

2008/12: Research For People With A Pulse

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A tutor once told me "creativity" comes from the Latin word for "chaos". Too often however, I find that there is too much chaos and too little creativity when it comes to research. As interior designers are by nature visual people, many find it hard to stomach even the idea of research, let alone get excited about it. While I can promise sheer glee at your next research proposal, there are some ways in which to make research much more palatable, organized and — get this — even creative.

Getting Your Research Mojo Started

Perhaps the most difficult step in research is determining exactly what you need to find out. "Free sketching" is under the same principle as "free writing". Sit down for ten minutes with ten blank squares of paper and sketch every single thing that comes to your mind. Allow yourself only one minute per blank square. Absolutely no idea or observation is off limits. If you cannot recognize the gaps in your knowledge yet, conduct a session with peers where they drill you with questions that may concern your topic. If you can't answer it, you need to find the solution. One of the most pivotal steps in research is establishing bullet points of questions you must satisfy and using them throughout your entire project.

Where Do I Look?

Journals, books and the Internet are the standards for information but can be quite dry if they are your only resources. What about audio and visual sources as well? News coverage, movies, and clips can help direct you but please do check the validity of your sources. Have you thought of making a visual or audio documentation of an existing situation? What about documenting a journey related to your research? Interiors relate to all of the senses, so why not research in this way. If you take away one of your senses, how would it effect your research?

Depending on your topic, a short "journey exercise" may be warranted. For example, take pictures of all of the things you automatically find yourself drawn to from textural detail to the main picture, to things making sounds, movement around you or the source of smells in the air. Try to capture everything that is influencing your senses because in effect you are trying to document an experience. This can then be presented in a multitude of ways from a PowerPoint presentation to a collection of items gathered along the way.

It never hurts to ask others who may be connoisseurs in this area either. By conducting an interview, you are not only gaining information you need, but also practicing interview skills and networking. If there are multiple people whose opinions you value and not enough time to interview every single one, think of creating a questionnaire. Keep in mind that questionnaires need not be purely text based.

Organizing Your Magnificence

The ideal way to research is to constantly organize all of the information you have gathered throughout the process. This will ensure that you have covered the vital points you established in the beginning of your quest and that you do not have a complete freak out the night before everything is due. Don't forget to prioritize as it is far too easy to go off on a tangent. Creating a checklist, reviewing your objectives and sketching a hierarchy pyramid (similar to that of the balanced diet food pyramid) can aid in keeping you in check.

Organization does not need to be dry either. Visual connections can be made through mind maps inclusive of arrows, color coordination and other prompts. By organizing throughout the research process you are continuously refining and contributing to your final presentation graphics and information.

From Chaos to Creativity

Transitioning from chaos to creativity can be the defining moment in your research. What about trying some tasty looking timelines and some good-looking graphics? Just as you gathered information using all of your senses, why not present it in a similar manner? As you compose your visual presentations of your stellar research, you are also analyzing the information and finding connections. You may even stumble upon something that you hadn't noticed before.

Don't be afraid to see how other creatively dynamic companies present graphical information to clients. Another idea: take a gander at graphic design books. Some of my personal favorites on visually appealing diagrams include:

- Envisioning Information – by Edward Tufte

- Graphic Design That Works: Secrets for Successful Logo, Magazine, Brochure, Promotion and Identity Design – by Rockport Publishers

- Information Design Workbook: Graphic approaches, solutions, and inspiration plus 20 case studies – by Kim Baer and Jill Vicarra

- Thinkmap Visual Thesaurus

Believe it or not, research can be addicting when you genuinely become involved, and your excitement will shine through in the final product. Test your creative boundaries and always always remember to accurately and honestly site your sources. Research shouldn't be bland because interior designers certainly aren't!