



WHY DESIGN STOPPED BEING SPECIAL

... and how this feeds free pitching

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than any other sector, design helps businesses unlock their potential. Designers can communicate the essence of a company to its market, allowing the one to interface with the other. Design is about positioning clients in the right place -- the place where customers are.

In a recession, such skills ought to be highly sought after, so why, then, has design become a devalued coin? Why are its practitioners giving expertise away for free on an unprecedented scale?

We know that design is an invaluable service able to solve unique business communication challenges, so why is the wider world coming to see design as a one-size-fits-all commodity?

This paper addresses these issues, and is aimed at small- to medium-sized communication design agencies operating in the private sector, as well as freelance graphic and web designers. It will explain why poor market positioning on the part of designers, particularly online, is a key driver both

of free pitching and the commoditization of design. You will hear from designers who have achieved sustained success without free pitching, and learn how they used niche market expertise to achieve this success.

The paper explores simple ways designers can build similarly profitable careers without free pitching -- by building niche expertise and then 'narrowcasting' this expertise to client prospects who need it.

It concludes by discussing the results of a study into how design as a profession lags far behind the wider business world in its use of SEO for online marketing positioning.

THE ORIGINS OF FREE PITCHING

This paper defines free pitching as being the supply of design services without payment, and as such it has been a way of life for designers for more than 40 years. The practise

first seeped into private sector design because of its proximity to advertising, where pitching is how ad agencies have always landed lucrative new accounts. But whereas advertising as a sector enjoys large profit margins, and so can absorb the costs of free pitching, this is not a luxury enjoyed by design; as a sector, design faces comparable pitching costs to advertising but nothing like the rewards.

Free pitching in private sector design also has origins in public sector procurement processes, where competitive tenders often involve 'requests for proposals' that are, in essence, requests for free design solutions.

ROOT CAUSE OF FREE PITCHING

Free pitching has reached pandemic proportions, afflicting design sectors in Europe, North America, South Africa and Australasia.

‘ **IT IS BECAUSE ALL DESIGN IS VANILLA THAT THERE IS THE COMPULSION TO TASTE BEFORE BUYING.**

While advertising and public sector procurement may have created the conditions that gave rise to free pitching in private sector design, they can not explain why free pitching is fast becoming the de facto way new business is won.

So what *can* explain it?

“An over-supply of identikit design providers,” says Sean Ashcroft, managing director of Zyzzyva, a venture that helps design agencies and freelance designers use online market positioning rather than free pitching as a way to win new clients. “Yes, today’s clients are in a position of market strength, which doesn’t help, but by far the biggest driver of free pitching is the fact 90%

Avoid toxic by-products of free pitching

COME BOOM OR bust, design bodies worldwide continue to warn creatives of free pitching's damaging effects. Some, such as the UK's Design Business Association, make non-free pitching a condition of membership.

The following are the main toxic by-products of free pitching that are frequently cited by design bodies:

Cost to design

Both in terms of lost resources and man hours, free pitching is expensive. The British Design Institute (BDI), a UK trade body for designers and innovators, conducted in 2005 what remains the most exhaustive study into the practice of free pitching, *Pitch Versus Productivity*.

This puts the average annual cost of free pitching to UK design firms at £38,000 (US\$61,000). Such costs are recoverable only if passed on to clients, which fuels design's reputation for being over-priced.

Debasing of design

Giving one's most valuable asset away for free -- expertise -- cheapens it in the eyes of clients.

"As an industry we need to appreciate that by participating in free pitches we seriously undervalue all of our businesses," says Nicholas Cloake, chairman of Design Business Ireland, design's representative body in Ireland.

"This threatens the sustainability of design as a professional career."

Dilution of design

Free pitches are usually a storyboard beauty parade. Pretty pictures do not constitute meaningful design, and nor can they form the basis of fruitful designer-agency relationships. Design's reputation ends up being further damaged by client dissatisfaction with ineffective design.

Clients suffer

The time-and-resources demands of free pitching compromises the service that is received by existing clients. This is hugely damaging to design businesses because keeping clients happy and delivering great results is the best way to both earn referrals and to win repeat business.

of design is completely undifferentiated. Because everything is vanilla, there's a compulsion to taste before buying."

