

IN-HOUSE DESIGNERS

By Payal Khandelwal



In-house design is a very powerful resource for a company and an in-house designer, a powerful person. He/she has the key to turnaround the design and eventually the brand and what helps him/her the most is the core understanding of the brand. This, in turn, is derived from his/her proximity to the brand. In this issue's Special Report, we decided to raise the magnifying glass over the in-house design microcosm. We spoke to various Indian in-house designers across categories to see what merits and demerits they see of their position. Do they feel as powerful as their international counterparts?



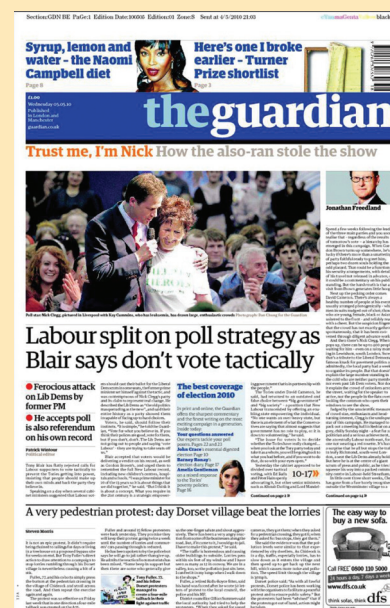
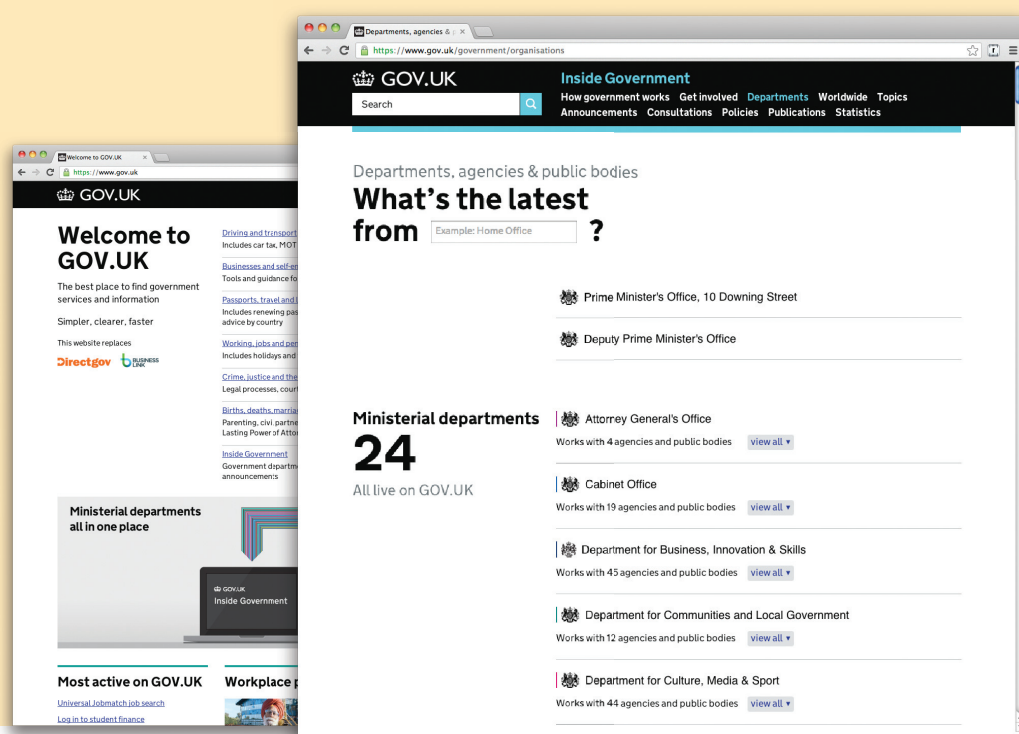
In April this year, the redesigned UK Government website (gov.uk) created a lot of stir and scooped various accolades. It was awarded Design of the Year by the Design Museum in London and D&AD Black Pencil. Redesigning this website was a herculean task as it involved folding a huge number of the then existing government websites into one holistic website. This mammoth redesign was led by Ben Terrett, head of design at Government Digital Service. Over the years, internationally, in-house design has become something of a movement. And this has led to some spectacular results for brands. Most of the highly successful redesigns have also been an offshoot of this movement. Take for example, *The Guardian* redesign in 2005 by Mark Porter (who still works as a creative director at *The Guardian*). In-house creative director for Bloomberg's *Businessweek*, Richard Turley (who joined Bloomberg from *The Guardian*), is often referred to as the guy who completely reinvented *Businessweek*'s design. In-house designer Allen Peter has produced some fantastic work for the American retail company Target.

