

DESIGN
a personal brand

DENISE ANDERSON

STAND

BUILD
a killer portfolio

OUT

FIND
a great design job

16. MANAGE YOUR STAND-OUT CAREER

Sharing personal career stories to inspire others.

On a recent class trip to New York, my portfolio students visited four RBSD alums who are successfully employed at Saatchi & Saatchi Wellness. When I asked the graduates and a room full of Saatchi personnel about the lessons they could impart to students, one person answered, “Do something purposeful.” Another said, “Stay passionate,” while a third responded, “Learn as much as you can.” In other words, their messages varied.

Over the course of your career, you will be given a lot of advice. Listen to it all. One day, a tidbit of wisdom will come back to you and resonate to your very core. You will find your mantra to live by, and you will have wisdom to share with others.

I have two bits of advice to share. First, do what you love most, and money will follow. Find a purpose (or calling) to wake up with each day and give meaning to why you are doing what you do. For several years now, I have kept a fortune cookie fortune taped to my monitor that reads, “Pleasant experiences make life delightful. Painful experiences lead to growth.” It reminds me that some days may not be pretty, but the process of learning will take me to a better place. Living a purposeful life will bring happiness and personal satisfaction. Be mindful; not every day includes balloons and cake, just like a “perfect” job is not always a party. When you make life decisions that are true

to who you are, though, you’ll find that the lows are shorter and highs last longer.

My second piece of advice is to trust your instincts. Rely on your gut when it comes to choosing an idea, picking a color, or hiring a designer. Instinct is your best friend, the entity that would help you make the right choices if you got stuck on a desert island together. Your instinct is a beacon in a storm, a full-bodied cabernet paired with a piece of dark chocolate (I’m projecting again), and a hug when you need it. When you nurture and develop your instinct, it will always be there for you.

In this chapter, I’ve asked people I know well or who I have met in my professional journey to share guidance with you. Each one has taught me something, mostly because I was open to listening and learning from their knowledge and experience. Some are not creatives *per se*, but their advice

is universal, and designers should look to the world—not just the design industry—for inspiration. Be open to what they’ve experienced, and find something to inspire you in what they have to say. They may offer a bit of advice that stays with you through your life and carries you through to the greatness you hope to achieve. Keep listening. You may meet someone along the way, when you are open to the message, whose insights become part of your core. And don’t dismiss a project, meeting, or situation that does not go as well as you hoped, because the outcome—learning something—can give you far more than a new piece for your portfolio.

Every stage of your life has brilliance, and as you get older and your experiences add up, you’ll find that sharing what you know with others is simply joyful, just as the people in this chapter discovered by sharing with you.

Ria Venturina

“Release your inner child, and love what you do.”

It’s going to be just fine after you graduate. Everything will come easy for you. You’ll land your dream job, start living in a big city, and your pay—oh man, your pay! Okay, this will happen for some, but it may not happen for you, at least not right away. Read on if you’re still a few steps short of “standing out” (pun definitely intended).

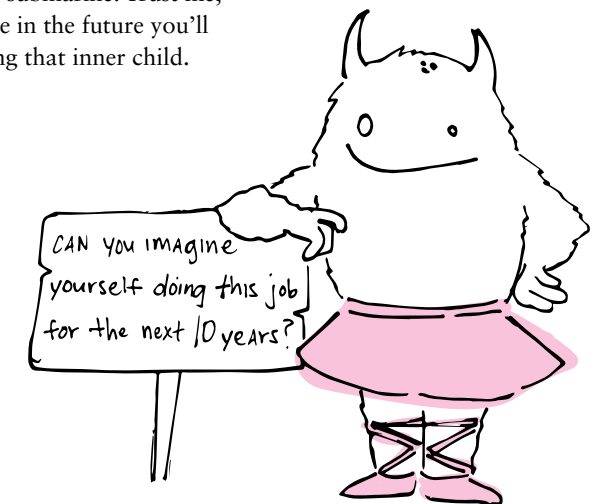
First, ask yourself this question: can you see yourself working in your field of study for the next 10 years? Interviewers who look at your portfolio can see the difference between work with passion and work with *meh*. My passion for advertising and design helped me stand out from my peers. Before I embraced that, figuring out what I wanted to be was a constant struggle. When I finally imagined myself with a long career in advertising, my work blossomed. According to *Business Insider*, people spend an average of 90,000 hours at

work during their lifetime. Considering we only have that one lifespan, we should be using our time wisely. (Netflix, of course, is an exception.)