But why do designers, en masse, seek to blend in rather than stand out if this hurts their businesses?

"Designers view their skills as transferable to any sector and do not wish to miss out on attracting any client, which is why it so often becomes a vanilla offering," explains Maxine Horn, who founded and ran the UK design-business organization, British Design Innovation, from 1993 to 2011. "With designers, the focus is always on winning new business -- any business -- rather than differentiating and using targeted marketing as the basis of increasing new business opportunities."

Horn is now CEO of Creative Barcode (creativebarcode.com), an organization that allows designers to disclose creative ideas in confidence. She adds: "For a creative sector, design applies precious little creativity to new business or marketing campaigns that will earn them stand-out."

And never has there been greater need for designers to stand out than in today's over-crowded design markets. Research from the UK's Design Council

-- one of the world's foremost design bodies -- shows there has been a huge increase in the number of designers over the past five years. In 2010, the Design Council undertook its second comprehensive survey of the UK design industry, the first having been conducted in 2005.

The 2010 survey showed there is a total of 232,000 designers, an increase of 67,280 (12%) on the 2005 figure. Freelance designers account for nearly all of this; there were 65,000 more freelancers in 2010 than in 2005.

This explosion in freelance numbers is explained by the impact of deep recession. Since 2007, thousands of agency designers have been made redundant, and while a number have gone on to start their own agencies, most have become freelance designers. Many agencies are also placing remaining staff on reduced hours, giving thousands more creatives sufficient time to freelance outside of office hours.

A further factor is the marked increase in design graduates. The tight job market is driving record numbers of young people into further education, and design is just one of many sectors experiencing a significant increase in

Find a niche – it's the free pitch antedote

ZACHARY Design (zachary.co.uk) is a leading player in the retail design and architecture niche. The firm does not have to free pitch, because it has deep expertise in a niche market, and is discoverable online for this expertise.

Zachary Design founder Stefan Zachary (pictured) explains how his agency's shrewd market positioning continues to attract client prospects who then go on to become paying clients.

"I'm not an architect, I come from a retail design background, but Zachary Design is unique in



being able to talk the same language that retailers use.

"The architectural element of the work we do is completely governed by my understanding of what makes retail work, not what makes buildings stand up, so the construction side is totally subservient to the marketing side.

"It's all about strategic design consulting -- our small resources are never wasted on free pitching, and we manage a healthy profit year on year."

Importantly, Zachary Design's online presence trades on this niche expertise to great effect; type in 'retail architecture' (without the quote marks), and Zachary Design ranks 4th in the Google search results.

"The website is attracting more and more enquiries from overseas," says Zachary. "We've started to find ourselves in new



markets, like the Middle East, Far East, Ireland, and India.

"We've recently designed a new town centre for Lavasa, in India, including a retail centre, underground parking, a new school, and 2,000 residential units. We got the work because they approached us via the website."

graduate applicants. Sadly, most of these graduates struggle to find internships with design agencies, let alone employment, and those not lost to the sector invariably turn freelance.

This rise in designer numbers is a similar story across Europe and North America, and it means that smaller agencies in particular are finding it harder than ever to win pitches in such an over-crowded marketplace.

Not that winning pitches was ever



“Over the past eight years our client retention has been over 70%,” says Mark Tomkins, co-founder of UK non-free-pitching agency aubergine. “Client retention relies on doing a good job and giving value for money, both of which are harmed by the demand on resources that come with free pitching.”

easy, even in buoyant times, as the Design Council’s 2005 survey of the UK design industry revealed. This survey shows that, on average, consultancies with more than five employees win two-thirds of their pitches, while those with fewer than five win just a third, mainly because larger agencies can throw more resources at pitches.

“I simply refuse to shovel my expertise down a black hole, which is what free pitching is,” says Stefan Zachary, managing partner of Zachary Design (zachary.co.uk) and founding chairman of the UK Design Business Association. Zachary Design does not have to free pitch, because its market positioning is finely honed: not only is it a key player in the niche market of retail architecture, but even within this niche its offering is highly differentiated from the competition. (To learn more of how Zachary Design thrives without free pitching, see the case study on page 6.)

