the unsustainable business model, and the sheer depth of responsibility that

fell on him alone led him to step away from the project, regain his health, and brainstorm a new model

for Art Heroes.

This new model places education at the center and focuses on equipping educators with high

quality resources to train their students, giving educators a greater incentive to visit the website. This

time around, the "ownership of connecting with the nonprofits is on the educators themselves." When

they can show proof that their students have used what they've learned from Art Heroes and completed

a project for a local nonprofit, they will be sent an Art Heroes t-shirt or other rewards. Art Heroes then

becomes a platform that essentially trains the "art heroes" of the world and provides them with the

means and inspiration to go out and use their skills for good. This also addresses the issue of quality

control and eliminates him from being a project manager for every ongoing project.

Like Donegan, McMahon also sees great value in specific courses that focus solely on a

nonprofits needs for the entire quarter. He believes this localized approach is far more personal, more

effective and has a greater potential impact. After interviewing both Donegan and McMahon, it is clear

that facilitating engagement between creatives and causes at an educational level has a great potential

for impact, but will take effort on the educators and institutions themselves to try and make a

difference. While a platform that helps bridge the gap between creatives and causes could serve as a

resource for educators, a greater paradigm shift with more focus on serving the needs of local

nonprofits is necessary in order to provide these causes with the high quality services that they need

and deserve. McMahon summarizes with his belief that "moving to a more localized solution and

getting colleges to have more 'create for a cause' type of courses," is how the greatest impact will

occur. "It looks good for the school and the professor. It helps the designer and it helps the causes.

When it works, it's pretty awesome. The universities themselves need to be more proactive in

that," (McMahon).

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

The intent of this research was to determine the most effective way to engage creatives with

causes, looking specifically at the viability of creating an online platform that serves this purpose.

Much of what led to this project and inquiry into how to engage designers with social causes comes

from personal experience and dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities and encouragement from

the Graphic Communication department for students to use the skills taught in the curriculum to assist

causes that are contributing positively to society. While the creation of a platform appears to be a viable

and supported solution from both creatives and causes, the potential impact that incorporating this kind

of engagement at the educational level can have appears far more reaching.

The data shows that most creatives are interested in helping social causes, however, it is not

entirely convincing that this is enough for creatives to actually take action. Based on the first-hand

experience of the founder of Art Heroes, many people appeared interested in the platform but only a

small percentage of them actually took action and did work for nonprofits. This is certainly

understandable, considering designer's general lack of time and desire to be paid for projects they work

on. Given the statistics of low engagement that Art Heroes faced, the need for a greater paradigm shift

where there is more value placed on doing work for nonprofit organizations and contributing positively

to society appears to be necessary.

The institutions with the greatest power to help facilitate this shift are the universities training

the designers, developers and creatives of the future. The potential for collaboration between the

Graphic Communication Department at Cal Poly and local nonprofits in the San Luis Obispo county is

great, but will take some work on the part of the educators to achieve. While an online website that

posts global projects from nonprofits could also assist educators in contributing to nonprofits, the restrictions that a website like this would face are a deterrent, as seen in the experience of Art Heroes. A more localized approach with in-person engagement has an even stronger impact, according McMahon who has gone through the challenges of trying to maintain such a platform.

Based on the response to the infographic that presented persuasive information to creatives as to why they should donate their creative skills, creatives do see the value in volunteering and are generally considering doing so. It also appears a majority of creatives are volunteering once a month or more and have positive i stories of how skill-based volunteering made them feel or how it improved their skills. Considering 87 percent of Graphic Communication students surveyed feel a personal obligation to make a difference in the world and 90 percent of them would rather be assigned real projects in class that serve the needs of nonprofits, I believe the university should respond to these desires of the students and take the opportunity to become an agent of change within the graphic communication industry. This could include creating upper-division, project-based, "create for a cause" classes; incorporating projects into current curriculum; or proposing the new metric for analyzing "good design" proposed in Chapter 2. Universities have the power to educate students on the career options outside of consumer-focused corporations, something that is currently lacking.

This research serves as both a foundation from which a plan to create an effective platform that connects creatives with causes can stem from, as well as the opening of a dialogue around how universities can, themselves, become more socially responsible by facilitating engagement at an educational level. There is an immense need in the world to serve causes who lack the funds to hire those with creative skills who are capable of increasing their visibility and telling their story in order to stand out in our visual culture. This paper is calling for a shift away from the profit-over-people business model and toward more purpose-driven design from the graphic communication industry at large.

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