



AN EVENING WITH

PAULA SCHER

PERSPECTIVES ON THE
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN
IN-HOUSE AND OUTSIDE
CREATIVE AGENCIES

"The in-house art director is the out-of-house person's best friend," declared Paula Scher, setting the tone for a stimulating conversation with a large group of in-house creative team managers who gathered for **"An Evening With Paula Scher"** held on October 23, 2012, at the School of Visual Arts Beatrice Theatre in New York City. With opening remarks by InSource President Andy Brenits, this InSource event brought together leaders of creative teams to share their perspectives on the relationships between in-house and outside design professionals.

Participants Provide Feedback on This InSource Event:

"At last, events like this for people like me—I'm coming back for the next one!" • "I thought the event was very well done from the cocktail reception to the program. Paula was great!" • "Paula was very accessible. It felt like she would have sat on the stage all night and fielded questions." • "Paula really connects with the audience to make this a winning event." • "The event was great, and the format was unique—the in-house angle was original." • "I really enjoyed it." • "I was so impressed by the quality of people who attended this event, such a great networking opportunity!"

Insights Based on Past Experience

With legendary stature in the design world, Paula Scher offers the voice of experience on this topic. Describing herself as the partner at Pentagram Design New York with the most hands-on experience working in corporations, she acknowledged her empathetic regard for in-house creative teams. She provided candid descriptions of the early days of her graphic design career in the 1970s, doing layout ads and record cover art at CBS and Atlantic Records. Using charts and graphs, she traced the approval process of routing work through the internal maze, noting the importance of understanding the realities of the structure of influence in an organization. She compared the work space for a “peon” with the work space found in a “power office”—the power office typically has a couch. When she received feedback from someone in a higher position with no background in effective design who told her to make a change that violated core design principles, she found it useful to make an analogy to a law practice: “If I was a lawyer, you just asked me to do something illegal.”

To illustrate her key messages on the dynamics of in-house and external creative teams, she shared specific lessons learned in working with such cultural and educational organizations as Jazz at Lincoln Center, The Metropolitan Opera, New York City Ballet, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Bard Graduate Center, and The Museum of Modern Art. She noted that external design teams are often called upon when an organization undergoes a dramatic change. However, the best outcomes that stand the test of time occur when in-house and external creative teams develop relationships that are truly collaborations.

“I believe the in-house art department is where the best work is done because they have the patience to keep it up and evolve (the design vision),” said Paula.
“Now it lives.”

With a strong preference for the “one-page manual” rather than lengthy manuals that people do not use, she encourages maximum productivity in the execution of the design vision that is focused on a clear understanding of structure and consistency with flexibility.
Two characteristics of success are:

- 1)** Total agreement about the power structure.
- 2)** The ability of the in-house art director to build out the organization’s identity.

Insights Based on Participants’ Questions and Responses

During the interactive part of this InSource event, participants shared their current challenges and concerns with respect to working as in-house creative professionals.

Advice on Various Issues Included the Following Take-Home Messages:

- When design decisions are made by others under circumstances beyond one’s control that lead to frustration, figure out a way re-own the design work.
- When confronting what may seem at first glance to be “changing design” approaches that can be described as “liquid identities” by some, stay focused on the core issue: the design must be recognizable to your target audience at all times.

- Whenever possible, strive to equalize the talent levels in developing relationships within one’s organization. Internal brand managers can bring value to the table.
- Involve the in-house creative team when choosing an outside design firm to address a specific need.
- Always ask the question, “Why are we going outside the organization for a specific design need?” Be sure both the in-house and external design professionals understand the reasons and their roles. Communicate and understand that you are working with the same premise.
- Some in-house creative managers hire outsiders to serve as advocates for their work.
- Trust is the key to develop influence. Social interactions on an ongoing basis that build trust are important in developing strong relationships.
- Whereas the in-house art department is often regarded as an ally and resource for outside design firms, advertising agencies sometimes develop a competing approach that compromises the integrity of an organization’s design work.
- Above all, “be fearless” in your work and “don’t be afraid to say what you think.”
Talk to the person with the most power. For individuals early in their careers, find people who can be “your recommenders.”
- Choose your battles carefully. Sometimes a particular disagreement over a design detail can be a matter of “cockamamie.” Know what really matters.
- When design work from an external source is presented and turned over to the in-house creative team, **own it together!**

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