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Project management isn't just for project managers. As these 5 calamitous commissions prove, there's a lot that the PM pros can teach designers about managing their own projects.

DESIGN, DERAILED

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roject management.”

Let's be real: It's a pretty awful term, right?

It reeks of boredom. It smacks of creativity killed. It's seemingly as exciting as watching C-SPAN on mute. And in an article, you might expect it to be the literary equivalent of an Ambien.

But it doesn't have to be that way. And in fact, it's anything but. Because when you see project management in action, when you see how projects fly or flounder based on it, you begin to realize how truly alive the subject can be—and why project managers can offer vital lessons for designers in any capacity, be they freelance, in-house or anywhere in between.

We've all read “how-tos” about managing projects successfully. So for this article, we polled top project managers at an array of firms about projects that *didn't* go according to plan—the tales of the toughest projects they've ever worked on, and what they took away from the experiences.

So stay with me. No matter how you feel about the words “project management,” it's undeniable that there's a heck of a lot any designer can learn from it. Here's how to manage your projects like the pros.

KEEP CALM, CARRY ON

First, the basics: As most designers know, project managers do a lot—in a *lot* of different ways, and under a lot of different titles. Every agency and firm handles project management differently, whether it's appointing specific employees to the task of serving as the person in charge of overseeing an effort from start to finish—and acting as the go-between for clients and the in-house team—or having designers serve as their own project managers, much like a freelancer does.

At the Cincinnati-area firm Madison Design Group, Colleen Sullivan takes the role on directly as an account executive/project manager. The toughest job she's ever tackled involved overseeing the development and launch of a fresh website for a big client with an existing brand. They wanted a completely new site to replace their slow, outdated web presence. They wanted it to be *streamlined, cooler, sexier*—something that would simplify consumers' hunt for what they need and give them a chance to spend time with the

brand before going to a store to make a point-of-sale purchase. As always, a good conceptual wishlist—but easier said than done.

The first commandment of managing a project, something that we all know well but can never hear enough: Communication is key. Open lines, clear directives. A project manager's role is that of a delicate balancing act, juggling workloads, juggling visions—“trying to maintain creative integrity but balance it with the client's business goals,” as Sullivan says. She adds it's therefore essential that any designer managing a project is comfortable being at the center of everything, and is able to work with a rainbow of personalities, regardless of tone or tenor. From programmers to CEOs to other designers to the client's internal chain of command, there are dozens of cooks in the kitchen, and they all have to be on the same page. And in Sullivan's case, everything soared to a whole new level of complexity because of a shift change.

The web project was well into conceptualization, moving quickly toward implementation. But in the middle of the process, the client switched up its team—which entailed intense onboarding in bringing the new contacts up to speed. Which, of course, entailed confronting potential delays, and upped the value of deep communication even more—especially if, say, the person you're onboarding wants to do away with what her predecessor set in place, and you have to deliver some soul-crushing news to the people who worked so hard on it.

And that brings us to one of the most valuable assets of good project management—not showing that you're sweating. Keeping calm and being the face of cool, whether you're a project manager or a designer managing a project, is essential to carrying on.

“There's no other option,” Sullivan says. “You're the last line of defense. If you lose it, then the whole team sees that, and it's going to affect everyone.”

In Sullivan's case, the firm conquered the project. And she says it was worth it, which shows that a hard-fought project can indeed produce the best results. “It was awesome. It really was. Once it was all said and done, they had a gorgeous website that was light years beyond what they had previously. It was definitely a challenge getting there, but you know, most projects are. You just have to understand that you have to keep chipping away at it and try to keep your head in the game. Eventually there is going to be a breakthrough. Something good will happen, and you just have to trust in that and keep at it.”

Moreover, Sullivan points out that the longer a project goes on, the more opportunity you're giving it to change—which goes hand-in-hand with interactive projects such as websites, which aren't easily made overnight. The key is being able to successfully adapt to such a change.

