

FIELD NOTE

TRAINING THE COMMUNICATION TEAM ARTISTS:  
A FOLLOW-UP VISIT

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Achieving a combination of illustration, text, and space in a harmonic and balanced form has always been a worry for designers. It is something more than just producing posters, fliers, leaflets, or advertisements with all the necessary information. It means playing with shapes, sizes, spaces, margins, colors, textures, type, and many other elements in graphic design to achieve a desired visual impact. The use of print materials to support health education programs is an especially complex process because the products must convey precise messages to audiences who may not be literate and may not even be very sophisticated in interpreting graphic representations.

This field note describes a follow-up visit to provide training to two artists working in the Health Promotion Unit of the Guatemalan Ministry of Health. HEALTHCOM had previously provided a consultancy to assist the artists in learning basic drawing skills, illustrating for nonliterate audiences, and working as a team with the health communication planners.<sup>1</sup> This second visit was intended to monitor their progress. It was also intended to introduce the artists to a few new techniques and to put into practice aspects of working on the professional communication team. In particular, the artists were to develop work plans, participate in field work, create designs according to input from the target audience, and interpret pretest results.

## **INPUT FROM THE PARTICIPANTS**

The previous training had helped the artists develop a number of basic skills including working from live models, producing quick sketches for review, and illustrating for nonliterate audiences. However, a number of both artistic and professional obstacles still stood in the way of their comfortable integration into the process of producing health communication materials.

The artists expressed training needs relating to layout, lettering, use of color, printing, photography, and so forth. In addition, they expressed more personal needs--to be considered an essential part of the group that was creating products; to work in an organized and honest way in the creative process; to have enough time to produce good materials; to be able to create by themselves without having to follow the specifications of copy writers, which seemed to them quite conservative and restricting.

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<sup>1</sup>See also field note entitled, "Art Serves Health Education: Training the Communication Team Artists," by Ann B. Jimerson.

But the colleagues and superiors of these two professionals also expressed needs. According to the copy writers, the illustrators took too long drawing rough copies; did not accept changes or corrections; could not develop their work properly because of lack of time or resources; could not follow what the copy writers asked, and so forth. Part of the problem seemed to be a mutual lack of understanding of the creative process. Part of the problem lay in lack of experience working as a group. The Unit needed to make the most of their different specialties and backgrounds and to provide feedback to each other in striving to reach common goals.

## **THE TRAINING PLAN**

While the first consultancy focused on artistic illustration, this one emphasized graphic design and materials production. It utilized an "on-the-job" training approach, incorporating lessons into projects currently at hand. These included the upcoming vaccination campaign, or jornada, and in particular a brochure called "How to Become a Happy Mother." Altogether the campaign would include 22 materials ranging from television spots to posters and fliers. During this visit the consultant, the copywriters, the artists, and communication planners had an opportunity to plan the development of many pieces and to field test draft materials. The strategy of this training was thus to combine theory and practice at every opportunity.

The broad items to be covered in training included the following:

- Working in a creative committee
- Elements of graphic design
- Lettering-- selection of type size and fonts
- Layout-- combining illustration, lettering, and space in a balanced way
- Psychology of color
- Use of new materials-- papers, screens, inks, markers
- Creation of materials for nonliterate audiences

- Creation of roughs
- Creation of mechanicals
- Printing processes
- Photography-- as a means and aid to design
- Professional relationships-- between the illustrator and the printer, and with an advertising agency
- Organizing promotional campaigns.

## EXPANDING GRAPHIC RESOURCES

The training process began with an "introduction to graphic design" which covered elements such as mass, line, plane, point, scale, texture, and color. We also discussed qualities such as rhythm, unity, and movement and different design processes such as roughs, sketches, preparing the mock-up and the layout, and producing camera ready art including photos or illustrations and the selection of type. As part of this training the artists experimented with various new graphic materials and techniques.

It was apparent that the artists were restricted in their creative possibilities by both a lack of materials and a lack of "idea sources." They are working in a difficult situation because each time they begin a task they have to fill out a requisition that needs to be approved before money is available to purchase materials. We discussed the importance of having a good stock of materials at the office. They need different kinds of white and color papers, mounting boards, letra press letters, a wide variety of markers, pencils, rapidographs, templates, triangles, and so forth. If supplies are available, time needn't be wasted ordering through a complicated process.

We also discussed the importance of always being on the look-out for new ideas. The artists need to have an "ideas bank"--a compilation of magazine and newspaper ads, brochures from different companies or about different products, illustrations, etc. They should have at their disposal specialized graphic design books as well to help them expand their thinking.

Both of the artists are excellent illustrators, which is important in developing health education materials. However, it can take a long time to develop a "perfect illustration." We talked about the use of photography as a fast alternative to an illustration in some instances.

## **WORKING AS A TEAM**

We discussed the idea of a "creative committee" and the role of the artist and the role of the copy writer. We discussed the importance of not interfering with the roles of others and in knowing who the final decision maker is. This person, in turn, must know what is involved when a decision or strategy is changed. Copy writers, for example, are responsible for giving to artists complete, correct, and approved texts. Otherwise artists lose time and the organization loses money because processes (such as typesetting, illustration, etc.) need to be repeated.

