

# IN-HOUSE DESIGN AWARDS

73 WINNING DESIGNS FROM AMERICA'S TOP COMPANIES

DESIGN IDEAS @ WORK

25TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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## CREATIVITY

## TURN DOWNTIME INTO PLAYTIME

When your workload slows to a trickle and you resort to clock-watching to get through the day, it may be time to spice things up with creative playtime.

Most designers usually have more than enough work to keep them busy throughout the day, into the night and possibly well into the next several weeks or months. But every now and then the stars align and there's a lull.

Whether it's because all the projects are out for review, times are slow in the economy, or the evil project manager likes to withhold valuable information for the pure joy of seeing you panic at the last second, sometimes we designers find ourselves just twiddling our thumbs.

Some creatives relish the free time, while others find the situation boring and intolerable. Aside from resorting to the extremes—watching the numbers on the clock slowly tick by while feigning busywork so you won't get fired; kicking your heels up on the keyboard, cracking open a new novel and exhaling loud, exasperated sighs of boredom; or routinely clicking on Facebook—what can designers do at the office during the slow times to keep their creative juices fresh and their jobs intact?



# HELLO



## PRODUCTIVE PROJECTS

The Flywheel folks use downtime to increase their self-promo efforts. The team took letters spelling "OK Great" around town and photographed them in different settings (above left), and created this e-blast to reach out to prospective clients (above).



### THE BUNCH

We have 100+ clients in a handful of states in Durham, NC. And we're an award-winning team. We're a tight-knit crew of designers, writers + artists, hell-bent on delivering the best in art, design and culture. The world is a big pile of awesome. We're the spoon. Dig in."

### INSPIRATIONAL BLOG

Designers at Flywheel Design keep the company blog ([www.okaygreat.com](http://www.okaygreat.com)) fresh with updates on personal projects by staffers. Here's how the blog introduces the team:

### OUR MISSION

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Hi, we're OK Great, a tight-knit crew of designers, writers + artists, hell-bent on delivering the best in art, design and culture. The world is a big pile of awesome. We're the spoon. Dig in."

### OUR CONVEY

Hi, we're OK Great, a tight-knit crew of designers, writers + artists, hell-bent on delivering the best in art, design and culture. The world is a big pile of awesome. We're the spoon. Dig in."



### OUR SERVICES

Hi, we're OK Great, a tight-knit crew of designers, writers + artists, hell-bent on delivering the best in art, design and culture. The world is a big pile of awesome. We're the spoon. Dig in."

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new business due to their self-promotion efforts.

But even so, Flywheel art director and designer Brendan Ward has found that while there's always a multitude of projects in the loop, work doesn't always flow at a constant rate, especially when it's spread among five designers. "Having absolutely nothing to do is frustrating for the designers and also costly for the company. Fortunately, at Flywheel this is a rare occurrence because we're encouraged to find other outlets for our creativity."

In fact, while most companies discourage their employees from working on personal projects during business hours, Flywheel wholeheartedly encourages it. The company's blog, OK Great, originally began with inspirational musings on art, design and music. Now, it's developed into an important showcase for the employees' experimental design work. Thus, with the blog requiring fresh posts on a daily basis, pursuing creative personal projects (and showcasing them) is supported and applauded when time permits.

For example, Ward had the idea to order some large foam letters that spell out "OK Great" to photograph around town. He pitched the idea to co-workers and everyone loved it. The team took the 16-inch foam letters all over town, photographing "OK Great" in various environments. Other experimental endeavors involve handmade typographic stencils of the blog's logo made from pencil shavings, coffee grounds, colored sprinkles and a variety of herbs and spices.

As Holliman sees it, "All these things constitute forms of professional development, which will ultimately benefit our company as well as the individual designer. In fact, virtually any activity which adds to

## UNLEASH CREATIVITY ON YOURSELF

Fueled with caffeine, frozen 'Locopops treats and an indoor basketball hoop, the creative team at Flywheel Design in Durham, NC, has some fresh ideas on how to keep designers' morale (and skills) at peak levels during downtime. Principal and creative director Woody Holliman encourages the designers at Flywheel to work on self-promotional projects for the studio or professional-development activities that recharge their creative batteries when projects are unexpectedly stalled. In Holliman's opinion, the term professional development is very broad and can encompass anything from reading a design magazine or blog, to designing a custom typeface or even taking a group field trip to a local art gallery.

In the past few months, the designers at Flywheel have kept busy during downtime by re-photographing the company's entire body of work, designing a new website, updating the studio blog ([www.okaygreat.com](http://www.okaygreat.com)), redesigning the Flywheel business card and stationery, and creating a self-promotional e-blast, direct mail campaign and client gift. Besides keeping the doldrums at bay, the staff noticed a dramatic spike in

the designer's knowledge base or skill set, or which inspires them with new ideas or enthusiasm for their work, is ultimately good for the studio as a whole."

