

# Information Design: What is it and Who does it?

## By Terry Irwin

One of my students asked me recently to explain in simple terms what distinguished information design from other types of design and I found myself struggling to provide a clear and concise answer. I wondered if Information Design isn't a funny animal that we all THINK we know what it is we're talking about, but are hard pressed to define when asked.

We know it involves the design of things such as signage systems, forms, tests and test scores, information kiosks, data tables, statistical displays of all types, listings, charts, diagrams, BALLOTS, maps, schedules and timetables, manuals, product catalogs and all that type of 'stuff'. But can we define it without describing the artifacts of our effort?

The term Information Design will rarely illicit a neutral reaction from designers. The thought of working on any of these aforementioned projects either makes a designer's mouth water and causes him to roll up his sleeves or sends him screaming from the room in terror. When I was running a design firm, it was always a useful litmus test for interviewing prospective designers to put a 1040 Income Tax Form on the desk and ask them how they would like to redesign it. If they're eyes glazed over or they broke out in a cold sweat, I knew it wasn't likely to be a good fit.

My former partner, Erik Spiekermann is at the farthest other end of that spectrum, having designed several typefaces whose primary purpose was for use in the design of forms for low-resolution output. This isn't surprising, given that Erik's hobby is photographing examples of bad letter spacing on subway signs in various cities around the world. It makes one wonder if perhaps there is a psychological component to the discipline, the analysis of which is better left alone. Maybe there is a touch of anal retentiveness or a Virgo rising in most of our astrological charts that makes us want to bring order to vast amounts of seemingly undecipherable information. Information designers can be a strange lot, but their work—as recently seen in the Florida election—can alter the course of history for good or ill.

As I pondered what distinguishes information design from other types of design, I decided to pose this question to a few of my friends and colleagues. Not surprisingly, I got a different response from every person I asked, however certain words and phrases found their way into most of those definitions. Words such as:

Useful  
Informative  
Helpful  
Pure  
Powerful  
Accessible  
Inclusive  
Ubiquitous  
Meaningful  
Functional

along with phrases such as:

The form **is** the content  
It doesn't sell you something you don't need  
It's not decorative  
It's not subjective  
In the hands of the wrong people it can have disastrous effects  
It's often poorly done  
Its potential for good is matched in equal proportion to its potential for creating confusion or harm  
Not shiny, but essential  
It's the underwear, not the tiara (sounds like a Tom Waits song)  
It's the soup stock not the spice  
Form **must** follow function

The following are among some of the attributes listed on the home page for The Institute for Information Design or IIID

An information designer:

- must be able to think both innovatively and systematically
- must be highly knowledgeable about the subject area they are working in
- must be knowledgeable about the communicative aspects and interrelationships of the components of the message
- must understand the relevant customs, conventions, standards, and regulations associated with the message
- must be familiar with human communication capabilities with regard to perception, cognitive processing and multi-sensory responses
- must understand the potential benefits to users of the information being communicated
- must be able to give form to information that is both attractive and functional
- must design for systems that need to comply with ever-changing requirements and guidelines that must be easily updated and changed
- Information designers must be able to communicate effectively in both their mother tongue and English
- must understand the capabilities of support sciences such as cognitive psychology, linguistics, social and political sciences, computer science, and statistics; and be able to work with specialists in these areas to design effectively for cultural differences
- must behave in a responsible manner with regard to the needs of the target users and society as a whole.

(I'm betting most of us didn't realize we were doing all of that)

In addition to these attributes I would add:

- must possess a rigor in thinking
- an innate curiosity
- street smarts & savvy
- empathy
- a love of details
- a love of clarity
- an interest and understanding of multi-cultural issues
- a willingness to get their hands dirty

and if not a requisite quality, then certainly a characteristic of many information designers is:

- a desire to help people

Information Designers are very special people who must muster all of the skills and talents of a designer, combine it with the rigor and problem solving ability of a scientist or mathematician and bring the curiosity, research skills and doggedness of a scholar to their work. I think they're the unsung and often unnoticed heroes of our profession.

About the author:

Terry Irwin is a design consultant and educator working with businesses and design schools throughout the country. In 1992, along with partners Bill Hill and Erik Spiekermann, Terry opened the San Francisco office of MetaDesign, an international design firm with offices in Berlin, Zurich, and London where she served as Principal and Creative Director until October of 2001. While there, Terry directed projects for clients such as Sony, IBM, The Getty Museum, Palm Computing, Apple Computer, Bank of America and The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and collaborated with both the Berlin and London offices of MetaDesign on international projects for Audi and Wells Fargo Bank. Prior to opening MetaDesign, Terry worked as a Project Director for Landor Associates and Anspach, Grossman Portugal in San Francisco.

Terry has served as a member of the faculty for Otis Parsons School of Design in Los Angeles, The Art Academy of San Francisco and has been an adjunct Professor at California College of Arts and Crafts since 1989. She has guest lectured and taught seminars at both the undergraduate and graduate levels at: North Carolina State University, Ohio State University, The Rhode Island School of Design, Art Center, Washington State University and Carnegie Mellon University. Terry completed her graduate studies at the Basel School of Design in Switzerland. She lives in Mill Valley with an extraordinary Boston Terrier named Max.