“You're going to have tons of iterations. It just comes back to knowing that at some point, you're going to have that ‘Aha’ moment where everyone's like, ‘Yay! It works! Go, go, go!’ And as sick as it is, that kind of makes it all worth it, because then you can look back and say, ‘That was funny when we showed them that third design, and they hated it ...’”

TRASH ‘TRIED AND TRUE’

Rhea Curry, brand director at 72andSunny (named “Agency of the Year” by *Advertising Age*), knows about adaptability.

The toughest project she's ever managed centered around everyone's favorite cultural phenomenon and source of devoted distraction on the web: the GIF. “It was for an internet company, basically, and so we wanted to use the language of the internet,” Curry says.

The problem is that it involved dealing with massive unknowns—something that exponentially ups the difficulty ante for anyone trying to map out an attainable timeline and course for a project. Curry wanted to stay true and genuine to the concept, and wanted to therefore *license* the content for the project, versus simply creating it in-house—one of the firm’s core competencies and comfort zones.

“Because it was GIFs, it was this crazy uncharted territory of the internet and licensing, because it was like, *Who made the GIF? Where are they? What are they associated with? Do they own that content? Who else owns the content?*”

Rather than letting it cripple the project or changing course, 72andSunny embraced the unknown and launched a massive licensing salvo. When they found a GIF to use, they had to become, as Curry says, “internet detectives.” They also had to adapt, and rethink how they would approach the project as a team. This meant that the business affairs department had to become part of the creative process.

“One of the key learnings is that all of the lines on ‘Who Does What’ were blurred,” Curry says. “I think everybody here is a hybrid talent, and would say that for this campaign in particular, it was amazing. The BA team became creative directors. The creative teams would find a GIF that they absolutely loved, and then turn it over to BA, and they’re like, ‘No way are we getting this, guys, but look what I found.’ And they would come back to us with five other pieces of content that the creative directors would fall in love with. Everybody did everything, and that’s the only way we managed to produce the campaign that we did.”

Curry says one of the biggest challenges throughout the project was keeping morale up. There can be a lot of heartache in such projects—even with something as simple as a GIF.

“I can’t tell you how many times I had to sit down my creative directors and look them in the eye [and tell them we couldn’t use a particular image], and I literally thought that they were going to break down,” Curry says. “But then on the flipside you have these incredible highs of when we were able to land that perfect piece of content.”

All of this meant that Curry had to do what a project manager does best, and what Sullivan cited earlier: You have to keep perspective and be the team’s cheerleader, regardless of whether you’re in-house or a freelancer balancing client relations. “You can’t forget that you’re setting the pace and tone,” Curry says. “The minute that you feel like something is not going well, it’s up to you to course-correct and change that.”

At the end of every day, Curry’s team was exhausted. To prevent them from feeling defeated, she developed a simple yet effective strategy: In the morning, the team would get together over coffee and talk about a “win” from the day before. Sometimes they were huge wins—they acquired a key piece of content—and sometimes they were small wins (“I only have five meetings today”). In fact, it was so effective that the team continues to do it.

“You have to just keep everything in perspective, or you’ll literally drive yourself crazy,” Curry says.

Moreover, she adds that designers managing their own projects shouldn’t be afraid to think about a project fresh, and should avoid resorting to processes that are tried and true. You have to find comfort in the unique chaos of such projects, and refuse to allow yourself to be trapped in the past.

“It’s not a one-size-fits-all,” she says. “You want everything to have a nice, tidy, perfect little plan, and you want to set it in the beginning and be able to stick to it the whole time—and I think that’s really limiting on the creative process. The minute you get out of your comfort zone, you start to really think about things in a different way, and you find all these little cracks and crevices that you never would have noticed before.



“Just roll with the punches. Don’t try to stop the punches from coming. You can’t block every one of them. But what you can influence is how you receive them, and how you take them on.”

