

Home-made, low-cost, high quality

From personal projects to low-cost self-promotion in today's graphic design

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Self-promotion is key for disseminating the work of young graphic designers nowadays. It is a practice of great interest. It is practiced not only by necessity, but also voluntarily, by professional graphic designers that are already well established. Through such projects, they reflect on society, the profession itself, develop conceptual work, etc. This activity, alongside with work methods based upon careful attention to the budget, to the resources and tools employed, can result in highly interesting projects. Their authors, thus, become graphic researchers who, sharing and disseminating their work in the networks, generate an enriching feedback that contributes to improve our cultural environment.

Key words: *graphic design, self-promotion, low-cost, personal project.*

When we see students (...) or things shown in sites such as ManyStuff, Work or FFFFound, we are under the impression that something quite interesting is going on. It is a graphic design boom, borderline DIY punk: bold geometric shapes, bright colours, big printed paper sheets, experimental fold-outs, people showing their posters by simply holding them up. Uninhibited graphic work.¹

It could be argued that self-promotion² already constitutes a distinctive genre within graphic design; proof of this is the fact that it is highly considered in certain professional circles and prestigious awards, such as the Laus Awards³, destine one of their prizes to this practice. It is interesting to see that, although this activity traditionally developed purely out of need, in the last few years a great number of interesting, innovative projects have been generated. Thus it has become a more or less constant working trend, not only among young professional or students, but also among studios with an established yet short career.

Self-promotional projects are a powerful, versatile tool for sharing and disseminating the work. It constitutes the ideal media to communicate and share many other and varied ideas, from a wide range of approaches. They are, today, the great tools that young designers and students count on, to transmit their potential, their will to work, the level of their professionalism, and their graphic and conceptual abilities.

1. Self-promotion in today's graphic design

How do we want to be regarded? What impression do we want to give? (...) being interesting is being different

and surprising. This means being successful, and for it, effort and dedication are necessary⁴.

It is true that nowadays there is great competition in the field of graphic design, and young professionals or students do not find it easy to be noticeable. Just a few minutes' search through blogs and sites such as FFFFound, Typojungle, Designspiration or Behance⁵ are enough to realise that today great amounts of high quality graphic material are produced, saturating our visual space, both virtual and printed. However, we could understand such saturation as something positive, since it contributes to generate a richer creative environment, permanent feedback between young designers and long-established studios. In all, a space to showcase and disseminate graphic material that is constantly innovative and in flux, should encourage us to experiment and generate higher quality and more ambitious proposals.

Which is, then, the key to a successful self-promotion project? Most probably, there is not just one answer, since, as mentioned earlier, the designer can approach self-promotion in many different ways, and it all will depend on the goals. It is important to highlight the importance of the briefing in self-promotional projects. Let us see the examples of two very different projects, Self promotional poster nr. 1 by Studio Worldwide and Autopromoción by Oxigen (Figure 1): the first one may not be of a great conceptual depth, but it does boast a typographic experimentation and a chromatic quality that does connect in a very special way with the target audience, which results in its correct response to its briefing, thus being a successful project. On the other hand, the main asset of the second proposal is a developed reflection on graphic design work itself, based upon highlighting the "invisible" elements that the studio regards as fundamental for professional work. In this case, form is rendered in a less striking way, however, this is still a successful project, since the studio's goals are precisely to transmit a philosophy of work and their own interpretation of the profession, that is, a vision that in this case has more to do with theory than with graphics based on large fold-out formats or saturated colour.

Nowadays, for a promotion to be effective it has to be attractive and make you think; it has to be something that a possible client may want to keep and use. If the receiver concedes it some value, they will be actively participating in the general message, which will notably increase the chances to be commissioned a project⁶.

Thus we understand that the quality of these proposals may be quite diverse, and that as we saw in the example above, the differential value of a self-promotional

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Experimental Jetset, in CHEETHAM, CHARLOTTE: "Portfolios" in *Étapes* nr. 7, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2009, p. 131. <http://www.manystuff.org>, <http://www.work.com>, <http://www.fffound.com>.

