

Enhancing Creativity

Goto is at the head of her class – follow her lead and inspire your staff to new creative heights

By Emily Cotler

It's truly a novel idea, certain to revolutionize the industry. Kelly Goto (www.gotomedia.com) is testing the following approach with the creative professionals she hires for the projects she produces: She insists they work regular hours.

Of course, regular hours include a little bit of overtime – Goto has one foot in the real world, after all. But after years of working herself into exhaustion, of calling it a day only when her contacts hurt her eyes so much she couldn't work any more before getting some sleep, after years of simply too much coffee, one basic tenet – so simple and clear as to be rendered as invisible as a typo to the harried – became painfully obvious.

Burned out designers create weak designs.

Goto acknowledges that the practice of working regular hours is still in its testing stage. Training herself to say "No, it can't be done in that amount of time," to clients was very difficult at first. She has learned, though, that most clients understand the concept of a schedule and can grasp the idea that good design does not get churned out, it gets formed and kneaded and explored.

And slept on. Creativity needs sleep.

Goto still imposes deadlines. No one disputes the necessity of deadlines in this industry, but her deadlines are more realistic now and they allow her designers to have lives outside of work.

But before Goto can even get to the jaw-dropping idea of imposing regular hours to promote creativity, she employs her most important and valuable asset, her key to ensuring a high level of creativity from the outset. This strategy isn't new. Ask anybody. The key to a creative



team is creative people.

"I attach myself to amazingly talented people," Goto says when asked what she thinks are her best tools for promoting creativity. "And then I match these people to projects I bring in – projects people can be really excited about."

Goto herself is amazingly talented. She is young and down-to-earth, with a solid background in design. A top-notch expert in her field, she speaks at every Thunder Lizard Web conference. She teaches classes. She has offices in San Francisco and Los Angeles. She is responsible for huge projects, such as Warner Bros. and the Rosie O'Donnell Web Sites. Her clients include Paramount Pictures and National Geographic Online. As an executive consultant for Red Eye Digital Media in San Francisco, Goto is currently producing the redesign of Food.com, the national expansion of Webvan.com and a few other \$100,000 budgeted accounts. She is wildly successful. She picks her jobs and fires clients that aren't worth it. What Kelly Goto is doing to keep her projects fresh and creative is definitely working.

Welcome to a time when a creative director can also be a project producer, a markedly different role from the project manager. Notice the glamorous ring to the title "producer:" it hails from the entertainment field where

everybody is their own company, where being on the staff is *déclassé*. In design, the producer is a relatively new position – an evolutionary blending of project manager, account manager and, in some cases, art director. The role of a project manager tends to be more static because she manages the day-to-day operations of several projects in progress; a producer creates a little company for each project by combining resources.

The key to a creative team is creative people.

Once Goto has gathered her team and drafted a schedule, she collects information from the client. She has a comprehensive questionnaire she gives to her clients to unearth their goals; the answers serve as a springboard for design. Based on the information she receives, she helps the client understand how much technology they will need for to meet their goals within the time frame or budget. “Early communication is key,” Goto says. “If the client has unrealistic expectations, or if as project producer I have not communicated well enough with them to discern their goals, then I am not giving my team a solid place to start from.”





After the goals have been established, Goto brings her team together for a brainstorming session. They pore over magazines, visit umpteen Web sites and discuss, discuss, discuss. As project producer, Goto guides her team to keep them on the creative path. “Brainstorming is a fast, iterative process,” Goto explains. “It is critical at this point in the creative process not to get bogged down by details.” Goto keeps the pace of the meeting fast; the focus is to come up with the widest range of looks and feels for the project as possible while keeping in synch with the project’s needs and requirements.

After brainstorming, Goto sends her designer off for about a week to develop their ideas before they all come back to the table. She does her best not to hover, but she does check progress. “One of the worst things you can do to a designer is stand over his shoulder. And while it’s important that designers stay on track, sometimes you just have to let people do what they want to do,” Goto says. She also encourages designers to

share work in progress. “I don’t want to pit designers against each other,” Goto says, “Rather, I want them to inspire and help each other.” It’s her way of keeping the brainstorming going after the meeting is over.

“The second meeting is the most creative,” Goto says. “This is where we see what is working and what is not; where we start paring down for client review.” By this time the project has momentum, but she must still make certain that everyone stays focused. The team refers back to the initial client questionnaire to avoid creative floundering. And of course, Goto is unfailingly available to her team.

So let’s recap. Here’s how to keep creativity bursting within your team:

-  Don’t work designers into the ground
-  Employ really creative people
-  Give designers as much inspiration & information up front as possible
-  And let them do their thing

Are there any other ways Goto drives creativity at a high level? “I believe in paying designers well,” she says. “It is a clear message that I value them.”

Now that really is novel.

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