

How to pitch design research



How to Pitch Design Research

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This note is my response to an email from a graduating student of the National Institute of Design (NID) in India seeking advice in understanding where Design Research fits in the job market. I have divided my response in two parts. First I will comment on the client and then on the pitch.

The Client

There are four broad categories of clients in design research. The first category includes design firms. Majority of the design businesses worldwide, especially boutique design practices and firms that are branded around the personality of a single designer continue to be focused on strategy and embodiment of design with relatively less emphasis on design research. However design practices that employ multi-disciplinary teams typically will employ design researchers on staff to better align their consulting services with strategic objectives of client firms. These firms are able to charge a premium to their services.

The second category are clients who employ design services. They understand the value of design to their business. They hire a designer (or a design firm) to come up with a “Design” that would appeal to their target audience. More progressive clients amongst this category have worked with leading design agencies that offer research and strategy during front-end phase of design. These clients understand the importance of additional investment in design research to bring alignment of the design idea with the expectations and needs of the target audience, thereby ensuring success of their designs. In addition to commissioning design firms with design research capabilities, these clients will also hire design researchers on their staff to ensure seamless integration of insights into go-to market strategies. Design researchers in these firms often serve as planners, managers and translators of design research.

The third category of clients, who hire design researchers have intangible objectives, meaning the expected outcome of a design research project is not necessarily a tangible object, image or an environment. They will commission a design research project with objectives such as - understanding behaviors of people (the customer, consumers, audience, or users); cultivating internal knowledge about an unfamiliar or emerging market; and building team synergies around future opportunities for business growth through value addition.

In this market space design researchers compete for jobs with traditional market researchers, business process consultants, HR consultants, and motivational consultants. This category of clients is now increasingly becoming aware of design research services. However, they do not always approach a firm for “design research services”. They may approach a design research company for Ethnographic Research (e.g. Conifer Research), Co-creation (e.g. SonicRim), Design Thinking (e.g. IDEO), Business Transformation Research (e.g. Doblin Group), Sense making (e.g. Humantific), Innovation research (e.g. Jump) or Market research (e.g. Cheskin Added Value).

Another category of clients who are drawn to design research are Venture Capitalists or Startups who want to verify the relevance of a breakthrough technology, or a product/service idea to the target audience, before committing investment. In a three way symbiotic relationship between the target audiences, the VC and the start up enterprise a design researcher is invited to play the role of a catalyst to bring clarity, refinement and alignment (with the market need) to the concept.

The Pitch

At SonicRim, than limiting our pitch to clients who are just looking for design research services we tailor our explanation of design research services based on what the client is looking for and what the client is expected to deliver within his/her organization. One question we always ask a prospective client is, “how will the outcomes of this research be used by your organization?” Prior to meeting the client we do research and/or have conversations with them about

their organization, organizational or team culture, their product line, recent successes and failures and the changes in the environment in which they deliver their product/services. Doing prior research helps reframe the clients' questions and aligning our explanation of what we can do for them with their needs for research deliverable. "Reframing the research question" is a very important requirement for success of a design research project, because the dialogue that leads to reframing of a question helps better align client expectations and success of the final outcome. This process of reframing the research question begins before research engagement is kicked off and continues through the project.

The clients who have an open mind and are willing to restate their original research question can benefit most from design research. We have had more successes communicating value of design research to clients who "know that they don't know what they don't know". These clients have greater tolerance for ambiguity and are open to surprises and allow new directions to emerge from the research and challenge their pre-conceived notions. A typical client of design research understands the value of qualitative research. On the other hand, a lot more dialogue and reframing of expectations is required with clients who have quantitative research backgrounds.

From professional perspective I find that today more clients in senior positions are recognizing that they need to invest in updating their knowledge of their audience, changing lifestyles, and impact of technology on life in order to compete, survive and thrive. They understand the importance of design research in bringing clarity to fuzzy and complex information about the context for design, that has critical implications for business decisions.

Today, daily lives of people are more dependent on Internet and information products than ever before. The need for designing Information architecture that is easy to navigate has opened up opportunities for UX (or user experience) research. Knowing how, when and why people need, navigate and use information requires understanding of human cognition, skills in pattern finding

and ability to conceptualize creative information architecture and products that make information accessible, understandable and meaningful. The field of information design offers opportunities for design researchers to make people's interactions with information design more useful, usable and delightful. While the field of usability research is relatively well established in the field of Human Computer Interface (HCI) design as a method of evaluating interface design, the value of exploratory design research at the front end of information design process is opening up new opportunities for design researchers. Creating expectations for an innovative, differentiated and satisfying interface, as a result of design research always captures the attention of the clients who are in the business of disseminating information and marketing information products and services.

The outputs of Design research are often presented as scenarios, stories, frameworks and illustrations of persona. It is important to show examples of how design research outputs help inspire shared understanding within client teams, conceptualization of meaningful ideas and solutions and leads to greater ownership and commitment to move ideas faster to the market.

Creative curiosity is a key competency for design researchers during a pitch. I explain creative curiosity as a mindset that helped Archimedes and Isaac Newton conceptualize revolutionary theories just from observing and interpreting mundane and naturally occurring behaviors. A design researcher not only has the responsibility to help generate research outputs but to also help cultivate Creative curiosity within an organization. Creative curiosity **helps develop a culture of learning within an** organization and teams. Graduating students in design research will have more fulfilling career opportunities if they can articulate the value of design research both for serving tangible and intangible objectives of their prospective clients.

A key question before the clients of design research today is, "How to remain relevant in a competitive marketplace that is continually inventing and offering new value to the customer?"

Complexity (of information ecosystems that our clients need to understand, design, and deliver) and unpredictability (of changes in lifestyles and competitive landscape) are two key areas in which clients face challenges. SonicRim has helped clients in addressing their needs in these areas.

Organizations that make significant investment in consumer insights face another challenge- that of aligning available insights with new teams that are restructured often. Consumer insights buried in reports do not become actionable unless they are collectively owned and acted upon by individuals and teams responsible for translating insights into ideas and taking those ideas to the market. It is hard to keep new teams informed of market realities. and inspired by the future opportunities within a specific business unit when they are restructured regularly. There is a need for a catalyst agency that evangelizes customer experience for a business unit and helps them co-own, co-imagine and co-create the future products **and** services, as the teams get restructured.

Overall, design research can help clients determine how to make smart use of creative resources and smart technologies **to** develop products, brands, services and value propositions that are aligned with what people need.