In-house design is a very powerful resource for a company and an in-house designer, a powerful person. He/she has the key to turnaround the design and eventually the brand and what helps him/her the most is the core understanding of the brand. This, in turn, is derived from his/her proximity to the brand. In this issue's *Special Report* we decided to raise the

magnifying glass over the in-house design microcosm. We spoke to various Indian in-house designers across categories to see what merits and demerits they see of their position as in-house designers. Do they feel as powerful as the international in-house designers?

Also, when it comes to in-house designers, the view from the outside is usually saddled with myths and questions like 'in-house designers must be bored to death of working on the same brand over and over again', 'severe restraining orders on their creativity due to rigid corporate agendas and brand guidelines', 'they must have a tough time adjusting to the corporate officer hours, decorum, dress code et al' and 'where do they draw their inspiration from, since they are always cocooned in the corporate space?' We decided to get to the bottom of this too.

Read the edited excerpts from our conversations with these designers and the conclusion based on those:





Pooja Tandon, design head, Pidilite Industries

She says that one of the main advantages of an in-house design studio is the belonging and an inherent sense of "ownership" that one has over the brands. "We work more closely with the management, marketing and sales teams as a single unit, rather than a service provider and a client. Information is shared more freely and hence, the end solutions are a lot more relevant. Also, the deeper intuitive understanding of the core values of the company enriches any individual campaign."

On the matter of creative freedom, she says, "It is natural for any client/agency to have a healthy debate on how they see a solution, as often they would have differing views. As you are not an "outside consultant" but more of an employee answering to management, the ability to stand by your design convictions is paramount."

Talking about the challenges, she says, "One of the challenges is to be able to deliver when briefs are not finalized, timelines are short and directions are not fixed. However, that is part of being an in-house agency, as one of your intangible services is to under-

stand what has not been said, through the experience that you have." She also feels that there is always the risk of being taken for granted, when you are so accessible all the time. Therefore it is our responsibility then, to keep the client educated, market ourself, highlight our abilities and make sure that the studio gets the respect it deserves."

On being asked the age-old question — 'do you get bored of working on just one brand?', Tandon says, "When there is a multitude of brands — international/pan Indian/ regional of varying sizes, there is an abundance of variety. Also the application sectors may differ — a single product may be used for B to C for an individual home owner/ for industrial use or in the international market, in which case the communication and media for each changes." In her case, there is also the opportunity to be involved with a product or service right from the conception stage and to be able to mould or evolve the brief before the project starts. Being seeped into the brands day in and day out, we are able to be strategic design partners to the company and pro-actively create projects that would be *mutually* beneficial, she adds.



HOW IT WORKS:

There is a process where any department who needs a standard job done fills out a "Design Brief" that is signed off by the HOD (head of department), explains Tandon. For jobs that are more demanding, there would be a meeting or several meetings with the concerned department's president, vice president, marketing head — key stakeholders. "While meetings are scheduled according to timelines, there is more or less an open door policy, so that if something needs to be discussed, it can be done freely. Being in the same office complex, the studio itself is designed in such a way that it is accessible to all."



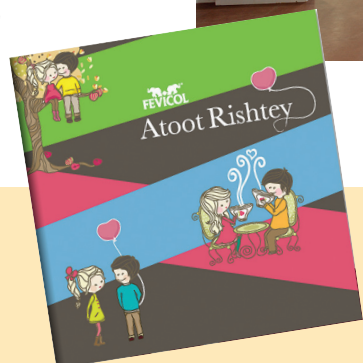


While Pidilite has a team of in-house designers and two consulting studios on a retainer basis, the outsourcing of work is done based on the nature of the projects. Tandon says that often there are jobs that need exclusive talent or skill or those that do not fall under graphic design. "In that case we find the agency that best fits the requirement of that particular job, engaging local or international talent. This also keeps our work fresh and brings variety and newness to design. However, the ownership of the job always remains with us and we work collaboratively using our company knowledge and their expertise to come out with the best results."

