

Stephen Doyle on Humor in Design

Stephen Doyle is the principal of Doyle Partners in New York City. Formerly a designer at *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, and M&Co., he cofounded Drenttel Doyle Partners in the 1980s and developed a distinct design signature and vocabulary combining a neoclassical (or what he calls “modern classicism”) type aesthetic with an interest in visual puns. His design of *Spy* magazine in the late eighties, with its multiple type styles and layers of visual and textual information, was highly imitated and became emblematic of the era’s magazine design. His work is as much about humor as a communications tool as it is about the formal issues of color and composition. His clients are as diverse as Martha Stewart and the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum (Smithsonian Institution), yet humor remains a constant.

What is the importance of humor in graphic design?

It’s a technique to involve an audience. If you design a film, you have a captive audience. When you design a book cover, you are trying to design something that’s magnetic—that’s going to draw people to it—something that’s related to the topic but doesn’t give everything away. It should have allure. That’s where the humor comes in. If something is nicely wrong enough, it can entice. If something is funny or warm or friendly, then it actually reaches out to people; it begins a dialogue, a two-way street. We try to use humor as a human magnet.

Do you inject some kind of humor into all your work?

No, it is not appropriate to be funny all the time. I pity the woman who married Robin Williams. Also, the work we do is not particularly slapstick-funny, it’s not “ha-ha” stuff. More often, we’re after charm or light humor—sometimes our design work is a little bit wrong or off-kilter. We’re after a double take. We might make something too small, to act insidious, or, then again, too big, to be bombastic. It’s that little bit of “upside-downsia” that gives our work a sense of being memorable. It suggests, “We know that you know that we know.”

Is humor a strategic tool as well?

I’m interested in humor as a marketing technique as much as anything. We designed some book covers for HarperCollins College Outline texts. These are supplementary college-level texts on topics like psychology and marketing and mathematics. Previously, they looked remedial. They were an embarrassment to own, much less carry around campus. We designed them so that even the guy carrying a precalculus book could look stylish—and smart!

But even if these atypical cover designs are appealing to students, how do you convince the decision makers to buy your ideas?

Every book design project has a couple of target audiences, and they're sequential. First, you gotta sell an idea to your client (the art director, editor, publisher, or whatever). Then, it's gotta break through at the level of the bookstore buyer, and only then does it have the chance to sit on some unsuspecting shelf and flaunt its cover to the consumer audience. How do you convince all these decision makers, when you only come face-to-face with one set? It's the power of the work itself that does the convincing. All the justification in the world, all the literary theory you can stomach, begging, insisting, or threats will get you absolutely nowhere on the decision-making ladder unless the work has some truth or resonance or personality to keep it alive with or without you.

In this particular case, our idiosyncratic approach actually increased sales. The bookstores ordered more books and racked them face out because they were amusing commentaries on the topic as well as good-looking as a series. And they were more powerful for the sheer quantity of them. Our introduction of humor to this genre of books made a big impact on the category, and now other publishers are copying us.

Do you find books are a good genre for design humor?

We don't design a whole lot of books, but we like to do books because they serve as a kind of design touchstone for us. I think what is fascinating about composing a book is that it's a narrative; even if it's just a picture layout, it's telling a story. My design roots are in magazine editorial as an art director. I worked at *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone* magazines, and I'm fascinated with the idea of telling stories with words and pictures. When you design a book, it's not just about graphic design, it's about design and time. It's about sequence and getting from here to there in a considered way. A designer gets to orchestrate the experience from this page to the next. You get to add to the three-dimensional product of the book itself another dimension of time. I love the tactile quality of books. I love the sound of a book hitting the table. It has, after years of magazine design, a permanence that really appeals to me.

Do you see your work as having a distinct Stephen Doyle personality?

"Personality" is a great term, which appeals to me because there really is a common personality rather than a common style with the work that we do. We try to make our work both appropriate to the audience and consistent with our thinking. But—*careful!*—that description also fits a tax return! As Joseph Beuys asks, if your work has no drama to it, who would ever be interested in it? That's where the personality factor becomes an important element. Who wants to go to a dinner party and be seated next to someone who's accurate? Wouldn't you rather spend time with someone amusing?

