

The Consummate Professional: Walter Dorwin Teague
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Walter Dorwin Teague (1883 - 1960) is considered one of the founding fathers of industrial design as well as one of the most prolific American industrial designers in history. Among his contemporaries, Henry Dreyfuss, Norman Bel Geddes, and Raymond Loewy, he stands out as a professional leader and influential businessman. His clients were the largest and most prominent corporations in the United States.

From the start of his industrial design business in 1928 the office grew from a staff of two to fifty-five by 1938, which included architects, engineers, accountants, model makers, and industrial designers. (Teague, W. D. Jr. 52) At this time his client list included: Ford, Texaco, US Steel, DuPont, National Cash Register, Eastman-Kodak, Steinway and Sons, A.B. Dick, Consolidated Edison, and New Haven Railroad among others. Teague maintained long relationships with these clients, some spanning over 20 years, designing iconic products, buildings and exhibits for over 3 generations. Says partner Stowe Myers: "By this time [1940], Walter Dorwin Teague's prestige at the top of his profession was well established." (Myers) He later expanded his firm to offices in Los Angeles and Seattle, and today his prestigious design firm continues to thrive 84 years later.

Industrial design principals and consultants today can learn from how Teague ran his design business, how he dealt with clients, how he approached projects, and how he treated his staff. This paper intends to reveal these century old lessons from the grandfather and "the Dean" of industrial design.

Learning from the Business of Advertising

Before transforming into an industrial designer, Teague had been doing advertising art illustrations for over 20 years. He took night classes at the Art Students League in New York City, and was an extremely talented illustrator. He worked with the advertising agency Calkins- Holden as an illustrator and typographer. This is where he learned how to do business with prominent clients. Earnest Calkins was an advocate of using form, visualization, design and art to modern advertising, and wrote what is considered the first textbook of the field, *Modern Advertising*. Ralph Holden was experienced at bringing in new clients, forming relationships and holding onto them.

Calkins and Holden became very successful with a number of high-profile clients including: Pierce-Arrow, H.J. Heinz, Ingersoll Watch, Thomas A. Edison Industries, Beech-Nut, and E. R. Squibb. Teague learned how to nurture relationships with prominent clients through Ralph Holden and how to demonstrate the value of their work through sales figures before and after an ad was published. Here Teague learned to have the experience and social tact for dealing with the clients that he was targeting.

"The value of this association was only equaled by the experience of observing at first hand the methods of Earnest Elmo Calkins and Ralph Holden, whose high ethical and professional standards have never been surpassed, he thinks, in his experience."
(WDTA)

Teague's value proposition to his clients was simple and effective. That industrial design will improve their products appearance, function, sales, and potentially reduce manufacturing costs and strengthen the company's brand. Being a student of the advertising firm, he would produce case-studies of before-and-after sales figures, with which he could justify the cost of his services and clearly present the potential value.

Gaining New Clients

How did the early industrial designers sell themselves to new clients? Raymond Loewy and Walter D. Teague answered this question during a conference in 1946 entitled “Industrial Design: A New Profession” held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. They demonstrated this by having a mock discussion between designer and client, with Teague acting as the potential client. What is interesting about this discussion is that much of the conversation sounds the same as our discussions with clients today with some notable exceptions. Here is an excerpt:

“Raymond Loewy: ...Mr. Teague, let us try to discuss it together. Would you like to take the part of the client?

Walter Dorwin Teague: All right, fine. Well, Mr. Loewy, I know that you are a designer of very substantial and eminent reputation, with a great many successes to your credit, but you have never served a business exactly like mine. I am perhaps the largest widget manufacturer in America.

Raymond Loewy: What type of product did you say?

WDT: Widgets.

RL: Oh Yes.

WDT: “You probably don’t realize it, but the business of making widgets is very different from any other business. I know that you have designed trains and automobiles and household appliances and business machines, and many other products, but widgets quite in a class by themselves. I am just wondering what gives you any assurance that you could do for us what my own staff of engineers has not been able to do.”

RL: “...We have studied the record of your company for the past few years. We know that you are doing very well; we know the reputation of your firm; we know that the products you are manufacturing are excellent, priced correctly and for the most part styled right. However, we feel that the influence of an outsider with an open mind, with no inhibitions about your product – working in cooperation with your own staff – could bring some fresh and unusual answers to your problems.

