

Visual Rhetoric:

The Powerful Design of Nonprofit Campaigns

An Interview with Peleg Top and Jonathan Cleveland

by the editors

Editors' note: *Ruth McCambridge and James Morgan of the Nonprofit Quarterly sat down with Jonathan Cleveland and Peleg Top, the authors of Designing for the Greater Good, to discuss what makes nonprofit media campaigns powerful. The images mentioned in the interview were selected on a competitive basis for inclusion in this unique design annual, which we highly recommend.*



PHOTO © STREET REACH CAMPAIGN: T2H ADVERTISING, MYRTLE BEACH, SOUTH CAROLINA

NONPROFIT QUARTERLY: *First, tell us a little about the book Designing for the Greater Good.*

Peleg Top: *The idea for the book came up about seven years ago, and I shopped it around to many publishers who really weren't interested in publishing a book on this subject, because "Why would anybody want to buy a book about work that's mostly done pro bono or for free? There's no market for this." It wasn't until Crescent Hill Publishing actually embraced the idea and enthusiastically presented it to HarperCollins, who said yes to the project, that it actually came to life. When we sent out the call for entries, we received close to 4,000 submissions: about four times the average entries to most design books.*



PHOTO © STREET REACH CAMPAIGN: T2H ADVERTISING, MYRTLE BEACH, SOUTH CAROLINA

NPQ: *Well, it is beautiful. Most of my questions have to do with what goes into making a campaign that captures people's attention. I'd like to go through a couple of campaigns in the book and ask you, "What are the things that people can learn from?" But first, I want to ask more generally why this kind of media is important to the relationship between nonprofits and their communities.*

PT: Where design and marketing can really play a powerful role in a nonprofit's outreach to their constituents is through making an emotional connection that almost puts the audience in the place of the people that they're trying to help. That creates a very powerful emotional connection to a cause.

NPQ: *So it's something that would retain its own space in somebody's head?*

PT: That's a good way of putting it.

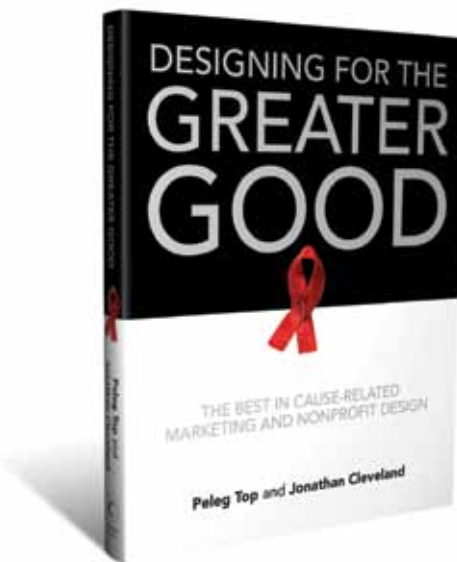
Jonathan Cleveland: It brings it firsthand and makes it real to you; so it does create that own emotional space, as opposed to simply providing an observation or watching experience.

PT: I think making it personal is the key. [The way someone will] care about something is if you put them in the other person's shoes. So marketing and design have the power to enable [you] to do that.

NPQ: *What can marketing and design like this do for organizations? What are the roles it can play in organizational missions?*

PT: What each organization wants is action. They want involvement of various kinds from benefactors, volunteers, and they want to create general awareness. That directly helps their mission. So it's not necessarily to help do the work but to help get the work done by supporting it, by donating, by talking about it, by letting everybody know about it. But ultimately these campaigns are meant to inspire action. One of the things we would always ask when we were at a meeting with a marketing department in a nonprofit is, "What are your goals here?"

JC: There is no doubt that great design in marketing can really bring that message to the people to create the action. That takes something different than pictures of lots of happy elderly people or happy kids. There is really no story there. We call that approach "spray and pray," meaning: "Let's just do a generic campaign, send it to a huge



"Great design in marketing can really bring [a] message . . . to create action."

—Jonathan Cleveland,
coauthor, *Designing for the Greater Good*

mailing list, and try to pick up some donors, as opposed to defining the message with great copy and great design."

