

## Commercial graphic design is NOT self-expression

Take a look at your design portfolio. Does piece one for client A have distinct similarities to piece one for client B? By that I mean, do the pieces share similar concepts and/or layouts? Do the same typefaces, color palettes, and types of imagery appear project after project? Is there a “look and feel” that permeates everything you do? If so, there could be a problem.

Why? Because each client deserves a unique solution to their specific problem. We should not be shoe-horning the client into our vision, our job is to help them develop a vision of their own. (I’m not referring here to the style an illustrator or photographer develops that a client chooses to emulate.) Advertising and marketing is not about its creator, the designer. It is not even its sponsor, the client. It is about its audience, the prospects, the people we want to take notice and move to action.

Don’t get me wrong, there are times when a formula solution is perfectly acceptable. Not everyone can afford the time and expense it takes to create a unique approach. As long as the client knows they are getting a formula solution to their problem, that’s fine. But even then, if we apply the same look and feel to the solution, we lessen its impact.

The truth is, the sum of a truly creative equation is never the same. When you multiply a client’s unique product, service, or idea by its one-of-a-kind audience, and add its unique position in an ever-changing market, it is virtually impossible to arrive at the same solution for any two organizations.

Here are a few ways to keep your solutions new and fresh:

### 1. Retain your anonymity.

Think of yourself as a ghostwriter. The challenge is to apply your skills for communicating ideas to the client’s project without anyone realizing it—to make the transfer seamless. Remember, it’s not about the designer. Our job is to raise the stock of the client in the consumer’s eyes, not to leave them wondering who designed the client’s brochure.

### 2. Keep your opinions to yourself.

A client project is not the place to express your personal political views, moral opinions, or to vent a provocative sense of humor. It is amateurish to base a message on material that you know will provoke a negative reaction from a significant number of a client’s prospects for nothing more than attracting attention. Let me say that again: gambling a client’s reputation for the sole purpose of attracting attention is the sign of an amateur.

To the client: Why would you ever settle for an approach that is guaranteed to turn off a significant percent of your audience? Opinionated, provocative solutions that offer no critical advantage reveal the author’s lack of creativity and marketing know-how—whether it is small design studio or one of the world’s top ten advertising agencies.

### 3. Keep opening new doors.

It is difficult to discover a brilliant solution for one client and restrain yourself from applying it to the next—but that is the challenge. The reality is, we need to come in the next morning, paint over the last solution, and start with a clean canvas. To be clear, we certainly need to apply what we learn through our successes. But the gauge of a good designer is their ability to devise different approaches to similar problems.

That said, don’t blame the messenger for the message. The reason I raise this issue is because I struggle with it myself. No one is immune from the desire to grab some of the spotlight for themselves. I simply propose you delegate self-expression to the design of your workspace, to a side business for developing your own products, and to sharing your opinion through articles, books, and blogs. That you consider the proposition that day-to-day work for clients is not the place for self.

[I welcome your thoughts here.](#)

Commercial graphic

# Design is NOT Self expression

It is, rather, about promoting ideas, products, and services with honesty, clarity, and style. CHUCK GREEN

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### AGREE?

Print it out and hang it up. A friend who teaches a college-level design course bought a walls-worth of small frames and invited fifty designers to contribute a piece of work. The idea being, to provide future students with nuggets of motivation and inspiration. This phrase, an opinion near and dear to my heart, is one I would like every young designer to hear. (I wish someone had told me early on.)

Agree? Print it out and hang it up. Disagree? Print it out, hang it up, and throw stuff at it.

### ABOUT CHUCK GREEN'S DESIGN IDEAS

Effective design targets a precise group of prospects, highlights consumer-centered benefits, presents solutions to specific problems, and uses unique words and imagery to move people to action. Anything less is decoration.

Chuck is a veteran designer, author of design books for Peachpit, Random House, and Rockport Publishers, and the host of ideabook.com: the how-to hub for everyone interested in the real-world, practical application of commercial graphic design ([ideabook.com](http://ideabook.com)).

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