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The term *autopromoción* (self-promotion) does not exist in the dictionary of the Real Academia Española. The reader is warned that in this text the term will be used referring to graphic design projects which main function is to promote their author.

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<http://www.fad.cat/awards/view/54>.

04

GUITTON, PEDRO: *Portafolios de diseñadores: 100 proyectos personales*, Barcelona, Index Book, 2006 (not numbered).

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<http://www.fffound.com>, <http://www.typojungle.net>, <http://www.designspiration.net>, <http://www.behance.net>, <http://www.flickr.com>, <http://www.domestika.org>.

06

LISA L. CYR: *El arte de la promoción: diferencias creativas con técnicas innovadoras*, Barcelona, Index Book, 2004, p. 55.

project could be both aesthetic as conceptual, and neither is better than the other. However, we find that the proposals that may have more to offer are those combining an attractive, well developed form with contents of some depth. Arguably, they are more interesting, since if the designer has nothing else to offer once it has captured the attention of the receiver with attractive graphics, possibly their project will be quickly forgotten and they will be missing an opportunity to produce a message of interest through a very visible platform. Is it not a lot more enriching, thus, to make the most of the platform that self-promotion offers, to transmit another kind of ideas that confer additional conceptual value to the project and that would prove the author's capacity to develop more interesting communication projects? Considering all this, we could classify self-promotional projects in two wide levels, according to the designer's approach. The first level would answer directly to a strictly professional motivation. In this level, the designer aims at expressing through the project that they want their professional skills to be known and acknowledged, often with the goal of arousing interest with an important client, studio or agency. This group comprises those projects that are closer to traditional self-promotion tools: a professional portfolio, a fold-out with work samples, postcards, original business cards or Christmas cards, all of them well developed both conceptually as graphically.

On the other hand, we could mention a second level, which constitutes a professional-personal level. The designer's goal is to transmit that he wants acknowledgment not only for his skills as a graphic designer, but as a generator of ideas or concepts of interest, beyond the realm of design, on a field borderline with art. In this second scenario, projects of more or less conceptual depth can be included; we could mention projects closer to the realm of art; or projects that are not based upon displaying the professional portfolio of the designer, but that are original proposals in themselves. Many of these projects do not arise strictly from self-promotion. However, inevitably, they tell us about the designers' interests, their methodology and endeavours; "Self-started projects often are necessary for the psychological health of the person (or the studio); such need to experiment and explore is perfectly understandable".

We could highlight examples of this kind of proposals, both Spanish and foreign: from the project *Básicos* (Basics), in which Ibán Ramón carried out an exercise of synthesis, highlighting the beauty of simple forms or the typographic experiment that is *Carta de un exiliado* (Letter from an Exile), by Didac Ballester (Figure 9), to *The Future is Unwritten*, a proposal by Bix Dixit, who encourages to re-write newspaper pages in the New Year (Figure 3). Some international examples could be Ben Jennings' reflection through his project `<html></html>`, around the relationship between the digital and analogue worlds or the manifest proposed by designer Katja Gretzinger on the role of design nowadays.

Therefore, we could say that those professionals generating self-promotion projects with these aspirations, not

only transmit their skills through certain graphics and concept focused on showcasing their own work, but they also contribute an added value as individuals interested in posing considerations, criticisms, telling stories, etc. They are professionals proving that, apart that an interest as professional designers, they are interested in the language of design itself, as a tool to do other things and to transmit many other messages.

There are nearly as many occasions –or excuses, depending on the point of view– to send advertising as a self-promotion vehicle. Season's greetings (not necessarily on holidays only), a change of address, the incorporation of a new associate...⁸. In this respect we could highlight the fold-out that the studio Vandejong produced about their moving to a new premise, which shows the actual moving route through an interesting photographic documentary.

