

How to jumpstart a stalled design

A checklist for editors who aren't designers

PROBLEM:

YOU'RE NOT MAKING YOUR DESIGN STANDARDS CLEAR.

*Is the staff uncertain which design ideas are encouraged – and forbidden?
Is there confusion (i.e., newsroom folklore) about management's likes and dislikes?*

SOLUTIONS:

- Post examples of pages you admire** (your paper or others). Identify successful elements (headlines, photo treatments, etc.) to serve as models for new directions to explore.
- Encourage experimentation on designated pages.** For instance, use Features to approve new techniques that will work for Sports; use Metro to test elements for Page One.
- Keep your non-journalistic dislikes to yourself.** Casual complaints based only on your personal tastes (“*I don't like purple*”) just inhibit your staffers' creativity. Shame on you.

PROBLEM:

OUR NEWSROOM PROCESS SEEMS TO FRUSTRATE GOOD DESIGN.

*Is our design too rigid or too old-fashioned to accommodate new ideas?
Are paginators powerless to influence stories, becoming mere decorators on deadline?*

SOLUTIONS:

- Create new design enhancements** – prototypes for new headline styles, photo treatments, grids, etc., based on the models you gathered above. Begin testing on designated pages.
- Maestro all big stories.** Don't just add occasional “nugget” sidebars – that's lazy. Require planning sessions to help designers collaborate *before* any big stories are written.

PROBLEM:

OUR STAFF LACKS THE ABILITY TO GENERATE CONSISTENTLY GOOD PAGES.

*Do staffers lack actual skills – or are they disempowered and frustrated?
Do they need more resources – or a change in the production schedule and workflow?*

SOLUTIONS:

- Redefine old positions – or create new ones.** Easier said than done, but still . . .
- Rotate designers and paginators to avoid burnout.** Are the same staffers working in the same departments year after year? No wonder everybody's bored with the results. Try cross-pollinating different design beats.
- Institute regular design critiques.** Display excellent pages and identify *why* they're good. Discuss *how* success occurred (or how it didn't), and address problems with planning, performance and workflow. Give public praise to those who raise design standards.

PROBLEM:

OUR PAPER SEEMS BLAND AND BORING FROM DAY TO DAY.

Do pages look too much alike? Do all stories get the same one or two design treatments, to the point where nothing ever feels fresh or special?

SOLUTIONS:

- Maestro all big stories.** Yes, and encourage *alternative presentations*: a Q&A instead of text. An opinion column instead of a news story. A photo strip down the side of Page One.
- Mix up the story count.** Same number of stories every day on every page? Is everything comfortably *mid-size*? You're locked into a predictable rut. Encourage a *different* number of stories each day, and watch how that freshens up the look and feel of key pages.
- Loosen up. Relax. Take more chances.** Yes, *you*. Open your mind. Do it *now*.