ILLUSTRATORS

Behind the scenes with an illustration agent.
In-depth interview with Kris Krüger,
illustration representative and founder of Egger Grey.

If you have ever wondered how illustration agents work and what their job entails, this in-depth interview with Kris Krüger, from Berlin-based illustration agency Egger Grey, will give you all the answers. Kris talks about how he started out, how he developed his skills as an agent, as well as breaking down how he works on a daily basis. This is a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at how to work as an illustration agent, and gives valuable insight for illustrators on how an agent thinks, and what it means to work in illustration when you're represented by an agency.

Illustrators Illustrated: Could you give us a bit of background about your work and education, and how you started working as an illustration agent?

Kris Krüger: I studied business administration and communication in Budapest and then in Berlin. From then on I worked as an advertising professional. I used to work in bigger companies and agencies as an accounts manager - which means project management with a little bit of strategy and client contact. I loved working in that role in an agency as I bridged the gap between the creatives and the clients, which was basically the way I got to illustration.

At a certain point I realised I would like to run my own business, one that focused on a smaller and creative part of the advertising industry. I am an advocate for the creativity of artists, and I thought it would be lovely to sell the products of creatives. I started with an idea for an online gallery and shop for illustration, which I started to build. As I started looking for more illustrators to work with the shop, I got to know some representatives. At an illustration festival in Berlin I met a representative from Brazil, who was looking for a partner to bridge the gap over the ocean. He represented a number of illustrators, and was looking for another rep in Germany who would take on his illustrators, to find commissions and work for them in Germany or Europe. We talked, we liked each other, and so that's how I started as an agent.

It sounds like a chance meeting that turned out to be quite formative!

In partnering with him, it meant I could immediately work with some good and experienced artists, who were a great reference for me in Germany. I got the know-how from him, and I could add my own contacts and artists. As I already had quite a good network of advertising professionals, which is still my main market, it meant I had good base for advertisers. I started Egger Grey as my own business, and we worked together as two equal partners; I was not part of his business in Brazil, and he was not a part of my business in Germany. I also chose which of his illustrators to work with, as some did not really fit with the European market, or there were language barriers.

How did you connect your illustrators to clients? Do you have a portfolio of images

that you quickly send? I assume that in the past it would have been a lot of paper-based, print-based illustration, and now it will be all be on a tablet…

When I first started under the name of Egger Grey, I started from scratch and I had to convince people to listen to me. I started by having private meetings, which I was able to arrange through my personal contacts from my account management work; there I already had a credibility. For those meetings it was very good to have prints, because they had a general 'what do you have, how does it look' approach. It was very good to have something physical for the clients to hold so that they can take their own time looking at the images. I have huge presentation portfolio folders, with big prints, one print on each page, and only six pages for each artist. Not a lot, but a good mixture of continuity of style, but also a feeling of diversity.

After the get-to-know phase, you have to talk about certain tasks, and the best way is an iPad because you are media-free. You have the possibility to switch images immediately, if, for example, you see a possibility of selling infographics. You also have the possibility for moving image, or if it is an online game then you can go online. But it is interesting that in my experience people probably look at printed images for a longer time than they do with digital images!

What is a normal day at the office for you at Egger Grey? I assume it might start with a coffee?

Yes, definitely an espresso to start the day with! No day is like the other. There are days and weeks when I am very busy with new projects, others full with ongoing projects, or others when I am documenting completed work or preparing acquisitions and contracts. I start every day by doing all the stuff that I can do, until an inquiry comes in. Often you are contacted by an advertising agency at the very last moment, so you leave everything else to one side and just concentrate on the new pitch. They hope that you respond quickly, and that you can send them references so that they can see that you can solve their problem. After that it gets a little bit calmer, and more exciting as you start talking about timing and money. Throughout the day I move around, always with my phone in my hand – it's my mobile office! Normally I get inquiries through email, so I have a very loud email notification sound! I also always have the whole database of art work with me so that I can react quickly. It is important to be the first to react, to be the first who is there, which is something you get used to.

We've talked about your background and the way that you have developed as an agent – what about illustrators! How do you select the illustrators you want to work with?

It is the toughest part of all for me! As an agent you need find a balance between the offered artwork, and the artworks that are needed by the clients. Not being able to present a certain style keeps the clients away. Equally tough is having somebody in

the portfolio for whom you cannot find enough work. In my mind I try to define areas which would be interesting for my clients, thinking from the perspective of businesses, and then I switch sides and think in terms of art direction, which styles are trending or can be interesting and are perhaps not so covered by other illustrators or illustrator agencies. The mixture of these two perspectives defines where I have to look and who I represent.