REMEMBER THE ENDLESS POWER OF PATIENCE

At Pentagram, designers wear many hats: They serve as their own project managers. Associate partner Julie Savasky says she prefers the structure because it allows

her to be in intimate contact with her clients, and to really know and understand what they’re after, what their communication challenge is, and how she can use her expertise as a designer to solve it by printing or producing something that’s both feasible and within budget.

“It cuts out a lot of back and forth, and a lot of potentially wasted time,” Savasky says.

Still, that doesn’t mean everything goes off without a hitch. Savasky cites one challenging project that’s taught her a few valuable lessons: a 600-page independently published coffee table book, which documents the author’s extensive world travels through photographs and journal entries. It was originally scoped to be a one-year project, but has been in production for five years now.

The reason for the delay, Savasky says, is that the client keeps going on exotic new trips—to Greenland, Antarctica, North Korea and so on—and every time he returns, he brings back more photos to add.

“There’s no limit to how much, how many photos he wants to put in, how many times he wants to make changes, and that sort of thing,” Savasky says. “It’s probably not the toughest one to manage, but it’s more like a marathon. It wears you out.”

Savasky believes the book may be nearing its end, and it could be out for the fall publication season. But perhaps most importantly, she’s been able to take a macro view of it, and she likes the way it came out. She says the key to working on projects that go beyond their anticipated time frame is to learn to take a step back and look at them with fresh eyes, and in perspective. In this case, “When you’re so close to something for so long, it becomes old—but I do think it’s going to have an interesting market. It’s got wonderful, historical photos of climbing gear from the ’70s and ’60s, just kind of a really interesting snapshot of adventure travel through the years.”

And the biggest key: patience. It’s easy for designers to simply remind themselves to be patient with clients, but it’s another to be able to practice it in real time, on a scale such as a four-year overrun. Patience, naturally, goes hand-in-hand with communication.

“It taught me to be excruciatingly patient, and just step back and try to explain the industry and the publishing ins and outs, and even design—like what a spread is, how you convey that to somebody who has never been in that world. You just have to find a way to communicate effectively with your client, whether it’s the CEO or middle-manager or intern.”

Taking that one step further, when working with individuals in an organization, targeted communication works best. Otherwise, managing a project can start to seem like a bad game of telephone.

“We have found that the higher up you can get access to in an organization, the better your chances are of having these successful projects, rather than just having access to, say, a mid-level manager and not with the CEO who ordered the project to happen,” Savasky says. “Sometimes, the simplest things are the most effective.”

STEER CLEAR OF BAD CLIENTS—AND THE WOLVES WHO’VE LEFT WALL STREET

A crucial factor in managing a successful project is often the client himself. Some projects can inevitably become unmanageable with certain personality types, and a designer has to be able to spot a red flag coming down the road. You have to know who you can work with—and who you can’t.

Savasky once took on a website for an ex-Wall Streeter’s startup. Savasky says the work in itself would have been manageable, but the client was very, *very* driven—“and it just ended up being a personality thing where he wanted us to be his only client, and be basically at his beck and call on the weekends and at night.”

Savasky says the client essentially wanted the agency to stop everything it was working on and tend to his project as dictated. And who

JUGGLING A PROJECT

Need a little help staying organized? Do it like the pros do.



At Sagmeister & Walsh, the designers on the team manage their own projects. Partner Jessica Walsh says this setup helps prevent misunderstandings with clients and allows everyone to have a larger sense of ownership and responsibility over their work.

The award-winning firm pairs up with some of the biggest brands around—so how do they pull it off?

Walsh recommends using Basecamp (www.basecamp.com), a hugely popular project management app that touts such users as NASA, AIGA, National Geographic and Nike. Basecamp creates an environment where users can brainstorm with one another, create to-do lists, define who’s going to handle certain tasks, set deadlines, schedule meetings, and manage all the factors in between.

“It allows for everything to be in one central place,” Walsh says. “Emails get lost and threads can become complicated, so it’s really vital.”