Second, let your inner child out. The inner child who holds your imagination can help you think outside the box. In the working world, I learned that most designers can be replaced. The irreplaceable ones are those who can think. Conceptual thinkers are one-of-a-kind and can see the big picture. They have a secret power that can make sense of abstract thoughts. Advertising feeds off of imagination and innovation because it lives in an abstract world. It’s the perfect planet for an abstract thinker. Let your inner child play. Let her (or him!) create a monster wearing a tutu in a submarine. Trust me, somewhere in the future you’ll be thanking that inner child.

Finally, be confident in everything you do. Walk into every interview like you already have the job. You have worked hard to create something that represents you; it’s an honor to show off your talent to potential employers. They make time to hear what you have to say, so say it proudly. Confidence can also create opportunities to enhance your skill and networking abilities. You will stand out when you create a “can do anything” presence among your team members, yourself, and—who knows?—maybe even the CEO of Google.

Ria Venturina is an art director at Saatchi & Saatchi Wellness. See riaventurina.com.



Robin Landa

“To be nimble, become a T-shaped creative thinker.”

Employers want to hire nimble thinkers, people who are not only content experts but who also are agile in adapting to new technology and new directions in their fields. Employers and clients call upon creative professionals to quickly conceive and execute grand ideas and to react nimbly to rapid changes in industries, technology, and business sectors. Generating viable ideas in the digital age presents new challenges for all creative professionals.

Designers need to be empathetic, interdisciplinary thinkers working across media. They must fully understand what each specific media channel can do and how each can be utilized to deliver an engaging brand experience, contributing an integral element of the brand narrative. Many art directors, graphic designers, and creative directors face the new challenge of creating relevant, original content for brands, causes, and organizations. Unique content in the form of films, stories, digital

utilities, interactive games, or other forms of entertainment for online platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter, as well as live events, must give people a story to tell, one that engages them enough to share.

To face these new challenges:

- Cultivate your creative thinking and prepare your imagination; and
- Become a design expert with additional knowledge gained by keen interest in a broad range of subjects.

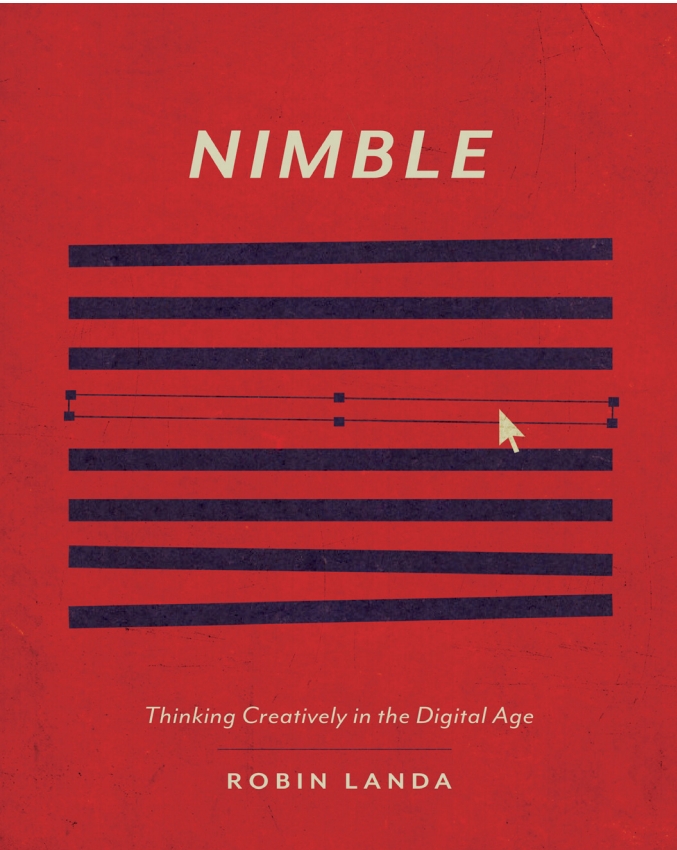
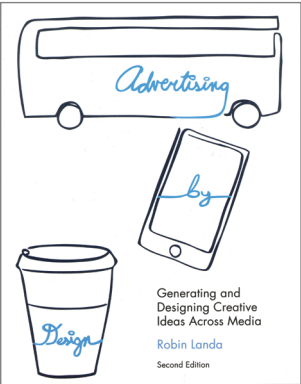
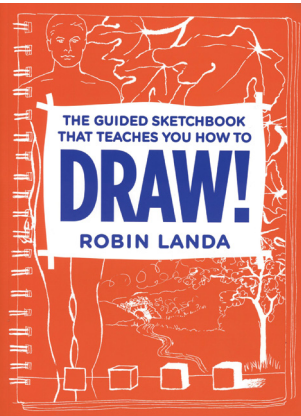
Learn to view graphic design, branding, or advertising problems by thinking of them as content creation rather than artifact creation. Address any assignment with the frame: This is the very first graphic design or advertising solution; there are no exemplars, no models. To do this, you must have an open mindset—you must set aside the closed conventions of what design, branding, or advertising is supposed to be. You strive to make a brand social and create original content that people will find engaging, relevant, or beneficial. Ask: Is the idea flexible? Is it entertaining? Is it informative? Does it have value? Is it true? Is it true for others? Will it positively impact society? Does the idea inspire content that people will share? How will the idea manifest and function for the capabilities of specific channels and platforms?