“We can’t promise to do so; but we feel reasonably confident that if we have the cooperation of your design department, of your engineering department, and if we have an opportunity to study the manufacturing facilities you have, the kind of equipment you use, we can do a job for you.

“We would like to study the widget market, however, before we go ahead and make any proposition to you. We would like to know what is being done in the field by competitors, and in what price range, and which are the widgets that sell best, and we would try to isolate the reason why they sell best; whether it is price, appearance, function, quality, or a combination of these factors. Then we can talk to you intelligently about doing design work for your organization.”

WDT: “Well, of course, Mr. Loewy, that goes much further than I had in mind. I had assumed that you would simply make me some sketches of what you thought my product ought to look like. After all, that is all we had in mind in connection with your-

RL: “Well, I regret to say that we don’t work that way. The leading designers, those who have established reputations and have reputations to maintain—such as Mr. Teague, a namesake of yours, of Mr. Dreyfuss or Mr. Arens—don’t work that way. They don’t like to start doing any fancy designing or blue-sky designing with knowing all

the factors of the problem involved. We couldn't do that, then. We wouldn't be interested, and I don't think you would.

WDT: Well, do you think that you could come into a business like ours and in a short time acquire enough information about it to be able to make wise decisions in the various fields in which, as you have outlined it, you would like to operate?

RL: Yes. That is the reason we are here to discuss it with you. We have done work in fields very close to widgets. The products may not be exactly widgets; but they are in the same price range, they sell through the same kind of retail outlet, and the servicing problem of these units is quite similar to yours. We feel confident we can do a job. I would like to have a look at your facilities, at your plant, and see what kind of equipment you have. We would also like to talk to your sales manager, if that can be arranged, in order to have some idea about your retail outlets.

WDT: Then we would more or less have to take you into the family and into our confidence in a matter of our business methods and procedures and so on?

RL: Yes—completely. That is the only way we could possibly work. You may not have heard about the reputation of our firm as far as ethics is concerned. You may be sure that any new development that happens when we work with you, or any new idea you may have, will be kept completely confidential.

WDT: “the question of personalities immediately intrudes itself. Do you feel that you could get along with our technical staff? After all, our engineers are very experienced in their work, and they are a little sensitive about people intruding from the outside. I just wonder whether we wouldn't have a conflict on our hands when your people come into our organization. ... What guarantee we would have of success? After all, this is going to be a very expensive thing for us. What assurance do we have that we will get the right returns?”... (Minutes of 1946 MOMA Conf.)

It is evident from this conversation that Teague and Loewy agreed on their business strategy as consulting industrial designers and communicate many of the concerns that they have experienced when approaching new clients. Teague shows an understanding and an empathy for his potential clients fears. Here are some of the fears that he mentions:

- That the designer is not experienced with their particular product market.
- Fear of loss of security of intellectual property and confidentiality.
- Compatibility with in-house staff. Staff will feel intruded by consultant and not cooperate.
- Fear of long term commitment in a relationship with a design firm.
- Fear of not getting return on their investment.

Teague and Loewy knew how to respond these fears with assurance, however they stood firm when pushed to the edges of their professional ethics. One thing that stands out in this conversation is that Loewy and Teague refused to take on any short term projects. They would not “simply make some sketches” or do “blue-sky designing.” They required a contract of at least one year long, in order to do their best at understanding their client, its market and their customers.

“After all, we are subject to the wishes of our clients. This discussion has to do with the client-designer relationship. Most of us may have the status of call girls, but we are not streetwalkers: we wait for the clients to come to us.” – Walter D. Teague (Minutes of 1946 MOMA Conf.)



Figure 1: Teague drafting room, New York City, circa 1938. photo by Stowe Myers.