ADVICE TO IN-HOUSE DESIGNERS:

"Unlike ad agencies, where client servicing stands as a gateway between the client and creative, in-house designers have to deal directly with marketing or sales teams."

Timelines tend to be short, and (since there is no billing), iterations can be many. Instructions may be given on the phone or verbally and there is a tendency to lose track. And because of this informality one has to be particularly diligent in maintaining protocol in taking job briefs and feedback. She adds, "Another thing to remember is to find the right balance between creative effort and understanding the need of the moment and what's the best that can be done for the brand and the company."





**Nagaraj B.V.,
general manager,
Innovedge,
Titan Industries**

“Over a period of time, we can understand how the brands behave and what turns them on. We are able to catch on to the nuances. This increases the effective design output from the department tremendously,” feels Nagaraj.

On challenges, he says, “The challenge stems from the fact that there are certain expectations which are put into an in-house designer by the culture of the company. While different brands do behave differently and have their own DNA, they are still a part of Titan Industries and its DNA.” He also echoes the fear of being taken for granted and aptly defines this point by the age old Hindi adage, ‘Ghar ki murgi daal barabar’ (Self possessions are always undermined and other’s possessions seem better). He refers to this as a sort of dichotomy as most in-house designers feel that while it is great to be an integral part of the company, they are often taken for granted.

HOW IT WORKS:
Nagaraj says that the interaction between the marketing and design team are intense and are at various touchpoints. Usually they are need based but there are weekly regiment reviews. “We get a lot of briefs from the marketing team to create design collections for them. Then we give a presentation to the marketing team with our ideas. Touchpoints also include looking at prototypes, samples and cost.” He, however, feels that there is a huge amount of power sitting with the marketing function which has a far larger say in the design than the design team which becomes a huge challenge and puts pressure and constraint on the designers.

For Titan, more than 90% of the work is done in-house. He feels that the association with an external agency is usually not easy and most (Titan) brands which have ventured out in the past, ultimately found solace in the in-house design team. “In the future, if we think that we do not have the skills to do a certain job, we would ourselves like to approach an external studio instead of the brands approaching them. That way, we ultimately become a one-stop shop,” he says. Getting onto the external clients route also helps in dealing with monotony. “Over a period of time, it does get a bit monotonous. And to

deal with this we have started taking external projects, like we did this one project on mobile phones. Right now this is not mainstream, but we would like to increase the percentage of external projects over time. When the design team works on other categories, it will have a fantastic rub off on the quality of our own designs.”

ADVICE TO IN-HOUSE DESIGNERS:
Nagaraj stresses on the fact that an in-house designer has to start getting into some kind of comfort in terms of design sensibilities. “In our case, a lot of design decisions happen in the marketing team. Thus, we all have to acquire the skill of calibration on our design sensibilities otherwise we will often be at loggerheads,” he says. He also says that even though as individuals, designers are completely different from other people in the organisation but when they are working as a part of the team, they have to wear a different hat and follow a certain amount of restraint and responsibility.

HTSE (High Tech Self Energized) wrist watch powered by any source of light greater than 200 lux. This hi tech watch converts power and ensure that you don't have to change battery for 25 years.
Design of the watch takes its inspiration from self-sustaining satellites and space stations which also runs on light power making it relevant to the technology used and gives a futuristic look.

SOVEREIGN HTSE



Adithya Kote, creative head, Coffee Day Company (Cafe Coffee Day)

Kote confesses that he misses a certain flexibility that independent studios have — “When you are in an agency, you are kind of sheltered. It gives you breathing time to explore more. In an in-house set up, since we are expected to have a faster turn-around, we don’t have that breathing space.”

The main challenge for a corporate company to imbibe design as design is still in its nascent stage in India, he feels. “Corporate companies abroad have much more evolved design cells. When I joined CCD initially, it was quite tough to convince people that design is a serious medium. It was a struggle to tell them things like why the consistency in font is required, why a particular color is needed etc. It has obviously changed now.”

On the question of monotony, he says, being in an entrepreneurial company with many business interests does not allow fatigue to set in. “We work with those different businesses like an external agency and this is what has kept me going for the last six years. Another way we

ensure to not fall into a rut is by attending events like Kyoorius Designyatra which allows me and my team to see what’s happening around the world in terms of design.”