Market positioning has also reaped rich rewards for non-pitching graphics and web agency aubergine (aubergine262.com), which is based in Leighton Buzzard, England.

Creative director Mark Tomkins

explains how they fell into a profitable niche, and then built a business on it: “Way back, we did some work for a property developer, and later he came back to us asking us to help him with his other businesses. After looking into it we found that entrepreneurs often have property-based businesses as their main focus, so we continued to approach a lot of bijou property developers, do work for many of them and off the back of this we got asked to help their other businesses, which are unrelated to property.”

Being a non-pitching agency also means aubergine is able to offer value, because it has no free-pitching overheads to recoup, plus with no free pitching distractions, it is able to concentrate solely on delivering a high-quality service to its clients.

“The most important thing in design is doing a good-valued job and doing it well, because without this nobody will come back to you with more work,” says Tomkins.

Lydia Thornley (thornley.co.uk), meanwhile, is a sought-after 49-year-old design consultant, who has worked for major London design agencies, including Pentagram. She has never free-pitched.

‘ I REFUSE TO SHOVEL MY EXPERTISE DOWN A BLACK HOLE, WHICH IS WHAT FREE PITCHING IS

“Free pitching doesn’t add up when you measure the cost of it against the returns to be had from networking, attending client events, public speaking, getting fees, building a reputation and getting job satisfaction,” she says.

Thornley stresses that market positioning has made “a big difference” to her non-reliance on free pitching; she differentiates herself both by discipline (print) and sector (charities, NGOs, social enterprises, public sector clients and small businesses).

“By differentiating it means the clients we meet are decision makers, and very much engaged with their projects,” says Thornley. “Plus, the kinds of projects we’re good at means clients come here with dilemmas about how to present their companies or organizations, and the best place to start with that is a conversation, not a beauty contest.”

DESIGN SECTOR SEO RESEARCH

SEO (Search Engine Optimization) is pivotal in positioning a company properly online, for it is SEO that attracts the highly targeted traffic that is needed to turn clicks into clients. For this reason, Zyzzyva undertook a study into how design as a profession is using SEO.

“Keyword research is like taking an X-ray of the marketing strategies at play in a given sector,” says Ashcroft. “Our research shows the global design industry to be a poorly patient.”

Zyzzyva found that, unlike other sectors -- where companies optimize on search terms that potential customers are using -- design is prone to optimize on what they *think* people are searching for. “It’s really bad business,” explains Ashcroft, “It’s a bit like guessing which airport a client is arriving at, turning up, then finding they’re some place else.”

1. Generic sells

Zyzzyva’s SEO research into the global design sector revealed that significant

Freelancers – get found, or stay lost

LIFE HAS RARELY, if ever, been more difficult for freelance designers.

A barometer of this is the widespread emergence of so-called ‘crowdsourcing’ design sites, such as, 99designs (99designs.com), Design Crowd (designcrowd.com) and Crowd Spring (crowdspring.com). These and countless other sites like them invite designers to submit creative work in response to customer briefs. The favoured design wins the work, with everything else

effectively going unrewarded.

“It’s free pitching in drag,” says Sean Ashcroft, managing director of Zyzzyva, “only far more insidious, because instead of going up against 6 agencies you can be competing with hundreds of freelance designers. It’s hard to imagine a less cost effective way of winning new clients. Why spend time spent churning out unpaid artwork on crowdsourcing sites when you could be undertaking pro bono design projects for a local restaurant, car dealership, florist or tradesperson?”

He adds: “On the back such experience, a designer can market their specialist expertise to similar ventures, both in their locale and further afield, online.”

The problem is, freelance designers are particularly vulnerable to the siren call of free pitching because many are recently graduated design students with little or no commercial design experience, and most are desperate for work -- any work

Oliver Kratzer, president of the Design Institute of Australia has this sound advice for young designers who are tempted to free pitch: “Spending the same time and resources on an existing client relationship, or searching for clients prepared to engage you on the strength of your folio, is likely to yield more-certain returns.”