The motto of this mindset is: *Entertain. Inform. Be useful. Do good.*

Prepare with studies in the liberal arts, art history, and design criticism. Become a T-shaped creative—a content expert with additional knowledge in a broad range of subjects. The vertical bar of the T represents expertise and skills in one’s field of study and practice; the horizontal bar of the T represents knowledge in areas other than one’s own, interest in other disciplines and subject matter, depth and breadth in one’s thinking as well as the capacity to collaborate across fields with other experts.

Rapid technological changes have altered the nature of work, human behavior, and what creatives need to be able to do. Keep David Ogilvy’s wise advice in mind: “If you want to be interesting, be interested.”

Robin Landa is the author of 23 books, including Nimble: Thinking Creatively in the Digital Age. She is a distinguished professor at the Robert Busch School of Design, Michael Graves College, Kean University. See robinlandabooks.com.



Cesar Rubin

“Listen, watch, and stay open.”

If I were to have a conversation with my younger self about my future, I would tell myself five things:

1. Listen to your gut.

It’s not enough to just hear what is actually being said; you have to read the subtext “between the lines” and hear the message that isn’t being stated outright.

2. Observe people.

Walk around New York City, or any big city, and when you see people on their way somewhere, reading something, or talking on their phone, make up stories about their lives and experiences.

3. Watch the classic movies.

Ideas and solutions appear in the most unexpected places. Devour what fuels your creativity—and what doesn’t.

4. Stay open to criticism and trying new things, even when it makes you uncomfortable.

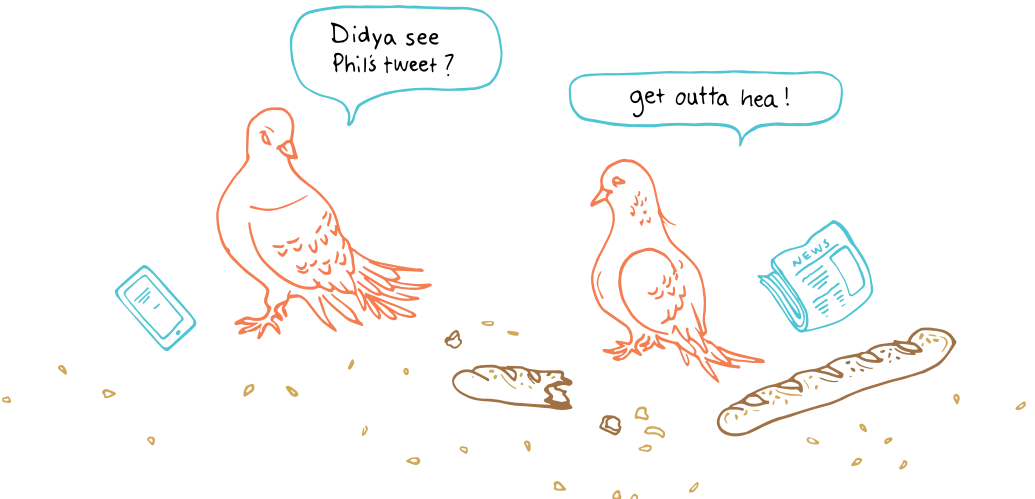
Taking on challenges and working outside of your comfort zone will bring out the best in you.