HOW IT WORKS:

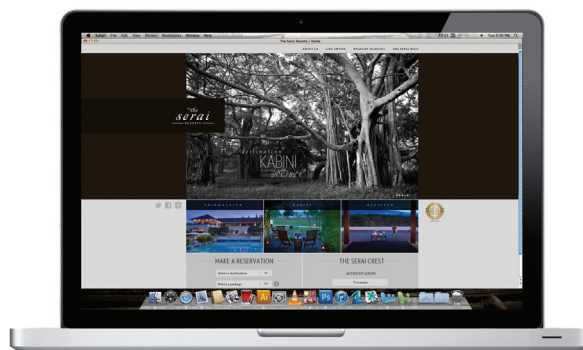
Kote has set up one core team which includes one person from marketing, one from creative and one from sales and this core team is always present from the start to the finish of any project. Usually, the marketing and design team always work together but in certain projects the sales team is also involved. He agrees that there are times when there is a difference of opinion but with good communication skills, it is easy to overcome. He and his team also go an extra mile by making sure that they explain an intangible concept in a tangible way with various visual references etc to make other stakeholders comfortable.

For Coffee Day Company too, outsourcing or teaming up with an external agency depends from project to project. Since he has a small team of seven designers and copywriters, it is difficult to handle the bandwidth of a cam-

paign. That work is outsourced to Creativeland Asia in Mumbai. “I am, however, involved in the strategy state which is where you actually define the brand. And as the internal team of marketing and design, we completely control how the brand looks and feels.”

ADVICE TO IN-HOUSE DESIGNERS:

Kote, who has worked in studios like Landor Associates and Brand Union earlier, feels that usually in studios there is a tendency to jump from one campaign to another. “If you are an in-house designer, your involvement has to be 100 times more. You have to understand the core and the need of the brand before you start talking. Losing the soul can be easy and an in-house designer needs to keep this in mind,” he says.





Arun Narayanan, sr manager — design, Coca Cola India and SW Asia Business Unit

Coca Cola doesn't really have an in-house design agency but a design management function. However it has an agency which almost works as an in-house agency as it has a few people "planted" in Coca Cola's office, reveals Narayanan. He also believes that the advantage is that the agency is familiar with things around and regulatory norms for packaging etc. For Coca Cola, this becomes really important because of the fairly large portfolio with a wide range of SKUs (stock keeping units) which would make an external agency difficult to work with it. "Especially in the food packaging domain, regulatory norms keep changing and we can be fined if we violate any of the norms and thus we find a lot of comfort in working with an internal team which understands this." He also feels that on an everyday basis there is a lot of tactical work that needs to be out and about; 15 briefs are flying around on any given day for different things and centralised design systems really help there. The internal design team can talk to the brand manager directly and thus it is very efficient from a communication and time point of view.

Narayanan moved to this part of the business because he felt that as a consultant his work

is barely rooted in the client's office. "Usually the project brief is created by the client's articulation of it and in India, where design is so nascent, you will rarely find a client who knows what to do with a design brief." He feels that as an in-house designer or design manager, it is possible to be part of the early conversations, to shape the brief and then be able to implement it much better at the tail end. "Internally you get to hold the project for a far longer time than you would as an external consultant. Therefore you are able to increase the value of design in the organisation and are also able to interpret design in terms of the value delivered and as a discipline."

About fatigue setting in, he says, Coca Cola has about ten very big brands and a few smaller brands and there are multiple initiatives within the big brands so there is no monotony involved. "We have a youth brand at one end of the spectrum and another brand which talks to in-betweeners and a universal brand (Coke) and within that we have sub brands like Coke Studio. We often co-brand with other brands. So the "working on one brand" idea doesn't apply to a multi-brand organisation like Coca Cola. There is enough vibrancy within the system."

He also believes that there are so many other areas in an organisation where design can play a role. There might not be a specific budget allocated to them but there are so many projects in any company that are lying dormant and can be brought alive with a "designer's eye" and that is another way to avoid tedium.