The [T2H Advertising 2009] Street Reach Campaign is a good example of storytelling with an image. They created ads and billboards that showed a person in one situation in normal-day life and then take that exact person and position them on the outside as a street person looking in the window at themselves having a nice dinner in a restaurant. This is a very effective campaign. It drives home a message and has a real pinpoint focus on it—as opposed to just showing a lot of down-and-out people.

NPQ: *You've worked with several groups in helping them to develop their images. What's the process like? Is there some value beyond mobilizing an organization's constituency that it brings to an organization to really consider an ad campaign like this?*

PT: I think what it does ultimately is help the organization tell their story in the simplest and most powerful way, which leads to action. So a lot of marketing and design is a form of storytelling, and what we do as creative experts and designers is help take that big story and everything that it represents from the organization to the cause and distill it down to a message that can connect with people. That's when it's effective. That's when it's



powerful: when somebody who has never heard of this cause sees their ad and gets what they are all about. They see a logo and they get it. There's an emotional, visceral connection to that cause and that organization that created it. It's beautiful. It's magic when it happens. That's what every organization wants.

JC: Nonprofits often have a decent knowledge of their audience, but I think we can bring new ideas to the table on reaching a broader audience. Because usually this is all based around fundraising of some sort. So the more you can bring the message to a wider audience, that always helps.

NPQ: *Let's go to the ads on pages 168 and 169 of your book [at left]. What do these pieces do effectively?*

JC: One of the first things we looked for in selecting the entries for the book and making the choices was visceral impact. This is one of the campaigns that presents something oddly. You really have to look at the picture, and the picture draws you in because it is so grimy and grim and dark and depressing. But then you have to take a double look at this picture to get the message here, and I don't mean that it's hard to figure out the message; I just think that it's done in a very intriguing way. Just the way the photograph has been used to manipulate with the person as part of that environment and then the message is projected onto the building, as opposed to a flat headline, you know. It just becomes one really effectively designed piece that is intriguing, smart, and gets the message across.

PT: Imagine looking at this ad and just seeing the photograph with the homeless person . . . just photographed just as a regular homeless person against the wall with the headline on top of it. That's the standard way many might show a homeless person. It will not be as effective as what happened in this ad because what they did is they showed you that when you're homeless, you are just one with the streets. And that's the story that they're telling.

NPQ: *It is very subtle but very powerful.*

PT: Exactly. So again, we go back to, “What story is the work telling?” You picked a perfect one for us to look at that really tells a very powerful story about being homeless, about how you are the street. Not just homeless on the street, you are the street, and in order for me to understand what that means, I have to see it. People are visual. They have to really visualize what it is that you’re trying to say, and that’s where the power of design comes in, where we can take an idea like that and materialize it.

NPQ: *And so, if we go from there to something a bit more in your face, the ads on page 140, “Real Manly Men Aren’t Afraid”[at right]. Can you talk about why this works?*

JC: One reason it works is because it is very fun. They’re attacking a subject that a lot of men just don’t want to deal with. Most men just don’t want to get a checkup and don’t want to go to the doctor; and so they’re presenting the need for it in a fun way by using the really big muscle man and then the cowboy: men’s men. There, again: it just draws you in.

NPQ: *So they’re using iconic images in a way that just flies in the face of the manliness concept.*

JC: Absolutely.

PT: This is an element that you’ll see being used in advertising over and over, which is a combination of humor and shock. They do something that’s not expected and give it a humorous twist. Those are two powerful ways to get a message out there. Think about all the ads that you reacted to—whether it’s for a nonprofit or not, even if it’s for products—what is it that grabs your attention? If it’s funny or if it just shocks you and everything in between is just blah—in the gray area that you don’t really remember. But we tend to remember things that either make us laugh or shock us. I think this ad does both.



“[These ads] do something that’s not expected and give it a humorous twist.”

—Peleg Top, coauthor, *Designing for the Greater Good*



PHOTO © UTAH CANCER ACTION NETWORK; LOVE COMMUNICATIONS, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

“The right designer with the right idea and the right style can really articulate a message in a way that is unique and noteworthy.”

—Jonathan Cleveland



ILLUSTRATION © HUMANE SOCIETY OF TAMPA BAY; COSMIC, ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

NPQ: So, moving from there to Page 95 . . . talk to me about this ad [at left].

