

StrategicProposals

Think like a designer

IMPROVE YOUR

PROPOSALS

Rachel Fisher CF APMP

Designers, *innovators,* *creative thinkers.*

Those lucky people, bestowed with talents that allow them to think 'outside the box', to problem solve, to disrupt. How do they do it? Maybe they were born like that, with creative genes.

The truth is, almost everyone has the capacity for creative and innovative thinking. It's a skill that can be taught and practised, and it's as much about unlearning as learning. For most of us, creativity has been stifled by a lifetime of being taught to just 'follow the rules'. We've not been taught how to think creatively.

Most people don't think of themselves as designers – but anyone can learn to think like one. I'm going to go through some easy ideas that can be applied to help people with bids and proposals, regardless of their background or role.

Reading this won't turn you into a designer, but it will help to demonstrate how you can apply design thinking to different tasks. Creative thinking isn't just for designers: it can and should be used by everyone to solve everyday problems.

[illegible]

If I ask you to think of a designed object, you may think of products renowned for their design, like Apple, or Dyson, or even a well designed proposal! The truth is, everything is designed. Every chair you sit on, every pen you pick up. Even the less obvious things that you can't see like systems and processes.

Design can even change your behaviour – for example, I could help or hinder your navigation of a busy roundabout, depending on where I painted white lines on the tarmac. Those same white lines may affect how you feel about your journey. Are you confident or nervous?



So when you put together a proposal or pitch, you're designing it. We're not talking graphic design here: you're designing the story, the messaging, the structure – even the processes and schedules that help you manage the project.



What is ^{GOOD} design?

As we've established, everything is designed. But how do we define a good design? Dieter Rams is a German industrial designer who was responsible for the design of Braun's consumer products for many years. About 50 years ago, when trying to answer the question 'Is my design a good design?', he developed ten principles. I've picked out a few that may be more interesting to us as proposal and pitch professionals.

See if you can think of ways these principles can be applied to your current processes.

Find the full set of principles here:

<https://www.vitsoe.com/rw/about/good-design>

If creative thinkers are made and not born, how do you do it?

Studies by Clayton M. Christensen and his researchers uncovered The Innovators DNA – five key behaviours that optimise your brain for discovery. Used together, these behaviours can help us find creative ways to solve problems.

“You can’t wait for inspiration, you have to go after it with a club.”

Jack London,
American novelist

Ideas to apply to your next proposal

The following techniques are used by designers, but the principles can be applied across all aspects of pitch and proposal production. Use them to assess your processes and productivity, define your structure and refine your story.

Become a master storyteller.

Imagine your client is the hero. The hero goes on a journey. They're challenged and tested but return triumphant. This reframes the usual narrative of your product/service being the hero. Imagine the hero's challenges and look at the whole journey.

Here's a typical story arc with example pitch and proposal structures overlaid.

This structure allows you to command attention from the outset and make the presentation all about value to the client. Repetition makes people remember exactly what you want them to remember.

Communication not decoration.

It's not about aesthetics, although these are important. Design is about solving problems and communicating. Legibility should never be compromised.

So, before you think about adding some design flair to your charts, or a contents page, ask: does it communicate what I need it to? Is it clear, from this chart, what the audience needs to know? Do the colours I've added serve a purpose, with a clearly marked key, or are they confusing the reader? Is my table of contents clear? Will it help the client navigate the document?

“Content precedes design. Design in the absence of content is not design, it's decoration.”