HOW IT WORKS:

There is an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) team which itself ensures a certain amount of interaction and integration and his team is a part of the marketing team itself. He says that the fact that there is no tension between the different teams is great, it can also be a bit of a disadvantage. He explains, "Usually, there is an adversarial relationship between the agency and the client and you both see the otherside as a bit of an irritant to your work. Your ideal situation would be that the other side is completely subservient to your view of how things should be done. However, this tension between the two is what usually results in great work. In an in-house set up, the good and bad is that there is no tension because we understand the same market reality pressures. When the oldest and most quintessential client's request to make the logo bigger comes, people within the team understand where that request is coming from as we have a rigorous process of doing market visits."

ADVICE TO IN-HOUSE DESIGNERS:

Narayanan re-iterates the point that in-house designers (and designers in general) should be evangelists of design as a function "As the champions of a discipline which is not completely understood, we have certain amount of responsibility. The choices we make and the interactions we have should further the cause of design. We need to believe in the transformational power of design."





M V Sushena Ramakrishna, senior manager — design, The Himalaya Drug Company (Pharmaceutical Division)

Ramakrishna thinks that the challenge is to send across the message that an in-house design cell is as good as agencies outside because there is always a feeling that it could have been better if done by an agency.

For him, it is even more challenging and exciting as his team caters to Himalaya packaging worldwide. So all his “clients” have different requirements based on their local needs.

Also, within Himalaya, the three different divisions (personal care, pharma and animal care) provide ample variety of work.

HOW IT WORKS:

For Himalaya, how it works for the pharmaceutical and animal care category is that the product management team conceptualises on how it is going to position a particular brand and then they go to the design team with the brief. The design team then brainstorms and gives them a first cut back which goes through the group product manager, marketing head, business head and a second cut is presented if there are any changes. Then the design team decides the specifications of how it is to be printed and sends it to the marketing services department which deals with vendors to get the quotes etc. After the machine proof is approved, it is signed on jointly and then it finally goes into print. So there is interaction between the teams at almost all stages. Ramakrishna says that over the years, this interaction has been quite smooth with little scope for clashes since in pharma advertising, the claims are managed

by the product managers and there is not much copy to work on by the design team.

While the pharma and the animal care divisions are completely serviced by the in-house team, in case of personal care, the label graphics/packaging is handled by an external agency, Foley Designs and communications by Meridian. However, after they give the first cut, the Himalaya design team takes over. The final changes in both cases are done by the in-house team.”

ADVICE TO IN-HOUSE DESIGNERS:

“An in-house designer needs to stick to the brand guidelines.”





Gaurav Raheja, creative head, Van Heusen, Van Heusen Sport and V Dot (Madura Fashion & Lifestyle)

Even though Raheja completely agrees on the advantages that an in-house designer has, he brings out an interesting point. In his work, being part of a corporate makes it more difficult for him to experiment with smaller trends and fads. "When you are in a corporate, the scale is quite huge. And especially when you are working for a mass brand like ours, you need to be very sure of the trend you want to launch in the market. If I launch something new which does not work, the impact will be enormous. But if I am working as an independent designer, I can experiment with smaller fads and trends without much risk."

HOW IT WORKS:

In Van Heusen's case, the interaction within the teams is huge too, says Raheja. His team of 16–17 people work closely with the product and sales team and are closer to the backend. And he works more closely with the marketing team in the process of taking the products to the market. There are differences in opinion and healthy discussions

which he sees as a positive thing as it makes them think more.

In the case of Van Heusen, 95% of the work is done in-house including the design for various retail stores and the work is outsourced only in categories where the design team does not have the exposure or skill set. "If we don't have exposure to certain fabrics, we outsource them and we also outsource certain products like accessories since the sense of aesthetics is not very strong in India." He sees clear disadvantages of hiring consultants who usually end up "charging a bomb, taking up a lot of time and giving us what we already know."

ADVICE TO IN-HOUSE DESIGNERS:

Flexibility is something that an in-house designer needs to be adept at, feels Raheja. He explains this by an example, "If there is a need gap in the market on a particular day and we feel there is an opportunity to get good sales, we end up closing our range in a day and half. Thus, we need to be flexible enough to quickly react to the market."