5. “No” doesn’t exist.

Everything speaks to us; you just need to be open, listen, and see things that aren’t there. As creatives, it’s our job to be visionaries and to create the things we want to happen.

All of your successes will happen because you never gave up. You will make people around you better and empower them to feel ownership. You will learn that when your team grows, so do you.

Cesar Rubin is a freelance creative director. See cargocollective.com/cesarrubin.



Alan Robbins

“Keep passion at the center of your choices.”

Early on I knew a simple fact about myself: I love making things. The process of coming up with new ideas, working them out step by step, paying attention to the strengths and weaknesses of materials, seeing new things emerge in the world—all of it has been a life-long passion. It was only later that I discovered that design is an actual profession. The beauty of being a designer is that you can build a career around this passion.

It almost doesn’t matter what I am doing as long as I feel creative about it and that I am making something new; that accounts for the zigzag nature of my career. I have worked as an art director at an ad agency developing campaigns for companies large and small; as a creative director at a marketing

company developing branding for a variety of clients; and as a freelance designer for many companies in the toy and game industry, inventing board, card, text, and digital games. I have been a professor for 25 years, developing new courses and trying to pass on my passion to create things to my students. At the same time, I have authored over 35 books—mysteries, short stories, and numerous essays about creativity, design, and technology.

See what I mean by zigzag?

Job titles and project goals can change, but the basic passion remains. Putting words together to tell stories; shapes and colors to create graphics; or parts and pieces to make games is all design to me, that delicious creative process involved in making dreams real.

My advice to anyone asking about life as a designer is this: no matter what you do or which path you take, straight or crooked, the trick to success is keeping your passion—for creativity, for making new things, for helping people, whatever it is—at the center of your choices. Money and prestige are fine, but they are also transient. Enthusiasm keeps you going in the long term.

Even if you zig or zag down your career path, you never get lost when passion is at your core, because you are always doing what you feel you are meant to do.

Alan Robbins is a professor at the Robert Busch School of Design, Michael Graves College, Kean University. See alanrobbins.com.



Paula Bosco

“The road to a stand-out career begins with honest evaluation.”

As an industry expert with nearly 20 years of regulatory legal and compliance experience in the financial services sector, I have come to learn that building a stand-out career is not something that just happens; it requires deep thought, hard work, and a level of dedication that is consistent yet flexible. It doesn't happen overnight, but rather is achieved through a series of experiences that define—and continually redefine—who you are, as both an individual and a professional.

The road to a stand-out career also requires a high degree of honesty—with yourself as well as with others. At its most basic level, that honesty starts with a truthful evaluation of your strengths, weaknesses, goals, desired work environment, etc. However, at some point, that honesty must evolve to include an evaluation of other considerations that may not be so obvious when you're starting out as a young professional. For instance, what are your core values and beliefs? Will the career choices you make regarding prospective employers/clients, location, and work projects be consistent with those values and beliefs? If there is a disconnect, will it be temporary or permanent? Will you be able to work, thrive, and stand out in the face

“A CAREER WITHOUT PASSION IS LIKE A CAR WITHOUT FUEL: YOU WON'T GET VERY FAR.”

of that inconsistency? Similarly, what sacrifices—personal, creative or otherwise—are you willing to make and at what cost? It's hard to keep building a stand-out career when you no longer remember the reasons for the choices you've made or when you lack control over the things that make you truly happy.

Finally, understanding that your responses to these questions will (and should) change over time is paramount, as is your willingness to ask yourself new questions that are undoubtedly shaped by your growing body of experience.

Although it's almost impossible to build a stand-out career without mastering the basics, there is one additional ingredient that is most important: passion. I once read that a career without passion is like a car without fuel: you won't get very far. And you certainly will not stand out.

Passion involves:

Thoughtfulness. Are you doing what you love?

Hard work. Are you willing and able to keep doing it and to make sacrifices along the way?