We're not interested in trends. They're antithetical to getting work noticed. Our job is to stand out from the trends and call attention to the product or the service or the client or whatever it is that we're promoting. Allowing personality into your work can salvage it from being "targeted communication" (which sounds dangerous or boring or both), and it can also rescue your work from being "about design"—that slippery slope of onanism that designers often visit by themselves.

Design students, in particular, are enamored with the trend du jour—

What a difference a day makes! Once everybody has a tattoo, they are a little less risqué.

Trends start as something new, but they become mainstream so quickly now, it's hard to tell who is the piper and who are the rats. The ultimate enemy of a trend is trending. It starts out looking different and noticeable, then it buries itself as everybody imitates it.

Trends extinguish themselves. And that can leave a student with a dated-looking portfolio.

Let's talk about the work you have done for Champion International paper company's Benefit line of premium papers. Speaking of a wink and a nod, the audience is other designers. Do you have a different set of rules or standards when designing for designers?

Down deep, designers really loathe each other's work. We'll never admit it, but we only feel safe truly admiring the work of the dead. Everybody else, at some level, is the competition. To market paper to designers, we tried to slip in the cracks and send them stuff that didn't really look like design. Our Benefit promotions have no pictures, and there's minimal typography. It's all about color, and, besides, you get good free stuff! Not even a graphic designer can resist free goodies, just so there's not too much design on 'em. We know that everybody throws away booklets, calendars, T-shirts, and refrigerator magnets. Our guiding principle was to develop promotions that people with too much stuff already couldn't throw away.

What we tried to do with Benefit was to remove the hand of the graphic designer so that when you get something in the mail, it's yours—not mine. It is about the exuberant juxtaposition of colors. We overcame language; the promotions do not say Benefit everywhere, but the colors just scream Benefit. I think this is the best identity we ever designed, and there's not even a logo. It's the colors themselves that are Benefit, and the colors change! I think this program is a wonderfully devious way to market to design studios.

From where do these colors originate?

The colors of refrigerators have been changing over the years. Why should it take so long for the paper industry to catch up? Tastes change. Look in the back of your closet! Slowly, but thoroughly, our tastes transform over time to "what's in the air," especially where color is concerned. The Benefit colors are designed by me. Coming up with these colors is very personal, but it is meant to reflect the colors that I see around me. My studio is very respectful when I get out my paints and start mixing these colors up, and that's the crude way that it's done. I paint swatch cards by the hundreds. I swing the hues with tiny variations into grays and yellows and greens. I paint blue swatches, add hints of red, swing through pale violets, and head off into gray. Then the editing and the juxtaposition begins. I try to develop a range with personality, but that is also reasonable as paper: colors you can use, but a little bit off the beaten path. That's Benefit!

Speaking of your romance with color, you have developed a distinctive palette for Martha Stewart's products for Kmart. How difficult has it been to inject your design sophistication into such a mass-market product line?

Difficult? It is a blast! She has just introduced a line of sheets and towels and tablecloths and curtains into Kmart for which we do the packaging and the in-store signage. Martha

Stewart and her team are insistent on not talking down to the millions, and her strategy is working. In one year, her brand has become a billion-dollar business. I think that the work we do for her is very much like what we've been doing for the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, which is to take high taste and introduce it to the masses. For example, the objective of the book we designed, titled *Design for Life*, for the National Design Museum is to take the museum and introduce it to the people on the street and show them what design is all about. In the same way, working for a mass-market store like Kmart and a high-end product like Martha Stewart, we are acting as translators between high taste and the masses, and that's a job we relish.

Can you be humorous in this realm?

Sure!

There is a photograph in your office of an installation celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of women's suffrage. It is the actual text from the Nineteenth Amendment that you applied to the floor of Grand Central Terminal. It says, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." Tell me about the challenge of working within a space like Grand Central and doing something that has such import. This is not about devising identities for high-end or mass-market products.

Can you imagine the power you feel as a graphic designer when you install part of the Constitution in a monumental landmark space like Grand Central in such a way that hundreds of thousands of people passing by stop to read it? This was absolutely thrilling for us. A real career high.

Also, this project curiously summarizes some of the very things that we have been talking about: translating from "on high" to the masses and humor. Even though we are appropriately reverential about the Constitution, and certainly women's right to vote, don't miss the fact that we positioned our type so that people rushing to catch their train were confronted by a massive word on the ground: a very compelling eight-foot-high "SEX"! It certainly worked to pique a little curiosity. After all, it is Forty-second Street!