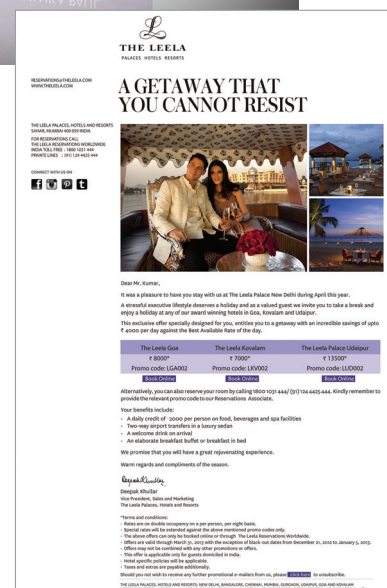


Priyanka Paul, corporate manager, marketing communications, The Leela Palaces (Hotels And Resorts)

Paul feels that the challenge faced by an in-house design team lies in the fact that their creative thinking does not get nurtured and gets neglected in the long run due to quick results and turn around expected. Also, sustaining and succeeding in a corporate environment requires the designer to wear many hats from understanding the objective, outlining the brief with the project head and generate the creative based on the final brief. While designers in studios are given a well sketched brief and are responsible for what they do best and that is: Design.

HOW IT WORKS:

"We choose which direction to go in (in-house or outsource) on a situational basis. However, in present times where cost control is important, using the in-house team ensures that costs are kept at a minimum. This is not only a cost effective approach; it also enables us to deliver on high priority items on a timely basis. For certain high visibility projects where the in-house team may lack the necessary expertise, we outsource the work to design studios," she says.



Conclusion

Most in-house designers we spoke to unanimously agree that the biggest obvious advantage is the in-depth understanding of the brand that the in-house designer gets due to his/her close proximity to the other divisions of the company. However, on the not so bright side is the fact that there is a bit of an expectation baggage that comes with this. At the end of the day, it is more difficult for them to experiment or take risks vis-à-vis an external consultant/studio. There is always this fear of being taken for granted and this constant need to prove that “we” are as good as “them”.

Shorter timelines and faster turnarounds are both advantages and challenges. While in-house designers are able to produce work faster because of easy access to the marketing and sales team, the challenge is in terms of lesser time to explore and experiment. They often starve for some breathing space and miss flexibility at times. The challenge faced by an in-house design team lies in the fact that their creative thinking often does not get nurtured and gets neglected in the long run due to quick results and turn around expected.

As we mentioned in the beginning of the report, one question that in-house designers are often bombarded with is, ‘do you get bored of working on one client over and over again?’ One common answer that emerged when we asked this was that after all it is a myth that an in-house designer works on just “one” brand. In most cases, there are so many sub-brands and a variety of projects to work on that it gets difficult for monotony to creep in. Another alternative is to seek external clients.

Being able to interact with the other departments (especially sales and marketing) can act as a huge advantage for an in-house designer but does this interaction actually happen in huge organisations or is it extremely layered? And more importantly, are they often at loggerheads? For all in-house designers we spoke to, there is sufficient and consistent

interaction that takes place with product, sales and marketing divisions. However, in a few cases, marketing reigns supreme and has the final word which leaves in-house designers a bit cold.

We also tried to understand how much of the work is actually done in-house and what are the situations or criteria when they outsource the work to an external agency. In most cases, it depends from project to project. And when the work is outsourced, the in-house team still usually gets to oversee the final output. Also, they look out externally when they are in pursuit of some exclusive skills that they do not possess internally.

The in-house movement in India might be in its nascent stages but nevertheless, it is gradually gaining momentum. The corporates need to look into some of the issues we have brought forth in this report and ensure that in-house designers don't feel that they are not capable or powerful enough to take decisions and contribute in turning around their respective companies as we have seen in the international markets. Corporates also need to make sure that in-house designers never feel undervalued. There needs to be a seamless interaction especially with the marketing team for the processes to be more strengthened and the final decisions need to be made at both levels together and not just by the marketing team. For in-house designers, shedding of ego and accepting a few basic principles of being in a company like adhering to a dress code (Coca Cola's Narayanan has written an insightful piece on this for our 'Columnists' section in this issue), sticking to the brand guidelines etc. are things to pay heed to. Hopefully, in the years to come, Indian in-house designers (and their companies) will be able to dust off many of these challenges and emerge as indispensable and crucial resources for their company with enough prowess and power to create spectacular, exceptional and clutter-breaking work.

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