Dedication. Are you committed to your process, your brand, and your goals, and to developing the requisite skills and knowledge to be successful?

Honesty. Are you being truthful with yourself?

Passion requires a willingness to take risks—not the reckless kind that can lead to undesired consequences, such as a loss of credibility or brand diminution, but rather the kind of risk that forces you to think and act outside of your comfort zone. Passion also requires an understanding—and acceptance—of the fact that you may (and, at some point, will) experience failure. How else will you be able to define and keep redefining your core values and other non-negotiable aspects of your professional life? Once you become honest about your level of passion, you will be in a much better position to build a fulfilling and lasting career—one that truly stands out.

Paula Bosco, MBA, JD, is the president of the Bosco Group. See bosco-group.com.

Ron Badum

“Arm yourself with the right resources and tools.”

As a creative director in advertising and marketing for more than 30 years, I have found that the best way to stand out from the competition is to be armed with the right resources and the right tools. Without these two elements, any designer can get lost in a competitive crowd.

First and foremost for designers is the quality of their network. A well-established pool of multidisciplinary professionals is essential and makes it possible to call upon any variation of skill sets required for any particular project. Throughout their entire careers, outstanding creative people continually maintain

and nurture positive relationships with talented and respected individuals from a multitude of industry specialties.

The second element that successful designers have in their arsenal is a basic but essential tool: their portfolio of work. You should always treat your portfolio like it's a living, breathing entity that needs your attention. Keep it current and fresh, delete anything you are not proud of, and make sure it represents your latest and best projects. The most successful

designers always have their best thinking ready to show at a moment's notice. With a well-designed and up-to-date website, you'll always be ready to show and talk about your work.

Do an outstanding job of maintaining these two elements, and your career will reward your efforts.

Ron Badum is creative director at Badum Creative Group. See badumcreativegroup.com.



Joseph Serrani

“Sweat the small stuff.”

It's your job to sweat the small stuff, to become an invaluable asset that your peers and superiors can rely on. It's not about being a doormat but about earning the reputation that when you work on something, it's going to be looked at, cared for, and well-executed, and

that the people you work with actually like working with you. This is very important when you start out, especially in graphic design and advertising. Both fields are small enough that you can and will see some of the same people you work with now again later on in your

career. So, it's really important that people like your partnership. Honestly, your work can be amazing, but if no one wants to work with you, you won't be working.

Joseph Serrani is an art director at Saatchi & Saatchi Wellness. See dapperjoe.com.

Jim Burns

“Build a strong foundation as a problem solver.”

If someone takes guitar lessons because he wants to be a fantastic player, it's unlikely that he would head into his second lesson and tell the instructor, “Oh, I've already done that. You covered it last week.” Yet my design students sometimes react to an assignment by saying, “We already covered that drawing technique!” or “I already did enough sketches for last week!” What they're really telling me is that they're not putting forth the effort required to master their craft.

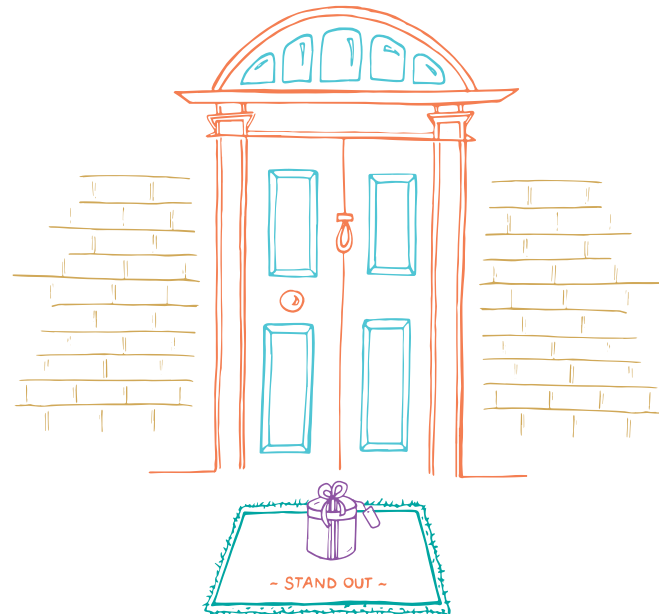
People who become great begin by establishing a foundation and reinforcing it through practice. They pick up their sketchbook, guitar, or whatever it is that they're learning, and they keep at it until they can draw or play like it's their second language. When you have a strong foundation, you can build a better house. If it's a mess, you'll never be able to put your structure together.

