

## Suffering from Post-Brexit Anxiety?

Shan Preddy, Partner at Preddy&Co, explores ten things that design firms should be doing right now

*This is an extended version of Shan's article which appeared in Design Week on 26 July 2016*



**Depending on which way you voted, and whether you're now feeling relieved or disappointed, one thing is sure: all of us in the UK now 'live in interesting times' politically and economically.**

Nobody – not the British Government or the European Council, let alone those of us working in the design sector – knows exactly what the eventual impact of the UK's decision to leave the EU is going to be. However, despite the well-known saying that it's 'dangerous to make predictions especially about the future', we can safely predict one thing. There will be changes, good and bad.

In the longer term UK design firms, like all UK businesses, will be affected by issues such as different international trading arrangements and employment laws. That's OK. We'll learn ways to deal with that. But what about in the shorter term? Some design firms will benefit from increased international work if current exchange rates continue to be preferential to overseas companies; others will suffer as clients hold fire on projects until the smoke clears and the UK economy has settled; all will face a much more competitive market as everyone fights harder for available projects. And, as in all turbulent times, the well-run design businesses will survive and the poorly-run will go under.

Uncertainty always presents a challenge for anyone in business, so here are ten things that we're advising business leaders at our UK design firm clients to do right now. They will help to prepare you for good times ahead as well as protect you from bad.

- 1 Focus immediately on your existing client relationships.** They are the quickest, easiest, cheapest and best source of future business. Take a long, hard look at your firm's client relationship management policies and practices; every member of your firm, whatever their role, should now have 'impeccable client service' somewhere in their job descriptions, and they should be equipped with the training and the tools to deliver it. Turn up the heat to maximum on satisfying, retaining and actively developing your current clients.
- 2 Contact recent-but-dormant clients in person.** Unless they've asked you never to darken their doorsteps again (or vice-versa), they are your next-best source of future business. They already know you and they understand what you can do for them. All they need now is a gentle waking up, but you need to do it properly. Database-driven, auto-send newsletters and blogs on their own won't be enough.

- 3 Stop talking about your marketing and sales programme, and just get on and do it.** How's your strategy looking? Have you got a robust positioning? Target market? Set of meaningful propositions? Have you updated them if necessary to adapt to the new economic climate? If so, are you articulating them clearly on every touchpoint from your website's landing page to your email signatures? Do you have a rolling 12-month campaign plan with activities, dates and budgets? Have you got the right people in place, in-house or outsourced? Are your activities as powerful, consistent and integrated as they need to be? Tweets, online posts like these and digi-conversations are useful (and great fun) but they aren't the cake or even even the icing on the cake: they are the lovely little multi-coloured sprinkly bits on top of the icing.
- 4 Brush up your credentials meetings.** Are they winners or ho-hum also-rans? If you get the opportunity to spend facetime with a potential client, remember that the limited time you're going to get should be treated as a sales meeting (which doesn't mean it has to be a 'salesy' meeting). Talk about them and their needs, ask challenging research-based questions, then discuss how you might be able to help them. Learn consultative, user-focused selling skills if you need to.
- 5 Work on your presentations.** Although a credentials encounter is a meeting and not a presentation, there might come a point when you need to show casework. And what about the day-to-day sharing of ideas, solutions and recommendations with your existing clients? Or with your colleagues? Are you and your team members as clear and convincing as they could be? And, talking of convincing, how are their negotiation skills?
- 6 Invest in your staff at all levels of seniority.** You hired the best: now give them the expert internal and external coaching, mentoring and training that they need. Without the right knowledge, skills and capabilities, how can they support you in your business? If they aren't performing to their full potential you have a problem.
- 7 If you have periods of downtime, don't just sulk.** Or panic. Or do nothing. Instead, use the opportunity to work on your business. Think. Then think again. Think until it hurts if necessary. As Einstein (always good for an intelligent comment or two) said: "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." Work with your senior team members on assessing whether your vision, values, goals and business strategy are still as relevant and exciting as they were when you first developed them, and then create forward plans based on different 'what if' scenarios. If one of the 'what ifs' actually happens, you'll be ready for it.
- 8 Be honest with yourself about your product.** When compared with your direct competitors and with the global market as a whole, is it good enough? Does it excel in terms of the three essential design pillars of strategy, creativity and implementation? And what about trends in your clients' needs, and in those of their customers or end-users? Are you not only keeping up with them but staying ahead of them? All successful sales match benefits (yours) with needs (theirs). Half the battle is in meeting those needs; the other half is in accurately predicting them. Without a good product, there are no benefits.
- 9 Review and tighten up the operational side of your business.** Are your financial, HR, IT and legal resources – whether they're in-house or outsourced – all running smoothly, like the clockwork you need them to be? Are they still bringing in the required information and results, and providing value to your business? Are you aware of all the different ways that they could help you? And have you considered working with additional

external experts who can help you to get where you want to be? Have those conversations.

- 10 And finally ... don't give away your work for nothing.** Yes, I'm talking about free pitches. More than ever, now's the time for UK design firms to stop providing unpaid strategic and creative thinking to prospects who can afford to pay for it. The sole exception should be any work you do for charities and not-for-profit causes that you support. In these cases, you're simply donating skills instead of money and if you give, do so generously and uncomplainingly. Otherwise, the relationship you have with your prospective clients (and your current clients, employees and suppliers) should be one of "professional-to-professional, expert-to-expert, equal-to-equal." You pay for work done for you; expect to be paid for the work you do for others. By the way, did I hear you thinking in point 3 that you can't afford a marketing programme? Try adding up how much time, effort and money you spent on free pitching in the last year. You could have used it on some proper marketing instead.

If you really are suffering from Post-Brexit Anxiety, it's worth remembering that the UK has an extremely robust design sector. It's not just world-class; it's world-leading. The Design Council's 2015 report *The Design Economy* shows that within the creative industries sector – which is itself growing at almost twice the rate of the UK economy – we are growing the fastest. Design generates over £70bn Gross Value Added (GVA) a year, equivalent to over 7% of the national total. That's impressive. And our unique and internationally envied trade body, the DBA, recently issued an uplifting post-referendum statement. Chief Executive Deborah Dawton reminds us that "our industry's proven ability to drive both business and economic growth has not changed, nor has the quality and effectiveness of our offer. The value design brings to the economy is undeniable." She concludes: "The arguments for design are resounding." Bravo DBA. And bravo UK design sector.

Here at Preddy&Co, we like the odd pithy quote so I'll leave you with one we love at the moment. It's from Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. This one's from the gloriously dotty *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*. It's a rallying cry to beat all rallying cries and a great one to use when times are turbulent and the way ahead uncertain: "Let's think the unthinkable, let's do the undoable. Let us prepare to grapple with the ineffable itself, and see if we may not eff it after all."

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