

Design Business Secrets Exposed

By Gino Orlandi



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About the Author

Hello, my name is Gino Orlandi and I am a freelance designer and on-line marketing expert. I have been freelancing from home ever since I took my first Photoshop class, over six years ago.

From the beginning, I knew that I would be more comfortable working from home, and I made it a priority to actualize this goal. I achieved my dream, and this eBook will help you!

My passion for design and my interest in helping others has inspired me to create this invaluable resource to teach others how to start a home graphic or web design business. The benefits of working from home are endless, and designers are fortunate to have this option.

My goal is to help you plot a course to a better life of working from home as a graphic or web designer. Are you ready?



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Foreword

Most of us would love to win the lottery and spend all of our time in the comfort of our homes doing the things we most enjoy. Sadly, most of us need to work in order to pay our bills. Those of us trapped in the daily grind can't help but notice that working involves a wide variety of truly unpleasant aspects!

Social conditions can turn any office situation into a daytime drama. Ignorant bosses yell at us about things they don't understand and then ask us to work late covering up for their own mistakes. Co-workers can be annoying, interfering, unpleasant, arrogant, obnoxious, boring, leachy, time-bandits and gossipers, and difficult to work with—just to list a few possibilities.

Traveling to and from your job everyday is an inconvenience at best, and a nightmare at worst. Sadly, every single person in the world seems to be on the road at exactly the same time that you're traveling to and from work—turning a 10-minute drive into 40 minutes of pure frustration.

Or worse, the only place where you can find affordable housing is two hours away from your office—condemning you to a life spent living in your car. An office job marries you to your vehicle and makes you dread those inevitable mornings when it's time to feed the tank—AGAIN!

Yes, they pay you at your office job, but they don't give you any credit for how much of your money is wasted on their special needs. Working in an office means paying lots of money each year for new office clothes. Most likely you have to “invest” in dry cleaning your fancy work-clothes, picking them up and planning what to wear every single day.

In short, there are so many annoying things about working—but there's good news! Most of the annoying things about working are caused by working FOR SOMEONE ELSE! Working from home and being your own boss solves all of these problems! Never deal with an annoying co-worker again—you have the option to work alone or only to work with trusted colleagues. Never deal with an ignorant boss again!

You are your own boss—deciding which types of projects you accept and determining how and when you will complete them! Never set foot outside your house again! (Well—only if that's what you want . . .) Or how about never setting an ALARM CLOCK again?

Are you ready to free yourself from drudgery and get out of the rut? Stop asking yourself questions like, “Is this what my life is really supposed to be about?” Transitioning into self-employment is a big move, but it's ABSOLUTELY worth it! If you're dedicated to becoming your own boss and working from home as a designer, your life WILL change for the BETTER!

Chapter 1

Getting Started With Working From Home

1. Identifying Your Target Audience & Niche

Before you can successfully launch yourself into working from home, you need to establish the framework for your business. Your first step is to identify your target audience. Why? Well, as you set up your business, so many of the decisions that you need to make are dependent on the type of client that you want to attract!

Your Target Audience

Are you going to accept businesses and clients of all sizes? Large or small—each end of this spectrum has its own pros and cons. Are small clients the best choice for you? The disadvantage of this choice is that smaller businesses generally have smaller budgets. They may not be able to afford as much as larger corporations and the projects themselves are likely to be on a smaller scale. However, as an advantage, this will make them more manageable.

Working on smaller projects will mean that you need to have a larger number of clients in order to meet your income needs, but there are some silver linings. Smaller clients with smaller projects make it easier for you to work alone, meaning you won't need to collaborate or divide the income with your assistants. It also allows you to preserve more of your independence—you are more able to pick and choose the clients and jobs that you enjoy the most, rather than being asked to devote all of your time and attention to a larger client.

If you prefer the relative security and simplicity of larger projects, you may relish working with larger clients. Larger companies or corporations often have large-scale needs—resulting in more work and more pay for you! On the downside, larger clients can be more demanding. This introduces the possibility that the workload is too large for you to manage alone, and you may need to delegate work to additional freelancers. Take some time and consider whether this appeals to you.

There is also a possibility that you may feel that a large corporation takes the place of your boss—essentially “owning” you, and negating some of the benefits of being self-employed. Another downside may be the risk of having “all your eggs in one basket” if your income depends mostly on the relationship with a single client. Still, with great risk comes great reward! If a single large client can satisfy all your financial needs, the benefits will greatly outweigh any inconveniences! In the end, your preferences should dictate your target audience. Once you've identified your target audience, learn as much as possible about these businesses or organizations. Research your future clients—know who they are, what they are doing, and why they are doing it!

Your Niche

Do you plan to target a specific group or niche? This is an excellent consideration for several reasons. Targeting a niche will give you a strong advantage. If you are closely tied to the inner workings of a specific industry, it will help you win new clients quickly and easily. Current clients will recommend your work to colleagues and affiliates.

Your inside knowledge will help you locate new contacts, projects, and clients through word of mouth, trade magazines, or conferences. You'll know how to specifically tailor your proposals toward businesses in your area of expertise. It will be easy for you to understand their needs and prove that you're adept at performing the type of work that they require.

An added benefit of selecting a niche is that it can give you the opportunity to combine your designing with a second interest or aptitude. Your design skills can be applied to nearly any field or industry, including: bands and music, art, fashion, restaurants, travel, automobiles, geographic preferences, environmental issues, politics, and charitable causes—there's almost no end to the possibilities for specialization! Not only can it give you a chance to work within a field that you particularly enjoy, but specialization also makes you more competitive. It assists

in your search engine optimization efforts (discussed in later chapters) and gives you an edge over your rivals.

If you are going to create designs and websites for a niche, be sure you know what's commonly included in these types of projects. For example, if you choose a music niche, bands often want to have galleries, a blog, links to social profiles, and want to sell merchandise and music on their sites.

- Research current design styles and trends that relate to your niche. See what other designers are creating.
- Always keep your niche in mind. Make sure the copy and design of your portfolio, business website, your brand identity, marketing materials, and marketing message reflect and appeal to this group.
- Your niche can also affect your price range. For example, small bands will often have less money than large corporations. Understanding the typical budget in your niche will help you establish competitive prices for your services.

In the end, what niche you pick is up to you, or you can design for all niches! The possibilities are endless, but just keep in mind that specializing can be a great way to focus your efforts on becoming top-dog in an industry and allow you to easily make a name for yourself in today's super competitive market.

Planning for Search Engine Optimization

If you plan on using search engine optimization (SEO) as a marketing method, it's a good idea to begin planning for that aspect now. Your business niche, target audience, and keywords will be the foundation for important business decisions such as establishing your brand, determining your prices, gauging your competition, building your website, and creating your marketing plan. To begin, think about what search terms (or keywords) your target audience might be using to find designers. Use the [Google Keyword Tool](#) to search the keywords that seem to apply to you—the keywords for which you would like to rank. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there searches being done for the niche or industry in which you are interested? (e.g.: band website design, band posters, band logo design)
- Who ranks for the keywords that you want to target in the search engines?
- How hard would it be to beat them in the rankings?
- Can you compete with the quality of their work and pricing?
- How long have they been in business and how old is their website?

These answers will give you valuable insight that you will use to compete in your field of specialization.

2. Freelancing vs. Starting a Business

One of the first decisions facing you as you embark on your venture into self-employment will be to choose whether to work as a freelancer or whether to start your own business. As with all of these decisions, there are positives and negatives to both ends of the spectrum. Understanding the differences between these situations will help you to determine which is closer to your own preferences. Where should you begin? Ask yourself the following questions as you determine whether to work freelance or to start a business:

- How much do you enjoy working with others?
- Do you dream of being “the boss” or just “your own boss?”
- How much do you value mobility and having a wide variety of options?

Freelancing

Take some time and consider your personal aspirations for the scale of your production. If you prefer to fly solo—doing projects single-handedly, partnering with other professionals only occasionally as projects necessitate—then you are probably a natural freelancer. As another simple starting point, freelancers tend to use their own name. If you are more suited to freelancing, this may feel like a natural decision for you. An interest in simplicity may indicate a preference toward this independent path.

Being a freelancer keeps you more mobile. Without need for a set office location, your options stay open. For example, you have the freedom to easily switch to becoming an in-house designer or running a larger home based business with employees. If you are a freelancer who chooses to work almost entirely alone, you avoid the chores of managing others—this can mean arranging and organizing schedules, training, resolving questions, negotiating and compromising, tracking payments to your collaborators, and it will complicate your tax situation. Again, if these tasks do not appeal to you, freelance may be your best choice.

Starting a Business

In comparison, establishing a true business could end up making you more money and put you in a management role. If you dream of having your work from home grow into a large-scale operation with a staff of employees, then a business is the obvious choice for you. Consider the following questions:

- Do you see yourself at the helm of your own company?
- Would you eventually like to have your own office, but also the ability to work from home whenever you want?
- Are you happy delegating work and leading a team?
- Are you interested in limitless potential for income and expansion?

If these questions seem to lead in a direction that appeals to you, then establishing a business is probably your best option. Knowing this information about your preferences early on will give you the opportunity to create a suitable framework—allowing you to advance as much as you’d like when the chances for expansion and development arise.

Other Options

Are there other options? Of course! I have presented the choice between business owner and freelancer as black or white, however, there is a great deal of gray area between the situations. It is entirely possible to be a business of one, and equally possible to be a freelancer who manages dozens of projects and oversees a crew of collaborators. The choice is yours!

Finally, a partnership might be a consideration if you find an individual with whom you work especially well. This is an excellent choice if you feel there's a gap in your skills or interests and you know of someone who has strength in this area. For example, maybe you want to design but would prefer to turn the business details over to a partner. Perhaps you know someone who excels in presentations and generating contracts, bringing in more work and allowing you to focus on designing. You may also have someone with whom you are comfortable working side-by-side and you'd like to divide your workload evenly with this colleague.

Whatever reasons you have for contemplating a partnership, and despite the exact workload division you may choose, you should thoroughly investigate several legal aspects before beginning a partnership. Consider the following questions:

- If your partner has legal or financial issues, will your part of the business become compromised?
- If your partner has legal or financial issues, could your personal assets become involved?
- How easy will it be to dissolve your partnership if you find that it isn't working out?
- If your business partner passed away, who would gain control of that portion of the business?
- Could you find yourself in a position where you'd be expected to "buy out" your partner—essentially paying for sole rights to a business that you'd begun?

A business partnership with a valued colleague can be a tremendously successful and rewarding experience. However, make sure that you and your partner have a signed legal contract that spells out the answers for both of you, in case of unforeseen events.

Just remember, nothing is set in stone. You can always change your business model in the future and adapt as situations present themselves. It's just good business to know all the options ahead of time and spend a while thinking about which path would fit you best. A great number of your future business decisions will be determined by your selection of a freelance or business model.

3. Establishing Your Brand

Your name, brand message, and appearance are critically important for the success of your venture. These aspects help distinguish and identify your business. They are the “first impression” between you and your client. In many cases, your name and appearance may be “make or break” in getting you work. Although it may seem intimidating, this is the ultimate opportunity to showcase your personal style and set yourself apart from your competition!

Choosing Your Name

Once you have picked a business model, choosing a name will be your next step. This is an exciting milestone in your path to working from home! Your name is the frontline in all of your promotion—it defines and describes your venture. You can use your own name, an independent business name, or use your own name as the foundation for a business name—“John Doe Designs,” for example.

Using your own name is by far the easiest choice, since it is already in place on your credit reports, taxes, resume, mailing address, forms of identification, and about a billion other spots. Your own name is already in action, describing you and any work that you have performed. As an added advantage, it is unlikely that this name will change—giving you permanence while allowing for flexibility.

Using your own name for your business venture will allow you the freedom to change your freelance work in any way that you choose, without having to worry that your business name might not convey in a new direction. No need to worry about creating the perfect business name, researching competition, or dealing with copyrights involving your potential name—using your own name is delightfully simple.

However, despite the extra work involved in establishing and formalizing a business name, there are hidden benefits to having a separate business name. For one, many clients feel more comfortable working with a business rather than a freelance individual. A business name can seem more professional, no matter whether you have 20 people in your “office” or just one!

Businesses usually create a unique name, and a well-chosen business name speaks for itself—increasing traffic, being eye-catching, and generating respect and interest. I would suggest that your name should be distinctive—you don’t want to be confused with other businesses, or worse, become involved in legal disputes over a name. Nothing could be worse than getting your business enterprise off the ground only to discover that you have to worry about changing your name.

If you select a custom business name, be sure to register that name at your local county clerk. The county clerk can check the availability of a name, register it for you and give you the right to do business under that name. You may also want to speak with a business lawyer about trademarking and incorporating—the legal foundations of your business. Finally, as soon as you decide on a business name, you should check to see if that name is available as a domain name! It can be difficult to obtain an ideal domain name, so there’s no time to waste. You may also want to consider grabbing variations of your business name, such as different extensions (.net, .com, .biz) and your personal name as a domain name, just for future use or if you change your mind.

Identifying Your Brand Message

In general, freelancers tend to use their own name and to create a brand out of their own individual personality. Businesses tend to create a name and build a brand around it. Whichever direction you’ve chosen, you should take some time and write out a mission statement similar to those used by non-profit organizations. Your mission statement will help you establish your

brand and could translate into a captivating business motto. Your brand message should reinforce the identity of your business. Consider the following questions while you think about your brand message:

- What image do you want to project?
- Who is your target audience?
- How can you appeal to your target audience?
- What is your brand style?

Different styles convey different images and emotions, and there are endless possibilities in the brand that you develop! You could present your business brand as very corporate, efficient, and professional. You might prefer a fun and easy-going image. A quirky brand is very distinctive and can distinguish you from the crowd if that suits your personality—designers are creative people and you should feel you can show off your skills as you construct your brand. Although we tend to think of logos, mottos, and brands as belonging exclusively to the corporate world, they are equally important for small businesses and freelancers.

Defining Your Appearance

Once you've decided on your name and made the critical decisions about your brand, it's time to tie the elements together into your appearance. Your appearance is defined by a number of characteristics, including: your name, your logo, the colors you use, images, and the fonts you choose, just to name a few things. Here is a list of the main considerations regarding your business appearance:

- Make sure that your brand is consistent all around.
- Create your own brand usage guidelines.
- Decide how and when your logo should be used.
- Select a uniform color palette.
- Make sure all print and web designs for your business are consistent with your brand's style.
- Make sure all your marketing materials tie together.
- Make sure your brand's style appeals to your target audience and conveys your message.

As soon as these decisions are made, you'll be ready when it's time to order business cards, letterhead, promotional materials, to set up your website, and to begin your marketing campaigns. You'll be on your way to starting your own business working from home!

4. Creating Goals

As a self-employed designer, calendars and lists are going to become your new best friends. Obviously you are familiar with this technology and have been using it in some form for most of your life. Certainly you have methods that you already use to keep track of deadlines and to manage projects. However, in order to launch your business and succeed, you're going to need to list and plan out your short and long-term goals, as well as the time-frame in which you'd like to accomplish them. Let the list-making begin!

Long-Term Goals

As I said, you've doubtless been using lists and calendars to keep track of your project deadlines. Of course you need to know when to complete certain tasks and stages for your projects, but your long and short-term goals are much more than just your project deadlines! During this phase of your business planning, you should view the evolution of your business in the same way that you view the completion of a design project. Consider the following long-term questions as they pertain to your business:

- What is the end product that you'd like to achieve?
- What is your ideal work situation or environment?
- Do you strive for a particular income level?
- Is there a scale that you hope to attain in the amount of business that you do?
- Do you have a set number of projects or clients you want to achieve by a certain timeframe?

Although it's ideal to have your long-term goals clearly established as soon as possible, long-term goals may be modified along the way. Your long-term plans may change or evolve as you move along your path.

Short-Term Goals

Short-term goals may be even more important in this stage of your planning since they are essential to getting your business started. Consider the following questions as you establish your short-term business goals:

- Are there new projects you hope to attain?
- Are there projects you would like to add to your portfolio?
- Are there specific clients you want to secure?
- Are you looking to get new client testimonials?
- How long will you take to establish your business before you feel you're ready for clients?
- When do you want your first project to begin?
- Would it help to establish a timeline of the stages needed before you launch your business?

When choosing both your short-term and long-term goals, make sure your goals are achievable and realistic. Your ideal goals should help you to improve your business one step at a time, while keeping you on the track toward your ideal situation. Keeping your goals realistic will help you stay positive and motivated. Your short-term goals can be as simple as completing tasks—things that are easy to do, but keep you advancing. Being successful at working from home will mean that you will need to become adept at moving forward, whether you have projects or if you need to get projects. Good goal-setting will ensure that you are regularly advancing.

Organizing Your Goals

You may choose an old-fashioned notepad, a calendar, a bulletin board, or you might have trusted software that keeps your thoughts and plans organized. Whichever method you prefer,

keep your goals and tasks visible! You'll stay on top of your game when you force yourself to see your target everyday! Remember the adage, "out of sight, out of mind?" Don't let this apply to your business objectives! Not only are you more likely to attain the goals you set for yourself and your business when they are posted in plain sight, but seeing them and reading them every day will help you internalize them. The more you hear your goals in your mind, the greater your chances of succeeding at them!

However you choose to organize your goals, make sure that you have a way to celebrate when they are achieved. Nothing beats the feeling of crossing something off your list! Be sure that you allow yourself that sense of accomplishment, even if a physical list isn't part of your organizational method. Every goal achieved is a step toward your dream.

5. Preparing for the Transition

Working from home will bring you more freedom than you've ever had in your work environment and schedule. The downside to this freedom is that it can be easy to lose momentum and become distracted. Knowing what to expect and setting some guidelines for yourself (and others) is the best way to handle these small hurdles and ensure that you get the very best out of your new situation—and out of yourself!

Managing Your Time

Effective time management is one of the most essential aspects for a work at home designer. The phrase “time is money” is especially true when you're self-employed. You need to maximize your productivity so you can generate business, keep work coming in, and earn as much money as possible.

Organization will be critical once you get off the ground. Managing multiple projects, clients, and collaborators can be a challenge. Outline what tasks will be most important for you to handle. Break tasks and projects down hour by hour—for example: x amount of hours per day working on projects, x hours for marketing, x hours on customer service, et cetera.

You might consider using productivity software. [Basecamp](#) is a good program to help you manage multiple design projects and clients; use it to network with colleagues, see how a project should be divided, manage your timeline, share files, assign tasks, and centralize feedback. Think of it as a virtual whiteboard. Try and familiarize yourself with your intended organizational method as soon as possible—this will ensure that it's already in place ready to assist you when your schedule starts to heat up!

Minimizing Your Distractions

Minimizing distractions will help ensure your productivity. Depending on your living arrangements and social circle, you may need to work a little at protecting your solitude. It's worth it to get a little protective of your work time and space—don't be afraid to set up a “security system.” It's possible that you might be besieged by curious or bored well-wishers coming to keep you “company.” They might mean well by encouraging you to abandon your work—it's best to set some rules. Many people don't understand that working from home is still work! Family and friends can easily interrupt your production and undermine your resolve if you don't set some boundaries. Keep distractions like TV, phone calls, and visitors to a minimum. You might consider setting up regular working hours and letting friends know that you're not available during these times.

If you enjoy flexibility and reject schedules, here are some time-protective measures that you might adopt. Consider a “do not disturb” sign for your office door. Soundproofing your office or using noise-canceling headphones can be a bonus if there are distractions happening immediately outside of your office. Use caller ID to help you distinguish between business calls and social calls. Don't feel bad about gently excluding others from your office area and work time—your business is incredibly important. Train companions to view your work time with respect.

As you work these next weeks or months on establishing yourself as a work at home designer, keep in mind that you're preparing yourself for a transition. Remind yourself of all the excellent reasons that motivate you to pursue this path. Begin to see yourself succeeding at taking your skills and profiting from them—from the comfort of your home! Remember the short and long-term goals you've set.

Keep them visible! Staying focused on these goals will help you know exactly what needs to be done to start yourself working from home.

