

# THE YEAR OF UNINVITED REBRANDING

Branding projects undertaken without permission yield results that may be pretty but have no strategic value, which undermines our value as a profession

by John Furneaux

*Fast Company's* year-end article on the best branding of 2012 claims that "it was the year of the unofficial, uninvited, branding campaign." Alongside innovative brand programs developed by leading firms, such as Pentagram and Wolff Olins, almost half the identities shown in the magazine were "concept" pieces done by designers who hadn't been commissioned by the companies they "rebranded."

These uninvited redesigns are creating new issues for our industry and, as Russell Brandom recently wrote on the website BuzzFeed.com, they have become the "frenemies" of many. They are the hypothetical musings of designers who haven't actually been asked to do the work. They do it for free with the hope of achieving publicity and new commissions. And they're everywhere. One used to expect students and recent graduates to use promotional tactics like this, but even established firms are doing "concept" work in the hope of attracting notice.

One brand given a prominent spec treatment in 2012 was American Airlines. The hypothetical identity program was "commissioned" by Victors & Spoils, an ad agency whose business model is based around design work being done on spec. Their "hypothetical" identity looks exactly like what it would have been seen as just a few years ago—a well-done school project.

The superficial and essentially pointless nature of this work became even more apparent when the American Airlines rebrand by FutureBrand was launched a few months later. Whether or not you like the solution's aesthetic is not to the point. What matters is that FutureBrand spent two years working closely with the airline to ensure that program solved real needs and engaged two audiences far more important than designers—customers and employees.

As an industry, we need to take a stand against uninvited branding. It devalues the efforts of those who apply a rigorous process and sound, strategic

thinking to our work. And it weakens our arguments when we fight for the elimination of spec work in pitches. Designers need to be part of a strategic process that informs and guides the creation of visuals. The solutions we develop need to be about problem solving, not our personal taste.

Uninvited spec work also characterizes the worst aspects of the designer ego. This stereotype paints designers as always knowing what is best for the client. In the *Fast Company* article they place the spec logos among the best rebrands, because the design studios "forewent the high fees big firms command for such jobs . . . to fully flex their design muscles and generate the kinds of identities that can result only from creative carte blanche." Funny, I thought that working with clients within the parameters of their strategic business objectives is what distinguishes designers from visual artists.

When we evaluate a rebranding on the basis of its visual appeal alone, we are only looking at the most superficial criteria. To be successful, a brand has to work visually, but it also must address other very important factors:

- Is it sustainable? Will the solution stand the test of time?
- Can it be embraced by all stakeholders? We don't own our clients' brands, the people who interact with them every day do.
- Can it be implemented? Can the organization afford to produce it so the idea truly comes to life?

As a profession, we talk about "strategic process" and have worked earnestly to be taken more seriously by businesses. So why do we get all excited about made-up projects and then say that we wish clients would just let us do as we pleased? As designers, we need to make up our minds about what we really want. If the goal is to work with our clients as strategic consultants, why do we encourage practices that make us seem more superficial? Would a management consultant dream up a plan for a company without a comprehensive understanding of its issues and opportunities? No. Then why should we?

I suggest anyone who is considering creating an uninvited brand to instead find a pro bono client who could really benefit from a redesign. That way, you'll be using your time to make the world a better place—not one littered with visual solutions that no one ever asked for.



**John Furneaux** is a principal at Projektor, a Toronto-based brand image agency ([john@projektor.ca](mailto:john@projektor.ca)).