JC: When they submitted this, I recall reading their paragraph on how they approach this. It is such a strong, important issue, and they wrote that there’s no way they could do a photograph of a dog dying inside of a car, so they really struggled with how they were going to get the message across. And there, again, I think a part of it is a little bit of humor and shock as well, and it’s fun and whimsical.

So it draws you in, but it is a really, really important message. You know, you got the little devil on the car and the dog trying to get out, but it’s not done in a grotesque way. You get in an instant that underneath the whimsy of the graphic, there’s a very important message that is being articulated.

PT: Illustration was the best approach on this, I think, because philosophically it could be tough to figure this out photographically.



ILLUSTRATION © TRAVIS COUNTY GREEN PARTY (POWER OF VOICE); GRAPHIC GRANOLA, AUSTIN, TEXAS

NPQ: How about the “Power of Your Voice” piece on page 163 [at left]? What is this meant to evoke?

JC: Oh, it’s so bold and out there and outrageous. It really visually grabs your attention and draws you to read what it’s about. It’s more of a political issue, and I think it illustrates that through the screaming-out image. It is trying to motivate you—whether you’re angry or not—to take action in your political party or go to this meeting to learn more about the Travis County Green Party.

It just grabs your attention visually, which I think is the first thing that every designer strives for. Does it stand out? Does it look different than anything else that you see out there? And that’s the power of design, and that’s the power of using design as a communication tool, because it’s a blank canvas and the right designer with the right idea and the right style can really articulate a message in a way that is unique and noteworthy.

NPQ: What is your favorite ad campaign in the book? Do you have one?

JC: I'll give you two. I love the Hurricane Katrina posters [at right]. That's not one, really, but there's a variety of those. But on a much simpler level, which I thought was done just incredibly well—simple and clever—is on page 45 of the book [see page 20]. I love the Goodwill poster for Halloween and probably one of the simplest things in the book, but I find it very fun. They took their mark and just played it out really well in a very simple format and that just works.

NPQ: *When people are looking to get design help for these kinds of campaigns, what should they look for in a design or marketing partner?*

PT: When designers ask me how to get into doing more nonprofit work, I tell them to begin by looking for agencies that promote causes they care about so they can see that you understand their world. I want to look for a designer or a design team or an agency that really understands my world and specializes in that arena and that has experience in that area. So I think experience is one thing and expertise is another, and the third thing is really a sense of aesthetic. “Do we connect on a level of aesthetics?” Because there are so many different designers with so many different styles out there.

JC: If you're lucky enough to find all of that, plus a designer or a design firm that also has a passion for your cause, that really helps.

NPQ: *A lot of the campaigns in the book are done by smaller nonprofits. Given their small size, how do you see these organizations balancing their organizing strategy with their communication strategy?*

JC: Well, at least from my experience, a lot of these smaller agencies have really tight budgets, if they even have one. So it's important to work with a design firm that really likes your cause and wants to be a part of it. But what I also find challenging with these small groups is they normally don't have a marketing person. You're usually working with a couple of assistants and maybe an executive director, so I find that there has to