In my time as an adjunct instructor, I have focused on giving students the base knowledge and design-thinking skill sets that form a strong base.

For example, I teach perspective drawing differently than some of my peers: my approach is to give students a pencil and an eraser—no rulers. I don't have them follow guides. (I'm not saying there's anything wrong with drafting and similar pursuits, but that's not the focus I want to accentuate.) I do it because I want my students to think of paper as another tool. They can crumple it up, toss it over their shoulder, or rip it up and start over. My lesson is to make them realize that, together, their pencil and brain are way more powerful than a triangle, ruler, or any other tool they're using.

Sometimes, students will tell me that they're struggling, that they just don't “get it.” My advice is this: make sure you understand the foundation of what you're learning. Practice even when it seems pointless and repetitive. Don't worry about where you're going. Someday you'll put it all together, and that's where you become valuable. It's what will make you an awesome problem solver, and better problem solvers make better designers.

Jim Burns is vice president of product design and development at EastPoint Sports, an adjunct instructor at the RBSD, and a freelance designer. See jpbdesign.com.



Dave Fleming

“Know your goals and build relationships.”

Over the course of my career, I have done lots of different things: I have been an entrepreneur, a salesperson, and a manager. I have been hired for almost every job I have ever applied for, and I've hired and fired many people, from counter help to management.

What I have experienced myself and observed in my most successful employees is this: to be successful, you have to know what you want from your career and where you want to be in the years to come. You have to set goals, and you have to write them down. Know them. Refer to them often. Work to achieve them. Your goals will change as your life changes, so you'll have to update them from time to time to get where you want to be. Your goals are all about you and what you want out of life. You'll only get there by moving forward on the path you lay out for yourself and by being positive and alert. It's not easy—lots of things will pop up to slow you down or make you settle.

With your goals in mind, and some skills and talent, you are ready to get started. Everyone has different reasons for wanting or needing a job—money,

location, hours, and social interaction top most lists. When you are called in to interview for the job you want, show up on time, look the part, and ask questions in addition to answering them. A good interviewer will engage you, but you can't count on that when it's your one shot at the job you want. You have to find out what the employer is really looking for. With this knowledge, you can show and wow them with what you bring to the table. The questions you ask will help plug you into what the employer needs. Help them see how you can fill the position with the best person for the job—you. Remember, it is all about the employer and how you can help them. Have a good game plan going in.

Don't take a job that doesn't fit into your goals or life, unless you need the money. If you do take a job for money, work it hard. Change it if you can, but if you can't, do a great job where you are, and use it to get your next job. Never burn bridges—you will want the

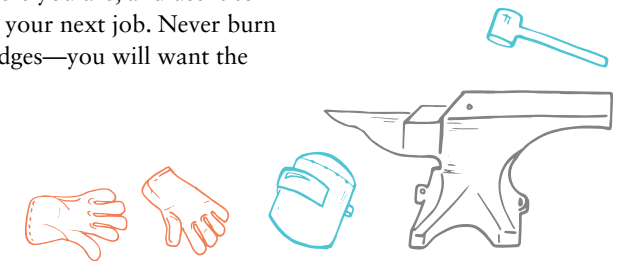
recommendation, and you may want to go back someday or do future projects with your former colleagues.

Once you're in a job, set up and get going. Have fun, enjoy the work, and form lasting relationships with the people in your industry. It will pay off big down the road. Always get better at what you do, keep learning, and stay up to date. Your employer will want results. It will be up to you to deliver what they want and on time.

Remember: if you have the talent, build connections, and keep your goals in mind, and you are willing to take chances when they come along, your career will be a ride to remember.

Have fun, make money, and be happy doing what you want to be doing.

Dave Fleming is an entrepreneur, salesperson, and manager.



Kristin Leu

“Leave your ego at the door, work hard, and pitch in.”

As a fine arts major, I selected graphic design because it is creative and artistic. I learned about design’s ability to interpret the meaning of content and tell a story visually. After I received my BFA, I worked as a graphic designer, art director, creative director, and business owner. In these roles, I discovered that design is a powerful tool to help solve problems and create change.