This screengrab from crowdsourcing site 99designs shows the fate that awaits freelance designers with no niche expertise. On the left, is an outline of the customer’s brief. At the time, 337 designers had submitted a logo in the hope of ‘winning’ \$495 – a one in 337 chance of new business.

25% of pitches awarded to no one

THE BEST INSIGHT into the client view of free pitching is provided by research undertaken by UK design body, British Design Innovation (BDI). Its report, *Appointing Design Agencies: The Client View*, canvassed the views of 23 of the UK's largest design buyers, all of which belong to the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers (ISBA) -- whose combined

membership spends **£10 billion on marketing communications every year.** The stand-out statistic from this report is that **more than a quarter (25.5%) of projects being pitched for end up being awarded to nobody.** Reasons given by clients include: **change of marketing strategy; change of mind; reduced budgets; and lack of chemistry with agencies.**

numbers of designers are optimizing on superlatives for which people simply aren't searching. It found that:

- Around **18,000** design service providers are optimizing on the phrase '*passion for design*', even though globally, 3,600 low-grade searches a month are made for it.
- Roughly **8,500** web design providers are optimizing on '*world class website design*', even though globally, just

91 searches a month are made for this phrase.

- Approximately **2,500** graphic design providers are optimizing on 'world class graphic design', even though globally just **22** searches a month are made using this phrase.

"Agencies and freelance designers need to stop marketing themselves in such an unfocused way," says Ashcroft. "Generic sells such as 'world-class

design' and 'passion for design' are patently not what client prospects are searching for.

"Clients have specific needs, not generic ones. Retail sector clients looking for the services of a retail design professional don't search for 'world class design', they search for 'retail architects and designers', and when they do, Zachary Design is the third site listed in Google results."

For clarity, Zyzzyva's study splits design into three categories -- artworking, web design and graphic design. SEO analysis was undertaken for each of these categories.

The study found the use of SEO and market positioning falls away the further one goes up the design chain; while artworking is well segmented by narrow areas of expertise, web design is less so. Graphic design practitioners, meanwhile, are ignoring the importance of both SEO and market positioning "in their tens of thousands", says Ashcroft.

2. Artworking

The entry-level end of the design market is well differentiated, with

artwork service providers often targeting ultra-narrow niches.

As an example, Zyzzyva explored global SEO activity on the term '*restaurant menu design*', and discovered the following:

- **11,500** US design providers are optimizing for the term, competing for an average of **3,600** monthly local searches for the term.
- A total of **4,280** Canada-based design providers are optimizing for the term, with local searches for the term standing at **480** per month.
- In the UK, **575** artwork providers are optimizing for the term, with UK monthly searches for it being **590**.
- There are **52** design providers in Australia optimizing for the term. Local monthly searches for it stand at **390**.

"Artwork as a segment of the design sector is alive to the importance of targeting narrow markets to generate business," says Ashcroft. "There is even competition for niche-within-niche



Woo decision makers with niche prowess

DIFFERENTIATION IN DESIGN is just as critical for creatives in North America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa as it is for those in the UK.

New York City-based Benard Design (benarddesign.com) is run by 43-year-old James Benard (pictured), who for years ran a high-end print shop,



working with large design agencies and fashion houses. Two years ago Benard took the decision to use this specialist expertise to build a print-design consulting business, and it is a niche that has delivered sustained success.

“Our understanding of the printed piece is a huge advantage because we design for the medium rather than consider it after the fact,” says Benard.

He adds: “A lot of design agencies get killed by the disconnect between design and production, but because we were producers first, we walk around so many of the

puddles that the competition marches right into.”

This deep specialist know-how also means Benard has the luxury of choosing to free pitch occasionally, in the knowledge he’s likely to win.

“We win because we offer production as part of the design process,” he says, but adds that he feels the widespread practice of free pitching is “pretty lame”.

“If you are friendly and professional with the decision makers and you do great work there’s no need to pitch,” explains Benard. “The trick is getting close to the decision makers, and it’s our specialist expertise that helps us here.”

search terms, such as ‘Chinese restaurant menu design’, for which 871 web pages worldwide are seriously optimized.”