6. Setting up Your New Home Office

Setting up your new home office may be one of the most enjoyable stages of your preparation! If you've been working in a cubicle, then you know how de-humanizing and impersonal a work environment can be—fluorescent lighting, cavernous ceilings, fewer windows than your average fallout shelter, grey industrial carpeting, grey desktops, and grey upholstered padded cubicle barriers. (These are padded to protect your employer from liability when you start beating your head against the walls.) Now's your big chance to rebel against those years of repression! The purpose of this book is to enable you to work from home—this lesson will focus on helping you create your ideal work environment, nestled in the comfort of your own home! Ask yourself the following questions as you begin making plans for your office set-up:

- Where do you do your best work?
- Do you enjoy working outside?
- Do you need to spread work out over a wide surface or are you happiest curled up in an armchair?
- Do you prefer a peaceful environment that relaxes you and helps you to focus, or do you like a vibrant atmosphere that energizes you?
- At what time of the day are you most productive?
- What equipment and furniture do you need?
- Do you want a brightly colored office or something more neutral and Zen?

Office Furniture

At the very least, you'll need your computer, a seat, a workspace, and some form of organization system. Let's begin with these! There will be those of you who would like to work on a laptop outside or to work in a comfy chair. I don't blame you at all—it sounds idyllic. If that's you, then you may not need to invest in a tremendous amount of office furniture. Perhaps there's already a place at home that you've been longing to utilize! For these nomadic types, your organizational hub will be very important. Being desk-free is a luxury that working from home will allow, but you'll need to work extra hard at keeping paperwork under control.

Most of you will choose to be desk-oriented. If this is your style, use this opportunity to set yourself up exactly as you prefer! Decide if you like a sprawling workspace on which to spread out, or whether you're more of a cubby person who likes drawers and shelves. Do you like to have things close and contained, or are you happiest working over a large space on a grand scale?

Although it's tempting, I don't recommend going cheap on a desk! This is one of the most important factors determining the functionality of your home office—take some time and be sure you get something that really meets your needs. If you settle for something less, it will be a constant source of irritation and you'll need to replace it anyway.

In the organizational department, you'll probably want a filing system and some form of visual organizer. A file cabinet is an excellent option—there's a good reason why they're so popular and prevalent. You want plenty of room to sort materials, whether they're examples of completed projects, your promotional materials, client information, details about pending contracts, or your tax receipts! Go as large as you can manage—you'll want to have enough space to expand. Places like the [Container Store](#) and [Ikea](#) can help you design custom workspaces and cabinet systems. You can even build a pull out office inside a closet!

There'll be a lot of paperwork that you're happy to store away out of sight, but you'll also have things that need to be out at eye level—calendars, thumbnails, notices, upcoming events, ideas, and inspirations are all examples of things that should be in the open. White boards, chalkboards, bulletin boards, or large calendars are all options. Not only is there paint that turns any surface into a [chalkboard](#), there's also a [magnetic](#) paint additive that turns any surface into a magnet board, creating endless organizational opportunities!

Ergonomics

The position of your body as you work is one of the deciding factors in your comfort and your productivity. You want to waste as little time as possible in stretching and fidgeting. Don't save money on office furniture only to spend it on massages and carpal tunnel treatments! Be very careful about the height of your desk and the position of your keyboard. Gel-filled wrist supports might be a valuable addition to your workspace.

Invest in an ultra-comfortable office chair that gives you superior back support—you will be spending a lot of time in front of the computer! Your ideal chair should adjust to suit your needs. Be sure it keeps you comfortable while keeping you alert—very few of us do our best work while we're napping!

Electronics

Let's talk about electronics! I recommend the [Apple iMac desktop](#) 27-inch model, but you may need something more powerful, or even a PC that is running Windows. The Mac book pro laptop is a great option for people who want to be more mobile while still having a powerful computer for design work. You'll need a camera for taking photos of your work and client work. Your camera can also be used to take your own stock photography or photos of textures for projects. A good quality printer is a necessity!

Whichever electronics you feel most comfortable using, spend some time determining the ideal layout for your computer and its components. Ideally, all of your equipment should be within easy reach. Remember those days when you had to hike out of your cubicle to the communal printer? Don't get sentimental and try and recreate that for the sake of old times! If it's not possible to have all your electronics at arm's reach, prioritize your desktop real estate. Make sure that the gadgets you use most often are closest. Accessories that play supporting roles can be moved to peripheral areas.

Office Décor

Personalizing is so much fun! Happily, the sky's the limit in what you can do to your own home office—no need to ask your “boss” for permission to bring in that lava lamp! I recommend setting up an entire room dedicated solely as an office—this will feel more business-like and will allow you to focus on work. However, not everyone has a spare room. A well-planned corner desk or work area can be just as effective. In the end, go with whatever is most efficient and comfortable for you! Your office should be a place where you love to go! Consider the following elements as you design your perfect work environment:

- Lighting—do you prefer light and bright or dim and relaxing?
- Paint colors—do you like bright and airy, dark and moody, or lively and vibrant?
- Windows, fresh air and views—use 'em if you've got 'em!
- Aromatherapy—a wonderful option for home. Again, scents can convey relaxation or energy, and almost any mood in between. (No co-workers to complain about your patchouli!)
- Speakers and music options—at last, this is completely at your discretion!
- Flowers and greenery—nothing makes a space more comfortable and inviting.
- Desktop wallpaper—a quick option for instant personalization.
- Office accessories—staplers, paper clips, and file folders can be boring—or not!

There's no end to the amount of personality you can add to your home office—the more the better! You'll be spending a lot of time here—you have the chance to make this space into whatever you've always wanted!

If you are ready to design your new office, check out some of the resources below.

Furniture and Accessories

- [CB2](#)
- [Crate and Barrel](#)
- [Ikea](#)
- [West Elm](#)
- [Office Max](#)
- [Staples](#)

Computers and Electronics

- [Amazon](#)
- [Apple](#)
- [New Egg](#)
- [Tiger Direct](#)

Interior Design Blogs

- [Design Sponge](#)
- [Apartment Therapy](#)
- [decor8](#)
- [Inhabitat](#)

7. Getting and Learning the Software

If you currently work in design and understand all the ins and outs of Adobe software, then feel free to skip this lesson—although I will be mentioning some great resources at the end of this segment. It's always a good idea to brush up on your design skills whenever the opportunity arises—you never know what new trick could transform your design arsenal! And of course, if you're not familiar or confident with the software that graphic and web designers live and breathe, then keep reading—this lesson is for you!

Getting the Right Software

Although once upon a time, designing was done with pencils, stencils, and rulers, now design is nearly 100 percent digital! Occasionally, you might use traditional drawing or photography techniques, but you'll still be scanning and manipulating those images in the end—there's no escaping it! For many years, design has been dominated by Adobe. Adobe Photoshop, Dreamweaver, Illustrator, and InDesign are the industry standard for graphic and web designers! These four programs are available independently or in a variety of packages—Adobe's "Creative Suite." The Creative Suite comes in Standard, Premium, and Master levels that range in price from \$1,299 to \$2,599. The Creative Suites also have field focuses, such as "Design," "Web," and "Production."

The cost can raise eyebrows, but it's important to remember that even the Master level Creative Suite can be cheaper than a single college course—and the college course would require you to purchase the software anyway! However, if you are taking college courses (or are even still in high-school, for that matter), students can get a discount of up to 80 percent off the retail cost of the programs. (Adobe does have specific requirements for deciding who is eligible to receive the student discount—research before you purchase.) The bottom line—this software is an absolute necessity for anyone working at the professional level!

Photoshop

For 20 years now, Adobe Photoshop has been THE software that designers, photographers, and graphic artists have used to prepare images for publication. Photoshop allows you to import and organize your images, compiling your files easily and conveniently in a single location. Photoshop gives you nearly endless capabilities for editing and enhancing your digital images! Use it to improve the appearance of an image—refine, correct lens distortions, sharpen, or remove noise. Use it to add artistry to an image by adding grain, simulating the use of filters, painting, adding natural and realistic brush strokes, or creating composites. Photoshop is essential for retouching images as well as warping or stretching graphics, text, or image elements.

Adobe Photoshop CS5 retails for \$699. Adobe recommends the Photoshop CS5 Extended version for web designers, which retails for \$999 and is \$199 for students. (Please be aware that prices and policies can change.)

Dreamweaver

Dreamweaver is essential for web design. Nothing is better at helping your websites adhere to standards. You have the opportunity to design either visually or in code. Dreamweaver will help you ensure browser compatibility; view your pages one at a time, as a split screen, or layered over one another as you check their appearance on multiple browsers and operating systems.

Dreamweaver offers CSS-based starter pages, and will allow you to develop pages with content management systems. Integrate FLV videos quickly by adding them directly to your pages and so much more.

Dreamweaver CS5 retails for \$399. The educational discount brings it down to \$149.

Illustrator

Illustrator is the best way to create original artwork based on vector graphics. This software gives you the opportunity to recreate the appearance of traditional methods—brushstrokes, pen and pencil techniques, paint opacity, nearly anything imaginable—while creating your artwork with the vector mathematics that allow it to be duplicated, manipulated, printed, minimized, maximized, or proportionally altered with precision and perfection.

Illustrator contains applications for advanced typography and shape building. It has drawing enhancement features that will save you time and ensure symmetry and perfection. The software will guide you easily through various color gradients and color transparency. Nothing is better for perspective drawing!

Illustrator is a necessity for creating logos, branding, graphics for advertising and packaging, graphics for banners, interactive experiences, web pages, and web page layouts. If you create your own designs, images, or artwork, Adobe Illustrator is the professional option for moving those images into publication or production.

Illustrator CS5 retails for \$599; the cost for students is \$199.

InDesign

InDesign is a tool for creating publications in today's technologically rich world. Design and publish documents for print, online, or mobile devices. This software integrates with Illustrator and Photoshop and allows you to present and publish anywhere that your clients and customers will be.

InDesign offers you efficient printing and typographic precision, while giving you the ability to incorporate interactivity, animation, video and sound into your page layouts. Convert eBook files into compatibility with devices such as Amazon's "Kindle." InDesign is the final step in taking your engaging, interactive content into the real world of today's media options.

InDesign retails for \$699 and is discounted to \$199 for education customers.

Learning the Right Software

Learning the software takes time and is something that you must constantly practice. New tools and updates are always being added. Continually, there will be new design trends to master, new effects to create, and changes in web standards and usability. The programs are designed to be user-friendly and easy to maneuver; however, they are complicated since they must be versatile, flexible, and comprehensive enough to satisfy the needs of these creative fields. It takes a lot of work to truly understand and utilize the software's potential.

As far as expanding and enhancing your skills, doing client work is not enough. You should always be exploring in your free time. Try tutorials, read blogs, and stay up-to-date on the latest software developments and trends. Attend conferences if possible! Design publications and associations hold yearly conferences in both the graphic and web design fields—these are excellent opportunities for enhancing your skills, viewing trends, and networking.

Happily, it is entirely possible to become a self-taught designer! The field relies heavily on software and technology. Use the vast amount of resources available to help you get the skills you need, but don't be afraid to go to college for graphic or web design if you feel willing and able. If you can manage the time and money, I highly recommend getting a degree in your field of choice.

At the very least, try and take some classes online. Having a degree is important for working in-house and for your resume, but the experience you get from your teachers and classmates is even more valuable.

In the end, your portfolio is the most vital. A strong design portfolio and a little marketing can get you all the work you need. When clients are looking for designers online they aren't necessarily looking to see if you have a degree.

Top-notch performance speaks for itself!

Chapter 2

Setting Up Your Design Business

8. Establishing and Pricing Your Services

Before you accept a single project, you will need to have already decided what services you are willing to provide and how much you will charge for them. Nothing is more unprofessional than not knowing your own fees! Likewise, you should have an idea of what sort of projects you are willing to take on—that way, if a client asks about a particular type of project or responsibility, you know your preferences and are ready to answer them quickly and confidently.

Establishing Your Services

What type of services are you going to offer? The more you offer the more you can earn! The lines between online and offline design have blurred—there's a tremendous amount of overlap between graphic designers and web designers. Don't be afraid to try out some new territory! If you feel you get in over your head, you always have the option to bring in colleagues to help you move through any glitches or to help get larger projects completed.

Start off by making a list of services that you feel confident offering. If you are a web designer, you could start your list with HTML websites, PHP, and WordPress blogs. Graphic designers may start with logos, business cards, and posters. Once you have your initial list, try and think of other services you could offer. Research other design business websites, or ask friends and colleagues to try and help you expand your offerings.

If you prefer only sticking to a few services, that's fine as well; you will just need to focus hard on those few services and try and get more clients or higher paying projects. You may find that you perform extremely well in one service and build enough of a reputation to work steadily in that type of job alone. Just know you can always expand!

Every day, more and more opportunities are arising for designers. The WordPress explosion has opened up tons of new work for designers to work on blogs, and the more recent social media explosion has created a market for custom social profiles, such as twitter backgrounds, social media integration into websites, blogs, and much more. We are now seeing a boom in mobile applications and designs for gadgets, such as the iPhone and the iPad. If you can stay on top of what's happening in the marketing and technology world, you will be the first to know of emerging design business opportunities.

Don't be afraid to upsell these new services to your clients. They can only say no, and there's no harm in that. If you are doing a website for a client, ask them if they need a blog or custom social profile designs. Maybe they need web banners and avatars as well. There are plenty of things to design and code, and if you have a list of options handy, you won't forget to pitch them.

Another point to mention is that you don't have to bombard your client all at once with potential things they may need. You could start off doing the website and if the project goes well, you can pitch the client more ideas in a follow-up email or phone call. Try the following:

"Hey, it was a pleasure working with you on your website. I noticed you guys don't have a blog or social profiles yet. If you are interested, I could create and code a great custom WordPress blog for you, along with matching branded social profiles. I can also integrate everything together for easy updating. If you would like to talk more about this, I have some great ideas—so, just email me back or give me a ring. Thanks!"

Sometimes that's all it takes to get enough extra work to keep you going and going!

Pricing Your Services

One of the most important—and perhaps most difficult—aspects of running your own business is deciding on your pricing. Obviously, your first consideration is to know how much money you need or would like to earn. Your second consideration will be finding the right balance

between prices that give you enough compensation and prices that bring in business. If you undersell your competitors dramatically, it might bring in more business, but it's likely to leave you overworked and underpaid.

Your first step—if you haven't done this already—is to find out how much your competitors are charging. Try visiting BuyerZone.com as a starting point; this website is aimed at helping consumers get a handle on the price range of a particular service (based on geographic location). It gives a great overview of the high and low end bids and what services were included in that price.

You can also check out industry specific sites (like the AIGA) for information on how much designers are charging for services or earning on salary. This knowledge can make it easier to price your services. Lastly, ask colleagues how they charge for services and what they charge (if they don't mind telling you). Everyone's pricing will be different, especially because of varying skill levels and reputations. For instance, a famous graphic designer, with 10 years of experience working with major brands, can expect clients to pay a premium price based on the designer's experience and reputation. Know your skill level and be confident in your work and pricing. Test out different methods and play around with different prices until you find something that works. Just know that your prices can only go up, up, up as you gain more experience as a graphic or web designer.

If you decide to price yourself lower than your competition, be careful that you don't get yourself into a situation where you feel like you're working for peanuts—your self-employment is meant to be liberating for you. Although you may be a beginner, remember that you are providing valuable, quality work and deserve to be appropriately compensated!

After you've researched comparable fees in the field, you might consider taking inventory of your personal expenses. Ask yourself the following questions: [bullet consistency]

- How much money do you need to earn?
- How much are your monthly bills?
- How much profit would you like to make?
- How many projects do you feel you could comfortably complete in a given month?

These questions will help you balance your personal end of the financial equation. Decide how much you need to charge in order to live comfortably, and compare that with what other professionals are charging.

Upfront Pricing vs. Custom Quotes

Consider how you will present your prices. Are you going to list your prices menu-style, or will you have potential clients fill out a form on your site and contact you for pricing? In my opinion, custom quotes work best; you can gauge the client's needs and do the proper research first—presenting them with a tailored proposal. On the other hand, some clients like to act quickly and buy right away—these clients may prefer seeing packages and pricing up front. Both choices have benefits and downsides.

If you display all your pricing up front, you can get creative and offer packages (such as an identity package or website starter package). Packaged services and pricing can eliminate a lot of the hassle of negotiating specific terms and provisions for each client. Small businesses may be overwhelmed by the options and feel more comfortable selecting a package, which makes the decision-making process easier and less intimidating. On the downside of menu-style pricing, it can turn off clients with specific needs—losing you some business by making you appear inflexible or your services appear inadequate.

If you choose to do custom quotes, you have the benefit of upselling each contract. You can gauge the potential client's situation and offer them the best combination of services that they currently need, as well as offering suggestions for their needs in the immediate or long-term future. Custom quotes allow you to earn more and to secure a better relationship with your clients. To present the negatives, it takes a lot more work to customize quotes for each cli-

ent—work that may or may not materialize. You may also lose the potential clients that would like immediate pricing information—these individuals may simply move on, rather than wait for you to return their call.

Whether your pricing is done by the hour, as part of a package price, or as part of a customized package proposal, remember to be VERY specific about what services you offer and what the client will receive. For example, if you design a logo, you need to specify the number of initial concepts, the number of revision rounds, provide a time line, list any additional fees upfront, and illustrate what will happen if they don't like the logo at all. If you plan on doing web designs, identify all of the features and pages the client will need. Clearly state what your price includes, how much revisions will cost, the cost of additional pages, and whether you offer website maintenance or other long-term services.

You have an obligation to protect yourself, your reputation, and your peace of mind. Whatever projects you will complete, you (and the client) should know clearly what is expected and what end result you intend to achieve. You don't want to be in a situation where endless revisions triple your workload and eat away your profit.

Make sure you get paid for the work you perform, even if you end up with a client who is impossible to please! Keep this simple statement in mind at all times, "This is what I'm willing to do, and this is how much you will pay me for it."

9. Start-up Costs and Budgeting

It takes money to make money! Fortunately for web and graphic designers, it doesn't take too much money to get yourself started working from home, being your own boss! Still, how much is "not too much?" Let's take a detailed look at the start-up costs and budgeting as you begin your business venture.

You'll need to create a list of your current and future costs. If you completed your list of business goals, bring it out—that list will play a part in helping you determine your start-up costs. You'll also need to make a list of the immediate deficiencies that you have, either in your home office environment or with your hardware, software, and equipment. Evaluate your short-term and long-term marketing goals and determine what costs you'll have in that realm.

Here is a List of Some Potential Costs:

- Computer expense—purchase or upgrade, if necessary.
- Software expenses—Adobe Creative Suite or essential programs purchased individually.
- Additional equipment—camera, scanner, fax, or phone.
- Home office expenses—desk, chair, light fixtures, file cabinets and storage components.
- Communications—business phone line(s), business email, business listings.
- Website—domain name registration, web hosting.
- Printed business materials—business cards, letterhead, brochures.
- Portfolio expenses—printing, binding, photographing, purchasing a physical portfolio.
- Stock—photography, vector art, custom work.
- Business bank account—opening deposit, business checks.
- Legal fees—registration of business name, filing of partnership or corporate papers, registration for copyrights and trademarks.
- Cost of marketing campaign(s)—search engine optimization, ppc, local advertising, banner advertising, content creation.
- Health insurance (if you are not covered)
- Professional and trade organizations—fees, subscriptions, dues.
- Office supplies—paper, notepads, ink cartridges, pens, pencils—all that jazz.

If there's a single component that's necessary for your graphic or web design business start-up, it's your computer. Fortunately, you've already got that! (You would probably not be reading this without one.) Although there is a possibility that your computer is not ideal and you would prefer a new one, you can probably get started with what you've got. Upgrades are entirely possible later in the game when you've already gotten yourself off the ground. Most businesses upgrade their equipment every few years anyway—you can get started now with what you have and worry about top-of-the-line once you get established. If, for some reason, your computer really is an issue, then this will be one of your largest start-up costs—you won't be able to get your business started without an adequate computer. You will also need to decide between using a laptop or a desktop computer.

Personally, I use a desktop iMac from Apple. I love these computers and the operating system. I rarely travel and I work mostly from my office, so I choose to use a desktop rather than a similarly priced laptop. I prefer a desktop's larger screen and extra power. However, you may want to travel, work in a coffee shop, or have the freedom to be more mobile in general, so a laptop may be best for you. The choice is yours, but it's worthwhile to spend some time thinking about the right decision.