In order to fully understand design’s value, I continued my education and received a master’s degree in design management, which helped me bridge the gap between design and business. I learned design strategy, design thinking, and the “bigger picture” of design: good design has the ability to solve problems, educate, build awareness, save time and resources, increase productivity and revenue, and create sustainable change.



Throughout my education and career, I’ve worked with various teams: in-house, in design firms and advertising agencies, as a volunteer, and as an entrepreneur. While each workplace has variations in company culture and product offerings, there are a few common points to practice for a successful, fulfilling career:

Solve a problem. Good design is not enough. Remember that your clients are coming to you to solve a problem. Demonstrate how your design solves their problem, and tell your clients’ stories in a visually engaging and creative way.

Practice your presentation skills. It’s important to articulate the concepts and thinking behind your designs. You will be presenting to colleagues, clients, and prospects throughout your entire career.

Design every project to your best ability. Do not cut corners. Embrace the detail work and the production. Care about the entire process from concept to completion, and make sure it reflects your abilities and work ethic.

Collaborate, brainstorm, and be a team player. Leave your ego at the door, work hard, and pitch in wherever you’re needed. Go above your job description, beneath your title, and beyond the project requirements to help your team succeed.

Enjoy the people you work with. Partner with colleagues in design and other disciplines who inspire you. Designers work long hours, so surround yourself with people you enjoy and whose work and principles you admire.

Share ideas and share the credit. There are a million good ideas out there, but it’s the implementation that determines an idea’s success. Collaborate with others, and you will achieve greater, more rewarding results.

Kristin Leu is principal and creative director at Leu Design. See leudesign.com.



Jennifer Bohanan

“Pick your battles and trust the process.”

As a creative working in a commercial enterprise, you’re in an interesting position. On one hand, you’re called upon to eagerly generate fresh ideas and innovative approaches, often under tight deadlines and with vague objectives. On the other, you’re subjected to an ongoing stream of input, opinions, and, yes, criticism from a lot of different people—your supervisors, colleagues, clients, and the vendors you do business with. Some will have helpful things to tell you; others may have no idea what they’re talking about. You’ll have to find ways to respond to—and work effectively with—everyone, and that can be a real challenge, especially when you’re emotionally invested in what you’re doing.

When you put a lot of yourself into a project, as designers (and writers!) tend to do, it’s easy to get defensive when you feel that your work is under attack. And it can be frustrating, because despite your tremendous effort and the irrefutable logic behind every decision you’ve made, someone is inevitably going to ask you—or direct you—to change something. And you may have to make the change, whether you agree with it or not.

Until now, you’ve exercised your creative talents in a positive and encouraging environment.

Your friends and family are almost always impressed at your talent and commitment. Your instructors and mentors give you helpful suggestions about how to improve your work, which you can use or toss aside. You’ve had the autonomy to choose what you’d like to work on and where you’d like your focus to be.

That all changes in a business environment, where priorities compete, opinions clash, clients call the shots, and there’s real revenue on the line. There’s no room in that mix for ego.

When you find yourself feeling frustrated and vulnerable, resist the temptation to let your feelings get the better of you. It’s a waste of everyone’s time. Make it a point to develop a thick skin, put your ego aside, and really listen. Look beyond the source (“The boss’s son said what? Isn’t he still in high school!?”) and try to understand how that different perspective fits into your total understanding. And always remember that it’s not about you and your creative genius; it’s about producing the best possible outcome given the parameters of that project.

The time will come when you’ll believe something strongly, and you’ll choose to stand up for

that idea. If you haven’t spent the last few weeks, months, or years resisting others’ input on everything and you’ve established yourself as an open, collaborative member of the team, there’s a good chance that you’ve earned the respect you need to make your point and, quite possibly, change a perspective that differs from yours.

The path to a successful project is often filled with bumps and curves. At times it can feel like you’re never going to get to where you need to be. But invite criticism, input, and feedback anyway. In my experience, by the time all those perspectives and opinions are considered and assimilated (even if you winced when you heard them), the outcome is infinitely better than anyone, including you, might have achieved alone. You’ll get there. You just have to trust the process.

Jennifer Bohanan is a freelance writer and editor. See wordsmatter.com.

