Towards Knowledge Building in Professional Groups

John Zapolski
National Board Member, AIGA
999 Steiner Street
San Francisco, CA 94117
J_zapolski@yahoo.com
415/867-2896

ABSTRACT

In this submission for the CHI05 Development forum, I reflect on my experience leading the Experience Design community of interest of the American Institute of Graphic Arts and suggest that the focus of the group needs to shift in order to successfully accomplish our mission.

Author Keywords

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BACKGROUND

Over the last year and a half, as chair of the American Institute for Graphic Arts' (AIGA) Experience Design (ED) national community of interest, I have put much effort into thinking about problems in contemporary design practice and our organization's attempts at addressing them: what we have tried to do in the past and what we have actually done; the set of people we have tried to serve and should try to serve; what the most pressing and relevant problems facing the community are; what activities we should undertake to address those challenges; and how we should organize to effectively work towards their resolution.

Our group began in 1998 as an informal gathering of leading designers at a retreat called the Advance for Design, intended to draw together a small, committed group of practitioners intent on investigating new trends in design and technology. A second gathering was held a year later, after which time the group was formalized as a community of interest within the AIGA, a 90-year-old professional organization for communication designers.

And so began an organized effort to build a community of like-minded people from design and related disciplines interested in advancing understanding of user experience practice.

SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

Looking back over our accomplishments these last six years, I believe we have primarily tried – with mixed success – to do three things. Firstly, we have functioned as a leading-edge collective of practitioners looking at how design practice is evolving, and trying to feed that back into the general AIGA membership. This I would describe as an internal think-tank function for the larger AIGA, and to this end we have influenced change in the organization's national agenda and helped produce a more broadly-focused and inclusive organization.

Secondly, we have tried to crystallize a community to advance understanding of user experience. In this way, too, we have been successful. We now have over 2500 practitioners and students, and unofficially helped spur the development of other groups with narrower and more specialized objectives (among them AIfIA, IxDG, and UXNet). While these other groups certainly deserve a lot of credit for their community building efforts as well, without a doubt there is certainly a much stronger, and more accessible, community of similar-minded practitioners today than there was before the AIGA ED group came along.

Far less successfully, we have attempted to build tools that can be taken up in everyday use and discussion by design practitioners and design leaders wanting to expand design's potential, with a special emphasis on expanding its strategic impact. We have probably come closest to this goal through our case study initiative (in part through our collaboration with ACM SIGCHI and SIGGRAPH), which has resulted in 38 case studies documented and available for download on the AIGA website. Undoubtedly, though, we can do more to be successful in achieving this goal, as the profession continues to severely lack a formalized body of knowledge about its practice.

LESSONS LEARNED

Considering the successes we have experienced in relationship to one another, it has become clear to me that the most productive use of the Experience Design has heretofore been to serve the needs of the larger AIGA. We

have been successful by looking for ways to shape and advance the mission of the organization and serve the needs of its members, and we have been least successful in attempting to move beyond the boundaries of the immediate need of our organizational home, in attempting to create tools and products useful in the practice of design. That, unfortunately, is exactly backwards.

PRODUCTS, NOT EVENTS

In order for professional organizations to stay relevant to their constituents in the future, they must recognize the larger ecosystem of services and organizations available to their members. Rather than look at their membership in isolation, as a stable entity to which need be delivered services, I believe they need to start from the outside – from the needs of real people in the real world – and work their way in to consider the role of the organization in fulfilling those needs.

For no matter how altruistic a professional organization's mission, it inevitably is beholden to its funding model. For the AIGA and the like, that means that every activity undertaken, whether done so consciously or not, needs to support the goal of getting existing members to "re-up" their membership. The organization's revenue comes almost entirely from membership dues and from annual member conferences. The underlying promise offered to members in exchange for their dues and fees is a sense of community – a place to fraternize and compare notes with colleagues of similar mind.

Hosting events, with the corresponding discount given to existing members, thus become the most effective way for professional organizations to encourage members to join and re-subscribe. Looking at this from a customer point of view, the point of view of the member, the underlying promise seems to be an opportunity to belong. A chance to have a home, a place – whether virtual or real – to go to connect with colleagues. And therein lies the problem. In our hyper-connected world of social networks, web communities, mailing lists, and meet-ups, we now simply have too many places to belong.

Stepping back from that, I believe it is useful to ask again about the larger purpose intended by our various professional associations. For the AIGA, it is "furthering excellence in communication design as a broadly-defined discipline, strategic tool for business and cultural force." The subsequent discussion, then, is about, how exactly to do that. If we see "furthering excellence" as synonymous with innovation, then we can say that the challenge is to take the practices and characteristics of high-end design, now accessible primarily only to those at the leading edge of practice, and attempt to find ways to make only the most important and functional benefits available to more people, at a cheaper price point.[1] In other words, the task at hand is to create a means for consolidating and sharing foundational knowledge of design, to make basic design accessible to more people.

To do that effectively, we need to build tools that make knowledge of design easier to acquire. I believe a more effective approach to doing this would be to create organizations that build knowledge products of these and sell them to design consumers. Instead of deriving revenue from membership dues, these organizations would maintain themselves through fee revenue attached to the products they sell. The effect of such an approach is to create more direct alignment between the needs of the organization and the needs of its constituents. In short, they have an incentive to be useful, in order to compete directly for the dollars of the larger market opened up to them, beyond that their members.

Case studies could be an example of one such "knowledge product". Case studies have been one way that other fields have codified knowledge from problems encountered by leading edge practitioners and made them interesting and relevant to a wider audience. As an imperfect but nonetheless useful reference point, Harvard Business School produces approximately 350 business cases per year. And their incentive for doing so is great – they sell an average of 6 million cases per year. At around $6 each, that makes for a $36million revenue stream. Now of course, I would not argue that the appeal of design cases would make for a market of a similar size. And neither am I saying that the intention of professional organizations should be to bring in revenues on the order of $36million. But if the intent of these organizations is to influence practice, to make it better, more excellent, more impactful, I do believe they need to find ways to get their practices out into the world at the order at a scale of reach comparable to those that business cases enjoy.

CONCLUSION

It is a truism to say that all institutions initially founded to serve a vital and noble purpose inevitably end up concerned mostly with furthering their own existence. Professional design organizations, though sincerely intent on promoting better design in the world, are locked in a trap of maintaining the size of their membership and the corresponding revenue garnered from dues. To truly serve their missions, however, organizations must think beyond justifying their existence through annual conferences and other events and create a product which can be marketed to a broader constituency. It may be the only way to avoid irrelevance.

REFERENCES
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