I already discussed the necessity of the Adobe Creative Suite and the pricing of this software. With the retail price of this software package ranging from \$1299 to \$2599, it's quite possible that this will be one of your largest start-up expenses! Almost every bit as essential as your computer—you simply won't be able to begin working without it.

The third largest factor in your start-up budget will probably be the set-up for your home office, and it's possible to spend a LOT of money in this area. If you've got the cash and want to "go to town" while decorating your dream office, you should feel entitled. This will be an important environment for you, and your success will depend on you feeling comfortable. Fortunately, if

your start-up funds are limited or you are naturally frugal, you can easily create a comfortable, functional work area with very little money—either using what you already have, or doing a little leg-work and finding things discounted or second-hand.

Sometimes, however, it's better to start off with the basics and hold off on making purchases until after you start making a profit. This way, you can reward yourself for achieving certain goals. For example, you could set a goal to make x amount of money next month—if you reach it, you can reward yourself with something new that you might need, like a printer or more comfortable office chair. This method can be great for motivation!

Budgeting

The way you plan and manage your budget will be a “make or break” factor in the success of your business. Definitely organize your expenses by wants or needs—with every choice you make, you should ask yourself if the purchase is essential for your freelance work. Depending on your personality type and financial situation, dealing only with essentials may streamline your start-up process! Not only will you save money, you'll give yourself the option of making less-important decisions later on, when you've got your business running.

Of course, you may also be in the enviable position of having ample financing for your start-up! If this is you, consider yourself lucky! You may be able to set yourself up nicely before you begin to take on jobs—although I might encourage you to refrain from spending every last cent; it's wise for freelancers to have a little stashed away in case there are dry times.

If you're starting out with almost no financial backing (don't feel bad, we've all been there), taking out a loan is always an option. If you are interested in borrowing, a small business loan will give you a couple of advantages. First, you'll be able to purchase everything you need or want upfront—giving yourself an ideal work situation from the start! Secondly, it will be easy for you to account for the payments and interest on your business loan—making things easy for your accounting and tax purposes. Finally, a loan can give you a financial cushion to help cover your personal expenses and act as a safety net while you get your business started!

On the downside, no debt should be entered into lightly. Consider your personal credit rating and debt ratio as you decide whether to apply for a loan. And naturally, a loan is a way to get yourself started and protect your personal finances; it should never be an excuse for a spending spree. Luckily, it's pretty cheap to start a home design business. You really don't need much more than the basics to get going. If you have a computer and software, you are already more than half-way there!

Again, before you get into things too much, create a physical budget for yourself. Outline everything you need and want, line by line, including how much they cost. You will also need to outline your recurring monthly expenses, such as web hosting, electric bills, health insurance, and so on. The lower you can keep your budget while working comfortably, the more money you will make each month. Follow your budget closely and track all your expenses so you make sure you don't exceed your monthly allowances.

Finally, remember to keep a record or receipt of every business expense you have. This way, you will already have a record of legitimate business expenses for when you or your tax accountant files your taxes. This is all a very important part of running a home design business.

10. Accounting Basics

This is going to become a critical aspect of your business! Even if you produce the most spectacular designs ever seen, your business can't survive if you can't control your cash flow! I strongly recommend money management software such as Quicken, moneyStrands, Microsoft Money, Intuit Cash Register, or QuickBooks. This type of software makes quick work of accounting by keeping track of your income and expenses, reminding you about upcoming bills, compiling tax-related information, and generating informative reports. If you already use something for your personal finance, check into the options that would help you track your business accounting—it's always helpful when you are already familiar with a product.

However, if you aren't set up with something yet, look for a product that is designed to handle the needs of a small business. Small business finance software may also help you create, print and mail invoices, and manage business contacts.

Bank Accounts

Although it will be possible for you to run your business without adding additional bank accounts, it may be a good idea to keep your business finances separate from your personal finances. A separate business checking account will keep all of your income and expenses clearly consolidated in one spot. It's a great policy to pay out profits to your personal account while keeping some extra overhead in your business account to cover expenses that will arise. A separate business account also looks and feels more professional.

On the other hand, it's just as easy to manage your business finances from within your personal accounts. This may be the best option for you and could save you money on business checks and other expenses. If you mix business and personal, just make sure to keep excellent records or you could be signing yourself up for the hassle of dividing your expenses, line by line, during tax time.

Accepting Payments

Now for the fun part! How will you accept the mountains of money about to come your way? PayPal, checks, and credit cards are the top methods that come to mind—each has its own downsides. The downsides of PayPal are that not everyone feels familiar with it quite yet, and you'll pay fees on each transaction (roughly 3% or less). Some people add the transaction fee on top of their payment, but this may offend some clients. Better to consider this expense in advance and factor it into your project costs, or just accept it and write it off on your taxes.

Another thing to consider with PayPal is that although your payment is instantaneous, it usually takes 3 days to transfer funds to your bank account. Nonetheless, PayPal is rapidly revolutionizing the world of finance—making it nearly effortless for you to accept instant payments on a website or by phone. They even have free invoicing that will email your bill complete with a “pay now” button. Your clients don't even need a PayPal account to pay you immediately from their bank account or with a credit card!

Checks have been the standard for about a hundred years now, and that's nice. Unfortunately, we are all aware that some checks are good and some are not, and there's no way to tell the difference until your bank sends you a little note (plus a bill for their fees). Another disadvantage of checks is that they usually come in the mail—assuming that they are even IN the mail. Sometimes they are supposed to be in the mail, but they are actually lying forgotten on a desk. Sadly, from time to time, you may meet a client that intentionally forgets to mail checks! (We'll discuss tactics for dealing with these issues later on.) However, despite the limitations, this is still one of the most common methods for making payments; with a few precautions and back-up plans, you'll be able to accommodate your clients while also insulating yourself from any potential problems.

As a third option, you can set yourself up to accept credit card payments. Again, this has advantages and disadvantages. Credit cards are used heavily amongst most of the population; some clients will be better able to afford your services or to hire you for larger projects if they can “buy now, pay later.” However, establishing your ability to accept Visa or MasterCard will take a little work and there will be fees on the transactions.

In order to establish your ability to accept credit cards, you would need to contact an acquirer (your bank, for instance), sign a few contracts, and purchase a card swipe machine. PayPal might still be the best option, since a client can finance payments from any account, including credit card accounts. After awhile, you'll get a feel for your clients' preferences and can add the options that are most convenient for them—and you!

Expenses

You can only maximize your profit when you control your expenses! You're not actually earning any money unless your income exceeds your expenditures—so pay close attention to what you're paying out. Establish a business budget and list your expenses in order of necessity. Remember that nifty work gadgets and frills reduce your taxes, but that's only because they've reduced your actual income!

Money management software will be invaluable at tracking your expenses—helping you know what regular payments are up-coming, ensuring that your business bills are paid on time, helping you stay on track with your business budget, and keeping track of your business expenses for tax purposes.

Employees

Having employees can expand your business, increase your production, and increase your potential; however, there is a lot to consider. At the simplest level, you can easily pay other freelancers. Write them a check or pay them through PayPal. Keep track of these payments for your tax purposes. If you pay an independent contractor more than \$600, then you'll need to issue them a 1099-MISC form in January of the following year, and you'll need their social security number. Read up on the requirements and forms so this doesn't catch you off-guard, because good business all starts with good accounting.

Taxes

It will be important for you to set up a tax plan as soon as possible. Before you accept your first payment as a self-employed business person, you should have an idea of how much of that is yours and how much you'll need to give to the IRS and to your state comptroller. The IRS has estimated tax calculators that will help you figure out how much you are likely to owe. I would suggest setting up a business tax savings account. Estimate your tax percentage rate—take that out of every check and stash it in your tax savings.

Keep detailed records of your business receipts. If you use money management software, pay special attention to its business features. It's infinitely easier to have your software keep track of business expenses and income—use the software primarily, but be sure to keep a file of actual hard-copy receipts. There are programs that allow you to scan in receipts and avoid the storage, but I think scanning sounds like more work than filing—an accordion folder works great.

Do you travel to meet clients? If so, you'll need detailed information on the use of your vehicle. Write down the beginning mileage now, before you start traveling. Some software can track mileage for you; you can also stay low-tech—keep a notebook in the car or write the mileage for each trip in your calendar. You have the option to itemize vehicle expenses such as oil changes, gas, and auto service and repair, but taking the federal standard deduction is much

easier. If you have a loan on your car, you might be able to write off a percent of the interest that you pay each year.

Do you have a home office? Be certain—the IRS is very particular about home office qualifications. One deciding factor is that the office is absolutely NOT used for any other purpose. If your home office truly qualifies, you'll be able to write off a percentage of your utilities, property taxes, and more. Keep records of this information.

When it's time to file your taxes, you'll be asked to list your business expenses by category. Money management software will give you the option to categorize your expenses and tag them as tax-related. General categories are fine (office supplies or advertising expense, for example) and tax preparation software will give you the option to add specialized categories for your deductions. As long as you have a good system that you can stick with, you'll be fine.

The IRS will expect you to file estimated taxes quarterly. If you were still stuck in the grind, you'd be paying a cut to them with every check. Paying quarterly gives the IRS the advantage of earning interest on your contributions. (I know, I know—try and feel good about your civic duty. Think of all those roads they build you!) Paying quarterly also benefits you by giving you the ability to keep tabs on the amount you owe.

You don't want to earn \$100,000 and live it up, only to discover you were supposed to have turned \$30,000 over to the feds. Better to address the issue in increments, one paycheck at a time, than to try and come up with a monstrous payout. I always recommend using a tax accountant; however, I know that some people prefer to file their own taxes, sparing themselves the expense of tax preparation fees.

11. Insurance Basics

If you are freelancing, you will need your own insurance. If you were back in the cubicle, there would be a secret network of corporate protection hanging around you—protecting your health, your property, your personal liability, and perhaps even paying compensation to your family in the event of your death. Once you're free from the box, it will be time to take some of that security into your own hands.

Health Insurance

Some of you may have health insurance coverage through a spouse, domestic partner, or even through your parents. This is excellent! However, I would recommend that you take a little time to evaluate the “worst case” scenarios—what would happen if that coverage disappeared?

If you know that you're cutting the umbilical cord of your health insurance when you sever ties with your corporate oppressors, it's time to begin research into independent health insurance coverage. Health insurance is regulated by state—most administrators are only authorized to operate in a particular region, so you'll need to see what's offered in your area.

There are several questions to consider as you shop for health insurance. First, do you have existing health concerns and routine medication, or are you a person who rarely ever goes to the doctor? If you visit doctors (and dentists and eye-care specialists) as little as possible, you may be able to opt for more basic coverage, or opt for higher deductibles in exchange for lower premiums. You'll be happier paying less in your annual costs and won't mind if occasional office visits and prescriptions cost more. You may even be able to find insurance that covers catastrophic health events only—such as accidents or hospital stays. If, on the other hand, you have some health issues involving regular prescriptions and frequent office (or hospital) visits, you will want to invest more money in your premiums since you already know you'll save yourself a bundle on out-of-pocket expenses.

Consider whether there's any likelihood of maternity and newborn costs in your future; not all health insurance plans cover pregnancy—it's best to know your level of coverage beforehand. Do you need coverage for dental and vision? Although it may seem like a lot of money at first, health, dental, and vision can easily save you tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars. There's really no way of knowing if a root canal or appendectomy might be in your future.

In all honesty, your options may be limited and your health insurance premiums may be high, depending on your particular needs. The Professional Association for Design (AIGA) has partnered with two health care administrators in order to offer its members the opportunity to secure health insurance coverage with the benefit of a group discount. Look into state-sponsored programs, and research whether health insurance is offered through any professional or personal organizations to which you belong. Shop around, and always consult with a trusted doctor before picking a health insurance plan.

Business Insurance

It may seem like there isn't much to insure in your business—you probably don't have employees, inventory, or a store front. You may already have homeowner's or renter's insurance and feel that you're covered. Be aware that you may not be as protected as you think. If you have an existing policy, it is wise to let your insurance agent know that you will be working from home—special considerations will arise from this situation. Home-based business owners should consider the following insurance options: contents insurance, general liability insurance, professional liability insurance, life insurance, disability insurance, and business interruption insurance.

Contents insurance covers the contents of a structure—if your dwelling burns down, (I know—this lesson is so full of happy thoughts!) contents insurance would pay for the replacement of your furniture, clothing, and possessions. Be sure the amount of your coverage is enough to replace the entirety of your home office and business equipment, in addition to the amount you would need to replace your personal belongings.

General liability insurance will pay for your legal costs, general damages, and any compensation due in the event that you are sued. For small businesses, this sort of policy usually protects you in cases involving bodily injury, property damage, personal injury, or advertising injury (where a client claims injury from slander or false advertising). General liability insurance will only cover the costs up to the limit on the policy.

Professional liability insurance (also called errors and omissions insurance) protects you from liability if you give a client advice that they believe leads them into loss. This is particularly important in the legal and financial investment fields, but may have applications for design.

We're probably all familiar with the existence and purpose of life insurance. It pays out a sum to surviving members of your family (or a named beneficiary) in the event that you die. Although it may seem like a no-brainer (sorry about the morbid pun here) that your business ends upon your death, take a little time to think about whether there would be business debts or business-ownership disagreements upon your demise. Life insurance can guarantee that family members are provided for and protected (a will isn't a bad idea either).

Disability insurance would cover your lost income if you were injured in a way that prevented you from working. Social security has all of us covered here, but you may want to consider whether you could live on how much the government would give you each month if you were to find yourself permanently or temporarily disabled.

Business interruption insurance would cover your lost revenue if something happened in your home office that interrupted your ability to work there. For example, if a flood or fire destroyed your home and your home office, contents insurance coverage would replace your personal and business belongings; however, business interruption insurance would replace the income that you would have made, but were unable to earn when your place of business was damaged or destroyed. Consider the possibilities and likelihoods here.

Check for small business insurance packages and business owners policies through your current insurers. Also look for group rates through professional organizations such as small business associations or your local chamber of commerce. Although it's incredibly tempting to save money by skipping insurance, we all know it's a gamble. Insurance is an investment in your health, financial security, and peace of mind!

Chapter 3

Creating Your Website

12. Your Domain Name and Web Hosting

In Chapter 1, we talked about picking a name. You might revisit this section as you choose your domain name. Whether you chose to use a distinctive business name or your own personal name for your business, it's a great idea to use your business name as your domain name. Not only does it increase your brand awareness, but it's simple and convenient.

Unfortunately, it may not be possible to use your business name as your domain name—the domain may already be taken! If you can't get your first choice, don't despair! This is an opportunity for you to think of something unique and catchy that can enhance the appeal of your business.

Selecting a Name

As a starting point, I suggest writing down 3-5 domain names with which you feel you could be happy. Once you've selected some possible domain names, you will need to shop around and see which names are available. Start with the domain you want the most. There are services, such as name.com, that can suggest available names. These services can offer similar alternatives to your preferred name, in the case that your first choice isn't available.

It can actually be a little difficult to find domain names nowadays because so many are taken, so try and register your domain name as quickly as possible! Don't be discouraged if it takes several tries before you find something that will work for you.

Domain names are very inexpensive. Generally, available domain names run between \$1.99 and \$9.99 for a year or more. Of course, if a really desirable domain name is already held, it may be available on the domain aftermarket. Names that are for sale this way may go to the highest bidder, for millions of dollars in some cases. Hopefully, you don't have your heart set on any pricey domain real estate, so this shouldn't affect your situation. If someone does hold the rights to a name that you strongly desire, you can always contact them about selling it to you—it never hurts to ask.

The most common domain name extension is .com. However, there are other choices, such as .biz, .info, .jobs, .name, .net, and .org—these options are all open and available for individuals and businesses. Two letter country-code domains are also an alternative (.us for the United States, .mx for Mexico, or .ca, for Canada, to name a few examples) and a local presence in that country may not even be required.

Despite the wide variety of top-level domains, I would recommend that you stick with .com, if possible. Users are so familiar with the .com extension—it's the most popular choice by far! It's so prevalent that you'll almost need to convince your visitors to remember any other choice.

You may also want to consider registering similar domains or variations of your business name, if you are worried about someone else using them. Assuming that you're searching for available names at an average price, it might be a good investment for you to register the names that are similar to yours, especially if that domain could become confusing or competitive later on.

Registering Your Domain

Personally, I use Godaddy.com to register domain names—it's a simple and easy choice. However, there are dozens of domain name registrars that can give you the rights to use a domain name. Network Solutions is an option for finding a domain name and registering it. Network Solutions is also responsible for the "Who.is" registration that links domain users to their domain names—useful in case you want to purchase the use of a particular name or would like to discover the party responsible for a site.

As another option, many web hosting companies offer free domain name registrations as a perk for using their web hosting services. For many users, it's nice to have this service bundled with web hosting—saving you a step or two as you set up your site.

Overall, your domain name is going to be with you for a long time. Switching your domain name later down the road will be an inconvenient and annoying hindrance to your business operation. If at all possible, make sure the domain you get is the one you will use for the long haul. Once you have your domain name, the next step is to get web hosting.

Web Hosting

Although web hosting may seem like an intimidating topic for many new webmasters, finding a hosting company is easier than you think. Happily, there is an abundance of great hosting plans that are perfect for small companies and their websites!

Although many people overpay, there are a lot of companies offering economical, basic shared web hosting plans that are ideal for beginning websites. Not surprisingly, shared hosting means that many individual websites share a host that provides system administration and takes care of common concerns such as security, maintenance, software, and technical support. Shared hosting is an inexpensive and convenient option for users with uncomplicated requirements.

Most shared hosting plans run from \$3-\$5 a month, and you can often find discounts if you're prepared to pay for a full year upfront. Shared hosting providers usually offer a wide range of useful services, including unlimited bandwidth, unlimited disk space, and unlimited email accounts. Most hosts include great features such as guaranteed 99.9% network uptime, visitor statistics and site traffic reporting, money-back guarantees, and 24/7 network monitoring.

Hosting companies should offer 24/7 account support and tech support through a variety of convenient methods. Many hosts provide a strong instructional and support community—supplying video tutorials, forums, blogs, and articles on nearly every aspect of website creation and maintenance. These sorts of resources can be extremely valuable as you begin a site and start to establish it on the web.

Many hosting companies offer free marketing credits for Google, Yahoo!, My Space, or Facebook; these offers can give you a great opportunity to start advertising your business website for free. As another incentive, some hosting companies offer free software; this can be another nice perk to help you select a host.

Hosting Upgrades

As your site grows, you may feel the need to upgrade to better hosting, such as VPS hosting or dedicated hosting. VPS stands for Virtual Private Server—a method of splitting a server. VPS hosting offers some advantages over shared hosting, most notably in providing independence from others sharing the server; it allows users to choose their own operating system and reboot independently. VPS is a nice compromise between independence and economy; it's much more cost-effective than using dedicated hosting.

Dedicated hosting is the most adaptable and customized method of Internet hosting; however, it can be expensive, so it is recommended only for more established sites. A user leases an entire server that is devoted exclusively to their needs. The user has complete control of all relevant aspects, such as operating systems, hardware, software, and security.

Special Considerations

It's not a bad idea to check out web hosting reviews to get a comparison of some of the leading companies. For most websites, shared hosting will meet all of your needs and be wonder-

fully cost-effective. However, there may be one or two considerations that can help you decide which hosting company is right for you.

- Do you feel the need to have your own security certificate? If so, is this something that the host can provide?
- Are you comfortable with a “techie” feel, or would you prefer a company with a more user-friendly feel?
- Is there a possibility that you may want to upgrade to VPS or dedicated hosting later on? If so, does the host provide that option?
- Are you interested in bargain-priced hosting, or would you be more at ease with a well-known company or brand?
- Does the webhost impose advertising on your site in exchange for free or low-cost hosting?
- How strongly do you believe the host’s claims of reliable uptime?
- How much space do you need for photo galleries and videos? Will the size of your content fall within the host’s definition of “unlimited?”

Signing Up and Getting Started

Once you select a web hosting company, you will need to login to your domain name account and update your DNS settings. These settings are the records in the Domain Name System that will allow you to access your website and emails through your new domain name. Your web host company should send you an email describing your DNS settings. If you have any questions, just call your hosting company or domain provider.

Once these settings are updated, you should be ready to begin construction on your site in less than 48 hours. Many hosting companies are extremely quick, and you could be ready to start work on the site in an hour or less! You’ll soon be on your way to having a live site!