The trend among these works deserves special mention, since it is the one that, perhaps has distanced itself more from the initial goal of self-promotion. However, it contributes to reclaim the image of the designer as an individual not only capable of generating an attractive form or graphics, but also a deep discourse of interest. We find an obvious representative of this line of work in Paco Bascuñán, of whom Raquel Pelta says that "since his beginnings as a graphic designer he was very comfortable practicing what he and his colleagues at La Nave defined as a sort of "creative gymnastics": completely free work that were not a response to any particular task nor to any client's request, but which are a useful vehicle to experiment"⁹. With these experiments, Bascuñán showed himself to be more than a conventional designer, he was a researcher, an author in the most humble sense of the term; a professional experimenting in search of graphic and conceptual solutions that could bring a more transcendental side to their trade, when this is not possible to acquire through commissioned work. Following his attitude, good advice for young generations of designers is to make the most of the powerful and highly visible communication tools that self-promotion offers, to show their worth and to propose interesting work that would go beyond attractive graphics.

It is convenient to keep in mind that the designer has the responsibility of generating interesting contents, and that designers should not fall in a dangerous ego trap of those generating a seemingly conceptual proposal that finally is an empty one. Thus, Adrian Shaughnessy says,

The ostentatious gesture of the project of one's own book is a typical example: an enormous, heavy book takes the scene, full of visual fireworks (...) but, upon perusal, meaningless, self-praising scribbles appear. And, for those who play this game, it is dangerously easy to come to believe their own lies¹⁰.

Raquel Pelta adds that "a designer does not become this kind of author overnight. First they must have a clever, viable idea. Defending this kind of authorship, in self-commissioned work, is not a synonym of populating the world with useless artifacts, nor throwing oneself headfirst to economic bankruptcy"¹¹.

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SHAUGHNESSY, ADRIAN: *Cómo ser diseñador gráfico sin perder el alma*, Barcelona, Index Book, 2005. p. 121.

08

FLEISHMAN, MICHAEL: *Tu carrera como freelance (ilustrador o diseñador gráfico)*, Barcelona, Divine Egg, D. L., 2004. p. 212.

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PELTA, RAQUEL: "Paco Bascuñán. Por siempre" in BASCUÑÁN, PACO: *La deriva tipográfica*, Valencia, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Carlos de Valencia, Campgràfic: 2009. p. 27.

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<http://www.fiffound.com>, <http://www.typo-jungle.net>, <http://www.designspiration.net>, <http://www.behance.net>, <http://www.flickr.com>, <http://www.domestika.org>.

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PELTA, RAQUEL: *Diseñar hoy*, Barcelona, Paidós Diseño, 2004. p. 59.

2. Low-cost design, today's design

When analysing graphic production of several studios of the last five years —both foreign and Spanish—, we will realise that many are developing a very interesting working method. It may or not be a consequence of the current economic situation, but it is without a doubt specific to our time. We can speak of the quest for maximum creativity with minimum economic resources of past times. However, among certain studios, a different approach can be appreciated; a growing, highly creative outlook on certain resources and tools that we may not associate straight away with high quality design. These are “home” resources, close to our environment, cheap and easily obtainable, that become the axis around which some projects are arranged.

Among these “low cost” resources available to professionals and students alike, and that both exploit with great creativity, we could highlight those self-promotion tools with very accesible production prices, such as posters, postcards, business cards, fold-outs, booklets, calendars, etc.; the tools for their production are what the average user has access to today, such as inkjet home printers, scanners; or the wide range of virtual resources that creative people use as dissemination and self-promotion tools (personal website, social networking sites, and on-line portfolio sites such as Behance, Flickr o Domestika¹²).

Thus, we are talking about a growing trend in a graphic design that we could call “low-cost design”. It is based not only on the use of the mentioned resources in graphic projects, but especially on the designers’ approach, their way of understanding materials, tools and the relation between quality and budget. In a way, it could be said that working on this low-cost trend means bringing to the field of commissioned work those techniques and ways of self-published work, closer to the field of fanzines or small self-promotional publications. In these,

It is not great quality of print that matters. What is important are ideas and how to transfer them to paper. Normally domestic printers and copiers are used, together with hand finishings and boundings. This low-cost characteristic (...) makes something that might have been originally a problem into a challenge, honing ingenuity and making it possible to do more with less. Here is where creativity and economical use of resources come in, generating a platform enabling publishing and dissemination of culture in a cheap and direct manner without compromising quality¹³.