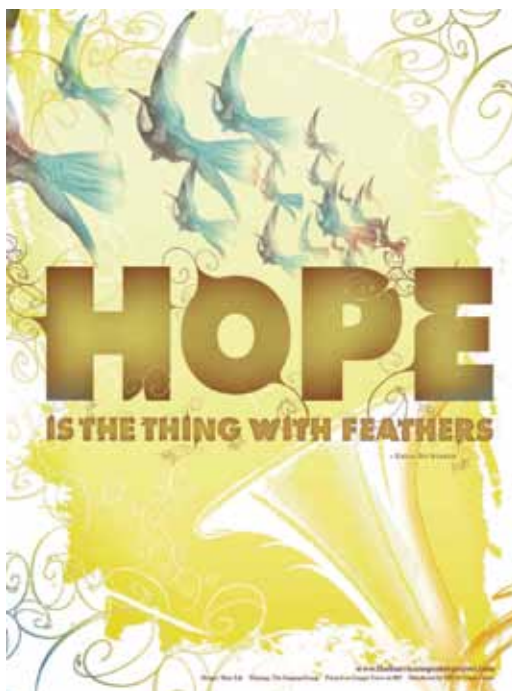


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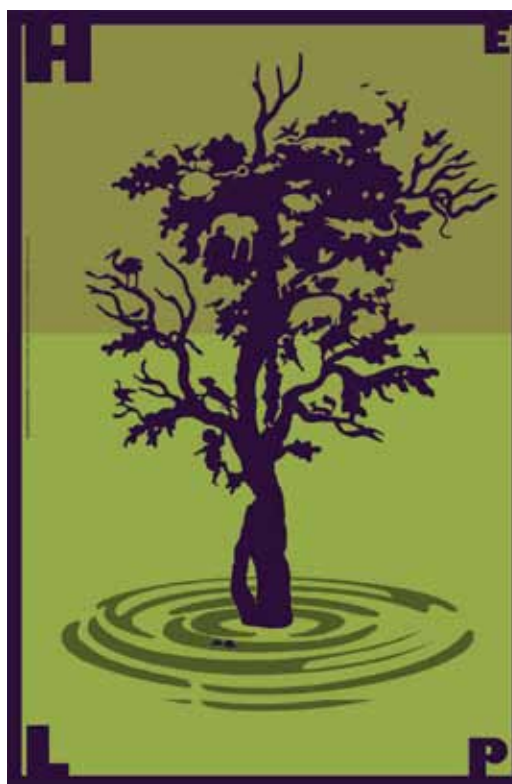


ILLUSTRATION © LANNY SOMMESE, PORT MATILDA, PENNSYLVANIA

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“When there is no value articulated, the relationship [between nonprofit and designer] can really get abused.”

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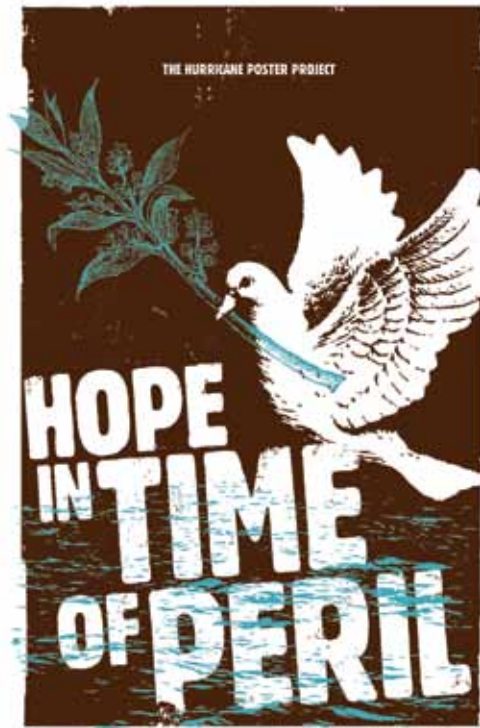


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be a lot of education and guidance, and it falls on the design firm or the designer to work directly with them to get the best possible product for pro bono or an extremely tight budget.

PT: Many times the designer or the design firm serves as an extension of the organization from a marketing perspective. We come in with our expertise and fill in that gap—that hole that’s missing internally for them—and we support them at that level with all of our expertise.

JC: Frequently a nonprofit will ask a variety of different designers to do a variety of different projects pro bono. They may be getting all of this work for free, but using different designers ultimately undermines their brand and their cause, and they lose sight of the value of the work. It’s best to build a relationship with one designer.

PT: Absolutely. I always tell designers that pro bono doesn’t mean totally free. It means an exchange. So if I’m a designer and I’m giving my services and my work to a nonprofit, there are two options here: just give for the sake of giving and don’t expect anything in return, or have an agreement with a nonprofit that recognizes in some way the value of what we’re contributing.

When there is no value articulated, the relationship can really get abused. So it is important to clarify that up front and put some ground rules in place as to what pro bono looks like. What are the boundaries? What are the limitations?

When both parties really know and agree on that, when that agreement is in place, it makes the project and their relationship beautiful, rather than creating anxiety. It’s important, in other words, for the nonprofit to understand that they’re getting something really valuable and to respect that and to offer something back that could be valuable to the designer.

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