13. Choosing a Content Management System

Delightfully, dozens of companies are competing to make your content management both free of charge AND ridiculously easy. A web content management system (WCM) will simplify the publication of your website's content—allowing you to submit elements without needing technical knowledge of HTML or file uploading.

What It Does

A content management system helps manage the flow of data in an environment where there are endless numbers of contributors. This sort of system allows large numbers of users share information—allowing the users to communicate, contribute, share, store, retrieve, view, and edit materials including documents, movies, pictures, and data.

Open source content management systems are getting a lot of praise right now. This method of software creation allows nearly anyone to add onto or modify the product—providing boundless options! Many of these additions and upgrades are free to use.

The other important feature of content management systems is that they usually come with robust administration systems that allow you to manage many aspects and elements of your site through an online admin panel. For example, in WordPress, all you need to do is log-in—you can publish posts, add users, edit content, install plugins, and tons more in seconds.

WordPress

WordPress started out as a blogging system but has grown into a fully-developed content management system—the largest self-hosted blogging tool in the world. It is based on the PHP scripting language and MySQL open-source database, and licensed under the General Public License—all of which has added up to it becoming an industry standard.

WordPress is free! It downloads and installs in five minutes! WordPress will simplify your website creation and make it delightfully easy to add your website content. It is open source software, so users are constantly adding plugins, widgets, and themes to help you develop or manage your site. Furthermore, with millions of users, you have a strong network of forums that offer ideas and assistance.

WordPress promoters describe it as easy, pleasant, and extremely customizable. The software uses sensible default settings but has endless capacity for meeting individual needs. It helps users update pages quickly, connects well with other blogs (via PingBack and TrackBack), and allows visitors to subscribe to feeds through RSS 1.0, RSS 2.0, and ATOM.

WordPress gives site managers the opportunity to decide whether others can create and modify content on their website. It also has template-driven design; its template editor tool and tags give website managers a simple and easy way to control their presentations. WordPress has thousands of choices in readily available themes that can be applied to any website, but users also have the option to create their own themes—simple, easy, and fun.

Joomla!

Joomla is another free and user-friendly content management system. Joomla administrators praise the software as a way for users to create and manage professional websites and blogs with little or no technical skill—making it an indispensable tool for anyone who isn't inclined to computer science. Like WordPress, Joomla downloads quickly—many web hosting companies offer Joomla as a one-click installation.

While Joomla is an excellent choice for beginners, it also has thousands of extensions that can help expert users create specialized functions. Its support forums and templates offer a considerable network to help users optimize their experience.

Joomla provides a vast selection of options on user management, media management, language management, banner management, contact management, web link management, menu management, content management, polls, searching, and an integrated help system. It provides everything you need to get your message out!

Drupal

Drupal is a very popular content management system with a large and dedicated following. Drupal can be used for a variety of site types such as blogs, community sites, and business websites. You can easily add, publish, and edit content like the other content management systems above, and Drupal also has its own massive directory of add-on modules. These modules let you do many things, including having a forum, blog, podcast, newsletter, picture gallery, and much more.

When it comes to content management systems, you really need to try each one and examine all the features to see which one is the best fit for you. WordPress has been my choice, ever since it has been out! I find it can handle everything I need, and I use it for almost all my sites, including Web Design Dispatch. WordPress allows me to setup a site in minutes. Whenever I need extra features, I can find WordPress plugins that do a great job, or I use other software that integrates with WordPress.

14. Website Style, Layout and Usability

As much as I don't want to add to the pressure of creating a website, I feel it wise to state that the design of your website will convey more to your prospective clients than the actual content. Yes, your website will need to hold useful, well-written, and relevant information that will seal the deal with your clients; however, in most cases, the design of your website will immediately tell your viewers whether you're the sort of person with which they would like to do business!

We all know that we're supposed to overlook superficial aspects and focus on content, but this is yet another situation where first impressions can be critical. Let's work step-by-step to help ensure that you get the kind of website that properly displays your skills, personality, and professionalism!

Style

First, as you selected a business model, did you choose to operate as a freelancer or did you decide to utilize a business framework? Whichever path you chose, that business model should be reflected in your website design. We'll refer to this difference as "portfolio style" or "business style."

For example, if you chose a business name and framework, it is more appropriate for you to create a business style website design. This style of website will give the appearance of a larger company, even if there's just you and yourself running the site. A business style website will have a certain amount of anonymity built in, can adapt to your business growth, and can display liberal use of your business name and logo, as well as providing information about your business identity and philosophy.

On the other hand, if you are operating as a freelancer—particularly if you are using your own name as your business name—it is more appropriate to give your website a personal feel. Your clients will already be aware that they are using an individual instead of a corporation. They will want to know about you personally (on a professional level, of course), and your website should probably answer the questions that clients will naturally have about your qualifications, experience, and background.

In your website's visual style and artistic direction, opt for consistency! Your color and typeface choices should remain as similar as possible between your pages. You want it to be obvious that the individual pages are all part of the same site.

Layout

Layout is very important, so let's review the basics. You'll need to cover all the bases as you assemble your Internet masterpiece.

Get attention! Each page needs to be eye-catching in some way. Not only is this just a good idea for any website or publication, but you ARE selling yourself as a designer! Even if you choose a mood of elegance, conservatism, or understatement for the style of your website, you still need to show people that you've got design skills and that your work can get clients the kind of attention that they're seeking.

Use focal points! Don't let your page layouts languish in mediocrity—use the "rule of thirds" and all your best composition skills to move the eyes (and minds) of your visitors! Lead your potential clients through your focal points. This should be a pleasing journey. Base your focal points on your main selling points—remember that you're trying to convince visitors to use your services.

Balance your layouts! I recommend a 2-to-1 or 3-to-1 ratio between text and graphics. A site dominated by graphics can be overwhelming, and it becomes annoying to try and find sub-

stance. An overly text-heavy site begins to bore the viewer immediately. The Internet holds a buffet of websites that offer site layout examples (and, of course, every website in existence utilizes a layout of some kind)! Shop around for something that suits your own sense of aesthetics and works well with the amount of text and graphics that you plan in your page.

On a subconscious level, your decision to balance your pages with more text or more graphics will give a certain impression. Text-heavy sites can be boring, but they can also give the appearance of being important, serious, and authoritative. In contrast, graphics-heavy sites have the possibility of seeming elementary, but can also feel lively and fun. Deciding which angle you prefer and working this knowledge into your layouts can give you an advantage.

Usability

Your website should be easy for your visitors to use. A major factor of usability is the navigation system on which your site will operate. Your navigation should be in a consistent location and use a consistent format for each page of the site. Ideally, your visitors will naturally understand or easily learn how to get around your site. The navigation should be efficient—visitors should know where they've been and where they're going.

Be careful about being too sophisticated with your site's navigation or links. Even if you possess amazing web design skills and want to impress your visitors with your expertise, be sure that it doesn't interfere with usability. If users can't find their way around or are being transported to links they didn't know were there, they aren't going to be impressed—just annoyed.

15. Essential Components of Your Website

Of course, you have a multitude of possible pages that you can include in your website. There's really nothing that says you need to follow a particular formula. In fact, graphic design is a creative field and a little quirkiness can be a good way to display your unique approach and distinguish yourself from the competition. On the other hand, your viewers will probably expect to find certain elements. Anything that you do to break away from the conventional expectations will come with the risk of alienating some users. Here's a discussion about the various pages that are usually found in a graphic designer's website.

About Us Page

Your "About Us" page (or "About the Designer" if you're clearly presenting yourself as an individual) can contain information about your work philosophy, your style influences, and your educational and professional background. Some designers list this information as a biography, a bulleted list, a series of statements, a resume, or even a timeline. This page is a good place for testimonials. It's also a good spot for displaying a little more about your personality, if you choose. It's up to you whether this page is all business or if it's a little more fun.

Contact Page and Methods

This should be one of the simpler pages to compose. Keep in mind that the contact page should be a two-way street. Certainly, you're listing as much of your business contact information as humanly possible, but also give visitors the option to be contacted by you! Some clients will prefer to use a designer who takes the initiative to contact them.

This is a great spot to place a quote form. Some graphic design companies offer free project estimates within 48 hours. Although this sort of guarantee is attained more easily by a team of employees than by an independent contractor, consider whether you can offer a similar policy. Visitors are much more likely to contact you for a quote when they have a specific cost (free is nice!) and a time-frame.

Many designers incorporate a "hire me" button on each page of their site. As websites become more complex and provide extensive work examples, visitors can become overwhelmed and lose sight of the fact that you are available for employment! This sort of feature gives prospective clients the ability to move immediately into contacting you, no matter where they are in your website.

Email

I'm not sure you've heard of this technology yet . . . ok—enough with the sarcasm. Some people prefer email. Although it's not likely to be instantly returned, it does offer a distinct scheduling advantage. Email recipients have the ability to read and reply to messages at their convenience—not when they're just running off to the break room, just walked through the door in the morning, or just got saddled with an emergency project. No need to worry about office hours, time zone differences, or that anxious question of how to fit all of your relevant information into a competent-sounding voicemail message.

Phone

Some people love it and some hate it. Whichever camp you're in, you can't deny that picking up the phone is a great way to get the ball rolling! Although you run the risk of calling at an inconvenient time or being asked to perform the art of leaving a message, nothing beats the chance to talk to someone immediately.

Direct phone conversations are simpler than emailing in some ways. Since emailing removes vocal cues, it's very easy to misinterpret phrases involving humor or sarcasm. Email correspondence should be carefully composed, and it can be difficult to get the right tone to a message. A phone conversation has a chance to evolve more naturally, is more personal, and allows participants to gain a better understanding of each other's characters.

Instant Messenger

Instant written correspondence definitely has its advantages! I don't think this would be a method that I'd offer to potential clients since it's immediate and difficult to ignore. However, it's a great way to communicate with clients and colleagues once a project is underway! Instant messaging allows you to get an immediate answer to a quick question—giving collaborators and coworkers the chance to deal with issues directly without wasting a lot of time playing phone tag or waiting for return emails. Instant messaging is enormously useful for work-from-home designers and other freelancers; it's the best way to communicate quickly and conveniently when you telecommute.

Skype

Skype is the best of all worlds! You have the option to make phone calls instantly. Your website visitors can call you directly through a Skype link on your website—saving them the trouble of picking up a phone and dialing! You have the option to use Skype for instant messaging. Skype's instant messaging allows you to create groups—very useful when you need to confer between multiple parties. You can also make video calls with Skype.

One of my favorite qualities about Skype is its archiving. Similar to having a stenographer listen in on your conversation, Skype provides you with a record of your written conversations. Never worry about losing information that passed quickly in a conversation—easily scroll back through the past dialog. Skype gives you the opportunity to retrieve previous communication or even to quote the other party in a current conversation. (“Yes, you did agree to that condition—you wrote it here on this date . . .”)

And the Winner Is . . .

Overall, I'd say that email is probably the best method for gathering information about prospective clients and their projects. If you create your own quote request form, you can be sure to get ALL the information you need about a project, including a description of the work needed, the budget, the timeframe or level of urgency, the organization's URL, a list of the organization's competitors—whatever information you feel you'd need to get an accurate picture.

Ideally, your schedule will be full. Hopefully, you won't be sitting around all day waiting for the phone to ring! Encouraging potential clients to contact you through email gives you the advantage of investigating the situation and responding to the client when it is convenient for you—when you have the time to give the proposal your full attention.

Services Page or List

Your website should provide detailed information on the types of services that you can provide. In Chapter 2, we discussed the importance of determining this information; it's a good time to make your decisions on this topic if you haven't already. As I stated previously, there's no better way to lose prospective clients than by being uncertain about what services you can provide—it's a good way to make yourself look like an amateur. Website design, logo design, branding and business identity, illustration, print design, packaging, letterheads and annual reports are just a small list of the hundreds of services that graphic and web designers can offer. When in doubt, spell it out. Oftentimes, a client may not fully understand what can be

done or what a service entails. Ideally, your list of services will give clients new ideas. (“Hmmm. I didn’t realize I could turn my annual reports over to a graphic designer . . .”)

Another decision you’ll need to make is whether or not you will include a list of your prices on your website. Some designers do and some don’t. If you include prices, you’ll give your potential clients some of the most vital information that they’ll be seeking. Almost everyone has a budget, and a patron needs to know if they can afford to have you perform the services that they require. Furthermore, if you don’t include a price list, there will be visitors that assume you’re too expensive. There will also be visitors that simply don’t want to take the time to contact you; potential clients that are looking for immediate pricing information are likely to just move on to the next website—taking your prospective income with them.

On the other hand, higher-end clients and corporations may be more likely to use a designer who doesn’t list prices. They may see a higher level of professionalism in contact-only pricing. A corporation is less likely to want cut-rate work. A corporation is also more likely to need a customized set of services and expect a business proposal instead of a price menu. Not listing your prices implies that you customize your work to such a degree that it would be impractical for you to summarize the cost of your services. After all, would Michelangelo have posted flat rates?

In short, it might be possible to generalize that smaller (and possibly less-informed) clients will appreciate a price list, while larger clients (such as corporations, with more complicated needs and deeper pockets) may not. You may ask yourself again which type of client or job you prefer. Would you rather perform a series of smaller, freelance jobs, or are you more interested in long-term retainer-style work? A compromise might be a good idea. Consider whether you can list prices for straightforward services while also clearly indicating that you are happy to consult and customize any number of services.

Portfolio

Absolutely, your portfolio is one of the most important destinations on your website. Your work will speak for itself! Clients can immediately decide if your vision, style, and quality of work meet their needs.

It’s a good idea to post examples to support each type of work that you plan to offer—web pages, publications, logos, and illustrations, for example, should each be represented by their own series of samples. However, it’s essential that your portfolio is concise and that visitors can navigate through it easily! Providing a series of thumbnails for each section is a good way to show what you have done for previous projects. You want to avoid the following situations:

- Images that take forever to load
- A maze of examples from which viewers cannot escape
- Content that may offend—politically divisive, religious, or “mature” themes
- Overwhelming visitors with hours of materials
- Examples of work that is not offered in your services

Recent Work

In addition to your portfolio, you might consider a section of recent work (usually displayed on the home page of your website) to draw viewers to your main portfolio section. Recent work will show visitors that you are in demand and that your work is current and relevant (“green” themed work is very popular now, for example). Including a section of recent work also gives you a good reason to keep your site updated, as well as giving visitors a reason to return. Ideally, you will develop a culture of creativity, and a following—waiting to see what incredible project you’re up to now!

Downloadable Resume and Portfolio Samples

Since your portfolio and resume will be such a major part of your website, let's take a little time and discuss portfolio and resume downloads. Simply zip the file containing your portfolio or resume—it will take up less space and transfer easily. Save the zipped file to your web server. Upload the zipped file to your website. Anyone who is interested can have their very own copy of your resume or portfolio when they click the download link.

Why Downloadable?

You might have a gallery and bio on your site. Why should you consider having a downloadable portfolio or resume? Offering your resume and portfolio as a download offers viewers a chance to keep a version of this vital information! Rather than a single visit or view of your portfolio or resume, a download offers people the chance to possess a copy. They might use this download to store your information with a group of other prospective freelancers, to present you as an option for a project, or even to include your work in publications, lists, or events that can bring you work!

Downloadable Resume

Offering your resume is a great way to reinforce the idea that you are available for hire. Remember that it's important for your website to present a clear purpose. There are plenty of sites on the web that exist to create collections of design inspiration, but the main inspiration that your site should produce is the desire to HIRE!

Most of us have been through this territory before. Briefly stated, your resume is an overview of your work history and achievements (including relevant educational information). You might prefer to include most of the following elements:

- Contact information
- A professional summary
- Areas of expertise
- Career background (in reverse chronological order, with job title, dates position was held, employer, and location of employer)
- A list of duties or accomplishments for each work experience (focus on action descriptions of what you achieved)
- Education
- Professional associations
- Relevant miscellaneous information

Use your own taste and judgment to decide exactly how to format your resume; you can also determine the order in which you present the features in your resume.

Regardless of the software that you use to create your resume, it will be best for you to convert your resume into a PDF (Portable Document Format, in case you never knew). The PDF is a universal file format that will ensure that the individual formatting of your document is preserved—its fonts, graphics, images, and layout—even if the viewer doesn't possess the software used in creating the document. No one can get hired when their resume turns into "wingdings" upon opening!

Downloadable Portfolio

A portfolio download is another great opportunity for widespread distribution of your work; however, you may prefer to limit access to this opportunity. Your portfolio download in the hands of the right person can open doors, get you work, and gain exposure for your talents. Your portfolio download in the hands of the wrong person can lead to copyright infringement

and idea theft. One option is to clearly present the opportunity of downloading your portfolio but to require completion of a request form.

The form that you use can include whatever details about a viewer that you feel you need to know before you grant permission—name, company, contact information, and how the images will be used, for instance. Be **EXTREMELY** clear about your copyright statement! Ideally, you will remind viewers about their copyright obligations while also giving them the opportunity to use your work under certain conditions.

Another option is to offer free downloads for personal use—photos, illustrations, and backgrounds are just a few items that could enhance your marketing, if they were distributed. Allowing individuals to use certain items can bring people to your site and increase your exposure. It can be great advertising! Again, if you choose this option, be certain that you clearly state how your work can be used. Freebies are cool, but not if it means your work runs rampantly over the Internet to be plundered and copied without earning you a dime!

Many potential employers will want to download your portfolio. Having your work and your resume in one PDF file can make it easy for them. Make sure the files are as small as possible without hurting the quality of your work. If you get really fancy, you could link each portfolio image in the PDF to a high resolution version hosted on your server. The easier you make it for viewers, the better your chances of getting new work.

16. How to Build Trust Online

Your website needs an attractive, balanced design. It needs eye-catching graphics and informative content. However, your website should also capitalize on a subliminal strength—trust building elements! Through the use of specific content, icons, and symbols, you can infuse your website with a sense of professionalism, ethical business practices, security, and legitimacy, which can turn into increased conversions and more work for you.

Trust Building Graphics

Certainly, graphics that display examples of your work will build trust. With these examples in sight, visitors don't need to guess whether or not your work is any good—they'll be able to judge it with their own eyes. However, work examples aren't the only visual aid that suggests a client can have confidence in your professional performance.

Due to the power of an image, there are numerous icons and logos that can be added to your website to increase its credibility. Facebook and Twitter logos alone will introduce a subconscious feeling of accessibility and familiarity, as well as being two brilliant ways to increase your marketing.

If your website contains a blog or you used this software, feel free to add Joomla or WordPress conditional use logos. Linking your website with well-known, well-respected brands helps you appear professional and respectable (sort of like running with a good crowd).

Certifications

SSL certificates are mandatory for any situation where money is transferred. If you are collecting funds, there's no excuse for not having an SSL certificate for your domain; you'll lose business if you don't. Web-users know they're sending their personal information out into the hands of strangers if they don't see a valid certificate. However, even if selling merchandise or accepting payments isn't the main function of your site, you may be collecting contact information from clients. Security indicators (such as the lock icon, "https" prefix, and green browser bar) immediately show visitors that your site strives to protect its visitors from information theft.

Certification from the [Better Business Bureau](#) can be a good idea. This organization is trusted by consumers searching for services of all kinds. Since the BBB helps identify businesses with shady practices, their endorsement will help reassure clients that your business is legitimate and trustworthy. The Better Business Bureau logo speaks for itself. Becoming a Better Business Bureau accredited business will support your website and instill confidence in your prospective clients.

Can you register your website with a web design company review and rating service (or two)? Registering your website with a variety of Internet directories is a great idea; it's even better if you choose directories that screen applicants and list only quality websites. The "Best of the Web" directory is a good example—it began as a website award but has evolved into a directory. For a small fee, the administrators will review and list your site—providing credibility for your website as well as adding it to an index that clients can use to find your services.

Are you certified with any professional organizations? Do you hold any professional accreditations? Connections with groups such as The Professional Association for Design, The Designers Accord, or groups of registered graphic or web designers are a strong addition to your website. This sort of link proves that, yes, you are an actual designer—not just a scam artist hiding behind a website. Clients will be pleased to know that you maintain professional contacts and that you are respected by others in your field. Finally, these types of organizations exist to uphold high standards; your connection with these associations shows that you operate at the highest level of professionalism in your field.