The studio that we consider the most obvious representative of this way to work may be the young Spanish design duo Bendita Gloria. Through their creative projects, their members remind us that often, a project carried out with cheap “home” resources is not only valid, but it can also connect in a very special way with the public to whom the project is addressed. Thus, we can find projects such as the stationery for La Barquichuela (Figure 16), which design is completed by the user, by deleting the unnecessary information. Apart from an obvious example of the use of low-cost resources, this project generates an interesting interaction with the end user. Other projects deserving special mention are Carteles Peinados for 5^o1^a Salón de belleza or their Libros a granel (Figure

10), both are projects that use materials in a clever way to produce a very attractive design.

We could highlight examples of work carried out in this manner by other studios and agencies: Tokteja, by Aristu; the invitation to the exhibition Frutta, by Eduard Cehovin, printed with one colour directly on apples; a drummer’s business cards, printed also with one ink, for this occasion on the patch of a drum, by Mixer; Lorgan’s The Furniture Store, by Kinetic or Productive Posters, by Projectprojects. The latter offers blank spaces for the audience to come up with suggestions for the use and improvement of public space, resources, etc. It was conceived as a low-cost project to allow the reproduction process of the user’s ideas and to make such project cheaper; it establishes their participation as an essential element that completes the design.

Today we can highlight the widespread use of single ink or two-ink printing, perhaps as an attempt to recover manual processes such as silk-screening or in search for a clear, direct communication. Often studios are producing very synthetic projects, in which a minimal detail in the design, stressing a word or a symbol, the use of a phosphorescent ink or a striking fold-out may be the features that make the piece stand out.

Nowadays there are some instances, the whole graphic project revolves around the very idea of low-cost (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7).

Along with this, the concept “cheap” is today subject of diverse initiatives, such as Cheap Design Contest, Paperback, ediciones baratas, The Cheaper show —although the latter is more related to art— or the publishing house Ultramarina Cartonera¹⁴. All of it shows that, nowadays, there certainly is a whole movement around these ideas.

This way to work, apart from the very interesting aspects already highlighted, allows questioning both the unfavourable perception that many sectors of the general public has of design as a factor that increases excessively the price of a product, and the perception that a cheaply produced design is a synonym of low quality. The numerous examples we have remarked show that the case is precisely the opposite. This is a different approach, thoroughly up-to-the-minute, that is, in many a case, a high quality, innovative design that could even connect very well with those sections of the population that are less accustomed to acknowledging and recognising design in a conscious manner. This would be the case since the design would be using tools and resources that are of daily use for them. Let us remember how the project Productive Posters —Projectprojects— demonstrates that it is precisely through these processes that a strong connection can be forged with the receiver.

3. Self-promotion (low-cost or otherwise) as work philosophy and as a way to experiment and innovate

As we have seen, not only young designers or students —whose need to self-promote is obvious— carry out personal projects as one of their usual activities, but also well established studios take up this exercise as a cornerstone of their work that is essential for their professional and

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<http://www.facebook.com>, <http://www.twitter.com>, <http://www.blogger.com>, <http://www.wordpress.com>, <http://www.behance.net>, <http://www.flickr.com>, <http://www.domestika.org>.

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VIDAL, ROBERTO: “Autoedición”, in *Étapes* nr. 12, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2011, p. 138.

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<http://www.cheapdesigncontest.it>, <http://www.marcovigo.com/es/content/paperback-ediciones-baratas>, <http://www.thecheapershow.com> <http://www.editorialultramarina.com>.

creative evolution. Thus, we could say that developing this kind of projects on a regular basis is not only a widely extended practice, but it also constitutes, as analysed above, a very enriching activity.

In this point, we find really interesting the way the mentioned two blocks present themselves, together, in the case of the young graphic designer or student. The need to self-promote, with or without the will to communicate messages of certain depth, personal interests, or considerations on diverse subjects, added to a restrictive approach to budget, or a creative, innovative approach to those resources that the designer will use in their projects. If we put together those two aspects we could talk about a more specific type of project, a working ethos as cost-effective as interesting, that we will call “low-cost self-promotion”.