### PRODUCTIVE PLAY

Brand Engine, a Sausalito, CA-based branding and design consultancy, takes a slightly more traditional approach. Designers work on personal projects on their own time, but Brand Engine definitely encourages and fosters creative play during the lulls at the office.

Will Burke, CEO and creative director, says, "With deadlines looming and new request after new request coming in the door, that balance can sometimes skew the wrong way. Downtime is a chance to relax and get away from the daily work, let your body and mind recharge, and, more importantly, play."

And play they do. Aside from a well-used pinball machine and impromptu Ping-Pong games in the conference room, Brand Engine recently offered an internal design challenge to employees during downtime to visually express their company values (partnership, empathy, potential, excellence and spark) on the bottom of skateboards. In addition to the design team letting loose creatively without client pressures or restrictions, the company now has five skateboards hanging on the lobby wall. "Keep [downtime] playful and use it as a time to promote your company values," Burke advises. "Balance activities that benefit the company with those that allow for personal growth and well-being."

### SNAP OUT OF IT AND GET INVOLVED

When San Francisco-based graphic designer Frances Liddell was an hourly employee at a small firm and fresh out of design school, she used to dread the office lulls. "I couldn't afford to wait around for things to pick up, nor could I afford losing hours of pay, so I had to find things to do to keep productive. I ran errands, organized files, ran maintenance checks on the equipment—whatever I could do until there was design work to be done," Liddell recalls.

In her current position at VIZ Media, an anime and manga company in San Francisco, the slowdowns still occur, but they're infrequent enough to make her appreciate them when they do come around. The troubled economy has made Liddell ever more conscious of using her time wisely and making herself as much of an asset to the company as possible. During the quiet periods, she'll busy herself with smaller tasks such as submitting artwork for processing, organizing the files on her computer or getting a head start on projects that she knows will be kicking off soon.

She also spends office downtime getting involved in fun projects with her local AIGA chapter. Last year she was invited to design a wine bottle to be auctioned for charity as part of the AIGA San Francisco fall gala, Put a Cork in It. Liddell's supervisor permitted her to devote office downtime to the project so long as it didn't disrupt her regular work. Liddell recruited fellow in-house design talent Fawn Lau, John Kim and Misaki Kido to contribute illustrations to the project. "It was lots of fun to work on a project with my team-



mates without worrying about whether it would meet with the approval of this or that party," Liddell says.

### NOT ALL OFFICES ARE CREATED EQUAL

Unfortunately, not all office environments are primed with basketball hoops, pinball machines and Ping-Pong tables. Likewise, there are design bosses far more comfortable playing the role of the micromanaging slave driver rather than encouraging creative mentor. But when your brain gets restless and time is moving slower than ketchup, keep in mind these wise words from Flywheel Design's Brendan Ward: "Do whatever you can to keep your work fresh and your creativity sharp. Find a way to tailor your [downtime] ideas to projects that might be beneficial for both your own portfolio and that of your company. This way, you'll be less likely to piss off your employer while trying to push your own skill set. Hell, you might even get a promotion for it!" ■

*Stephanie Orma is a San Francisco Bay area graphic designer, illustrator and wordsmith. She's principal/creative director of the boutique graphic design and copywriting studio Orma Design. During her office downtime, Orma brainstorms creative ideas for her clever card company. She's SO Creative.*  
[www.shesocreative.com](http://www.shesocreative.com); [www.ormadesign.com](http://www.ormadesign.com)

**WILL BURKE SAUSALITO, CA** [www.brandengine.com](http://www.brandengine.com)

**WOODY HOLLIMAN DURHAM, NC** [www.flywheeldesign.com](http://www.flywheeldesign.com)

**FRANCES LIDDELL SAN FRANCISCO** [www.viz.com](http://www.viz.com)

[www.francesliddell.com](http://www.francesliddell.com)

**BRENDAN WARD DURHAM, NC** [www.flywheeldesign.com](http://www.flywheeldesign.com)

### » WEB EXTRA

For specific activities to spice up your slow time, check out "15 Ways to Avoid Downtime Doldrums."  
[HOWdesign.com/downtime](http://HOWdesign.com/downtime)

### MAKING OFFICE ART

The five skateboards hanging in the lobby of Brand Engine were created by designers in an internal design challenge during a lull in their client work.



**CHARITABLE CHALLENGE**  
Frances Liddell and co-workers were granted permission to design this wine bottle, which was auctioned off for charity for their local AIGA chapter, during office downtime.