Testimonials

Testimonials speak strongly for you in a way that nothing else can! Visitors want to know what kind of work you did, but they also want to know how easy it is to work with you and whether you achieved a client's goal. If a client was self-motivated to write something praising your work—perfect! This sort of testimonial is a genuine complement. In these cases, ask for permission to publish their comments. If no one's gushed about your work on their own, don't be afraid to ask clients if they'd be willing to make a statement about their experience with you. Oftentimes, people see that this sort of situation is an opportunity to throw a small amount of attention back to their organization. (All part of the tangled web of marketing!) Of course, if you did a great job for them, they should be happy to spread the word.

Case Studies

A case study is a more in-depth form of testimonial. Case studies take a specific project example and follow it from start to finish. This type of example often includes a description about the client, their challenge, your solution, and the result. Case studies are an excellent supplement to your portfolio since they allow visitors to judge you on the method you use to solve a problem.

Simply showing a brochure you designed doesn't answer a visitor's questions about whether or not the client was satisfied with the solution you chose. Maybe the brochure you designed looks great, but did it meet the client's criteria? Did it get results? Case studies are a great opportunity for you to display statistics relating to the success of your work, such as a noticeable increase in sales, visits, rankings, followers, or participation.

Press

Hands down, one of the best ways to increase trust in your site is to provide links to articles or awards that showcase your achievements. If you are lucky enough to have awards, interviews, and articles showcasing your talents, place these items prominently on your website!

Although it's ideal to have your press come from known and respected third parties (trade magazines or news organizations, for example), there's no reason why your press section can't contain self-generated, in-house news stories. If you're involved in your community or with a charitable organization, this information provides a very positive message about your activities and yourself as a businessperson.

Feel free to post your own press every time you run a 5K for charity or spend your Saturday cleaning up the wetlands. People are more inclined to use a business when they feel it has a conscience.

17. Website Maintenance

Once your website is up, you can't just leave it and forget it. It needs to be updated from time to time, so that you continue to get the most traffic and business possible. Below are some very important elements that you should monitor on your website. Some elements will need to be updated more frequently—keep this list handy and review your website for these items at least every few months.

Broken Links

Broken links are a common problem on many websites. These malfunctioning links are bad for usability and can hurt your search engine rankings. You never know when someone will delete a page or take down a website. Whenever you do your website maintenance, use a [backlink checker tool](#) to scan your site and see if there are any links that may need repairing.

404 Error Pages

Similar to broken links, sometimes websites have moved or deleted pages; this will return a “404 error” message to anyone who tries to visit the URL. All 404 error pages should be redirected to a new page or URL using a [301 redirect](#), which is a permanent search engine friendly redirect that will take users to the new specified URL, if they visit the old one. If you'd rather not use this method, be sure to customize your 404 error pages to be more useful and to direct people to certain areas of your site.

If you signed up for Google Webmaster Tools, once your site has been fully indexed by Google, any 404 errors should show up in your Webmaster Tools admin area. This will allow you to fix the errors as soon as you notice them!

Other Elements to Maintain

In addition to the elements above, here are some other things you should always keep updated, to ensure that your business runs smoothly online:

- Contact Information
- Portfolio Designs
- Resume
- Site Copy
- XML and HTML Sitemap
- Content Management System and Add-ons
- Website Design
- Server
- Virus/Malware Detection and Removal
- Spam removal – Comments, etc.
- Hosting and Domain Renewal and Registration information

Chapter 4

Marketing Your Services Online and Offline

18. Creating a Marketing Plan

Not surprisingly, the first step in beginning your marketing campaign is to determine how much you can afford to spend and to decide the time-frame under which you'd like to operate. These two factors provide the frame-work that will help you make decisions about your marketing. We will then dive into many different affordable online marketing methods, which can be used to promote your design business and keep the work coming in!

Your Budget

How much can you afford to spend on your initial marketing? In the beginning, you may feel motivated to jumpstart your marketing; this is a good move. This will be the "grand opening" for your company—it makes sense to devote more time and money in order to get your business off the ground. Maybe you have a couple clients lined up already, but in the beginning, you may have all the time in the world to devote yourself to promoting your new business! Remember the business adage, "You have to spend money to make money!" Especially in these early stages, your marketing budget is an investment that will yield a larger client base and a higher monthly income.

Do you have an idea of how much you'll want to spend on regular monthly or quarterly marketing once your initial campaign is completed? Both the U.S. Small Business Administration and the Counselors to America's Small Business recommend that a small business spend 2% to 10% of their profit on marketing, depending on the industry. Graphic designers won't generally need to spend as much time and money on marketing as a retail business or restaurant might; however, this doesn't mean that a graphic designer is immune from the need to invest in marketing. Certainly, there's a great deal of flexibility in the amount that you budget for marketing, but it may not be wise to try and cut costs in this area—especially at first. Simply put, if no one knows you're there, they can't hire you; your business won't take off, and you won't be able to support yourself from it.

Your Timeline

After you've determined your marketing budget, you should decide on your timeline. Again, the timeline is up to no one but you. However, you'll need to begin by deciding on your marketing strategy. First, choose the individual components of the strategy. Will you be submitting work in competitions? Are there fundraisers in which you'd like to participate—opportunities presented by other organizations that have specific deadlines? Are you willing to offer a free seminar or to donate your services in other ways? This is the time to scour the calendars of local organizations or trade groups to determine if you can contribute—contributions that benefit them and provide networking and press to your brand-new business.

You will also need to plan out your online marketing options. In online marketing, there are so many methods from which to choose; you won't be able to do them all at once! It will be essential for you to create a timeline. For example, search engine optimization is long-term, so you may want to invest in that from the start. Pay per click advertising, on the other hand, can cost a lot of money upfront, so you may want to hold off on that until you are making more profit. Additionally, you might only pay for press release submissions when you have really important news. Knowing how and when you will approach each marketing method is an important part of any business plan.

Determine when each step or stage of your marketing timeline needs to occur or to be completed. Some deadlines will be external; if you're entering in a contest, for example, you'll need to abide by their deadline. However, if your marketing plan involves self-imposed goals, put those on your calendar too! There may be some elbow room in the completion dates for your personal goals, but not much! The goals that you set for yourself should be treated with as much respect and dedication as those set by others—taking them seriously is one of the best ways to ensure that your business moves forward!

Initial Launch and Continued Marketing Strategy

There's a difference between the initial marketing launch and your continued marketing strategy. Think of your business as a debutante. In some ways, your initial launch is the debut for your business; you're arriving on the scene for the first time, making a grand entrance, looking amazing and letting people know that you are new, wonderful, and available.

Your continued marketing strategy can involve less fanfare and less pressure (also less money), but it can't be ignored. It's vital to keep making appearances! You're showing up in all the right places. People are talking about you. You're not hiding at home washing your socks and wishing someone would call—you're always out mingling, center stage if possible.

The Initial Launch

Just a few months ago, your business wasn't formed. No one knew it was there. Very soon, however, you'll be ready to burst onto the scene! If you were opening a retail store or a restaurant, your initial launch would be a big event. You would need to bring as many people as possible to your location. Happily, as a work-from-home designer, you don't need to bring the circus to your front lawn in order to launch your business! However, you will need to make some calculations about the best way to make a big impact and get your name out.

In your initial launch, it's always possible to blow a lot of money; however, blowing a lot of money never guarantees you'll have any return on investment (ROI). For example, you could spend tens of thousands of dollars printing glossy brochures that will be mailed to every person in your zip code—but how many of those recipients actually need graphic or web design services? An ideal marketing campaign (even in the beginning) is one where minimal expense and effort are used to reach exactly the people that need your services—convincing each and every member of your target audience to hire you. In reality, no one gets 100% success; however, keep the ideal in mind—you want to identify the most fertile ground and sow your marketing seeds there! Tossing your marketing dollars to the wind and hoping they bring you clients is only slightly more productive than flushing them down the drain.

This eBook and chapter focuses heavily on online marketing because it has become so affordable and accessible. Many of the methods I'll cover cost nothing more than a little elbow grease. Even though I recommend a heavier focus on online marketing, some of you may prefer offline marketing for both your initial launch and continued marketing strategy. The choice is yours in the end. My goal is to inform you of the latest and most effective marketing tactics, how to approach them, and how to use them so you get the best return on your investment.

Your Continued Marketing Strategy

If you were in charge of marketing for another company, you would present a marketing plan. This plan would contain the following components:

A Situation Analysis—this evaluates a business from internal and external viewpoints. This report can include a “5 C analysis” (company, customers, competitors, collaborators, and climate), it can include a “PEST analysis” (political, economic, societal, and technological factors), and/or a “SWOT analysis” (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats).

A Marketing Strategy—this would include a mission statement, objectives, and a focused strategy that includes a market segment focus (dissecting a market into specializations) and a discussion on product positioning.

A Sales Forecast and Expense Budget—the bottom line. This tracks sales and expenses month by month and follows up on the results of the plan in comparison to the analysis. It also tracks specific sales tactics, programs, management responsibilities, promotions, and other elements.

Consider each of these aspects when you are analyzing and forecasting your own continued marketing strategy. These are the methods and reports used by big businesses, but that doesn't mean that you need to create formal reports. Certainly, not all of these apply to a sole-proprietorship, and you don't need to convince upper-management—you ARE the upper-management! However, using the same decision-making process as a larger company can help you decide what needs to be done and how to achieve your goals. One of my favorite categories in the marketing analysis is the "opportunities" section of the "SWOT." It's good to have a reason to watch out for things like trade shows, fairs, conventions, or contests.

If possible, it's also a good idea for you to establish some method of tracking the actual success of your marketing efforts. In each element of your marketing strategy, decide if there's a way for you to gain some quantitative feedback on how many contacts you gained from each aspect of your campaign. For example, if you offer a discount through an ad in the newspaper and one in a trade magazine, it would be wise to know how many clients were brought in from each advertisement. Gathering information about the success rate of your efforts is one of the best ways to decide what actually works—what you want to use again in the future.

Once you've launched yourself into the professional realm, there is a nearly endless list of methods that you can use to keep business flowing in! Here is a list of the best ways to start promoting your business online and offline (it happens to be exactly the same as our next 17 lessons):

- Becoming an Industry Leader
- Networking
- Referrals
- Email Marketing
- Blogging
- Social Marketing
- Search Engine Optimization
- Pay Per Click Advertising
- Banner Advertising
- Promotions
- Design Galleries
- Design News Sites
- Design Blogs
- Online Press Releases
- Direct Mail and Print Advertising
- Guerrilla Marketing
- Viral Marketing

We're ready to discuss each of these in detail!

19. Becoming an Industry Leader

An industry leader is someone who is recognized in their field as being a top professional—someone with great knowledge, who is innovative and experienced. Becoming an industry leader is the first marketing tactic and the most important. You may be a top professional, but to make the most of this method you need to be well known as well. If no one knows who you are, how can they refer work to you?

I'm not saying you have to star in a TV show, but if you produce great work, do interviews, maybe write a book, and you network in your industry, you will eventually start to build up a name for yourself. The more people know you, the more they will talk about you and refer you to others. Below is a list of great ways to get your name out there and start establishing yourself as an expert in your field.

- Start a blog related to your industry
- Write whitepapers and reports
- Do interviews
- Write a book or eBook
- Attend conferences
- Network with other design industry professionals
- Start a podcast
- Become a part of the online design community
- Showcase your designs anywhere you can, online and offline
- Use your brand name everywhere and keep branding consistent
- Be innovative with your work

The sooner you start making a name for yourself, the better. Like with any other marketing tactic, you need to keep actively promoting your brand name, whether it is your personal name or a business name.

20. Networking

You've made the decision to work from home as a graphic or web designer—freeing yourself from the daily grind of commuting and the annoyance of office politics! However, it's important to continue to maintain professional contacts. Networking keeps you connected to other design professionals, gives you a support network, increases your business contacts, and aids you in your marketing!

There's nothing more important than networking (next to becoming an industry leader, of course). Whatever your individual preferences and style, you'll need to find a path that links your skills to the clients that need them. In the end, professional contacts, industry events, associations, and affiliations will be the best way to expand your network and achieve your goals.

Professional Associations

One of the best places to network with other design professionals is through professional associations! They are guaranteed to be full of people with insider information and excellent contacts. (Not to mention they're also a great spot to pick up deals, offers, promotions, and benefits.) Here are some of the best organizations where like-minded professionals go for opportunities, assistance, and enrichment.

The Professional Association for Design (AIGA) is one of the most prominent organizations. It provides a member gallery where you can exhibit your portfolio. It has a calendar of events including conventions, openings, exhibitions, competitions, festivals, and lectures. Its network of over 22,000 designers and members are all listed in their AIGA Designer Directory. Members receive discounted rates for conferences, workshops, professional development activities, seminars, and activities to improve your business practices. Members also receive a copy of the annual Aquent Survey of Design Salaries, which can help you make educated choices about your fees.

The Art Directors Club is a non-profit organization which strives to promote creative visual communications and connect professionals within the industry. It offers a variety of social events that help link graphic designers with patrons, as well as hosting competitions, providing portfolio reviews, and posting job listings.

The Graphic Artists Guild offers community forums for networking. Regional chapters host volunteer opportunities to help build your resume and boost your spirit. The guild posts member portfolios, helping you gain exposure. Best of all, the Guild is dedicated to advocacy for the profession, so it also offers you health insurance, legal counseling, a PDF download to help you copyright your own work, and it works to raise industry standards. It also offers relevant telecommuter classes, which can help you enhance your skills from the comfort of home. Finally, it provides discounts on nearly everything that a graphic artist could need or want!

Bloggers

You might have some blogs that you're already following. You might be beginning a list of blogs that you could use for website link-building. Bloggers are some of the best networkers! They naturally want to connect with others in their field—they have a desire to spread or exchange information, to mingle and associate. You never know when an opportunity is waiting around the corner!

Designs blogs also feature interviews, which you could use to get your name out, as I mentioned previously. Don't be afraid to contact bloggers to let them know you are up for an interview, to show them your portfolio, or offer to write a guest post.

If you help people they will help you. Be sure to stay in contact with bloggers; don't just message them when you need a favor. It will be essential to have friends who are bloggers when you are looking to promote something really important—a book, for instance.

Local

Don't forget to think local! Your community business groups are an excellent source of networking—especially since these organizations will give you personal introductions to exactly the kind of people that need your services! The Lion's Club, your local Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club and the Better Business Bureau are just the beginning of the local connections that you can form! Happily, this isn't even a fraction of the networking opportunities that exist. Almost any personal network can lead into professional connections!

Keep your contacts organized so you remember who is who, how you met, and so on. You never know when you might need to reach out to your network.

21. Referrals

Overwhelmingly, referrals are a very strong source of advertising. There's nothing more powerful than a personal recommendation. Referrals cost you almost nothing and convert into higher sales—nothing is more cost-effective!

When a trusted source recommends you to a potential client, that trust transfers over to you. The potential client comes in ready to hire; there's less need (sometimes no need at all) to present your credentials, overcome suspicion, and sell yourself. When a potential client starts to search for a graphic or web designer from scratch, it's impossible for them to know if they'll have a good experience—it's a concern whenever a client hires a vendor. However, receiving a personal recommendation makes the decision infinitely easier—if they've heard that working with you is great, you're likely to get hired!

How do you get referrals? Make your customers happy, of course! We tend to think of referrals as being intrinsically motivated. (They just really did have a great experience with you and can't stop talking about it!) We also view them as being spread through word of mouth. However, neither of these ideas is the only way to attain and distribute referrals. There are techniques that a business can use to encourage them; this field is called "referral marketing."

One of the first steps to generating referrals is to prime a job situation from the beginning. By mentioning referrals in your early meetings with a new client, you plant the seed. You present referrals from previous jobs or long-term clients. You mention that you appreciate and reward referrals. Advertising as little as \$20 per referral or (more commonly) a percentage of the job can encourage a client to keep you in mind when their friends and colleagues are looking for someone in your field!

When a job is complete, ask for the client's opinion of your services (provide something that is easy to complete—no one wants a four page questionnaire ending in an essay question). Ask your clients to leave honest reviews. Good, genuine reviews make all the difference! If the feedback is bad, you know you've got some improvements to make. If the feedback is good, ask for permission and see if you can use it in your business promotions. In many cases, clients are happy to have a link back to their own business and it can help increase awareness of their own organization. (Every little bit helps!)

If you happen to be a web designer, consider asking clients for a "designed by" link in the footer of the website or blog you created. This is a great way to get referrals when a person visits the website and likes it. I've personally used these links to find designers to help with my projects. If you are a graphic designer, you might ask for a credit somewhere in the printed material. Print clients will be less likely to give you the credit, but you could sway opinions with some green, if you catch my drift! A little money spent this way could turn into more money in the long-run.

Even if a project is complete, you'll probably have some regular communication with your past clients (by phone or through mail)—it's a good idea to work at maintaining a relationship with these clients, even if they don't need your services at the moment. Feel free to mention referrals in the course of these contacts. Provide your business cards. You might consider combining the power of a referral with the power of a discount. You can offer a discount to the client making the referral, the new client, or even both. In a final thought, once you have a nice collection of positive comments and good reviews, be sure to place these recommendations on your website and in your business listings, when possible. Don't be shy about letting people know how great you are! Keep turning referrals into more referrals!

The bottom line: make your clients delightfully happy with your work and their experience working with you! Happy clients will LOVE to share your name with others. If you are professional, responsive, and produce top-quality work, then your business will SUCCEED!

22. Email Marketing

Setting up an email list is an ideal way to advertise and network! The success of your online business will rely on your marketing skills—maintaining a targeted opt-in email list is a way of creating your own marketing opportunities and instantly contacting the people who are most interested in your services. Essentially, this is a method of publishing—rather than spending on printing and distribution, you have the advantage of getting your message out to your subscribers immediately, with almost no cost to yourself! It's one of the most amazing advertising vehicles available! This is absolutely one of the best ways to increase traffic to your site, increase awareness of your brand, and promote your business!

How to Setup an Email List

Organization is the key to setting up email lists the right way. If you are doing multiple promotions, you want to keep your lists separate so you can track your results efficiently and manage your subscribers through tightly targeted groups. For example, you could have one email list of people interested in web design work and one for print clients. This would allow you to tailor the content of your emails. When your emails relate directly to a targeted group, you will have better response rates and fewer people unsubscribing from your list. In our communication-saturated age, people are quick to remove clutter from their inboxes. Be careful what you send out. If your emails aren't providing relevant content, your contacts will be quick to unsubscribe! Create as many lists as needed, name them properly, and then make sure you customize your subject matter.

Consider using software such as Aweber, which lets you customize almost every detail of your emails, including the verification email, welcome email, and branding of your emails. This is a very important advantage because it gives your emails a warm and personal feeling. Aweber also gives you the option to test emails, so you can see them in action before they go out. Review all the options and changes you make carefully because the verification email and welcome email are the first emails your subscribers will see. First impressions are everything!

Autoresponders

Once you have your initial email setup, you may choose to use an autoresponder, which can send a series of emails automatically at certain time intervals. For example, people could be subscribing to a newsletter of yours about 10 “must-know e-commerce tips.” Use an autoresponder to send one new tip every week. At the end or during the lessons, you might promote a special e-commerce web design offer to turn your new subscribers into customers or clients.

If you are creative, you can save yourself a lot of work and on-going maintenance by using an autoresponder to set up everything at one time. Every time a new person subscribes, the autoresponder will begin at the time you set it, so you don't have to manually initiate anything. It's all automated, which is the beauty of email marketing.

You always have the option to send out custom emails as needed and create more marketing campaigns with new autoresponders as you expand. At the very least, each email list should have a welcome email; autoresponders are just a really nice option.

Creating a Signup Form

Many of the services mentioned above have online form generating tools that can help you quickly create a signup form to place on your site. For example, with Aweber you can pick from pre-made templates and then customize them to your specific needs. As an alternative, you can design the form exactly how you want in Photoshop to give it a totally custom look. When creating your signup form, keep simplicity in mind. It's hard enough to get people to give out

their email, with spam running wild nowadays. Make it easy for users to join your newsletter by making the process as simple as possible.

I usually ask subscribers for just an email address and then provide a simple submit button. You may want to collect your subscribers' names as well, and for large scale promotions you may have a more complex form. Just make sure the email is always added to your list so you can use it later.