3. Web design

Web design as a sub-sector of design encompasses backend web development as well as SEO services, factors that may explain its reasonably developed use of market positioning and SEO.

For web design, Zyzzyva studied global competition for the following niche market search terms:

-- ‘website design for charities’

Web pages optimized for term: **759**.

Global monthly searches: **720**.

-- ‘web design for schools’

Web pages optimized for term: **551**

Global monthly searches **5,450**

-- ‘web design for estate agents’

Web pages optimized for term: **617**

Global monthly searches: **390**

But Zyzzyva also found that the volume of unfocused marketing among website designers is also high. There are,

for example, 7,200 pages online optimized for the search term ‘world class website design’, even though there are just 91 searches per month globally on this keyword.

“Why target such a woolly, unpopular search term when there are lots of niche terms out there that can deliver targeted traffic?”, says Ashcroft.

He cites ‘web designs for schools’ as an example: “Competition for this phrase is low, with just 551 design providers optimizing for it, even though there are 5,450 monthly searches on the term. Consequently, many of these 551 perform well in local search results for the phrase, and this puts them in a good position to convert targeted traffic into clients.”

Ashcroft concludes that “there remains plenty of scope for tighter market positioning in web design”.

4. Graphic design

“This is where the wheels start to come off the marketing wagon,” says Ashcroft, “because the volume of non-specific marketing gets cranked right up.”

Zyzyva discovered, for example, that there are 251,000 web pages

Aim to create discoverable case studies

WHILE THE USE of SEO (Search Engine Optimization) to become discoverable for areas of expertise is key, just as important is the site content that the SEO is directing targeted traffic toward.

The British Design Innovation’s *Appointing Design Agencies* study shows that just under half (48%) of the clients questioned use search engines to identify suitable design agencies. When asked for the most important factor in assessing a design provider’s credentials, 100% of design buyers replied they wanted to see sector-related case studies.

While most designers do use case studies to demonstrate expertise, they frequently fail to direct client prospects toward it.

“Most designers sink a lot of effort into online case studies,

but this effort is being largely wasted,” says Ashcroft.

The following are common case study failings:

- Failure to use SEO to steer targeted traffic straight to a page containing case studies relevant to those searches.
- Failure to make case studies discoverable online; too many are built using Flash. Search engines cannot read Flash content.
- Failure to focus on bottom line improvements that have been achieved for existing clients.

Ashcroft says: “Discoverable and honed niche market case studies build trust with client prospects before they’ve even picked up the phone. Trust is to free pitching what kryptonite was to Superman.”

Here’s some ways case studies can help hook new business:

- If your agency has six areas of expertise, it’s better to have six branded, unique websites optimized and targeted for those narrow markets than one site aimed at everyone. Also, these site addresses should describe a skill rather than contain the agency’s name.
- Business blogs that are built on case studies. Dynamic, relevant content is highly valued by search engines.
- Use of social media (Twitter, LinkedIn) to drive targeted traffic to case study content.
- Using case study material as the basis of a white paper that discusses the problems of a niche market. By showing you understand their problems, people will naturally want to know about your solutions.

globally optimized for the term 'graphic design solutions', chasing just 2,400 searches a month for the phrase.

Other generic sells include:

-- 'passion for graphic design'
2,090 pages chasing **73 searches**.

-- 'world class graphic design'
1,880 pages chasing fewer than **10 searches**

-- 'outstanding graphic design'
1,490 pages chasing fewer than **10 searches**.

But, most damagingly, believes Ashcroft, is the number of graphic designers marketing themselves on affordability. Zyzzyva found that over 50,000 graphic design providers are optimizing on 'affordable graphic design', even though just 1,000 searches a month globally are made on this phrase.

"Compare this to divorce lawyers," says Ashcroft. "Globally, there are 2,130 law firms optimizing on 'affordable divorce lawyer', chasing 5,400 monthly searches. If your market is looking for affordability then yes, build affordability into your marketing strategy.

"But by targeting affordability when so few are asking for it, design is devaluing itself before it even engages with client prospects. This, coupled with design's penchant for the generic sell over the specialist sell, is what feeds the free pitching beast."

