

The fine line between graphic design and art direction

 By [Vanita 'Bezi' Phiri](#)

21 Jun 2012

As an art director, my title misleads people into thinking that I take home a hefty managerial wage. It gets more confusing when I try to define my line of work since what follows is often a request to explain the difference between graphic design and art direction. I'm weary of assigning demarcations, especially in situations where perplexity originates from likeness and not difference.

The difference

Though art directors may have more responsibility in the advertising sense in that they supervise or 'direct' work, it is a misconception that the difference between a designer and an art director is the difference between *look* and *feel*; or that the art director *creates* a concept which a designer *implements*.

This over-simplified and inaccurate distinction stems from the advertising industry where the designer is placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of the creative team. It does not, however, apply to graphic design as a discipline in that an advertising agency is not a superior version of a graphic design agency.

Another myth is that art directors generally work in above-the-line advertising while graphic designers work in print media. Though statistically this may be true, many art directors specialise in below-the-line advertising (and design).

Some people see the graphic design process as a mere creation of pretty pictures, while art direction as a process driven by emotive appeal and strategy. However, good graphic designers are just as concerned with overall concept and strategy as they are with technical execution.

Art director as designer

During the golden days of print, when copywriters ruled the advertising scene, the art director was the designer. The copywriter came up with the ideas, and the designer put them together. But after the advent of television, when the visual needed to evoke as much as the written, the art director was born.

Most art directors are designers; in fact most art directors start out as graphic designers. Because 'art direction' is not offered at mainstream academia, graphic design programmes involve art direction.

A student who wants to work for an advertising agency will most likely want to become an art director, though design skills are essential. Conceptual skills drive all things creative, and so the designer cannot simply hide behind pixels and colour

swatches.

I'm a great believer that no one can be a designer, without some art directing skills - unless by 'designer' we mean the guy at the corner print shop who confuses Photoshop and CorelDraw skills for a graphic design qualification. In fact, in many parts of Europe, graphic design, copywriting and art direction all fall under the umbrella of 'visual communication'. The term 'graphic design' is avoided in favour of visual communication because the responsibilities of a designer comprises a little of everything.

A collaboration

Though graphic design is generally understood to be the *how* and art direction being the *why*, in reality the result is a collaborative effort of the two. Some companies will hire designers and never art directors, and others will hire art directors who spend most of their working hours designing. In my opinion however, whether one creates packaging for a milk brand or a billboard for a petroleum giant, conceptual and strategic thinking always comes into play.

The difference between an art director and a graphic designer is often a matter of context (and titles - art directors will kill me for saying this!). I personally don't agree that designers blindly choose colours, fonts and images with little reasoning and strategic planning. If anything, that's the definition of a *bad* designer.

Strategic thinking may be more apparent in a television advert than in a logo. Yet a good brand applies strategy whether it is through the corporate 'vision' mounted on the wall of the CEO's office, the well-crafted pay-off line or the layout of its website. The end result is a collaborative effort from the marketing manager to the illustrator.

Perhaps, the question one needs to ask is not what the difference between art direction and graphic design is, and the same may be asked about copywriting and art direction, but the *relationship* between the two because it is clear that there are more overlaps than disparities in the two disciplines.

ABOUT VANITA 'BEZI PHIRI

- Africa: An advertising voyage of discovery - 15 Oct 2013
- Decoding the creative brief - 24 May 2013
- The hidden cost of creativity - 28 Aug 2012
- The fine line between graphic design and art direction - 21 Jun 2012
- CS6: who gives a buck? - 5 Apr 2012

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>