

# A SEAT

By Cheryl Heller

# AT THE TABLE



**“Why don’t I ever get to meet the client?”**

Ever since my first days in this business, I’ve heard designer after designer complain that they’re not taken seriously. That they don’t get to go to strategy meetings, and that they don’t get the respect they deserve.

At the same time I’ve noticed where they make this complaint. Let’s face it: Designers are an insular bunch. We tend to meet, greet, and socialize with our own kind. When we’re together, we love nothing more than to talk about design. And these are the types of discussions that leave nondesigners out of the in crowd.

Over time, I’ve become convinced that there is a relationship between these two things. Designers who talk only to other designers have a hard time being taken seriously by their

clients. They lack the social tools, business skills, and especially the language they need to make an impact in the meeting room. Sure it’s fun to assemble with those you resemble, but as a designer you need to make an emotional connection with writers, clients, researchers, marketing people, and other potential partners.

So how does a designer bridge the gap and become more “strategic”?

Of course, you could go out and buy every Wharton book on business strategy, bone up on the lingo, and practice it on anyone you can find. But I don’t think that will really help. Those ideas and that language are sterile and academic; though accurate, they don’t always reflect the real world.

## 5. Pick a deserving project and practice collaborating.

Choose a nonprofit or volunteer to do something interesting pro bono. Collaborating on concepts and working in teams are very different from being handed an assignment and delivering layouts. And it will take practice to make the change if you're not already working this way. It helps enormously if the project is meaningful to you.

OK, I admit these ideas sound painfully simple, but I believe they're powerful tools in getting the best out of yourself and your clients. In the end, you'll build trust, and once a client trusts you, you'll have much more leeway for bringing your own visions to life.

I think it's still true that I have never sold a campaign when the first time I meet a client is at the creative presentation. The odds are just too stacked against it because it's impossible to truly understand what problem needs to be solved—and what will solve it—without spending time getting to know the client and the company for which you are working.



*A few of the tables at which I have sat.*

*From top left: The Ice Hotel, Sweden; Patroon, New York City; Sans Eustachio il Caffè, Rome; Basil's Bar, Montréal; Half Moon Bay, Jamaica; Monterrey, Mexico; La Palete, Paris; Rue du Bourg Tibourg, Paris; Rue du Parc Royal, Paris*

### Suite collaboration

Learn about the collaboration features in Version Cue® CS2, part of Adobe Creative Suite 2. [See it in action \(SWF: 1.2MB\).](#)



## Cheryl Heller



Cheryl Heller is the CEO of New York's Heller Communications, a job that puts her, as she says, "at the crossroads of design, branding, advertising, and public relations."

Heller's career dates back to the 1980s, when she founded and ran HellerGreene, a design and advertising agency in Boston. In 1990, she moved to New York to become executive creative director at Wells Rich Greene, a position she also subsequently held at the branding and identity firm Siegel & Gale. Finally in 2000 she set out on her own again, forming the communications company that bears her name.

Over the course of her career, Heller has been profiled in publications ranging from *ID* and *Communication Arts* to *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*. She is a recipient of countless awards from national and international competitions, and her work is included in the Library of Congress permanent collection.

Nowadays, she lectures around the world, trying to help others in her field learn to build better relationships with their clients—a process she believes is key to creating the best possible work.

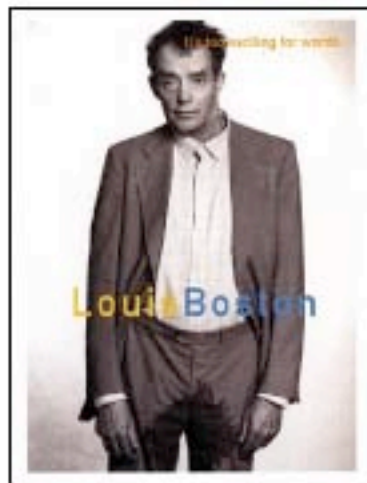
"These crossroads have not always been easy driving," she says. "But I have learned the most from the people who are the least like me—and they have been lessons that have served me best."

In her spare time, Heller is also a passionate photographer and a closet writer.



## Proving the point: The True You

*I have been creating communication programs aimed at designers for a very long time. This personality quiz was easy to write precisely because we are all ultimately so much alike. Know your audience, know yourself.*



## Louis Boston

*Humor is very different in the confines of your office or among your friends than it is on a billboard on the Massachusetts Turnpike. Women found this ad hilarious, but for some strange reason, men did not.*



## Discovery

*When you are creating work for global use, it's critically important to spend time listening and learning about cultural differences that impact local needs. What seems so clear and simple from your own point of view becomes far less so when seen from the perspective of others.*