Zyzzyva found many potentially profitable niche graphic design search terms that are being virtually ignored. One is 'corporate brochure design'. Zyzzyva discovered:

-- In the UK, just **2** design providers are optimizing for the phrase, even though there are **880** monthly UK searches on it. (See *SEO X-ray reveals 'design disease'*, opposite.)

-- In the US, **32** design providers are chasing **480** searches for the term.

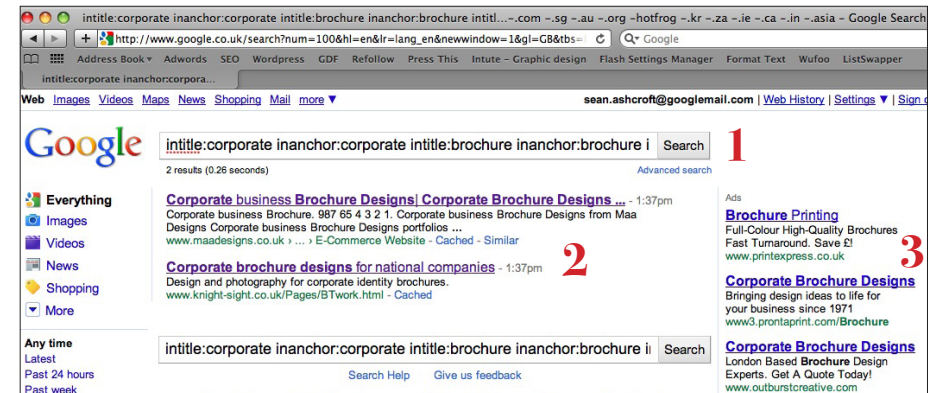
-- In Canada, **6** design practitioners are strategically targeting **73** searches.

-- In Australia, **zero** designers are chasing **210** monthly searches on the term.

-- In South Africa, **6** design outfits are targeting **28** monthly searches.

SEO X-ray reveals 'design disease'

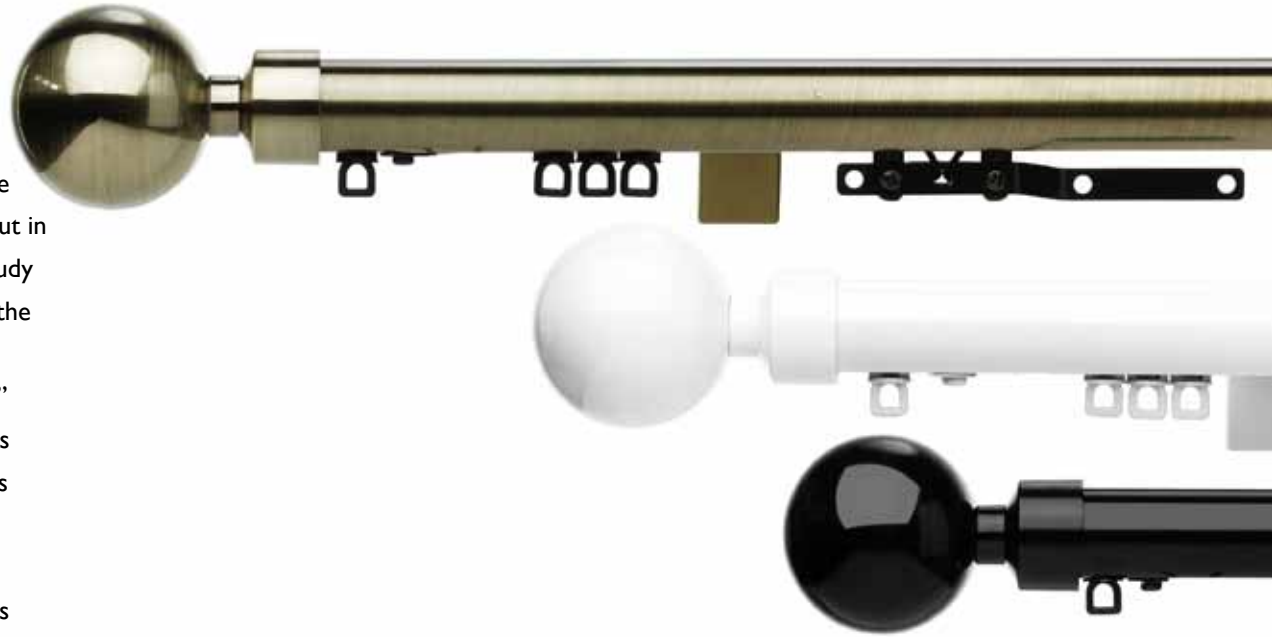
THE SCREENGRABS BELOW capture a small part of Zyzzyva's SEO study into how designers in English speaking territories are neglecting online marketing positioning as a way to win new business. The images show the results of research into how the UK design sector is optimizing on the search term 'corporate brochure design'. It can be seen that just two UK design providers are chasing 880 potential leads per month in this specialist market.



