

CAREER

29 TIPS FOR YOUNG DESIGNERS

Too bad there's not a handbook for making the shift from design student to design professional. To make that transition easier, Doug Bartow, principal of id29, offers 29 things he thinks all new designers need to know.

“Free fonts from the internet are crap, I will not use them.” Keep saying that.

Interacting with students and young designers has always been a fulfilling endeavor for all the working professionals in our studio, one that has kept alive the notion that design education is a lifelong experience. Fostering design thinking through mentoring relationships at the local level is particularly exciting, as we get to see the designers we've helped nurture go on to fabulous careers in a variety of creative fields.

We regularly invite design students to tour our studio (in Troy, NY), and we participate in local student portfolio reviews and exhibitions; our involvement is a team effort.

Many of the questions and concerns young designers share today are the same we had as graduating students looking to make our mark in the professional world, with only a résumé and portfolio of student projects to get our collective feet in the door. There's nothing different in the design industry today that makes getting—and nailing—that initial interview or client pitch any easier.

Throughout the years, I've collected these questions and have tried answering many of them as an ongoing personal project. Here are 29 of my thoughts on how to approach and interact with our culture as a young designer, in no particular order.

1. SWEAT THE DETAILS

You are a professional communicator; act like one. Carefully edit everything you publish: résumés, social media, e-mail, blog posts, letters, text messages, everything. Get a copy of “The Chicago Manual of Style” and keep it handy. Most potential employers and clients don't appreciate text shorthand, so don't use it. They won't be ROTFL, and you will end up SOL.

2. PLAY NICE

People you work with and for will make your blood boil from time to time. Whenever possible, be a pro and take the high road. Avoid burning bridges, as people change jobs more often than they did a generation ago. Your paths may cross again in a much different situation, and having a good working history together will make rehiring you easy. Apply this to your online persona as well. Anonymous jabs are petty—be better than that.

3. DON'T FEAR TYPE; BECOME ITS MASTER

Often, being a good typographer means not making the simple mistakes. To accomplish this, you'll need a working knowledge of classical typography. Go get one. “The Elements of Typographic Style” by Robert Bringhurst, “Thinking With Type” by Ellen Lupton and “Grid Systems in Graphic Design” by Josef Müller-Brockmann are cover-to-cover must-reads. Repeat after me: “Free fonts from the internet are crap, I will not use them.” Keep saying that.

4. DEFINE YOUR AUDIENCE

Who are you speaking to and what is the objective? If you can't definitively answer both of these questions about a project you're about to start working on, go back to the drawing board. Graphic design is simply a plan that visually articulates a message. Make sure you have the message and its intended viewer sorted out before you start making. Communicate with purpose—don't just make eye candy.

5. BE YOURSELF

Be confident in yourself as an author, designer, pho-

tographer, creative. Don't work in a particular personal style. Rather, develop a personal approach to your creative work.

Your commissioned work should never be about you, but it can certainly reveal your hand as the designer. As your work becomes more well-known, you will get hired for exactly that. For your personal work, don't be afraid to tell your story. No one else is going to do it for you.

6. LEARN TO SAY 'NO'

Some of your best design business decisions will ultimately be saying "no" to clients or projects. Unfortunately, it usually takes a few disasters to gain the experience to know when to walk away from an impending train wreck.

Carefully measure the upsides of any project—creative control of your design work, long-term relationship-building and gross billing—versus the potential downsides—the devaluation of the creative process, being treated like a "vendor" and ongoing scope creep (where the volume of what you're expected to deliver keeps expanding, while the schedule and budget don't).

7. COLLECT AND SHARE EVERYTHING

Find and save relevant and interesting things and pass them along to your friends, co-workers, followers and clients. Use the web and social media to share your own photos and work, as well as the work of others you find engaging.

Be funny, serious, irreverent, businesslike, self-promotional, curatorial, whatever—just be yourself. For everyday inspiration, surround your workplace with the design ephemera you collect (see No. 5).