This category is understood in an open way, since not in all cases the designer will judge it convenient to follow the guidelines below. Carrying out self-promotional projects, low-cost or otherwise, may be an exercise that may bring about many positive outcomes for the young designer, since it can contribute to improve their skills when it comes to:

- Professional attitude and predisposition to work, since it is the designer the one who decides to develop the self-promotion project, thus transmitting that they have initiative and are able to offer high quality results, through high level graphics.
- Personal implication, since they are aware that, as every other person, they have their own ideas and messages —reflections around their own trade, on social or political subjects, etc.—, that they may or not decide to show in their projects.
- Graphic research and experimentation, since they work looking for solutions and distinct, daring proposals.
- An efficient communication, since they are making an effort to connect with the target audience of their project, without decreasing the value or importance of the messages.
- Innovation, due to the creative plus that comes from making the most of the available resources, from a highly creative approach and from the innovative use of certain resources for graphic projects of a high graphic and/or conceptual quality —“diseño low-cost”-.

Under this working philosophy we could include projects such as *A book full of spam*, a very synthetic proposal, easy to reproduce and highly creative, with which Bendita Gloria accepts the fact that self-promotion is, in the end, spam and uses such idea as the basis for the project's graphics (Figure 11); *Packaging para Cds*, (CD packaging), a very interesting research and personal experiment by Didac Ballester, using recycled materials as a starting point (Figure 8); *Wish list of 100*, an experimental project in poster format, in which Tim Wan presents a list with 100 aspirations or wishes of 100 people, which he later represents graphically or the *Cartas Ficticias* (Fictitious Letters) that Charlotte Noruzi handwrote to several publishing houses with the aim of promoting herself, representing in them several classic characters in literature, with customised lettering for each case.

Let us remember that we are considering this philosophy or work ethic from a very broad point of view, since we are studying a field that is today in constant development, and in which we cannot talk about a straight-forward trend of “self-promotion design” or “low-cost self-promotion”. However, the mentioned projects undeniably change their authors, up to some extent, into the kind of professional we are describing. They are watching their environment, the communication languages in it (*A book full of spam*), they are researchers seeking innovation (*Packaging para Cds*) and, very often, they propose reflections that are, up to a degree, personal and that may be of great interest (*Wish list of 100*).

With regards to the encouragement of graphic experimentation and innovation that this implies, let us relate again low-cost self-promotion with some of the aspects of self-published work such as fanzines. Probably, their common feature that could be more interesting for the designer may be complete freedom, along with self-reliance and independence. When there are no limitations of contents imposed by clients, or technical limitations imposed by printers —in the case of printed work—, the margin of what can be done widens. It is true that self-publishing has its own limitations, such as not being able to produce or print in large editions. However, the designer enjoys complete freedom to experiment and create. It is such independence and experimentation that make this practice a media for constant innovation, search for new solutions and proposals going beyond what had been done before.

Thus, it is not illogical to think that the more self-promotional projects that are “home-made”, experimental and daring being uploaded to the virtual space and are shared, the more aware clients, printers, etc. will be of the fact that things can be taken further, and the more often they will find a way to do so. The project *Stevie Wonder*, by Bendita Gloria constitutes the application of such work ethic to commissioned work; before the lack of budget for making die-cut posters, it was the members of the studio who manually cut each poster (Figure 35). This project shows that such “can't be done” does encourage young creative professionals to find the way to make it happen.

Therefore, we could say that it is very convenient for the young graphic designer to adopt self-promotion on a regular basis as their work ethic, encouraging experimentation and graphic research, giving free reign to their personal vision of reality. Working in this kind of projects with a low-cost mindset can be the best way to generate good work habits; strengthening innovation with an outlook on media and communication elements that we may not immediately associate with high quality graphic initiatives, but which may generate very interesting projects. Above all, we find extremely positive the feedback that this type of proposals generate through constant exchange in networks. It not only can contribute to generate a richer cultural and graphic environment, but also it can help bring respect to the figure of the young graphic designer, showing clients that they can be a lot more than a professional with technical knowledge.

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