Another important thing to consider is adding privacy trust graphics or text that reassures your website visitors that their emails will not be shared, sold, or rented to third parties. Privacy is a top concern for many website visitors and respecting privacy should be a top concern of webmasters.

It's a good idea to brand your sign up form or to blend the design seamlessly into your website. You don't want the signup form to look out of place or like an afterthought; however, it should draw some attention so people don't miss it completely!

Many webmasters incorporate whitepaper mockup graphics, graphics of other freebies, or an ebook into their signup form design. Include some text telling people that if they join the newsletter, they will get instant access to the free download. The possibilities are endless, so try out different designs and see which gets you the best conversions. One small change can make a big difference if you have a lot of website visitors coming to your site!

Placing Your Signup Forms

There are many good locations for an email signup form. Of course, your main website is going to be the first place you want to add it. The most common place for a form is either on the home page or the footer of the website (or even both). You may also want to include it on certain sub pages of your site, such as an about page.

Another great place to put a signup form is on your blog. For blogs, the best location for a form is the top right of your sidebar, where it is most visible. You should also include your email signup form in certain blog posts, such as when you release freebies, whitepapers and so on.

Just remember your portfolio, content, and blog posts are the main focus. Your email form can take away from the quality of your site and blog if it is too visually overpowering, distracting, or offered in too many places. It's always important to avoid annoying tactics such as pop ups. Keep user experience in mind. An email will do no good if the person behind the email is frustrated or annoyed.

Getting Email Subscribers

It would be wonderful if you already had a group of followers hanging on your every word, constantly wondering what you were doing next, hungry for information, interested in being a part of your magical culture and desperate to buy whatever you offer up for sale. However, back in the real world, your email list will need to offer something tasty that will convince subscribers that signing up for your feed is in THEIR benefit more than yours. How is this accomplished?

Newsletter—do you have an area of special interest? Fonts, illustration, sample layouts? Are there collections, images, or articles that you can pass along?

Offer tips—this technique is used nearly everywhere now. Unfortunately, visitors know what's behind this and they may already be overwhelmed by all their current subscriptions and feeds. Your tips will really need to be something that they want or something that saves them time. Free reports and whitepapers are a great way to turn tips into something bigger.

Market news/industry news—collect anything newsworthy that you can pass along, either within the graphic design or web design community, or in the business community. It's great if

you can include information that relates to a client or potential client; one of the best ways to impress a client is by showing that you understand their field.

Links—articles, photos, cartoons, useful websites, great examples—there's no end to the possibilities!

Promos—people may be jaded and suspicious, but—boy!—do they love discounts, freebies, games and gambling.

As always, it's important to consider your audience. Although it's easy to plan for a newsletter that offers graphic design tips, other graphic designers may not be your biggest clients. The graphic design community is a great place for networking, but the business sector is probably going to be your meal ticket; it's best to tailor your content to businesses and clients that require graphic design services.

Consider topics such as “What to look for in a Graphic Designer,” “Do you need a new web-site?” or “Are you saving money with cheap business cards?” Your best articles, editorials, and tips will be the ones that help make the process easier for clients, answer their questions, and convince them to hire you for your services!

A strong email list that keeps growing can be the ticket to long-term success, so get going!

23. Blogging

In recent years, interest in web logs or “blogs” has exploded. It’s easy to find blogs on nearly any topic, and a good number of blogs are successful at attracting followers for their image, lifestyle, or visual appeal as much as for their content.

Beginning a blog is another great marketing tool. A blog can increase link-building for your website. It will bring in visitors and help establish a group of loyal followers—who will, in turn, bring in more links, visitors and business. A blog gives you the opportunity to present relevant information such as industry events and news. You also have the option to choose a more personal tone for your blog rather than it being only about your professional experience—less dry, more personality.

Many of the benefits of an email list also apply to a blog. Again, this is an opportunity for you to advertise and network, drawing in an ever-expanding group of contacts and clients. While it can be difficult to distinguish your blog from the crowd, it’s exciting to know that your blog can act as an internationally available, ever-changing billboard for your business—generating interest and excitement in your skills.

Of course, your blog will need to entice people to visit. There needs to be something there for them; no one but your mother is going to visit your blog because of you—at least, not until you become a superstar designer that everyone worships. Try and find a way to break away from the crowd—is there a particular niche that you think you could fill?

The types of materials that make good content for your marketing emails are also good for your blog. Tips, links, promos, news, articles, and photos are just a short list of the kind of content you could include. We’ll discuss freebies and promotions in detail later; they’re one of the best techniques to bring in visitors!

In some ways, a blog is even better than an email list alone because a blog has infinitely more artistic direction. Your correspondence with subscribers on your email list is more limited in the amount of design, typography, and images that you can control. Your blog, on the other hand, can be its own world—a stunning example of form and function, where useful information merges with your design talents and personality.

WordPress

WordPress started out as a blogging system and is still the most widely known and loved—the industry standard. Free and easy to install, this is one of the most convenient and enjoyable software options for blog creation and management! For starters, WordPress.org offers you their five-minute download; WordPress.com offers the TurnKey WordPress appliance that will establish a free blog that runs immediately with no manual download or configuration at all!

Once you’re established, WordPress offers a directory of over 11,000 plugins that can be searched by types; users always have the ability to rate plugins and make comments, as well as to add their own plugins! The software’s template-driven design is the basis for its ease of use and endless capacity for customization.

The WordPress.com free blog offers statistics, over 100 instant themes, networking and marketing assistance, spam protection, widgets for Flickr and Twitter (among others), tracking for replies, and the opportunity to create an endless number of blogs. Blog owners have the option to allow ads, or (for a small annual fee) be ad-free; high-traffic blogs have the option to show their own ads. Blog owners may upgrade to premium features that include control of a domain name, extra storage, custom CSS, and VideoPress. If you prefer control rather than convenience, blog creators that download WordPress 3.0.1 have almost no limits to their creative and administrative options!

Plugins

Well, what is a plugin? Plugins or add-ons insert a set of software components into a larger software application—enhancing or customizing it by adding specific capabilities, which are often developed by a third party. With plugins, software users have the ability to add nearly endless features to the original program. To list a few of the ways that plugins can enhance software, they can be used to support easily adding new features, to reduce the size of an application, to encrypt and decrypt email, to process images, to support file formats, to add custom commands, to add specialized features, to play video or presentation formats, to support different programming languages, and—my favorite—to add themes such as customized visual and design elements.

RSS Feeds

Really Simple Syndication (RSS) is a type of web feed that is used to keep multiple parties updated when a frequently edited body of work receives changes. In the case of a blog, RSS will automatically send any new updates to the blog's subscribers—letting publishers (like you) automatically syndicate content. It's like owning your own mini-newspaper, except you don't have to hire journalists and delivery people or own printing machines.

24. Social Marketing

This branch of marketing is relatively new—stemming from the recently exploding popularity, prevalence, and power of social media! Some sites that may ring a bell are Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Digg, Stumbleupon, and WordPress.

In contrast to traditional media—such as newspapers, television, radio, and film—social media is inexpensive and accessible to anyone. Social media reaches a global audience, allows for instant editing, and requires little training. For example, for a small business to produce a television commercial would take a specially trained team and considerable expense; in all likelihood, small businesses would never be able to afford the cost of nationally broadcasted airtime. In contrast, posting a video on YouTube doesn't need specialized industry knowledge or money for the substantial cost of buying a television advertising spot.

Social media took the power of entertainment and media content away from executives and put it in the hands of the everyman—opening up a new age in marketing!

Facebook

If you haven't already, you should join Facebook, and your business should have its own page. Your business page will be another opportunity for marketing, networking, and feedback. You will have a chance to post videos, photos, links, or to share your latest news. Colleagues, clients, or even your network of personal friends will be able to become a friend or fan of your business—linking their pages with yours; anyone linked to each of your friends will have the opportunity to be quickly and easily exposed to your business logo, mission statement, and contact information.

It's easy to link Facebook with your website and blog. You can use Facebook to add blog posts that describe your creative processes, give teasers for upcoming projects and provide behind-the-scenes details. Facebook will also list your upcoming events, keeping your contacts aware of your achievements.

Twitter

Twitter is a tool that delivers small bits (up to 140 characters, to be exact) of information instantly to your friends or subscribers. Celebrities use Twitter to communicate directly to their fans. Friends can use it to keep in touch regarding thoughts, plans, or the details of daily life. But how does any of this relate to a business? Twitter can connect you with your clients in a uniquely personal way—giving you an opportunity to understand better ways to tailor your projects to meet their needs.

Signup for Twitter, follow some people and then start posting interesting industry news and information about your business. As your brand recognition grows, you should naturally start to get more followers. To get even more Twitter followers, you can also start creating promotions such as, "Follow us on Twitter and retweet this post to be entered into the contest."

YouTube

YouTube is the number one spot for your self-posted videos. Recording and posting interviews, commentary, or individualized content for your business can act as a commercial—particularly if there's humor involved or if you offer a useful tutorial. If you can create unique or quirky content that will bring viewers to you, YouTube will help spread the word about your business. Experiment with different types of videos to see which work best.

There are many other social networking sites out there that you can use to your advantage, so don't think you are stuck with just these three. Remember to add social bookmarking links to your blog, so your visitors can easily share your blog posts, designs, and other content on their own social profiles and networks. Finally, be sure to always link to your social profile on your main website, so people can easily find out how to follow you.

25. Search Engine Optimization

Simply put, search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of achieving high organic rankings in the search results for target keyword phrases on search engines such as Google. For example, if you ran a web design business in Los Angeles, you may want to rank #1 on Google for the keyword phrase “Web Design Los Angeles” because it could drive very highly targeted traffic to your website on a steady basis.

Researching keywords is the first step in the SEO process. There are tons of keywords out there for which you could potentially rank. I will also discuss “on page” optimization and backlinks, so you can better know how to get the top rankings for your target keyword phrases.

Keyword Research

Successful SEO starts with keyword research. Before you can get the traffic, you need to know what search terms people are using and the keywords for which you want to rank. Use the Google Keyword Tool, and be sure to research each keyword carefully and to see how much estimated traffic each one will bring in per month. You'll also need to evaluate the competition in the search results for your keywords. In general, the more results that show up for that keyword, the harder it will be to rank for it; however, don't let that discourage you.

It might be best to start with some “longtail keywords,” which are keyword phrases that consist of two or more keywords—“web design company los angeles” is an example. Eventually, you can work towards ranking for simpler, more competitive keywords, such as “web design los angeles”.

Once you've found some keywords, make a list and organize the list into groups of keywords. For example, you could have a group of keywords like the list below. You will be using your keyword groups to set up pages and optimize your site for better rankings.

web design los angeles
web design la
web design company los angeles
web design company la
web designer los angeles
web designers la

On Page Optimization

Once you know what keywords you want to target, it's time to optimize. I suggest that you optimize your home page for your most important set of keywords, and then create additional pages with different content that targets any other groups of keywords for which you want to rank.

Developing unique content should be your first step in optimizing for SEO. Your content should be useful, relevant and include some of the keywords for which you are optimizing. The best way to create content is to write it naturally, and then go back and add in keywords. Always make sure your content is easy to read and has a benefit for your visitors. It's pointless to have text just for SEO purposes; valuable content is the purpose of your site.

Once you have the content, try and work in additional elements that include your keyword; some options include an H1 tag, H2 tag, subtitles, images with alt tags, and optimized file names. If these extra elements include your keyword phrases, it will help the search engines understand what your page is about—helping you achieve better rankings for those optimized keywords.

If you are creating additional pages, above all, the two most important elements that should have your keyword phrases are the URL of the page and the page title. Remember to keep it natural when optimizing. Use your keyword phrases where you can, and mix up the phrases a bit so that every element is not exactly the same.

Backlinks

The third part of the SEO puzzle is backlinks. Search engines mainly give rankings based on the quality and amount of backlinks. The age of your site and the success of your on page optimization will also factor into your rank. However, without backlinks, search engines will not find and index your site or give you better rankings. There are many ways to get backlinks; I'll list a few of the best and easiest ways to get started.

Whenever possible, remember to use your target keyword phrases in the actual anchor text of the link. So, if you had a page for "los angeles web design", you would want your links to use that anchor text and variations of the keyword phrase as they link back to your page—this will increase your rankings.

Ways to Get Backlinks

- Directory submissions
- Article directory submissions
- Guest posting on blogs
- Reviews of your business on blogs
- Give away freebies such as website templates, vectors, etc.
- Host/sponsor giveaways
- Creating great content on your business blog and promote it via social media
- Leave comments on blogs
- Leave comments on forums with a signature link
- Giving away whitepapers or free ebooks
- Link to great sites and resources who may link back to you
- Network with other designers
- Partner with non profits
- Ask for "design by" links when you create websites or blogs for clients
- Sign up for social profiles and add links back to your site wherever possible
- Submit your blog posts to design news sites
- Showcase your work on design galleries
- Do interviews on design blogs
- Create and send out press releases using press release services

This should be enough to get you started! As you learn more about SEO, you will be able to get more links and better quality links to increase your rankings further. I highly recommend taking the time to optimize and promote your site via search engine optimization. It is one of the best marketing tactics out there and it can give you long-term business.

26. Pay per Click Advertising

If you want to take your advertising to the next level, you can try pay per click (PPC) advertising. Basically, this is the sister of organic search engine optimization. While search engine optimization takes advantage of organic rankings, PPC takes advantage of the sponsored spots at the top and right of the organic rankings.

PPC is a great way to start getting super-targeted traffic right away; however it costs more money upfront and has a higher learning curve than SEO. In a best case scenario, you would be ranking at the top of page one organically for all your keywords, and you would also have a strong PPC campaign running.

Each search engine will have its own PPC program. Whether your potential customers are using Google, Bing, Yahoo (or something else entirely), the PPC ad that they click will be provided through the search engine that they are using.

Google AdWords is the leading PPC program. Hopefully, you already have an account. According to their site, you create your ads, they appear on Google, and you attract customers—simple! Google allows you to select a fixed daily budget or select a maximum cost per click—their tools will help you find keywords that can meet your budget. They have extensive information to show you the amount of global or regional traffic per month and to help you estimate the cost of your campaign. You bid on your keywords. Based on many factors (such as your actual bid amount, the relevancy of your site to the keywords, your ad copy, and your click through rates), you show up in a certain position on the page.

Yahoo! Search Marketing and Microsoft adCenter are also options. The steps are basically the same as Google AdWords. Yahoo has a convenient “quick idea” cost calculator available even if you don’t have an account—it’s a nice feature. With both Yahoo and Microsoft, you choose your keyword or keywords, you write a text ad, you determine the maximum amount that you are willing to pay per click and this is your bid. The bid determines where your ad is located in the search engine’s results.

Managing Campaigns

The search engines will throw a tremendous amount of convenient and useful information at you to help you manage your PPC campaign. Their reporting will provide you with immediate data in a number of categories. Aside from the reports that the hosts themselves provide, there are a number of independent software manufacturers that have created applications that can optimize your PPC campaigns. Here are a couple of the choices:

WordStream

WordStream is designed to help you lower your PPC costs while also improving your traffic and conversion levels.

PPC BidMax

PPC BidMax offers account, campaign, AdGroup, and keyword management, as well as automated bidding, reporting, and ROI tracking.

When running a PPC campaign, be very cautious of your settings. I would recommend setting a maximum daily budget and loading funds to your campaign instead of having them bill your account automatically. This will remove the possibility of you accumulating a disastrously large PPC campaign bill. Start with a small local campaign with highly targeted ads groups, and then expand as you become more experienced.

You should always split test your ads. This process will help you create more effective ads—ads with higher conversion rates. Higher converting ads will help you lower your bids and get more bang for your advertising buck, since the quality of your ads and campaign is better.

It takes time to master the art of a PPC campaign; it takes a lot of tweaking to get it right. However, if the technique is used correctly and you manage your bids properly, PPC can get you high converting traffic FAST and cheap!

27. Banner Advertising

Banner advertising is one of the oldest forms of Internet marketing and is still a great way to get traffic and sales. I find it best to use banner advertising in one of two ways. The first way is to create a large banner campaign for a short period of time; this is a great tactic to help launch a new business or service. By doing this in a targeted manner, you can create a lot of interest to help jump start a website or business enough to get it rolling.

The other method that I suggest is to use banner advertising steadily to promote something like a special discount or offer to a specific community. This method is most effective when you are highly selective about your advertising sites. Choose sites carefully and weed out the ones that perform poorly. Eventually, after cutting out the bad sites, you will be left with some really well-converting banners.

With banner advertising, it's really not a good idea to buy a few random banners here and there and expect to get results. You either need to go with a large and short campaign or a steady, but highly targeted campaign.

Either way, your banner designs need to be great! Your banners should include your brand name and some images that entice people to click. After users click your banner, the landing page where they appear needs to be highly targeted and relevant. If your banner is promoting a special offer and you send them to your home page, they may get lost. They should be taken to the exact page of the special offer where they can find more information and act quickly.

Finally, be sure to keep your banner designs consistent and coordinate them with your main website design. This is an important tool in branding. People will eventually start to recognize your logo, site colors, typography, and other elements; this will help them remember you when they are in need of design services. Repetition, repetition, repetition! Repetition is the key to marketing and the key to a successful banner advertising campaign.

28. Promotions

Although we like to think that people make decisions based on the quality and integrity of a product or business, truthfully, people are easily roped in by promotions. Visitors that would never consider giving out their email address or contact information suddenly don't think twice about it when they can "Enter to Win \$500!" Although I'm not proud to admit it, in marketing we exploit weaknesses like these.

Freebies

Offering great freebies is one of the ways that you can increase interest in your site, widen your base of visitors, and add to your subscribers. Try offering things like calendar pages, sample page layouts, copyright-free photos or images, vector-based graphics, illustrations, tools for business owners, and so on.

People love free stuff and many are willing to subscribe to an email list to get the free content. This is a great way to quickly build up an email list that you can use for other promotions, such as discounts and coupons.

Keep the freebies relevant and useful. Certainly, you can create freebies that will help attract potential clients. For example, you could create a free WordPress blog template for business owners, or a social icon pack for business owners to use on their website. However, you can also create free material for other designers, which will help to boost your name within the design community. You could even take it to another level and create an industry report or some useful software, such as a website color palette creator. Get creative with your freebies and be sure to promote them properly.

Giveaways

If you can buy it in bulk and have your logo printed on it, then you can consider giving it away! Pens, stationary, office supplies, t-shirts, house wares, key tags, bags and totes, water bottles, Frisbees, can holders or koozies, stadium cups, mouse pads, hacky sacks, and letter openers are just the tip of a large iceberg that can have your logo on it! Again, the key here is to try and tailor your imprinted items with your target audience. Do marketing executives need hacky sacks? Ask yourself whom you are trying to impress. Then ask yourself what sort of item they are likely to use on a regular basis. When properly done, giveaways will increase your traffic and promote your brand.

Can you consider holding a contest? You would be amazed at how little the prize needs to be! Contest prizes can include things like magazine subscriptions, cash, and gift certificates. As little as \$50 can loosen up a person's determination to remain aloof and anonymous. Offering a chance to win something is a great tactic to encourage people to sign up for your RSS feed—more ways to increase your networking! You can even offer your own product or service as the prize.

Discounts and Coupons

For whatever reason, people love a deal! It's a universal truth—everyone wants to feel that they got a special offer. People love the sensation of getting more products for less money. If you decide to stimulate sales by giving clients the taste of a bargain, make sure your offer is tailored to your audience. In the case of multi-million dollar corporation clients, this may mean percent-off discounts that encourage early sign-ups, quick decisions, or imply that a certain time-frame will be cheaper than another. For example, if you know that a particular month brings less work for you, try offering 10-20% off certain fees for jobs during this time. You'll help fill your calendar during a slow time and you'll open the possibility of drawing in new cli-

ents. In another example, from time to time you may meet a client that has problems committing to a decision; a time-sensitive discount may be all that's needed to inspire clients to act.

If you're trying to increase interest from the general population (say, in business card design or brochures for local organizations) try coupons. Direct mail coupon distributors are a method often used to increase local clients. Offering a deal may encourage individuals or small businesses to use your services. This group of potential clients is often nervous about the costs of using a professional—they may believe that they should save money by using do-it-yourself or amateur products; coupons can peak their interest, and bring in an entirely new variety of patrons. Offering a “secret” discount or a discount for locals only is another technique for courting jobs from within your community.

