



By

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With Mike Monteiro's [new book for clients](#) just released, let's look back at its companion book for designers, [Design Is A Job](#), a manifesto for designers taking a stand as well as responsibility.

The author

I have to admit Mr. Monteiro has become a bit of a personal hero to me. He's like the George Carlin of design: smart, witty, principled, and bluntly forthright. He dispenses tough love for clients and designers alike and doesn't mince words. Case in point:

"If [clients] don't come to you for strategy and problem-solving, they're not coming to you for design, they're coming to you for production. And if you do production work, you don't get to call yourself a designer."

Ouch. I have to agree, though. We have to make a living, of course, but calling production work design perpetuates misconceptions about our field and makes it harder for all us to do good design in the long run.

The premise

We've all got unique skills in crafting great experiences, but how do we craft a productive client relationship that allows us to do great work? After all, this is all-too-rare:

“Optimally, a client shows up and says ‘We have a good sense of our problem, we’re not tied to any particular solution, and we’re looking forward to working together to come up with one using our collective expertise.’ And then we take off on our unicorns.”

The book aims to make us better at this other part of our jobs— from getting projects and getting paid (if you run your own business), to effectively presenting, gathering feedback, and working with clients and others. It’s the latter part that resonated with me most, as it relates to all of us, whether freelance, agency, or in-house designer.

It’s hard to summarize a book this packed with advice and insights, but a few themes run throughout:

- Understanding your client
- Taking responsibility and control
- Drawing the line
- Understanding your client

“Clients tend to show up with a solution in mind, even if they can’t fully articulate the problem. It’s whether you’re able to walk them backward from the solution they envision [...] and how open they are to that process, that lets you know they’re going to be a good client. Your ability to do that is a sign of how good you are as a designer.”

Monteiro argues that many struggles in the designer-client relationship stem from a combination of misconceptions and anxiety:

- Misconceptions about what we bring to the table (problem-solving vs. prettifying), how we work (process vs. magical intuition), and what we need (goals vs. solutions);
- Anxiety about putting their money and reputation on the line by having hired us.

This can lead a client to take charge of the solution and process. And while the client brings the business expertise, it’s good to remind them that they hired us for design expertise including the process that allows us to continue to create successful products:

“Let [clients] know that not only are these your problems to solve, but they are paying you to solve them.”

Taking responsibility and control

Whether it’s selling our craft or gathering feedback, our responsibility doesn’t stop with the deliverable. Presentations, for example, have a way of derailing when we don’t take control of them. Monteiro recommends we always set an agenda, clarify the desired feedback (including inviting constructive criticism), speak to goals not features, and be confident.

“By and large, most clients want to be good clients. [...] You can roll your eyes about how much they don’t understand about design or you can roll up your sleeves and start practicing your craft by helping them clarify what they need.”

Drawing the line

“Good work comes from mutual respect.”

If, despite your best efforts to educate your client and lead the process, a client keeps dictating solutions or deviating from the agreed-upon plan, that respect has been lost and it may be time to walk away.

“Get comfortable saying ‘No.’ [...] You will lose work. But you will also feel better about the work you get. You may even get a reputation as a hard-ass. I can tell you from experience, it’s not the end of the world.”

This means we can’t always be “nice:”

“There’s a difference between being enjoyable to work with and being ‘nice.’ Being nice means worrying about keeping up the appearance of harmony at the expense of being straightforward and fully-engaged.”

Conclusion

This is an important and readable book for anyone who produces, manages, or sells design. It’s also one of my personal favorites in 15 years of designing and consulting.

I hope you’ll pick up a copy and feel inspired to start putting these ideas into practice to improve our work and field. As Monteiro puts it:

“We are all links in a continuous timeline of a shared craft. It is our responsibility to keep that timeline strong.”

Damon works in interaction design at Blink UX with a passion for understanding users, making the complex simple, and doing the right thing. He has recently started combining his love of traveling with that of rock climbing.