8. BE A DESIGN AUTHOR

Develop ideas. Write them down, edit them, share them and elicit a response. Poof! You're a design author. Read design blogs and participate in the discussions. Have an opinion. If you find yourself spending hours a week contributing to other designers' blogs, consider starting your own. The cost and effort for startup are minimal, and the opportunities are diverse.

9. BUILD YOUR BOOK

One piece of advice I give young designers looking to fill out their portfolios is to find the best local arts organization with the worst visual brand identity or website and make a trade. They get some great design work, and you get creative control and real-world projects in your book that other potential clients will recognize.

10. CLEAN UP YOUR ACT

Manage your online profiles carefully and be sure to keep all your listings accurate, consistent and (mostly) professional. You can count on co-workers, potential employers and clients to Google you, so make sure what they find won't be too incriminating and sink your chances for that new job or project. Employers read social media posts, too—especially ones that include their proper names—so use common sense.



11. RESEARCH (AND DESTROY)

You'll never know as much about your clients' businesses as they do, but part of our job as designers is to try. Learn as much as you possibly can at the inception of a project about your client's business space, their goals, their competition and their history. Dedicate a half- or full-day download session, ask a lot of questions, and then shut up and listen.

12. OBSERVE TRENDS (THEN AVOID THEM)

Keep current on the state of our industry by reading books, magazines and blogs, and attending conferences. RSS feeds will allow you to quickly skim design- and culture-related content. Avoid design annuals as a source of inspiration, as they're a record of what's already been done. Study the work of others to understand it, not to duplicate it.

13. DEFEND YOURSELF

One of the biggest benefits of a formal design education is the lessons learned in the crit room defending your work in front of your instructor and peers. If you can articulate your ideas and design process in that hostile environment, learning to do the same in client meetings usually comes easy (see No. 21).

14. THE PAPER MATTERS

Contrary to what you might read on the blogosphere, print is not dead. The beauty and tactility of a well-printed piece on quality paper cannot be appreciated or replicated on a screen, tablet or mobile device. Paper manufacturers, merchants and printers are doing a terrific job helping designers make sustainable

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paper choices to minimize the impact on our environment. Become well-versed with the Forest Stewardship Council certification program, and use this knowledge to choose your papers wisely. Clients are demanding it (see No. 28).

15. CONTENT IS STILL KING

Technically, Elvis is still the king, but for the sake of this argument, let's put an emphasis on the message, and consider design as a plan for delivering it. The most effective and memorable visual communication almost always has the right mix of form and content, regardless of medium. Good design can engage a viewer, but interesting content will keep them reading, and thinking, past the headline.

16. REJECT PERSONAL STYLE

Picasso had his Blue and Rose Periods, Georgia O'Keeffe obsessed over flowers and animal bones. The difference between them and you? They were artists solving their own personal communication problems. We are designers, primarily tasked with solving the communication problems of others. Using one singular style or direction for multiple clients or projects will rarely be successful and, in retrospect, will look one-dimensional (see No. 11).

17. SAY NO TO SPEC WORK

Speculative work, or spec work, is a request by a potential client for uncompensated creative and design work at the inception of a project. Avoid this like the plague—it's a devaluation of the entire design process and marginalizes our efforts as a whole. AIGA.org has great resources for dealing with spec work, including a sample letter that you can personalize and send to clients explaining why their request is unappreciated (see No. 19).

18. BECOME INDISPENSABLE

What are you really good at? Contrast that to the skill sets that could help you advance at the workplace. Could your studio benefit from having an in-house photographer, web programmer, video editor or screen printer? Follow your bliss and get the additional training you need to expand your talents and, ultimately, your role at work. Now, does the studio come to a grinding halt when you're home sick for a day? Congrats. You're indispensable.

19. JOIN AIGA

Founded in 1914 in New York City, AIGA is the professional association for design, representing more than 21,000 professionals, educators and students with 65 local chapters and 200+ student groups. AIGA supports our efforts at the chapter and national levels through the exchange of design ideas and information, research, innovative programming and as a source of inspiration. If you're missing that sense of design community you had in school now that you're in the professional world, AIGA will help reconnect you for life.

20. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Build personal relationships with everyone you work

with, not just your clients. Get to know your delivery people, paper merchants, printer reps, local politicians and business leaders. Attend Chamber of Commerce events, network and meet people. Get on people's radar screens—they will be impressed with your well-designed business cards that prominently feature your website address.

21. SEEK CRITICISM, ACCEPT PRAISE

As a designer, listening to your ideas being questioned and your hard work being ripped apart isn't usually very pleasant. However painful, though, constructive criticism of your design work is the most effective way to grow as a visual communicator. Remember this when you leave the crit rooms of design school for the boardrooms of the corporate world. Build a network of friends, co-workers and mentors you can use to collect feedback on your work. Online sites (heavy with anonymous commentary) are not an acceptable substitute for this discourse.

22. NEVER COMPROMISE

Once you've built strong relationships with everyone you work with (see No. 20), strategically use them to get what you want. Convince your clients to use the offset printers or web developers you know that value design and will actively work with you on the final quality of your project. We work too hard as designers to accept compromise at any stage of a job, especially when it can usually be avoided with proactive planning. Timelines that detail every step of a project and outline responsibilities for everyone involved are required to accomplish this.

23. KNOW YOUR HISTORY

Learn as much as you possibly can about the history of graphic design—its movements, terminology and important figures. Understanding design's cultural past will help you design in the present and future. Study typefaces and their designers, and share with your clients the significance and history of the particular typefaces you've chosen for their projects. In addition to being a go-to design resource, this knowledge will help position you as a trusted adviser moving forward.

24. VALUE YOUR WORK

A common mistake designers make early in their careers is undervaluing their work in the marketplace. The best design jobs aren't always awarded to the low bidder—even a client with the smallest budget often values work experience and compatibility over price. Set an hourly rate for your services, and take a close look at the number of hours a job will take to accomplish, including revisions. Your estimate is simply your rate multiplied by the hours. Make sure you have a firm understanding of the entire scope of work you're providing an estimate for. Trade? Sure, but don't make a habit of it—this is your livelihood, not a hobby.

25. MAKE MISTAKES

Take a measured break from your comfort zone and experiment with an approach you've never tried before. Force yourself to take chances with form: Use a

different technique or medium with text and image to create work you're unfamiliar and uncomfortable with. Save and display your best piece as a reminder to think differently.

26. KEEP A SKETCHBOOK

You don't need to be prolific at drawing to benefit from keeping a small book in your bag or back pocket. Ideas tend to arrive at the strangest times, and being able to record them on the spot will help you remember them later. When you fill a book, date, number and shelve it. Soon your bookcase will be a library of your best thoughts and ideas.

27. REMEMBER THAT YOUR MAC IS A TOOL

Twenty years ago, many people in our industry were sure that desktop publishing would mark the end of professional graphic design as we knew it. They confused the convenience of new technology with the skill and passion required to design with it. Take a good look at your design methodology and the role technology plays in your work. Can you select "Shut Down" and still be an effective visual communicator? Practice that.

28. RESPECT THE ENVIRONMENT

Make the everyday effort to create a positive environmental impact by integrating sustainable alternatives in your work. Start small by identifying the things you can do in your studio to save energy and resources, and build from there. Present a digital slideshow rather

than traditional color output spray-mounted to mat board. Get creative with your consumables by investing in reusable kitchenware and cloth towels in place of disposable plastic and paper products. Consider adopting the Designer's Accord (www.designersaccord.org)—a global collection of designers, educators and businesspeople working together to impact the environment through positive social change.

29. TEACH OTHERS

Regardless of your experience, get involved with mentoring younger designers—or students who may be interested in design as a potential career path. It doesn't require developing a curriculum to get involved. Find a local AIGA chapter, design program or arts center and volunteer some of your time. Participate in local student portfolio reviews, and share your knowledge and expertise with aspiring designers. You'll find the experience rewarding for everyone involved. **HOW**

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