29. Design Galleries

Designers love going to design galleries for inspiration, and business owners go to galleries to find designers for their projects. This is why it is essential to use this marketing channel to its fullest potential. Luckily for designers, there are tons of galleries on which you can get featured. These galleries will drive traffic and backlinks to your main website, along with building up the brand awareness of your design business.

There are galleries specifically for both graphic design and web design, and most of them are easy to use. Just signup and submit your BEST work. In general, the web design galleries link directly to a live website. For these galleries, you will usually submit your personal website design to the galleries, rather than client designs. So, it's usually a one-shot submission for web design galleries—at least until you do a redesign of your site! The graphic design galleries are a bit more in-depth, and you can submit different designs as often as you create them.

Graphic designers can submit to web design galleries too if you have a really nice custom website design for your business. When submitting to design galleries, use your name and website URL whenever possible—this will maximize the number of people who see your name, and it will help increase your traffic. You will be surprised at how many people search for designers to hire using design galleries as a starting point!

Again, be careful to submit only your best work. Furthermore, try not to submit too often. Many of the sites are moderated; submitting excessively could annoy the moderator and result in you being banned. A few examples of great design galleries are [Behance](#), [Creattica](#), [Deviantart](#) and [CSS Drive](#).

Keep an eye out, because new galleries pop up often. Take advantage of design galleries because your competition surely will!

30. Design News Sites

The concept behind using news sites in your marketing campaign is simple—you publish posts on your blog or site and try to get them featured on the news sites. This technique is a great way to increase traffic and backlinks. The web is full of design news sites, but don't limit yourself to design news alone! Getting on general news sites, like Digg.com, can be even better. Forwarding and promoting content on design news sites and other news sites, via social media and more, is simply a great way to get the word around. This is why it's so important to have a blog for your design business—it will allow you to publish all kinds of relevant content quickly and easily!

News sites often incorporate user voting, which is another reason why it's so important to network with other designers and business owners—to come together and help promote each other's quality content! The bigger the network of friends you have, the better your marketing efforts will be when there is a social element involved, such as voting.

So, get that blog up and start publishing content on a regular basis so you can take advantage of this unique marketing tactic. It will be a great source of traffic, if used correctly. You can find an extensive list of design news sites in Free Bonus 2 – Design Resource MEGA List.

31. Design Blogs

Blogs are dominating the web, and the design community is no exception. There are thousands and thousands of great graphic and web design related blogs that can provide opportunities for promoting your business. However, there's no reason to stop there—you can promote your business on a wide variety of non-design blogs as well. For example, consider contacting marketing blogs and asking them to post about a discount you are offering on your services in creating or setting up blogs. You could contact small business blogs and hold a giveaway where you redesign a business's website or logo for free—this can help you get your name out. Design blogs can be great if you get interviewed or have your work showcased in a designer spotlight post. The more fame, the more business you will get! Almost any niche can work if you just take some time to think about the target audience and how they could use and benefit from your design service.

How You Can Benefit From Blogs

In general, blogs help you in three main ways—three times more reasons for trying to get mentioned on as many blogs as possible!

Traffic: Most blogs will already have traffic coming in and usually have a subscriber base. This means if they post about your blog, it's likely to send you direct traffic. This is a great way to get your name out and get new business. Imagine a small business blog with 10,000 subscribers seeing a new post about your affordable small business web design service! Even a blog with 50 subscribers will benefit you in the long run. Just make sure the blog is relevant, actively posting, and has an audience that would benefit from your design services.

Backlinks: As I mentioned in the SEO section, backlinks help increase your search engine rankings when used properly. The more backlinks your site has from relevant blogs, the better. When blogs post about your business, they will usually include a few backlinks to your site, which will help you increase your organic rankings. These increased rankings for your targeted search terms will help send more highly targeted organic traffic to your site, resulting in more steady business.

Branding: Branding is the third bonus of getting your business featured on blogs. Basically, you want as many people as possible to read your name and see your logo. Always try and have the blog owners use your brand name and post your logo image whenever possible. Repetition is important in branding, and over time, people will begin to recognize your business more and more, especially if you target certain niches and industries particularly well.

Establishing Communication with Blog Owners

When contacting blog owners, personalize your emails and take some time to know who you are contacting. Use their names if possible, and avoid sending cookie cutter emails. Chances are, you are not the first person to try and advertise on their blog; many bloggers are very busy and only have time to read the more serious emails.

Let them know upfront that you are interested in advertising. Let them know what types of promotions interest you, and then ask them about pricing for those options. Below is a sample email that you might send when contacting a blog owner.

Dear [Blogger Name],

I recently came across your blog, www.blogname.com, and was interested in becoming a sponsor. [Your business name] offers web and/or graphic design services, and I think your readers could benefit from what we have to offer. You can view our portfolio here: www.yoursite.com. We have been in business for x amount of time and have worked with clients such as this guy, that guy, and the other guy.

We were interested in several forms of advertising and have a list, below, of what we had in mind. If any of these options are available, please let us know the pricing for each. We are also open to any suggestions or creative advertising ideas you may have.

- *Review of our service*
- *Case study*
- *Guest post*
- *Giveaway or discount promotion*
- *Exchanging links*
- *Anything else you think of*

We look forward to hearing back from you soon!

Sincerely,

Your Name

The easiest way to contact blogs is to organize blogs niche by niche and then create a list of blogs for each niche. For example, you might start by creating a list of small business blogs and go down your list one by one, until you have contacted them all. Be sure to sort your lists alphabetically so you don't send the same blogger multiple emails. Whenever you add new blogs to your list, sort as well, and delete any duplicates. When going down the list, it might also make sense to record other details, such as the person's name, email, and when you last contacted them. This can make it much easier to re-contacting the same bloggers later on.

Don't forget to keep your budget in mind; most blogs will expect some sort of compensation, free services, or products in exchange for advertising on their blog. Prices will obviously vary, so consider this factor if you are contacting larger blogs—they are likely to have very high advertising rates. It may make sense to start by targeting smaller or newer blogs and then contact bigger blogs later, once you have a bigger budget.

Many bloggers also have strong opinions about what forms of advertising they will accept. For example, one blog owner may allow you to do a giveaway, but they won't exchange links. Another blog might only be willing to do a review and nothing else. Don't be pushy with what you want, and try to respect the blogger's wishes. As I mentioned, it's best to send them your ideas upfront and see which ones they accept.

If you want your home design business to become successful quickly, establishing relationships with bloggers is going to be essential. Try and get mentioned on as many blogs as possible, and always keep in contact with the blog owners with whom you work.

32. Online Press Releases

A press release is written communication that reports on an event, circumstance, or occurrence. Press releases are different from news articles, which contain facts compiled by journalists and are published as news content for a particular media outlet. In comparison, press releases are generated and submitted by businesses, organizations, and individuals. The purpose of a press release is to bring certain information to the attention of the press, in the hopes that it will motivate journalists to report on the information—passing the “news” along and giving it more authority.

Through the Internet, the distinction between news articles and press releases is becoming less defined. Traditionally, media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and magazines were not directly accessible—it was necessary for marketers to present press releases in the hopes that their “story” would be picked up. However, the Internet presents such a variety of publishing opportunities! You can easily publish your own “news” stories on your own blog! Still, it’s an enormous advantage to be mentioned in traditional media outlets, and press releases are still one of the best ways to achieve the distinction of traditional media coverage. There are a number of online press release submission and distribution sites. These sites are an excellent way to gain exposure for your activities—they will present your press release to media outlets and, through online outlets, also give you a chance to present your information “direct to readership.”

Distribution Sites

PRLog is an example of one distribution site; best of all, it’s free! PRLog offers a search engine optimized dedicated webpage and PDF page for each submission. Their press releases have clickable links, can include an image of your work, include your business logo, and can be listed in multiple categories, by multiple tags or keywords. In their submission process, you have the ability to preview before your final submission. Your submission will generally be released the same day, but you also have the option to schedule a release up to two weeks in advance. PRLog will submit your press release to Google News and other networks. You’ll have the ability to edit or delete your press release and to view statistics on your visitors.

The Format

A press release always follows a particular format. First, your information must be written in the third person—as though a “third person” is describing an event. You disguise the source, and camouflage the fact that you present this information about yourself.

Generally, a press release should be under 500 words. Begin with an attention-grabbing headline. (Try to avoid exclamation marks—this is supposed to look like real news and not advertising.) At the beginning of your first paragraph, you’ll include the physical location (country or state, city), and the date (month, day, and year). For example, your press release may begin this way:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Grand Opening Of New Design Business (all words will be capitalized)

NEW YORK, New York (January 1, 1900) – This is where you would begin to insert your own amazingly descriptive content that would include a couple delightful paragraphs of intensely interesting newsworthy things. Remember that people are busy and you’ll need to work to get their attention. Explain why this information is something that they really want to know.

Two or three paragraphs are ideal, but your press release can be longer if needed. Your first paragraph should answer who, what, when, where, and (if applicable) why. In your second

paragraph, you'll begin to provide more detail about the basic information that you presented in the initial paragraph.

After the body of your press release, it's time for contact information and disclaimers. Online press release distributors will provide the proper format for you and give you the chance to fill in as many relevant "additional" as needed; these may include the company, business, or agency name, the name of the contact, telephone, email address, website, links, trademark information, timelines, or a company bio. Signal the end of your press release with these three characters:

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33. Direct Mail and Print Advertising

Before the dawn of the computer age, this was the mainstay of most advertising—newspapers, magazines, and direct mail were the foundation of most marketing campaigns. While we're lucky to have so many new options, there's definitely still some use for these traditional methods! Let's discuss them.

Direct Mail

Flyers, brochures, postcards, and even coupons are all a form of direct mail advertising. While this method of advertising has some costs (and they can become substantial), it's very useful under certain circumstances.

Although direct mail has gotten a bad name ("junk mail"?), it's completely possible to use this technique in a respectable and advantageous manner! One of the first tips to succeeding in direct mail marketing is to avoid any appearance of being . . . junk. You ARE a designer—make sure your design is appealing and eye-catching; you want your material to avoid the direct route to the trash can. Color will usually cost more money, but will probably also be more appealing and get more attention.

In your concept, be creative and avoid clichés and predictability. Check around to see what your competitors are doing—avoid whatever that is. You are different. You are better. Fill your material with quality copy—you don't actually want to look like you're selling something. Ideally, you will present the idea that you are providing something that your viewers need or want. Once you've given them that idea, you should answer all of the initial questions they would have about your service. Address all of these basic questions and make sure your answers stimulate their interest!

In your copy, don't be afraid to admit to any weaknesses (for example, we know that professional design costs more than clip art), but counter with the strengths of your product. Honesty builds trust. Know what you want your material to accomplish. What is the goal? Is there a call to action? Something like "Call today for a free quote!" can give a vision of the next step.

Although there's a common perception of direct mail as being unsolicited, anonymous and a poor fit for graphic design, this isn't true! You choose your mailing list and the options for mailing lists may be surprising! First, you could decide to contact a list broker. List brokers can provide you with mailing lists based on standard industrial classification codes or job titles. They'll be able to provide you with a targeted list for nearly any criteria.

Next, you could select a list based on geography and zoning demographics; if you know of a neighborhood that's cluttered with strip malls and offices, that area would make a prime target to send your info. You could also target a particular residential district; just make sure that you target the sort of services that individuals and families are more likely to use.

Finally, trade magazines, business publications, and associations may have directories that could help you create a mailing list targeting specific businesses and the individuals that make their decisions on marketing. If you have a list of this kind, consider opting for personalization in your mailings. Many mailing houses can work with you on personalizing each piece of mail.

The steps involved in a direct mail marketing campaign are fairly simple. Design your material, have it printed, choose your mailing list, and deliver your materials to a mailing house for labeling and distribution. Simple!

Print Advertising

If you happen to find yourself in the midst of an economic downturn, one benefit may be that it's a buyer's market in the world of print advertising. If advertising revenue is down, maga-

zines and newspapers may be happy to provide discounts. Don't be afraid to negotiate for a lower price on ad space. Waiting until the day before the deadline for a month's ads can give you an advantage—if there's unsold space, they may be likely to accept as much as 60% off the regular ad price. Similarly, summertime is an off-peak time for magazines; it may be another good time to negotiate for a steep discount!

Magazines sometimes offer a bulk price if you're willing to sign up for 12 months of ads. However, they may be willing to give you this price prorated per month for 2 or 3 months. Ask if they're able to let you test for a few months before you commit to a full year. Occasionally, magazines may offer free ads if you're willing to share market data with them. Some companies may also allow a "per-inquiry" fee, similar to pay per click; in this case, you would pay by the number of responses you received, not paying at all if the ad fails.

Ad-brokers are another option. Since they buy up large quantities of ad space, they might be willing and able to offer numerous benefits. Sometimes it's possible to score cheap billboard or bus board space that is open, or you may be able to arrange online ad placements for a magazine's website.

Some companies will be able to throw in "complimentary copy" or "advertorials"—these are newspaper articles that feature your business. It's also possible to get regional ads in some national publications, since some national magazines have regional editions. These regional ads will only be distributed in your local edition, but those readers will see your ad in a national magazine! Impressive!

34. Guerrilla Marketing

Guerrilla marketing is a very popular type of marketing, especially for businesses on a low budget. The theory behind guerilla marketing is to invent really unique marketing ideas and target people when they least expect it. For example, you could go to a high traffic store, like Apple, and leave your website open on the computer screen so that it's seen by the many people who visit the store. How big or small you go is up to you. The possibilities for guerrilla marketing are only limited by your own imagination.

Try sitting down with friends or colleagues and brainstorming some wacky and creative marketing ideas. Try not to think about conventional advertising, but do think about where you could find your target audience and how you can advertise your business to them when they least expect it. The problem with conventional marketing is that people tune out things like banners and TV commercials. Guerrilla marketing solves this problem—taking people by surprise and actually getting their attention.

Guerrilla marketing catches people off guard, leaving them with a strong impression and memory of what happened and, hopefully, your name. Just remember to keep it legal and keep it positive! You want people to walk away with a good impression of your business, one that will inspire them to research you further and—with any luck—get them to talk about you!

35. Viral Marketing

Viral marketing has been around for a long time but has mostly been associated with word of mouth, until now. The Internet has given viral marketing new life and a whole new meaning, with many online marketers and businesses now doing everything they can to go viral.

I am sure you have seen those YouTube videos that have been seen millions and millions of times, or certain images that seem to be everywhere online. Fortunately, it doesn't take millions of views to be a viral success, and it doesn't take a lot of money either. Many viral videos are based on reality, or they can be very low budget productions that are just really funny and strike the hearts of many, many people.

Videos, images, and text tend to be the most commonly viral forms of media, so I would suggest trying all three. Similar to guerrilla marketing, you want to come up with very creative ideas and surprise people in a good way, but you will be using more common forms of media that are easy to share over the web, such as video.

Whatever you create, keep in mind that it needs to appeal to a general, mass audience, and it should be easy to share over popular social channels such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and so on. When creating viral content, never lose focus of your end goal, which is to get your name out and get more clients. So whatever you do needs to make sense and tie back to your business somehow. Creativity is good, but why waste your time if you aren't going to get something out of it?

Experimentation is the key to viral marketing. I would suggest studying what types of media have gone viral, and try and figure out why. This can give you better insight into what makes something a viral success and will help increase the chances of your own creations going viral.

Lastly, keep in mind that it's hard for anything to go viral unless it's given a little push. Don't expect to just put something on your blog and hope for it to catch fire. You will need to get the ball rolling, and that can cost money; however, if it takes off, it will be worth it many times over.

Chapter 5

Managing Clients and Day to Day
Operations

36. Essentials of Organization

There is no way to keep your clients happy unless you know what they want and you deliver it on schedule. How can you provide what you promised if you can't remember what it was? In order to manage your clients and your day-to-day operations, you'll need to have top notch organization—there will be a tremendous amount and variety of areas requiring your attention and supervision. Let's take a detailed look at these areas.

Project Info

Organizing and storing your business information is VITAL! Keep the basic info on each client clear, accurate, and readily available—it should be effortless for you to locate what you need. Know where things are, so information is always at your fingertips! You must be the master of your files. There are going to be records and there is going to be paperwork! Who are your clients? How can you reach them? What do they do? What do they want? What did you say you'd do for them, by what time, and for how much money?

From hardcopy proposals, contracts, and business contact information to thumbnails and brainstorming sessions, things will need to have their place. The only way to stay on top of organization is to have a good system established—one that accommodates your needs and suits your personality.

Your project info will probably be divided between hardcopy paperwork and computer files. For the hardcopy files, store them in something that presents its contents clearly and is tremendously easy to access. Anything that leads to opening, rummaging, piling or compressing is ultimately creating extra work for you. Extra work is bad. This is what we want to avoid. Label your files clearly. Watch for anything that requires action, needs entering or filing, must be read and/or returned, or is urgent—keep these things in plain sight.

For your computer files, there's no shortage of software that can manage your project information and timeline. [Basecamp](#) is a great management solution that can help you share files, assign tasks, centralize feedback, and manage clients. Along a similar vein, [Dropbox](#) is a product that allows you to synchronize your files online and across your various computers, as well as between collaborators or with clients.

You may also consider [ProofHQ](#)—an excellent option for work at home designers! It can expedite the process of having your proofs approved—one of the biggest setbacks in the timeline of any project! ProofHQ will allow you to create proofs from whatever program you use normally; it works with any file type. Your reviewers can easily view, make comments, and edit the proofs from their location—without the need for emails, faxes or couriers. You can also open a real-time dialog between you and your clients and colleagues—helping to limit delays and avoid confusion!

Project Timelines

Experts would agree that the vast majority of missed deadlines and skewed timelines are due to the clients themselves. As frantic as clients may seem about their project deadlines, they are often notoriously late in giving feedback, approval, materials, or direction. In another example, the more people, departments, or contractors that the client involves in a project, the more difficult and time-consuming it will become. As more people are included, there will be more differences of opinions—leading to more extensive revisions and negotiations.

If you are dependent on other contractors, such as photographers or copywriters, remember that your project timeline will need to include enough time to coordinate with them and accommodate their schedules—the same is true if you must work with in-house departments. It may be wise to forewarn your client about the effect of extensive collaboration on a project's timeline.

Managing Multiple Projects

The organization of your project scheduling needs to be impeccable—particularly when you have multiple projects running simultaneously (and that's a great spot to be in, financially)! There's no way around this fact, and there's no way for your business to succeed unless you are disciplined in this field. Many areas will need constant attention; you'll need to have a clear method for tracking your meetings, return calls, conference calls, proposals, contracts, billing, and the deadlines and timelines for projects. One of the most important aspects of being your own boss is to know what is happening and when it will occur.

Whether you use software on your computer or phone, a wall calendar, desk calendar, or daily planner, you'll need something that shows your schedule and your immediate deadlines for each project, as well as the subtleties and big picture for the various clients. Although it's a tall order, choosing and implementing the right organizational plan here is CRITICAL! A functional scheduling method will take the pressure off of you—managing your schedule for you effectively and allowing you to focus on getting the tasks done.

Google Calendar is an easy way to manage multiple projects and coordinate with clients and vendors. Multiple clients or projects can be color-coded on a central calendar, while each having specific pages. You have the option to invite anyone to view and contribute, and the schedule can be viewed and edited no matter where you are located.

With any luck, you've already got a wonderful system in place for keeping track of client information, individual projects, project timelines, and for managing multiple projects. All you need now are some clients to put your organizational system to the test!

37. Creating Proposals

Creating effective proposals is a critical part of increasing your client base, acquiring projects, expanding your business, and generating more money! A design business proposal is basically a sales pitch. Your proposal might be a client-generated Request for Proposal (RFP)—where you will compete with other designers. An organization may ask you alone for a proposal, or you may be sending an unsolicited, self-generated proposal.

Self-generated proposals are an effective way to gain new business. Not only is this a strong sign of your capabilities, professionalism, and motivation towards a client, but creating a proposal specifically for a particular client gives you the opportunity to really analyze a company's needs and to clearly establish the services that you could provide for them.