The first project with a new illustrator is where you get to know the way you work together. Apart from good style and technique, and an understanding for the client, the most important part of the relationship with illustrator is trust; you need a huge amount of trust in each other. If the first project goes well then I offer another trial period to see how it works with the market. Sometimes you offer a style, a technique, content or a way for displaying content which is not often used, and then hope that it raises interest. Sometimes it works out, sometimes not - I can't make a promise!

Do clients often come to you for a particular style, or a particular illustrator, or do you have to negotiate matching the right kind of illustrator to client?

It's always different. The easiest job is to have a client asking for a particular illustrator. You verify it, and confirm they are the right illustrator for the job, but you don't have to think in terms of sales propositions, offers, or how to make an illustrator attractive for them. The flip side is when you get a request for a particular task without an idea of style; then it is very hard to be right. If you offer more than three styles, then you just raise more questions and you end up in a situation where no decision can be made. I tend to show fewer illustrators, perhaps two options: a choice to take the red or the white pill, but not the blue and the yellow and the green! If we eliminate one, or both of them, then we can still be in discussions and you can continue to find someone to suit their needs.

You have said that you mainly work with advertising. Do you have clients and art directors that you work with often, and has that changed over the development of your agency? Have you seen different clients, magazines for example, coming back to illustration?

I would love to work with magazines more, but most of the time it is advertising – it is how it evolved. In advertising you have many different situations, with different people writing you with requests, and they all have different approaches. Sometimes you work with an art director who has a very thorough view on the artwork or style. Sometimes you work with an art buyer who is very good at having an overview of styles and making offers. Sometimes you will have a very good project manager who is bringing the clients perspective in as well.

And you need to be flexible to deal with all of those approaches...

Yes, you need to know what they do in the business, and what their profile is. You need to know also the situation of the agency, then the people inside the agency. Those are two factors which play a role.

So there is a lot of market research you have to do, and have an understanding of how the industry operates.

Yes, at least understanding what the position holds, and what their responsibilities are. No matter who's making the request, they have their own agenda, and then there are other agendas, which they have to take into account, mainly depending on their position in the company.

How do you think about your role as a representative for illustrators? You seem to have to understand the client's perspective, but also stand up for illustrators and the way they work.

That is part of the partnership you have with the illustrators. In any commercial job, you almost always have at least three people in the mix: you have the client, paying for the service, you have the illustrator, with the talent, and, if there is no direct contact between them, then you have an illustration representative, a freelance producer, or an art buyer, and sometimes all of them!

If you are a representative then you are on the side of the artist and you are trying to get the most out of the deal for the illustrator. Of course you are connected to the client as well, but you represent the interests of the artist as they are the one who needs your support and with whom you work together as a team. If you are in the middle, you are normally a freelance producer, representing your own interests, and working for both the artist and the client. You look for the best deals, on both sides. If you are on the client side you are an art buyer, representing the interests of the client or agency, by trying to get the most for the agency out of every deal: the best quality for the best price, for the safest timing. As I said, I'm the rep, but many times there is the art buyer sitting on the other side, and we talk to each other and work things out.

What sort of skills do you think you need as a representative?

I think you have to have a lot of empathy. Understanding what the other people need. Because you're in a service role, there's a task and you are there to offer a solution. You need to figure out what the other people need, what their concerns are, what their means are, and then be able to make a proper offer. You have to understand them, and you have to be right in your understanding - not missing the pressing stuff! Reliability is also very important. Credibility, in the sense of keeping your promises and more, instead of over-promising. You also need a basic understanding of how business works on the financial side.

That is something that often freelance illustrators struggle with because there is little transparency when it comes to contracts or pricing. Do you feel like there needs to be more transparency in this area?

Definitely. The way I approach the calculation for making an offer is pretty easy. You have two factors which play a role: how much time is needed to make this artwork, and usage rights - how much reach, or coverage, this artwork will get. With timing, you need to make it clear how much time an illustrator needs for a job. When you are writing an offer some factors are not known, for example how many changes will be needed, but you can estimate how many days an illustrator normally needs. You have a net time: the time the artist needs to do a job; and a gross time: the time in which the job needs to be done. If the illustrator is very good at time management, then they can fill in the gaps with other work. A gross time doesn't have to be paid, if it is possible to plan. If it is not possible to plan, then you need to add a factor there as well. That is the theory.