The artists also need to work with professionals outside of the Health Promotion Unit. They must be intermediaries between printers and the rest of the group. This requires improving their knowledge about printing processes, papers, and the range of choices in developing materials. In addition, the artists need to become more involved with the advertising agency and art directors.

## **CREATING NEW MATERIAL**

The training process focused on production of the "How to Become a Happy Mother" brochure. This piece provided the opportunity to investigate many aspects of layout, lettering, color, production of mechanical, and printing processes. It also introduced aspects of communicating with nonliterate audiences. We discussed the need to use imagination and have an open mind because each audience is different and will perceive the same drawing in different ways. Special care must be placed on details because these are often the key to a health message. For example, the ways of vaccinating a child must be shown in a precise way. Continuity from drawing to drawing is also important. The "main characters" must retain the same physical characteristics throughout a piece. Continuity is also important in the development of an idea--that is, following the logical progression of events in a narrative.

Perspective and use of color are especially crucial when working with unsophisticated audiences. The Guatemalan population has a very rich tradition of symbols, colors, and designs. Each region uses a basic color in its dresses. Each region also employs abundant, geometrical use of lines (straight, broken, horizontal, vertical) to

produce patterns thus clearly showing in which part of the country it is located. This can facilitate the artists' work since target audiences identify with certain images and can be led more easily to associate graphics and messages with their own environment.

We met as a team with the copy writer to finalize text and select drawings for the "How to Become a Happy Mother" pamphlet. After creating a final rough mock-up we took the brochure to the field to test it with three groups of mothers from the target audience. This experience was the central "learning" device of the consultancy.

## **ARTISTS WORKING WITH MOTHERS**

The audience is the ultimate judge of whether artists have produced something which "succeeds" or not and whether the message that a program is trying to transmit visually is understood or not. When artists and audience meet, therefore, the context is not one of criticism and congratulations but rather one of mutual problem solving. The experience is both inspiring and challenging to the artists. Working with the target audience requires artists to move with speed and precision, to be able to present several ideas or variations of one idea, and to give the audience successive alternatives until an acceptable one is found.

During the focus groups the artists were able to create new sketches when mothers told us that something was "off" in either text or drawing. Revisions were tested immediately. This helped demonstrate to the whole communication team the importance of artists' participating in focus groups. Instead of collecting ideas, bringing these back to the artists, spending a week making corrections, and then returning to the field for further testing, the corrections and the second test took place in the same day. When we went back to the office we knew that the brochure fulfilled the mothers' needs.

## **RESPONDING TO TIME CONSTRAINTS**

During the period of this consultancy the Promotion Unit was also under a great deal of pressure to create a whole set of materials for the upcoming vaccination campaign, "The Day of the Vaccinated Child." Roughs of these materials had to be presented to the Minister of Health for approval. This challenge provided an opportunity to work with the creative committee and also to work with the artists in developing an idea from beginning, through mock-up, to presentation.

The team had only one week to come up with 22 materials, which of course is an overwhelming and even unreasonable number. It pushed their ability to work quickly--a particular weakness with these artists. The artists generally have a difficult situation because everyone wants their materials at the same time. In addition, they have many other duties besides those which appear in their job descriptions. This diffusion of their energies makes it particularly hard for them to see any individual piece as part of a communication strategy or as a coherent series of creative steps. The jornada gave us the opportunity to concentrate attention on the strategic process and its elements.

The project began with a group meeting of copy writers, artists, communication director, and consultant. We spent the day coming up with text and graphic ideas. The artists then experimented with fast ways to produce roughs--using small boxes in order to combine text and illustration. Once again, production of actual sketches became an opportunity to teach different aspects of graphic design.

We presented our package of campaign mock-ups to representatives of international agencies in a meeting just a few days later. During the next four days we made revisions based on their suggestions and also created some new mock-ups for presentation to the Minister of Health.

## LESSONS

Although the purpose of this consultancy had primarily been to teach the artists in the Promotion Unit principles and techniques of graphic design, the pressures of the work at hand dictated that the experience become much more than this. The artists were able, through their experiences, to understand the importance of different design principles and to appreciate such steps as pretesting with the target audience and revising on the spot. It also gave the artists practice in carrying out what they had learned.

The major lessons conveyed to these artists were the following:

- Always have an open mind regarding design.
- Work in creating new ideas, abandoning the convention, letting the imagination fly.

- Look for ideas that enrich your own by studying magazines, newspapers, books, and other publications.
- Use color without fear but carefully, especially when choosing colors that in one way or another can be associated with political groups, official campaigns, national organizations, etc.
- Involve yourself more in the work in the field, especially when promotion materials are being tested.
- Involve yourself in the creative process to learn in depth the product that is going to be worked on.
- Be present when materials are being pretested so alternatives can be tested immediately.
- Work quickly.
- Work as a creative team.

These seemingly simple principles can mean the difference between working as "illustrators" and working as graphic designers as part of a creative health education team.