

Pitches

Are Bitches

Imagine going into your mechanic and asking for a full service on your car to see if you're satisfied with his handiwork and not paying a cent. What about going into a doctors office, having a full check up and uttering the words 'I'll let you know' as you leave, all your cash in hand. Having a plumber fix your leaking drain for free? A restaurant providing you with a free dinner? All on the promise of potential future business?

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It's a glorified beauty pageant

Unfortunately, the idea of a 'free lunch' is all too familiar for those who work in the design industry. "The Pitch" is possibly one of the most debated topics in the design world to date. A term used to describe "Any practice that involves the speculative provision of design services (including concepts) for a commercial client, that may result in the designer receiving less than their normal professional rates (or none), for work that is intended to be commercially realised—in an attempt to win new business".

The pitch, free pitch, spec pitch or speculative pitching as it's commonly referred to, had become rife in the design industry throughout the early 90's and begun to fall out of favour with designers as the market began to perceive the



greater importance of design. The last few years though have seen the uncomfortable return of the pitch—believed to be the result of an increasingly competitive landscape and an economy that was on the brink of disaster.

The concept of the pitch is quite remarkable when broken down and analysed against other industries. Essentially, it's a glorified beauty pageant, asking professionals to invest hours of their time all for the promise of a potential short listing for a job which presented no immediate signs of financial reimbursement for their blood, sweat and tears. While it can be argued that it's an investment in a relationship and a peripheral yet fundamentally inexorable characteristic of the subjective nature of design, it doesn't change the fact that it is a very unique assignment of risk versus potential reward which is unusual to the design industry.

Where did it start, how bad is it and what can we do?

Lets explore further.

Origins of the pitch

Originating as a spin-off from the advertising industry, the creative nature of design left the door open for the pitch to come in and make itself at home. Considered as a creative domain, the pitch was a technique commonly used by advertising agencies in their attempts to attract new business.

Expensive and highly competitive in nature, the pitch has the ability to work well in specified disciplines. Advertising, architecture and broadcasting design use different practices where their employees are expected to participate in pitching. This typically works because the initial design is not the final product and is followed up by financial investment to ensure it's refined to suit the clients desired outcome.

We also have to take into consideration that these disciplines have a much greater budget at their disposal and follow with the opportunity of these industries to exhibit or display the work produced to help with future pitches and clients—this is rarely the case for designers.

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Cons of the pitch

Pitching is a lot more common than you may think. The greatest issue involved in the process is that it seriously compromises the quality of the design work, which evolves as a result of a very vague set of guidelines and limiting collaboration. Clients that request pitching do not understand the lasting effect it has on the industry, which is now starting to gain greater recognition worldwide.

it threatens the integrity and work ethic.

Initially it's the issue of collaboration. The goal of a designer is to create value for their clients, which is best done through a process of understanding between both parties. If a successful design campaign is to be built—one that reflects the clients objectives, understands their competitive landscape, and deals with their commercial needs—then the only way it is going to succeed is through collaboration. Take this away and you're left with a superficial assessment of the work, designers who are left with more questions than they started with and a client who typically is never truly satisfied. This whole process can become a nightmare for both parties.

We should also not overlook the idea that asking for free work from any professional devalues the role of the designer, their industry, the process by which they work, their values and beliefs and ultimately reflects in the work provided to the individual or client. To an extent, pitching threatens the integrity and work ethic of the respected professionals.

The most disappointing element to rise from speculative pitching is the effect it has on smaller design companies and sole traders, those whose passion for design have meant significant sacrifices throughout their lives to ensure they can follow their dreams. Organisations are taking advantage of these small agencies, taking their ideas and casting them away. Smaller agencies are always going to be at a distinct disadvantage in the area of speculative pitching, as they are limited with their time, cost and resources available to produce this work and engage in this type of tendering process.



Alternative options

So what are our options? To say the pitching can be completely removed for the design world is unrealistic. We will always have those who are seeking a foot up in the already cut-throat industry that is design, but we do have ways around it.

One suggestion, which must be credited to Con Kennedy in his piece "Why spec work is bad for the designer and client", looks at the idea of providing what could be considered a much more effective and ethical approach to commission work. It suggests that a client should request a panel of suitable designers to submit examples of work from previous assignments accompanied with a statement on how they would have approached the assignment in question.

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This allows for clients to assess the quality of the designers, their work and their way of approaching the task without having the individual or organisation produce the work (being disadvantaged with time spent and finances involved). The chosen designer can then begin to work on the project by producing original work to match the client's brief, whilst under contract and with the adequate resources available to them.

The other option is simply paid pitches. Although there are still flaws to the idea of paid pitching it does make a lot more sense for the agencies involved. First off, an organisation that pays for work is going to be a lot more engaged in the process—sometimes without even knowing it—which satisfies the greatest issue at hand, the lack of communication and explanation of the design project. It also allows the design agencies involved to use more resources in the process—undertaking the appropriate research into the market—which will overall produce better work for the clients. Finally, if an agency isn't chosen, the work produced can be passed on to the client knowing that at least at a financial level, the parties involved have been reimbursed for their appropriate time and effort.



What can we do?

There is a lot of debate surrounding the pitch, some positive, most negative. Here at UNO we reflect the opinions of industry professionals and design councils worldwide, who understand the destructive nature of the pitch and who have identified that change is necessary, ensuring fairness and equality is available for all—no matter your profession.

Overall, as an industry we must strive to educate the broader business community—that creative and effective design is essential to any successful organisation. For this to occur, successful communication is required for designers to form and gain a true sense of understanding for the client and their needs.

It's this lack of communication which forms the catalyst for the ineffective nature of pitching. As a whole, the industry needs to be conscious of pitching and that by participating at any level we are doing serious damage to the credibility of our industry. This only jeopardises the understanding of our industry and the growth and development of design as a profession for future generations.

Taking a stand!

There are a number of design organisations that frown upon the pitch, understanding its negativity and destructive nature for the industry. These groups strongly discourage client's requesting design work through pitching and all discourage their members from producing speculative work. These organisations include AIGA, AGDA, DIA, ICOGRADA, Design Business Association, Association of Registered Graphic Designers and NO!SPEC.

For free pitching or speculative pitching to be eliminated from our industry then all participants must be united. Unfortunately, we will always have those who are seeking a foot up in the already cut-throat industry that is design, typically those who are under skilled, underqualified or unprofessional in their design methodology.

For the professionals within the industry it would be a disaster to fall into the trap of speculative pitching when times are tough. Having individuals giving away their expertise, or seeking to undercut or undermine their fellow colleagues in such a competitive landscape only spells disaster for future generations and the evolution of good design.

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**United
we stand,
divided
we fall.**

- Design
Institute of
Australia