Keyword	Competition	Global Monthly Searches	Local Monthly Searches
corporate brochure design	4	2,900	880
best corporate brochure design	Low Competition	140	12
corporate brochure design templates		73	<10

1. SEO research involves using advanced Google search operators to limit results only to pages that are optimizing on certain combinations of keywords, in this case, 'corporate brochure design'.
2. There are only two .co.uk websites optimizing on corporate brochure design, and only one of these makes the top 100 results on a regular Google UK search on, corporate brochure design.
3. A small number of print providers are running Google Adword campaigns built on the search term, corporate brochure design. Adwords is pay per click advertising

- run by Google that places adverts on search results pages that are relevant to the keywords that feature in those adverts. In general, print suppliers are far more profitably positioned than design suppliers on this, and many other, niche-market keyword phrases.
4. Google Adwords Keywords tool is used for discovering how popular any given search phrase is. Here, we can see that there is low competition for the term, corporate brochure design...
5. ... even though in the UK, there are 880 searches every month on, corporate brochure design.



-- A total of just **46 graphic design providers** globally are positioning themselves online to attract corporate brochure work, even though every month **2,900 client prospects globally** seek design experts to meet their brochure needs.

Zyzyva found many other examples of niche markets that are being similarly unexploited by graphic designers across English speaking territories.

Ashcroft says: "When taken together with the poor overall differentiation of graphic design, our SEO research would seem to suggest there is a dearth of niche expertise among graphic designers, which of course is not the case -- there is plenty of such expertise, it's just that designers fall down badly on communicating it to client prospects." (See the boxout 'Aim to create discoverable case studies', on page 16).

CONCLUSION

Business lives by the diktat 'Differentiate or die', yet design, particularly graphic, has never been less differentiated, nor more over-

subscribed. "No one is pretending that being discoverable online for niche expertise can alone banish free pitching," says Zyzyva's Ashcroft. "But in conjunction with compelling case study content it at least puts designers in the right place at the outset -- the place where quality client prospects exist."

Being able to convert these clicks into clients is the next stage, and this requires deep expertise in at least one niche market.

"Many designers already have this expertise, but need to wise up on communicating it," says Ashcroft. Others -- particularly freelance designers -- need to acquire such expertise, by cutting back on free pitching and sinking that time into niche pro bono projects, on the back of which they can position themselves online far more profitably.

"A move away from the generic and toward specialization will always be the best and most decisive way to combat free pitching," says Ashcroft.

He concludes: "Unfortunately, so many designers are going in the opposite direction that design is ceasing to be special. It's why buying design has become like buying curtain rods; everything seems to do the same job."

RESOURCES

Design Council

[Design Industry Research 2005](#)

Design Council

[Design Industry Research 2010](#)

British Design Innovation

[Pitch Versus Productivity:](#)

[The Agency View](#)

British Design Innovation

[Appointing Design Agencies:](#)

[The Client view](#)

ABOUT ZYZZYVA

Zyzyva is a venture that helps design practitioners combat free pitching through online market positioning, social media marketing and expertise marketing (white papers and speeches). It was founded by journalist and writer Sean Ashcroft, who has been writing about the design business since 2005.