Office Atmosphere

How did Teague run his office? What was it like to work at WDTA during its heyday? In 16mm film shot by partner, Stowe Myers, the 1940's staff of Teague is shown at work and at play in their New York office studio. Drafting desks are arranged in two long rows, all facing the front of the room, where the most senior designer or architect would be working. The film also shows office parties, which included drinks and group singing. It also documents a casual office art exhibition, where staff could display their personal artistic works, painting, drawing, and watercolors. Although everyone worked rigorously, he allowed occasions for staff to celebrate their hard work and talents with parties and other creative events. Stowe Myers who worked there from 1934 to 1952 said:

"Both offices [Loewy's and Teague's] engendered certain camaraderie of the personal and a general ambiance that was more likely I think in the 50s and maybe less evident today. There were Christmas parties and sometimes birthday parties and then there were the four martini lunches, so to speak. They were common place. It was all in line with the pressures of advertising agencies are noted for, and because so many of them were on that street, Madison Avenue.." - (Myers)



Figure 2: Teague joking around during an office party 1938. Photo Stowe Myers.

Senior Product designer, Gifford Jackson, who worked there from 1954 to 65, writes:

"The office in New York was well run and business like. There was a certain underlying discipline, but it was a pleasant place in which to work. The partners were very gentlemanly and Mr. Teague, although in photos sometimes looked as though he could be stern and tough, was very nice to confer with. He certainly was very good to me. In general, there was a good feeling between the designers in the "bull-pen" (referring to the booth-like spaces we worked in). Many of us made friends there which lasted many years." (Jackson)

In 1945, Teague changed his corporate structure from a sole-proprietorship to a partnership, in which he selected a few of his most senior staff to be partners in the company. This allowed them to participate in profit-sharing and allowed Teague to delegate greater responsibilities, especially considering the growth of his business. This also increased employee retention and pride in ownership in the company and encouraged the project's success.

Building Alliances

Teague's son, Dorwin, worked with his father for many years and writes this about their strategy for business development:

"Much of the success of a particular assignment depended upon the personality of our contact in the client's organization. This was usually the chairman, president or the chief executive officer. His attitude would be reflected by the engineering and marketing personnel and could range from enthusiastic cooperation to suspicion and outright hostility. In the early years, cheerful acceptance of the designer's contribution was the norm; later on we would occasionally run into antagonism. In most cases I was able to convince the engineering people that I was sincerely trying to work with them and was not threatening their jobs. Nothing infuriates an engineer more than to have some outsider second-guess a product that is the result of years of hard work on his part. But if he can be persuaded that a better final result will be achieved, and that he will receive at least part of the credit for the improvement, an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation develops, which guarantees successful conclusion."

In later years one member of our organization, the account executive on some large accounts, would deal strictly with the person in charge of the client's organization. He determined first what this individual was expecting and then slanted the design in that direction." (Teague, W.D. Jr. 48)

Teague's strategy was to form an alliance with the top leadership within the client's organization. He would learn about the goals and objectives of the senior decision maker, CEO, President, or owner, and become their advocate and supporter. He also established an alliance with the client's staff, assuring them that the relationship would not be antagonistic, but rather mutually beneficial. Teague knew that business is about relationships. He developed lasting, close relationship with key people in the client's company.

Design Research and Designer Sensitivity versus Market Surveys

Teague believed in the designer's intuitive sensitivity of culture and understanding of the client and end-user, to lead them to the best design solution. Teague expresses the limitations of marketing and surveys in this speech in Detroit 1960:

"These people can't tell you what they are going to like three years from now- that's been completely proven; but they can't even tell you what they will like today if you've never seen it. So the designer will learn next to nothing from the quiz programs some

companies conduct at great expense. But the designer should be aware of and sensitive to the trends that are moving in this small, communicative world of ours....

And when you find this attitude of mind expressing itself in architecture, home and office furnishings, machine design, and a hundred fields of human endeavor, you had better get in tune with it. It is the voice of your times speaking to you, and your sensitivity to this spirit of your age is your greatest asset. The men who count heads and add up answers to questionnaires can produce no creative additive for your use: the people they question haven't yet seen the thing that is going to thrill and excite them and it is *your* job to reveal it to them." (Teague)

W. Dorwin Teague Jr. writes this about dealing with resistance to change:

"The client's marketing group was sometimes more of a problem in getting a new design accepted than the engineering department. With marketing we were dealing with intangibles difficult to define and pitting our recommendations against their years of experience in the industry. I'm sure every designer has encountered the complaint that, 'We tried that back in 1954 and it caused nothing but trouble' or 'the so-and-so company did that in 1962 and almost lost its shirt.' These experiences may indeed have been bad news at the time but in the intervening years the public's taste could have changed radically or new materials and techniques been developed which eliminated the original cause of the trouble. Sometimes there was a reluctance to go to a radically new design because "it is ahead of its time." A favorite example used to justify this attitude was the Chrysler Airflow [automobile] which failed, not because it was ahead of its time, but because it was a supremely ugly design." (Teague, W.D. Jr. 50)

Teague was always prepared to deal with opponents to progress. He had rational arguments ready to deal with those who were resistant to change. He also directed his designers to be sensitive to culture, to have a pulse on the trends of the public, and trust their intuition, not market surveys. He encouraged them to look to other innovative fields for ideas and inspiration.