Usage rights are also very easy in the theory. An illustration works for a client to make a convincing mood, or to sell products, which means every time it is seen it does work. If an artwork is not used a lot, then it doesn't have that share in the reach or in the profits. If it is used a lot then it has a higher reach, so it is working more, so you charge more.

This is the basic calculation of an artwork. The hard part is having value for it. This is where it helps if you have some way or feeling of the client's business. For example, take an invitation card of 50 pieces for an advertising agency. There is a difference in how much you would charge depending on the audience of the card and how much value it might bring to the agency. If it is an agency's employee Christmas party invitation card, then you will have problems to sell it for a high price. But if it is the invitation card for the top 50 clients, then there is a big difference in the value they would place on the card, and you can adapt your calculation to fit that.

How does it work to calculate your own costs as well? Do you charge the illustrators time, and then your time on top of that?

Yes, the commission fee is a very important part, because it's how I earn my money! This is where it is important to realise that you are a business partner with the illustrator. It is a commonly expected and accepted deal to have commission fee to work together. The illustrator has to believe that the work of the representative is adding value to their work, and freeing up time. As an agent, you have a market where you are trying to get the highest price, and that is exactly what you said earlier when you mentioned that there isn't the transparency of how much work is valued at. It's not like selling milk! You get a package of talent, reliability, nice to work with, references, maybe also an artists name which can be used. You cannot compare one package to another package. It is really like the stock exchange, where you have a lot

of factors that you cannot influence.

Do you encourage your illustrators to look for their own jobs as well? Many illustrators are good at doing their own self promotion, making connections, and collaborations. Perhaps those illustrators have an agent or a representative as well, but many use social media and other platforms to look for work themselves.

Each illustrator has different strengths. Some are very active on social media, others are very good at talking with clients. Over time you develop a clear feeling for which type of client the illustrator can reach, and which kind of client you can reach. In my experience, if you're an illustrator, using social media you can get a lot of work but you are not really attracting the right kind of client. Clients who are not ready or able to take risks will probably pay more than the clients who are willing to take risks on jobs. You can get big names, big brands, finding you on Facebook, writing you an email, 'Would you like to make us a poster for the next upcoming club event', or whatever. But they don't ever really pay for you.

Trust management is a big part of rep's role. The social media part is hard, because it helps me a lot to sell the illustrator because there's visibility which I can refer to, but the trust is missing. Seeing as nice artwork on Instagram doesn't say anything about what the brief was, what the challenges were, how the timing was and how the work together was, how many changes had to be made, how easy or hard it was to connect, to interpret or interfere with the ideas of the illustrator. It doesn't say anything! It's just a nice artwork.

Do you offer much constructive criticism to your illustrators? When they work on a project do you get much feedback from the clients, or from yourself that you can then take to the illustrators?

I feel very lucky because it is not really an issue most of the time. I think I tend to give far more feedback than it is usual, but I have had the experience that any criticism was taken on board very well. I try to get to know the illustrators and their sensitive spots - where they reach their boundaries. When I see something which could be important to change, but probably not that easy to change, then I don't usually talk about it. On the other hand, if I realise there is something that an illustrator can develop as part of their normal business, I talk to them about it. It takes a lot of learning about the people you work with, and avoiding 'criticism', in big letters. There are certain things that cannot change, and you need to accept that you cannot change it.

Do you have any advice for someone looking to work as an illustration agent?

It is very important to love the work, understand what the work is, and do research of your own. With varying kinds of media, and social media, it is changing the landscape

and changing the role a lot. Right now I have the feeling that trust management is an issue. You have to protect your right to exist as a rep, because you are the one who is the intermediary and the guarantee for quality and execution of a work. But you have to find much more to it than that. A big part is being able to work with people, understanding which people can work together, and which can't.

Do you have some advice to illustrators wanting to work with an agent, or working in the industry?

For illustrators, a very important thing comes down to the word illustration, and to understand what it means: what makes an illustration, and how it differs from a drawing. An illustration illustrates and works for a product or an idea and it awakes emotions to sell products, services or an idea. It visualises a concept, or makes an emotion visible. There is always an exception, but on the whole, a client is not looking for style, they're looking for the carrier for an effect or an idea, for something to communicate something. That is the most important part if you want to work as an illustrator. If you want to be an artist, or to draw, it is a different concept.

I think having a balance of commercial and self-directed work is very important. It is comparable to a business, where research is very important. You need to do research, which is the self-initiated work, to profile yourself as somebody doing exciting visions, realising exciting perspectives. On the other hand you have to get the money, so you need good commercial examples in your portfolio.