

The origins of the Information Design Association

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The IDA was launched on 14 May 1991 at a meeting at the Royal Society of Arts attended by about 200 people. ROB WALLER of the Information Design Unit consultancy shares his recollection of how it all began.

From IDJ to IDA

Although still resolutely independent of one another, I think the concept of the IDA was always implicit in Information Design Journal (IDJ). For non-readers, IDJ is a journal that, starting in 1979, has published research articles about information design. It appears from time to time, when enough material of the right standard becomes available, and in my biased opinion (I'm on the editorial board) it is essential reading.

IDJ was started to consolidate a community of interest – an invisible college – that had emerged in the 70s among a number of designers, teachers and researchers. It built on and was inspired by Michael Twyman's curriculum at Reading University Typography Department, Merald Wrolstad's Journal of Typographic Research (later renamed Visible Language) and the interdisciplinary work of Herbert Spencer and his RCA colleagues, Patricia Wright at the MRC, Jim Hartley and Peter Burnhill, and the Textual Communication Research Group at the Open University, where I was based.

IDJ had a definite agenda – to get specialists in language and design talking to each other, and to make research more accessible to designers. The origins of the term 'information design' are somewhat hazy – Bryan Smith (my co-editor for the first few issues) and I tossed a number of terms about before settling on this, but whether it was original or not I can't say. I think we probably thought it was, although at about the same time Pentagram, the design firm, published a book of their work in which the graphic work was grouped together in a chapter entitled Information Design.

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Certainly we had a distinctive meaning for it – to apply processes of design (that is, planning) to the communication of information (its content and language as well as its form). It was intended to be a counterpoint to the corporate identity and glitzy graphics that seemed to take over graphic design in the 80s. IDJ quickly found a small constituency, and we ran five conferences for IDJ readers. It became clear that there was an appetite for more, but that the existing IDJ infrastructure could not provide it (to dignify our rather disorganised, academic way of working, which was resourced by tolerant employers).

From early conversations to launch

I haven't searched our attic for early documents, but my recollection is that the IDA really started to take shape with a conversation at Tecdoc 87 in Eastbourne where Julie Baddeley and I found we had both been thinking of the same thing.

For her part, Julie wanted a more organised, more recognised, professional context for the practice of information design – to help grow the market, provide a focus for training and career development, and as a lobby group.

For my part, I had spent a number of years at the Open University where I had the freedom to edit IDJ and run conferences. I was thinking about leaving, and wanted to set up a framework to support what I had been able to do on an ad hoc basis up to then. I had also sounded out a number of others, some of whom eventually joined the start-up steering group.

Unlike the modest budgetary expectations of my more parochial academic perspective, Julie thought big – Baddeley Associates had grown incredibly fast from a standing start to about forty people in three or four years. So her concept was probably more of a trade association than the IDA has turned out to be. Certainly the first meeting I had with John Lawson of Baddeley Associates, who contributed a huge effort in the early days to help start the IDA, involved a PR consultant who would have needed a sizeable budget.

That meeting, I believe, happened a year or so after the original conversation, and we put together a steering group which was designed to represent both academics and professionals, and to balance language and graphic design interests. We held a meeting at the fourth Information Design Conference, in Bath in 1989, to gauge interest, and decided to go ahead. The steering group transformed itself into the first committee.

This group organised the original membership drive and eventually the public launch in 1991. Sema Group chutzpah landed us Nick Ross as the chair of the launch meeting, which packed the RSA. That meeting proved that information design issues are potentially of tremendous interest, although in retrospect I think that Baddeley Associates was right – it would have taken expensive help, possibly full-time, to get information design properly noticed. There were attempts to raise sponsorships but, apart from anything else, the economic climate was poor.

Early ambitions

This idea of the public interest was prominent among our early ambitions – in both senses of the term. In terms of 'the public good', we wanted IDA experts to sit on relevant British Standards committees and similar bodies discussing, say, food labelling or safety warnings.

In another sense of the term 'public interest', we had ambitions for the media to appreciate that the public might be interested in what information designers say. We hoped that information design experts might be interviewed along with other experts after, say, a disaster in which poor information design contributed (e.g. the Three Mile Island nuclear accident).

Perhaps because of these and other early ambitions, some members are inclined to be gloomy about the IDA's actual achievements. Over the years I think the IDA has done as well as can be expected (given a realistic assessment of resources), and in many ways better. Things that have gone well have done so because individuals nurture them and give time and effort – the meetings programme, for example, and IDEAs. The things that haven't happened can similarly be put down to the fact that individuals haven't come forward to take them on. That seems to me to be a fact of committee life, and to be expected.

Different cultures?

There is a tendency to suggest that the IDA – indeed, the whole field of information design – may be torn between the differing priorities and approaches of academic, commercial and small business perspectives. But I have always worried about creating needless divisions. For instance, I remember several times objecting vociferously in the IDA committee to academics caricaturing people in business as unprincipled money-grubbers. You could as easily describe some academics as 'unprincipled' in their search for grants and career advantage; and many practitioners are as deeply motivated by their interest in progressing the subject area as the academics.

Business people are of course constantly under real pressures to get work and survive. I don't think this should be caricatured as badness. Perhaps it's true that at IDU we have the slight luxury that we are not owned by a larger firm who sets profit targets and imposes a corporate culture; but on the other hand, when you employ other people, what keeps you awake at night is whether you will have work for them.

That's not to say that the realities of business practice have not had an impact on how the IDA has developed. Take the trade association question. This was fairly explicitly one of the early goals – it was hoped that the IDA would provide a platform for jointly growing the marketplace for information design for both larger and small firms. But in practice, I think everyone was too nervous of introducing their clients to their competitors.

It takes all sorts

I still feel that a healthy state for information design needs all sorts of ingredients. It needs a flourishing research sector addressing real issues and feeding answers and ideas into education and practice; it needs a professional sector which takes the concepts to customers, improving the standard of everyday information and feeding issues back into research; and it also needs an education sector which links the two, and trains people to work in information design practice.

The IDA is the place where the interchange between these constituencies can best happen.

In search of information design

Just what is information design, anyway? It's a question which is constantly asked of us, and we debate definitions between us -- for instance, recently on the InfoDesign list on the Internet.

In the long term, I suspect information design will always have something of an identity crisis. To some extent it exists in contrast to other things as much as in its own right -- by which I mean, it is not graphic design, nor copy-writing, nor advertising, etc. Information Design is cross-disciplinary and integrative in its approach, and that is always more difficult to communicate than a specialism.