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Spreading the eco-challenges through the graphic design contests

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ABSTRACT

In the wide panorama of social and environmental communication the graphic design contests plays an important role, especially for the experimentations in techniques and languages. This paper aims to give a global overview of this kind of contest that find their large diffusion in the last ten years and then analyze their results in order to define some common guidelines. The conclusion is a very fragmented situation with a high component of innovation and an increasing quality of languages used for the social and environmental communication.

KEY WORDS: environmental communication, graphic design contest, ecodesign.

1. ORIGIN OF SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN CONTESTS

Communications about sustainability issues have traditionally been under public responsibility with the purpose of sensitize and educate citizens. Reducing the damage caused by anthropogenic activities to the eco-system necessarily requires long-term policies to be undertaken [1].

The advertising is one of the most common form of communication able to involve the larger number of people as possible. Actions become rightful when they show consistency with the values of the society in which they are taken [2]. The first examples come in late Sixties, when the environmental problems were strongly declared in all over the world. With some years of delay, the governments took on the commitment to express the pressure of some environmental and social problems. The advertising by governments had a strong educational imprinting and were often linked to strong feelings such as fear and condemnation.

2. THE ROLE OF NO-PROFIT ORGANISATION

Over the years, that kind of advertising was supported also by non-profit organization, like WWF, Greenpeace and so on, adding new terms of communications like humor, sarcasm and instruction (*figure 1*). The biggest international non-profit organizations, that daily work on environmental and social problems, give new attitude also to the communications, reaching a large number of people [3].

In that overview, I would like to underline the role of other nonprofit organizations, those ones that are smaller and focused mainly on graphic design, but really close to Planet issues. The latter associations are often small groups of creative people that would give a service to the society so often they uses contest formula to activate a global debate through graphic design. These small associations uses as much as possible the web to spread the results and go over the national boundaries, because the mentioned themes are of general interest and haste. Not surprisingly if they start around 2005 in United States and in Europe, with the main difference in the prizing approach.

The way today's technology and the Internet are pervasive, and they have made communication immediate and multidirectional, so much so that the traditional dichotomy between sender and receiver has been revolutionized. A plethora of messages combined with ever interchangeable roles is making social and environmental communication increasingly horizontal, raising debates and contentions. The generally used media have broadened out to encompass the variably conventional online channels, such as web pages, corporate blogs and social media (facebook, twitter, youtube etc.) [4]. Social networks can be set up to be an excellent means of disseminating and promoting environmental policies implemented by companies with hands on environmental communication, although such an option does not necessarily make them socially responsible.



figure 1: Your hands can clean more than you think, Advertising Agency: Forchets, campaign Legambiente Italy, 2008.

3. DIFFERENT APPROACHES WORLDWIDE

In United States, the contest organisers are supported by private foundations or national institutions, like the Adobe Foundation and the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), and choose to be more selective, giving just one or three prizes in money. For example, the contest Design ignites change, organised by AIGA, with the partnership of Adobe Foundation and WorldStudio Projects Foundation, have granted over $100.000 in support of student projects that address social issues in communities around the globe and awarded more than 600 students with $936.375 since 2009.

In Europe the most of contest's organisers give non-monetary prizes, but choose for selecting as much projects as possible (from 40 to 100) and publicize them through expositions and books or catalogues. In that case, the use of social media is very high and all the organisations have multi-canals to spread their results. The attention is given to Poster for Tomorrow that from France is spreading really all over the word, with an increasing numbers of supporters day by day, today the Poster4Tomorrow FB page counts more than 18.000 likes. The other similar contests in Europe are Good50x70 and Posterheroes [5], with more than 5.000 likes, instead in US the numbers are really paltry; the best one is Sappi-Ideas that matters with less than 2.000 (*figure 2*).



figure 2: Cyclist make better love, Riley Brady, USA, selected by Posterheroes 2012.

In that very active and fast-moving context with many small associations and many activities, some of them redirect their efforts on other events, like Good 50x70 and Cause/affect, that had their last contest edition both in 2011. Furthermore, I would like to have a spot on Russian creative underlayer, because since Nineties they have very intensive activities on these themes with international expositions of posters and other graphic design supports. The most important is the Ukrainian 4th Block (International Triennal of Eco-poster), whose name derives from the explosion of atomic reactor in the 4th energy block in Chernobyl`s atomic power station (April 26th, 1986). Because of that hard experience, the theme of moral responsibility of artists in front of threat of new technological catastrophes, pollution of environment, in 1991 an international poster exhibition was organized, devoted to a fifth anniversary of Chernobyl tragedy. The designers and printmakers from 54 countries responded at the invitation and sent their art works. Since that time every three years thanks to efforts of many like-minders, support of private and state companies, in Kharkiv take place International triennial of eco-poster, graphics and youth eco-projects. Exhibits touch the most painful ecological problems, pollution of environment, global warming, genetic engineering etc. [6].

4. WHICH STYLES FOR SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL GRAPHICS?

Through communication people are informed about anything that happens, motivations are given, problems are uncovered and in some cases their solutions are found [7]. Looking at the results of these Social and Environmental graphic design contests, the artworks can be grouped in seven typologies in according to different languages used: informational, synthetic, emotional, evocative, exhortation, ironic, viral.

The informational communication aims to give the real complexity of the environmental problems using a huge quantity of data and the relation between cause and effect.

On the other hand, the synthetic one condensates in a simple and effective way the message, that doesn’t have the presumption to be complete, but the will to reach immediately the attention.

The designs with emotional language want to draw the attention on these important themes of environmental issues thanks to unconscious power. The most used emotion is the fear, because people stand in front of shocking images (f*igures 3*).
The evocative communication is usually not so immediate but needs some time of reflection on its content. The spent time on the interpretation of this kind of artworks help people to remember it longer. This kind of communication works not directly on environment issue but transferring it in defferent and parallel topic, using often the morphing, from natural to artificial and viceversa (*figure 4*).
In opposition to this category, there is the exhortation communication with a clear message that suggest some define actions for a better environment. That kind of communication don't want to explain in details the whole and complex scenario of environmental problems, but give practical suggestions to people that can change their behaviour in a more sustainable way (*figure 5*).
The ironic one tries to protect people with many accusations and "to-not-do lists" playing with a positive attitude. They manage to get a smile out and suggest a change of behaviour without guilt (*figure 1*).
Last but not least, what I want to call viral communication because join the content and the media in a very cohesive way and suggest the action just in the moment in which people are doing the behaviour that should be change. This kind of communication is very effective because doesn't pretend that people remember the message for long time but they have the strengthen to be in the right moment (*figure 6*).





figure 3: Here's the rest of your coat, for Peta by Canili Milino.

figure 4: Do you know what you eat? By BBDO Moscow for Greenpeace 2011.



figure 5: Use Both sides, selected by Good 50x70, 2006.



figure 6: Tree Paper toilaet By Greenpace 2010.

5. CONCLUSION

When communication organically engages the players, its role is more meaningful as it nourishes the growth of structural forms of cooperation and true entailment in the business processes. This way, when it comes to responsible commitment, the communication widens its own role so that an active listening and debate may lead to actions that help create common sense and shared views [8].

An effective environmental communication should be planned to be realistic and en- gaging, in order to congregate people who can raise the debate and help make public opinion increasingly aware of these issues [9].

The communication of sustainability can not be an empty marketing strategy but an opportunity to innovate and update the context in the founding principles, in the social choices, in the selection of products, in the production process for companies, etc . So that, it creates an extensive marketing strategy, acting on the process of innovation in visual communication and design.

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