Figure 3: WDTA model shop and staff. Circa 1940. Photo TEAGUE archives.

Be the Authority

Teague used a bold strategy with his clients, one which most consultants do not dare to do today. When it came time to present the design deliverables, he only presented one. It was presented with panache and great authority, usually as a beautiful and perfect full scale model, with dramatic lighting and within a contextual environment. Teague's perspective was that he

was the designer, and he had the experience and authority to make the final design decision. His office had explored all possible options and alternatives, and this was the best solution.

"We work very closely with our clients, their engineers and executives, so that we thoroughly understand the conditions of success in their business. But we consider that design is our business, not theirs. We never show them sketches and never present alternatives.

"Here is where the designer's professional responsibility to his client and the public comes in – the two are inseparable. It is the designer's obligation not only to find and develop the one best solution for the client's problem, but also to convince the client that it *is* the best solution. We do it by presenting our one right solution in so complete and finished a form that no one can get a fingernail under any edge to pry it loose." (W. D. Teague)

Senior Product Designer from 1954-1964, Gifford Jackson, describes an example of this:

"I was put to work right away to design a new set of bathroom fixtures... the client was American-Standard Inc. I made many pastel sketches to develop the design and then I sculpted the wash basin and bath... I created a clean, simple, bowed fascia, and this was mocked up full size by the model shop in lacquered plaster. To present these designs, we had the model shop make up a complete mocked up bathroom, with wall tiles, towels, soap etc to display the new fixture designs.

"We designers were introduced to the clients' executives but Mr. Teague made the presentation. In an adjoining room, Mr. Teague read out the original design brief, then ushered the client's people into the mock-up bathroom.

"Mr. Teague always showed designs in model form, generally full size and finished to look exactly like actual products. We never showed alternatives, only the one best design we felt answered the requirements of the brief. The firm had a very good success rate using this method. (Jackson)

Here's what his son, Dorwin, says about this approach:

"A few times I ran into complaints because I had only submitted one concept. Why hadn't I submitted several ideas so that they could make a choice? But I had automatically considered and rejected alternatives and had no interest in submitting anything but what I thought was the best approach. If the client remained adamant and insisted on seeing alternate ideas, my course of action was always to bow out of the relationship as gracefully as possible. Fortunately there have always been enough understanding clients, so that I have been able to concentrate on designs that I can still be proud of." (W.D. Teague Jr. 50)

Here Teague urges designers to be the authoritative expert. Present only the best design solution to the client in such a convincing way, there is no doubt that it is the best direction.

Conclusion

A number of lessons can be learned from these observations of Teague's business practice.

1. Have a person on staff that has the experience and social tact for dealing with the clients that you are targeting.
2. Demonstrate your value to clients through documented case studies that show increased value and income as a result of your design work.
3. Understand and empathize with the fears and concerns of the new client.

4. Avoid short-term, low commitment projects.
5. Work hard, and then celebrate. Allow occasions for staff to celebrate their hard work and talents with parties and other creative events.
6. Offer profit-sharing and partnerships to employees in order to increase retention and pride in ownership in the company and the project's success.
7. Ally with the top leader in the clients company. Learn about the goals and objectives of the senior decision maker (CEO/President/owner) and become their advocate and supporter.
8. Establish an alliance with the client's staff. Assure them of the consultants support and the mutual benefit of the relationship.
9. Be prepared for battle with opponents to progress. Have rational arguments ready to deal with those who are resistant to change.
10. Be sensitive to culture and trust your intuition on design direction. Look to other innovative fields for ideas, trends and inspiration.
11. Business is about relationships. Develop lasting, close relationship with key people in the clients company.
12. Be the authoritative expert. Present only the one best design solution to the client in such a convincing way, there is no doubt that it is the best direction.

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