Beyond Basecamp, Walsh says designers should simply use common sense when managing projects and dealing with clients—and know when to stand their ground. “Be nice, but also be firm when you strongly believe in something. It’s OK to say ‘no’ and fight for what you want. But you also have to know what battles to pick.”

knows, it might have all been endurable—had it not been for what happened next.

Pentagram developed a logo and identity for the client over the course of six months of discussion and six subsequent months of design work ... and then the client backed out. Savasky says this plays into a phenomenon where startups will hire a firm, tap the expertise of their designers and developers, and then fire them and have someone implement their plan at a cheaper rate. She notes that it perhaps happens more in the web development world, but it's becoming more prevalent for designers because the two fields are now so intimately linked.

"That's not to say that all startups behave that way at all, because we work with many that don't and are charming and just want to wow the world with good design," Savasky says. "[Look to] the demeanor of potential clients in the negotiation phase and then in the RFP and proposal stage. If they become overly demanding about stuff and it's just unusual demands and unusual impatience and that sort of thing, that would be a red flag for me."

A simple lesson, but a valuable one: Choose your clients wisely. Not every bad client will cut and run, but a great client will make doing great work all that much easier.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK

To state the obvious: Creative freedom is fantastic. The experience of designing what you want, filling it with the copy you want, and doing it all on your own terms is unrivaled. But that might not always seem like the case when you're managing a massive project for a client.

One of the most challenging projects that Kari Peglar, a client manager at Landor Associates, has experienced involved a generous proposition: Landor was responsible for creating a corporate identity for an insurance company from the ground up.

"You can kind of think of it as getting a blank book and imagining what could fill the pages," Peglar says. "It's not something you get to do every day."

From a management standpoint, the challenge is, of course, the total ambiguity of it all. Peglar was tasked with setting up meeting objectives, next steps, timelines and all the rest, while the project was being developed in real time. Which begs the question: How do you set future meetings and ongoing objectives up front for something that hasn't even been made yet?

"Quite frankly, it's a bit scary because there are so many places you could go—but which is that right one?" she says.

Landor focuses on building brands that connect with people based off of human insight, so Peglar started by working to unearth those insights with the client and build the story of their brand—what it could stand for, and most importantly, *why*.

After developing the vision and strategy and getting it approved, though, the team hit another roadblock—the Sullivan roadblock. The company had a changing of the guard in the form of leadership shifts, which impacted timelines and other facets of the project,

"Just roll with the punches. Don't try to stop them from coming. You can't block every one of them. But what you can influence is how you receive them."

—Rhea Curry

and required onboarding and making the case to the new contacts for the previously agreed upon direction.

Throughout the process, Peglar says certain elements were essential. The first isn't talking or issuing directives—it's *listening*. Observing and absorbing how your client operates, how your team operates, and how to marry both.

"It's really a powerful human ability that sometimes isn't always thought of as a strength, but it certainly is the best way to learn," she says.

Following that, she says to not be afraid to ask questions, admit what you don't know, and create solutions to put into play. Accept critiques and grow from them—"everybody's input is important, everybody can be creative, and that's how we get to better brands." And beyond that, critique yourself. Step back and analyze what's happening. Don't simply take joy in putting a line through something on your to-do list, but analyze what helped you be able to cross it off your list—what you did right, and what you could have done better.

Peglar cites some advice from Landor exec Jane Geraghty that has stuck with her: *Don't confuse activity with achievement*.

"I think it's an interesting thing to ponder, because it's basically saying just because you're doing *something*, that doesn't mean you're being the most efficient at it, or you're actually getting the job done. So really trying to understand what makes you efficient and what makes you effective in getting the job done."

Sure, creative freedom is fantastic when you're designing—and Peglar proves that a blank slate should be just as thrilling when you're managing a project.

"Now, I appreciate that ambiguity honestly is beautiful and it's exciting. It's really something you can be proud of to say, 'Hey, I made that.' And that's something that I'd never experienced before, and I think it's a way to just keep the work refreshing. It gives you a lot of pride in what you do." **HOW**

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