



PENTAGRAM CASE STUDY

Interview conducted with Paula Scher,
Partner, New York

Pentagram is an international multidisciplinary design firm whose partners are all working designers: graphic designers, product designers and architects who collaborate in the creation of graphic, identity, interactive, architecture, interior and product design. The firm is organized and run so that the designers may achieve their best—because design at its best satisfies clients, pleases users and gratifies the designer. Pentagram believes that ideas make design distinctive, and that identity, function, aesthetics and value make design work.

Project Examples

Madison Square Park

Madison Square Park is a public park located directly across the street from Pentagram's office in Manhattan's Flatiron District. The nonprofit organization Madison Square Park Conservancy requested and secured Pentagram's pro bono design talent to help revive the park's image after a prolonged period of neglect. In response, Pentagram created an identity for the park that now appears on banners, promotional materials and the Conservancy's website. Pentagram also redesigned the environmental graphics and packaging for the on-site hamburger joint Shake Shack established to contribute to the park's revitalization. Today, Madison Square Park is a bustling green space whose lawns, gardens and public programs draw visitors from all over the city. Through this pro bono project, not only did Pentagram improve the quality of their own neighborhood, but they expanded their reputation within the community and gained public recognition.

High Line

The High Line is a 1.5 mile disused elevated railroad track that runs along the West Side of Manhattan. When a group of community members were looking to gain public and government support to transform the track into a one-of-a-kind elevated green space, they asked Pentagram to design a logo for their awareness campaign. Pentagram accepted because of the uniqueness of the project and as a result of their contribution, an incredible amount of popular support has been generated, the organization's fundraising capabilities have dramatically increased and the project is currently under construction.

Robin Hood Foundation

The Robin Hood Foundation targets poverty in New York City by finding and funding the best and most effective programs and partnering with them to maximize results. The Library Initiative is one such program for which Pentagram has donated their services by designing environmental graphics for public school libraries in New York's underserved communities. Uncommon Schools, a nonprofit charter school organization whose mission is to close the achievement gap, is another Robin Hood project for which Pentagram has designed an identity, signage and environmental graphics.

Public Theater

Over the last 14 years Pentagram has developed numerous promotional posters and marketing materials for the Public Theater in New York City. Perhaps best known for its summertime Shakespeare in the Park series, the Public Theater is dedicated to making high quality theatrical productions accessible and relevant to the public. The work Pentagram has created for the Public has heightened awareness of the institution and its mission as well as the theatrical productions it stages.

One Laptop Per Child

One Laptop Per Child is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide laptop computers to children in developing countries worldwide. The organization approached Pentagram to create an identity that would successfully represent their mission on an international platform. With this in mind, Pentagram created four icons (representing vision, participation, a child and a laptop) that would be intuitive across international cultural boundaries. The icons were also designed to coordinate with the navigational icons for Sugar, the laptop's user-interface, and the organization's website thus creating a cohesive visual identity for the nonprofit.

Pentagram is dedicated to working for cultural institutions and nonprofit organizations and provides many design services to such clients at pro-rated fees including the Metropolitan Opera, the New York City Ballet and the New York Philharmonic.

Good Business?

"We do pro bono because it's good business," says Pentagram partner Paula Scher.

Builds Reputation and Attracts New Clients

Pentagram has retained, strengthened and gained new clients through their pro bono work because of its visual appeal and public presentation. "A lot of the work we've done is outside, public and very visible, so clients will call us because they've seen the design," says Scher. "I can't tell you how many jobs I've gotten through the Public Theater. We're connected to virtually every cultural organization in the city and we're rewarded in recommendations as well as being included in groups where we find out information about upcoming projects—it's all very good business."

Allows Greater Freedom and Creativity

Pro bono projects tend to happen quickly because of the easier approval process that exists within the non-profit administrative structure. These projects also tend to have fewer restrictions that allows for greater design creativity. "Thank god for the pro bono work, otherwise my team would feel like nothing ever got made," says Scher.

Revenue Benefits

By securing new clients and strengthening their reputation for quality and innovative design, pro bono work has helped Pentagram's revenue. "I just don't understand why more design firms are not doing pro bono, unless their incomes are hurt by it. But I have to say—and this has to be made clear—that we've made all kinds of donations, and in no way has it done anything but helped our income; it's just good business."

Evolution of Pentagram's Pro Bono Involvement and Strategy

Pro bono work at Pentagram has been part of the firm's culture for decades and is endemic in the nature of the partners. Pentagram attracts like-minded people who are conscious of their community, desire well-designed environments, and want "to be involved as a graphic force within their community—pro bono is typical of who we are and what we do." Pentagram's pro bono mentality has become inherent in every aspect of their work. Pro bono projects are highly desired by all of Pentagram's partners because of their public nature, freedom in creativity and community use.

For Scher, and the other Pentagram partners, pro bono work is "about the spirit: to be a designer and a force within a community, to help make the community a better place to live, isn't that what we all want to do?"

Work with corporate clients enables Pentagram to accept pro bono projects. These for-profit projects span a variety of organizations and have contributed to the prestige of the firm that in turn enables them to do even more pro bono work.

"I think that it's all selfish—it's all in our own self interest," says Scher. "I like to live in a better designed world, and I want everyone to have access to it, and we want to give it to them." Because of the work Pentagram has done for New York City's cultural institutions, nonprofit organizations, schools and parks, New Yorkers recognize the firm's work and associate it with having enjoyable areas to be in and walk by. As designers, Pentagram maintains the desire to donate because of the self-interest in the business benefits and social impact.

"If you do something you like to do, find the people that you can help with it and do it for them," advises Scher. "Because you're going to do it better for them than you would for the people who don't expect it for free."

Pro Bono Management

Project Acquisition

As with paying client work, non-profit organizations approach Pentagram requesting their design expertise. Because of Pentagram's co-operative business structure, partners individually accept pro bono requests according to the organization, the cause and their team's availability.

Determining the Amount of Pro Bono

Pentagram's structure also permits a varied schedule of projects that easily integrates pro bono work. Because of this, they have been involved in hundreds of pro bono projects. About 30-50 percent of Pentagram's projects (not time) are pro bono or pro-rated.

Projects can take a few days or several years depending on the relationship.

Employee Involvement

Pro bono projects are chosen and overseen by partners who work in conjunction with their team members. Teams consist of a dedicated group of designers and project coordinators that typically number between six and eight people.

Lessons Learned

Biggest Challenge

Occasionally an organization will take advantage of pro bono work by demanding highly specialized details and expecting a long-lasting relationship. When doing pro bono work, “people should be considerate of the fact that you’re going to invest your best intelligence and give it your best shot, but that you’re going to try to do it in a minimal amount of time,” says Scher. “Doing your best work has nothing to do the amount of time you spend on it—[for design work] it has to do with the approval processes—we explain this to them and we’ve found that people are generally very appreciative because it always benefits them. Generally, people who come to us are pretty savvy about who we are. If you’re coming here, you expect to get something terrific.”

To learn more about their program, contact:

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