Jeffrey Zeldman,
American web designer

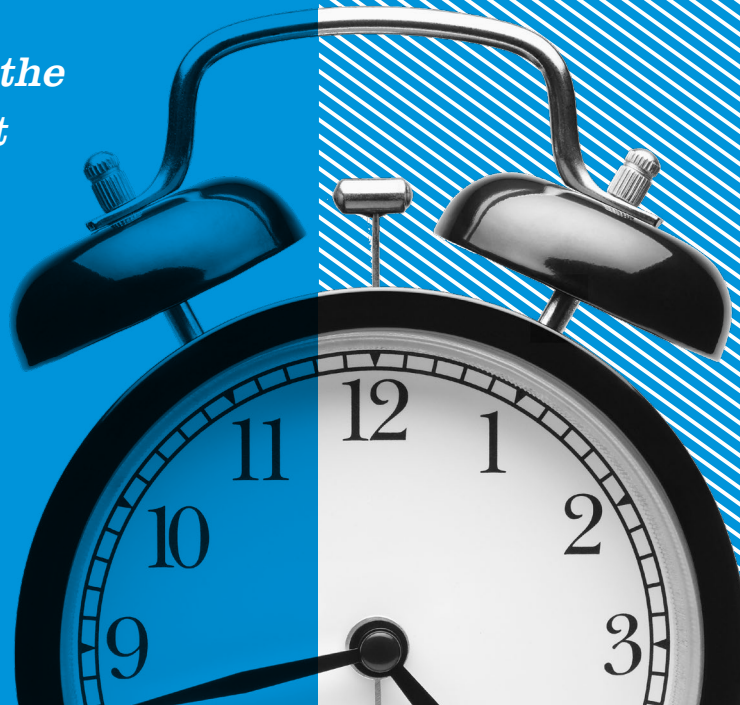
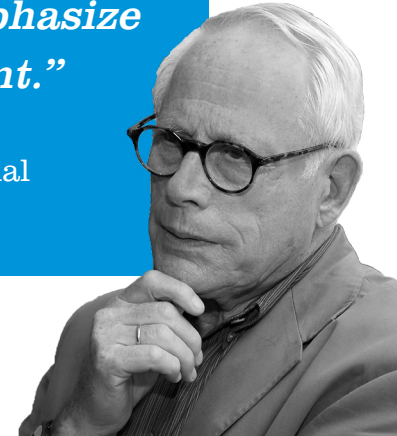
Less is more.

Simple means not just removing things, but making what's there work better. Strip away the non-essentials and make sure everything that's left fulfils its potential.

It means being brave - braver to remove things. It's easier to add more detail, especially when understanding is low and the pressure is high. Make it easy for your viewer to make sense of the content. Once you've stripped out everything non-essential, you can revisit the essentials, making each as elegant as possible.

“One of the most significant design principles is to omit the unimportant in order to emphasize the important.”

Dieter Rams,
German industrial designer



Embrace constraints.

A designer needs constraints. Give a designer a brief without a time limit and they could spend weeks on it. Months even. They would probably keep going until you told them to stop. Would the end result be better than if you'd given them a time constraint of a week? Possibly not!

Limitations inspire better thinking. There's no point complaining about constraints such as time, money or resources. Your problem is what it is. Think about how you can solve it given the resources and time that you have.

Don't be afraid to fail.

If you want to think creatively, you mustn't be afraid to fail. After coming up with the concept of a cyclone vacuum cleaner, James Dyson made 5,000 different prototypes before he was happy with the design. That's 4,999 fails!

A key difference in creative people is how they deal with negative events. You can't control your client's deadlines or requirements, but you can control your reaction to them. If you can adopt a positive attitude to a scenario, you can achieve a positive result.

At Google, once a product fails to reach its potential, it's axed, but the company extracts the best features and uses them for future designs. Every great idea comes from hundreds of bad ones.

“Failure is actually a badge of honor. Failure is the way to be innovative and successful. You can fail with pride.”

Gopi Kallayil, Google's chief social evangelist

It's not about you, it's about them.

Focus on the user. Look at the problem from their point of view; put yourself in their shoes. This isn't easy – in fact, it takes great empathy. We purchase with emotion and how we feel has an enormous effect on what we buy. Think about the evaluators and the users of whatever you'll be supplying: what values drive their decision making? What is their attitude to change, their motivation? Disregard feasibility issues for now, and think about what the user's story is and what the ideal solution looks like for them.

If it isn't broken, improve it.

There is always a better way. We go along with normal – because it's always been done that way – when we should be looking to improve. Challenge and question tried-and-tested methods and process. Where can efficiency be gained? Where can small improvements be made? Look at the same pieces of copy you roll out of the knowledge bank for every RFP. When were they last reviewed? Could they be improved?

Even if the proposal and pitch delivers a win, it's always possible to improve. And each time you win, the clever loser will be thinking of what they can do better. You just can't stand still.



An IBM Global CEO study found creativity is valued as the most important leadership quality for successful businesses, above integrity, global thinking and influence.

Anyone can be creative. Be brave – and don't be afraid to fail! Creativity encourages problem solving, supports innovation and increases productivity.

So, give it a go!

**For more inspiration
on how to improve your
proposals, contact:**

0800 009 6800
rf@strategicproposals.com
strategicproposals.com

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