Overall, a proposal is a way for you to obtain a job by negotiating the variety of particulars all at once. In this single document, you'll be showing the client that you know and understand their business goals, that you understand their problem or need, that you have a clear plan for solving that problem or filling that need, and you'll explain what you will need to complete the task—in time, supplies, and in money. Ideally, your proposal should be as detailed and accurate as possible—you should present a complete and realistic picture of the working experience that the client will have with you, including a description of any possible glitches.

Essentially, a proposal is similar to a resume in two ways. First, you are working towards a job and presenting yourself as the best candidate. Second, although a proposal should contain certain general information, every individual has the opportunity to customize this information in a way that impresses the client and sets the candidate (you) apart from the competition. Proposals generally follow a certain format. Most include the following components:

1. Your proposal should begin with a front cover or title page listing the proposal recipient's name, the project name, your company name, your company logo, address, and date.
2. Next, you'll need to include a copyright statement. There are a variety of wordings that you could choose, but basically, you're trying to protect your intellectual property. The company should be reminded that it is unethical for them to use or share your ideas without your permission.
3. Include an executive summary that shows your understanding of their company's objectives. Research your client! Understand their company goals, culture, operating systems, and preferences.
4. Provide an assessment of the company's current situation, with its pros and cons. Be kind and diplomatic in describing what is wrong—avoid stepping on anyone's toes. The person reading your proposal may be the one who set up their current situation.
5. Describe your target audience, if applicable.
6. Give a detailed description of the project goals. Explain your concept clearly and succinctly—the easier it is to understand, the easier it will be for them to embrace. Don't be afraid to state the obvious; it's better to show your understanding, rather than working too hard for sophistication and ending up looking like you missed the point.
7. Outline your creative strategy, illustrating how you'll reach the goals.
8. Explain your technical strategy, illustrating what technology you will use.
9. Provide details about your implementation process. This will pave the way for your timeline—giving your client an idea of what steps are involved and what to expect. Your implementation process should include explanations of the stages of consultation, design development, production, and delivery.
10. List your estimated budget.

11. Present your fee schedule. Usually, your total payment will be divided into a third upfront, one third upon completion, and a third at some specified mid-point; however, you should feel free to negotiate whatever makes you feel comfortable.
12. Give a detailed development schedule and/or timeline.
13. Finish with a conclusion that includes your biography and contact details.

Your timeline may be one of the trickiest aspects of a proposal, since it can easily become a point of contention in a project. Clients are often emotional about their deadlines but may not understand how they are critical in moving a project along on schedule. Again, most contractors would agree that the clients themselves are often the weak link in the process! The timeline in the proposal is preliminary, but it's still a good idea for you to take the time to educate your client about the possible pitfalls. Be sure to give yourself enough time to receive feedback, to work revisions, and coordinate with other contractors, if need be.

It's definitely worthwhile to create a generic proposal and then customize it based on the individual project and the exact client needs. Larger companies can delegate this important step to a particular department, salesperson, or vendor—however, as an individual it's a great idea to save time and effort by having a customizable document ready to go! There are countless business proposal templates available and many of them are industry-specific. These can be a good investment if you're just getting started or need to manage and submit multiple proposals in a short amount of time. However, be careful not to stay generic!

38. Closing the Deal

You've sent off your proposal—now what? It's easy to wait and assume that the client will call you soon to accept, but is that wise? No. Running your own business requires a wide variety of skills—you'll need to shift away from your design skills and utilize some sales techniques in order to move your potential clients from the proposal to the contract.

Although it's possible to leave the proposal and the decision-making completely in the hands of your prospective client, it's not the best way to secure the situation. Certainly, you don't want to make a nuisance of yourself, harassing clients with calls; however, it is professional and appropriate to follow-up. It may be a good idea to set a schedule for follow-ups (for example, two or three days after the proposal was received, and a week after that date). Writing these guidelines into your calendar and applying them whenever you write a proposal can ensure that you're actively involved, but relieve you of the hassle of remembering and deciding if or when to make contact.

However frequently you decide to make contact, it is important to maintain a presence. It's easier to put your proposal at the bottom of the drawer if you've disappeared. Use an email, letter, or phone call to follow-up with some of these questions: "Did you receive my proposal?" "Are there any questions that I can answer?" "Do you have any concerns about what I have proposed?" "How can I make this ideal for you?" Be a good listener. Hear or decipher what reasons they have against your proposal—solve or answer their doubts. Is there another proposal that looks good to them? Why does it look good? Is there anything you can do to match or exceed your competitor?

You should assume that you may need to revise your proposal. Maybe the work won't pay off for you, but it does give you an opportunity to show your willingness to meet the client's needs. Your potential client may ask that you re-work, revise, or re-write your proposal to adjust the focus, add or remove aspects, or to include certain conditions. It's all part of the bargaining process, and if you do it well, you'll get the job!

In sales, it's great if you can move a customer immediately from the proposal to the contract; however, this can't always be the case. In the end, there are two things you need to know—what level of pressure will motivate your client and what level of pressure you feel comfortable delivering. If you know your client, it will be easier for you to know what to expect—do they need time to feel comfortable making a decision, or will the extra time only give them an opportunity to become less decisive? Are they dependable and motivated—giving you a timeframe in which they will make a decision, or are they notoriously flakey—probably forgetting they even requested the proposals?

If you've had previous sales experience, you'll have a good idea about what level of involvement works for you. If this aspect of the business isn't your strongest point, you may need to get used to broadening your comfort zone. In sales, it is essential that you feel comfortable about what you're doing—if you're pushing things, the client will hear or feel your uncertainty and it will work against you. If you are a hands-off person, you have the option to leave the decision entirely to the client. Do a follow-up letter or an email or two. However, if you feel comfortable being a little more aggressive, there are a lot of options. For example, you could create a sense of urgency—offering discounts or bonuses to reward or encourage speedy decision-making.

As another example, you may use competition as an incentive—listing the successes of other businesses in their industry to encourage them to improve. Businesses (even non-profit organizations) are constantly aware of their competition. They know their own client-base and are concerned about losing them. They know how they rate in their industry. Knowing critical information about that industry, the client's goals, or about their competitors can help you motivate them to move forward with your proposal. A good way to maintain a presence AND utilize competition as a motivation is by passing along industry specific information. Relevant press releases, test findings, or trade magazine articles can all have a positive effect.

Similarly, feel free to send client testimonials. It's a great idea to pass along information that supports your own successes or shows how other clients benefited from your services. Data that supports your achievements is an excellent addition!

Overall, the best sales pitch is one that makes the customer see how this is good for them; the worst sales pitch is one that obviously serves the salesperson. Distance yourself from thoughts about how great the job would be for you or about how much you'd like the money—this motivation will come through in your communication. Always focus on the client—show them how this opportunity helps THEM more than it helps you.

39. Contracts

Now that you've won over the client, you'll need to prepare your contract. If the proposal was like a first date, the contract is like a pre-nuptial agreement. You'll be telling the client exactly what you are obligated to do for them and how much they will pay you; however, it's also very important that your contract contains the information that will protect YOU in case the relationship turns sour.

Contract Template

You'll need to have a contract template. If your business thrives, you'll be writing a lot of these! You can write one on your own, but there are also tons of design business contract templates available online. If you choose to use a pre-existing template, it will only take about 20 minutes to read through one and add your company information. This is a great starting point for designers who are just beginning to work freelance or for people who need a contract fast!

At its simplest form, the contract provides the specific information about a project—what you will do for the client, what they must provide for you, how they will pay you, and the schedule by which the project milestones will occur. It will be signed by both you and the client—legally binding you both to the agreement. The basic information isn't so terribly complicated. You could probably write a decent summary on a napkin and have it signed. Unfortunately, the contract has to work on another layer as well—it must include a broad spectrum of inconvenient details and predict unwanted possibilities, such as protecting you from cancellation, non-payment, and liability, among many other things.

If you are more experienced, you may already have some ideas about the situations that can occur and that you'd like to avoid. If you've been in a bad deal before, then you're painfully aware of that possibility and you know, personally, to always include clauses in your contract that can protect you from that circumstance. Ideally, however, you'd already have that condition written into your contract, and you would be protected from it before there's ever a chance that you could be burned.

Therefore, it's a good idea to sample a variety of contracts or templates—each one will have certain things in common, and viewing a sampling of contracts will give you an idea of the sort of clauses and provisions that are standard. Viewing a sampling of contracts will also give you the best picture of the terms or conditions that you can request and the protections that are most important to you.

Contract Format

In general, the introductory material of a contract will display your company logo and contact information, as well as the client name. The contract should include the date, a purchase order number or job number, and who commissioned the project.

For the meat of the contract, you will describe the assignment in as much detail as possible. You might consider including any of the following list that apply: the type of job, the size of any final artwork, the number of pages, the sections and features of a website. No matter what type of job you are undertaking, it is very important to include the number of versions of a design and the number of rounds of revisions that you are willing to provide. Placing a finite limit on versions and revisions will help protect you from getting caught in an endless design cycle with an indecisive client.

Your contract should include a detailed list of the materials that the client needs to supply—including the date each item is needed. You will also need to include a detailed production schedule, which will include milestones, due dates, and fees due. Again, it is best to be as specific as possible, and it is a good idea to include a section on events that will affect delivery, such as author's alterations, third party delays, or even catastrophic events.

Use your contract to inform the client of their responsibilities and the deadlines that they must meet to keep the timeline on target. You should give detailed information about what will happen if the client doesn't hold up their end of the timeline. For instance, what happens to your timeline if the client is negligent with authorizations or material? Even worse, what if the client is unable to determine the direction of a project and it gets put on hold indefinitely? It's a good idea to build in clauses that can ensure you're paid for your work, even if the client bails.

This portion of the contract will end with an estimated due date and the estimated expenses. The expenses section should be carefully considered. You will want to include your estimated costs, but you should also detail miscellaneous expenses such as stock photography, extra consultations or updates that may be billed hourly, travel costs, shipping and handling, printing, or web hosting.

Your estimated expenses should give a clear summary of your payment terms and schedule. You may choose to have some portion of your fees paid as a deposit; you may have your total fees paid in quarters or thirds broken up over the milestones of a project. If you charge interest on overdue payments, or will stop work if payment is not received, outline these preferences in your contract.

One of the most important clauses in your contract will be the "Kill Fee" or cancellation fee. You must stipulate that you will be paid a set amount in the event that the project is cancelled for some reason. If you don't include this, there's no guarantee that you'll be compensated for your effort up to that point. Don't risk working for months but losing out on the pay!

Legal Terms and Conditions

The contract will end with the legal information, and this can get substantial! You may want or need to have some or all of the following disclaimers in your contract:

- Payment, default, and billable expenses
- Estimates
- Client alterations or agreement modifications
- Acceptance procedures
- Cancellation or assignment termination
- Ownership and return of artwork
- Copy protection
- Credit lines
- Releases
- Code of fair practice
- Warranty of originality
- Limitation of liability
- Dispute resolution and legal fees

One of the very best resources available is the [AIGA](#) (the American Institute of Graphic Arts) "Standard Form of Agreement for Design Services," which is available on their website. This form is created in modules that can be added to a designer's own documents. The association assumes that designers will have their own style preferences in the creation of their proposals and contracts. You create your own documents, using your own format, font, and graphics; the legal information is written specifically for designers and organized so that it can be placed into your own business document formatting. Their "Basic Terms and Conditions" and "Intellectual Property Provisions" modules are intended for all design projects; however, they have specific terms and conditions for print, interactive, and environmental designs, as well—these modules can be added to the designer's document if they are needed.

Pay particular attention to questions about the ownership of your designs and artwork. It will be your decision whether you retain ownership or turn it over to the client. Remember, if the client has ownership of the material, you should make certain that your contract gains you the right to use your work for your own promotion and in your portfolio. Specify the amount and type of examples of the final artwork that you need for your own professional use. As another

condition in this section, you might need to determine who has ownership of preliminary design work.

One of the most critical disclaimers in your contract will be the limitation of liability. You need to protect your business and your personal assets in the event that a client brings a lawsuit against you. This sort of event is rare, but can be devastating; it's best to cover yourself ahead of time!

I overwhelmingly recommend hiring a lawyer to run over any contract template that you intend to use. I know it can be intimidating and seem like a pricey luxury. Check out Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts—this organization connects lawyers and artists. If you have a membership with any professional organization, you may have legal services or discounts through that connection. Before any legal consultation, be sure that you have your questions and information thoroughly researched and documented. Being prepared will limit the duration (and expense) of your visit. Overall, paying a little to have your contract evaluated will be well worth the expense, considering the financial damage that a poorly-planned contract could invite.

40. Getting Paid

Yes, you love to design, but we'd all be lying to ourselves if we didn't admit that the money's mighty important! Unfortunately, working as a freelancer means that you may come upon a share of clients that are irresponsible about settling their bill with you. Whether they're dishonest, disorganized, or cash-strapped, it can be frustrating to complete a job and then find you have to chase down your pay! Happily, there are ways to help make it easier for you to get the income that you deserve.

Invoicing

For your invoices, you may consider software that can do all your billing for you! Small business billing software can dramatically reduce the time you spend creating invoices. QuickBooks is one option. QuickBooks will allow you to organize all your finances in one place, create invoices and track sales, see where you can trim expenses, view financial reports and much, much more.

PayPal has an extremely convenient online invoicing service. Not only will it email your invoice, but it has a "pay now" button that allows your clients to pay you instantly with a bank account or credit card. The option to pay or be paid instantly is a huge advantage.

You can produce your own invoices, if you prefer. Of course, there are a wide variety of invoicing templates available on the web; you can shop around for one that suits your needs. Invoices can be as simple or elaborate as you would like. The basic contents are fairly simple. Here is a list of the information you will need:

- Your business name and contact information
- The name and contact information of the business that you are billing
- Tracking information such as an invoice number, client number, and date
- A short description of the work performed
- The amount of hours or bulk services
- Your pay rate
- Additional charges, such as materials, outsourced labor, interest fees, or taxes
- The date that payment is due
- Any terms and conditions that apply to payment

Invoices are usually "Net 30," meaning that the payment is due within 30 days of the date on the invoice. (Some clients may interpret this as 30 days from their receipt of the invoice.) Often, design projects may be "Net 15." It is reasonable to expect payment on a design project earlier, since a designer may need funds to start the project or to pay the invoices of other vendors that are collaborating on the project.

If you print and send hardcopy invoices, you may consider sending two copies to the client. This gives them one to file in their records and one to return with their payment. Enclosing a self-addressed envelope is another time-saving courtesy that your clients will appreciate. Anything that simplifies the process for your clients is worth it—you want it to be easy for them to pay you.

Interest and Credit

It is standard for designers to charge interest on overdue payments. Usually, 1.5% of the overdue balance is added per month—this adds up to 18% per year. Add the interest on a line of the reminder invoice. Any payments made should be applied first to the interest, and then to the oldest balance.

If you have a good relationship with a client, you may win yourself some goodwill by extending credit to them. Obviously, this option is only for clients that you trust. In general, it's a better idea to make it known in your proposal and your contract that you reserve the right to cease

work on a project if the client does not make payments on time. The more complicated a payment arrangement becomes, the more administrative work you will create for yourself.

Non-payment

Hopefully, you won't find yourself needing the information in this section; however, let's discuss some of the options you have, should you find yourself dealing with a deadbeat client. In some cases, it may be difficult to reach the person who is responsible for writing checks and issuing payments. Especially in a larger corporation, you may find that you get the "run-around" and that no one feels any sense of urgency or responsibility. It can be maddening to deal with people who have a casual attitude about you receiving your money—you can feel certain that they would be a little more concerned if THEIR paycheck was stuck in the pipeline! A campaign of phone calls, emails, letters, and even personal visits will be your first set of options.

If you suspect your client is suffering from financial hardship (rather than just disinterest or disorganization), offering a manageable repayment schedule is one way to get results. Keep in mind, the more complicated a situation becomes, the more work it will be for you to keep track of it. However, oftentimes, a little bit of money coming in over a longer period of time is better than no money coming in at all. It's easy to fall into anger and resentment when you're dealing with this situation. Making arrangements that your client can manage will help you keep the business relationship moving forward in a positive way.

A debt collection agency is a good alternative if you aren't having any success on your own. When your collection efforts begin to eat up too much of your time and you're owed a sum that you can't overlook, you should consider turning the debt over to an agency. For their fee, debt collectors will take between 20% and 30% of what they recover. However, they have the advantage of doing this full time (they are NOT actually trying to make a living as a freelance designer), and they have the ability to report your deadbeat client to a credit agency—this threat carries some weight.

You have the option to sue for money that is owed to you, but it's a very tricky ordeal. First, avoid threatening legal action unless you really mean to go through with it. Habitual offenders may be familiar with the laws and comfortable with how much they can push the system. If you're serious, you'll need to do some research on the options in your area. The laws will vary based on your location and the location of your client. If both of you are in the same general vicinity, you may have a pretty straightforward experience in small claims court; however, there will be specific rules determining which cases can be filed—for instance, there may be a limit on the amount of money that is owed to you. If your client is in a different country, you may need to completely abandon any hope of using the legal system. You probably don't want to consider hiring a lawyer unless you're owed a substantial amount of money, and if your client is delinquent because they are broke, no amount of legal intervention is going to create money that they can use to pay you.

Whatever debt collection techniques you decide to use, you should probably read through the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act. This document offers a description of the fine line between collection attempts and harassment—so, being forewarned will give you the knowledge you need to keep your mediation moving in an entirely blameless way.

41. Customer Service

It may be easy to assume that your work is limited to what is written on your contract—in a way, that is true; however, to really meet your clients' needs, you'll need to add an extra layer into the experience. Customer service should be a philosophy that you will use as you gain clients or work through a project, instead of only something that you offer after a project is completed.

Correspondence

Be prompt, dependable, and professional with all of your communication! Emails, phone calls, feedback or return paperwork should all be dealt with as quickly as possible. If you need to, set aside a particular time of the day that you can devote entirely to correspondence. If there aren't any return calls or emails waiting, you can use that time in another way—like generating new clients!

There's nothing worse than a person that never returns your email or your phone call. It gives a clear message that the person doesn't care. This is NOT the impression that you want to give your clients! Keep in mind that clients may develop urgent needs or last minute projects—these situations can easily take over your schedule, leaving other tasks at the bottom of your priorities. A client will appreciate your willingness to assist them with a special situation; however, try to keep on top of your regular communication with other clients, even during unique circumstances. It's simply not professional to leave people hanging, no matter what the reason.

The Big Picture

Don't neglect master planning for your clients. Obviously, you want to perform perfectly at the tasks that you are asked to complete, but you want to go above and beyond—this means analyzing the big picture once in awhile. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the next step in this client relationship?
- How well are things going—timelines met, budgets maintained, profits earned?
- What does this client want?
- What services would benefit this organization?
- What does this business need in the future?

You want to make sure that each client's long-term goals are met, and these questions will help you ensure that you're doing your best. Work these large-scale considerations into your schedule as needed. Analyzing, understanding, and predicting your clients' needs can help you generate additional work for yourself, while helping the clients reach their objectives. Everyone wins! Including these concepts in your scheduling will ensure that you're doing all you can for each client, as well as maximizing your OWN potential for growth.

Client Relationships

Consider software to help you manage your client relationships! Highrise is a program that will help you organize and direct your client communications and obligations. It will help you track your clients' needs and maintain contacts. It will keep track of your proposals and your pending deals, organize overlapping projects, and document your calls, meetings, and follow-ups! Highrise will also give you the ability to make detailed notes about your clients' preferences, habits, and goals. Programs like this one will simplify your customer service schedule—allowing you to excel in your client relationships without draining time away from your designing!

One of the best ways to give excellent customer service is to deliver what you promise! With organization and attention, you'll NEVER have to make a lame excuse for why you dropped the ball. Ideally, your clients will never need to call you about emergencies, repairs, or complaints; however, good customer service implies that any problems are solved quickly. You'll impress your clients if you treat problems with grace, alacrity, and professionalism.

We tend to think of customer service as something that's needed only when things go wrong. However, if you are prompt, courteous, and professional in every interaction with your clients, you'll be way ahead of the game. Satisfied clients are the best advertising!

Chapter 6

Expansion and the Future of Your
Design Business

42. Keeping in Touch With Clients

Keeping in touch with your clients is going to be essential to long-term success. The key is to turn any new clients into life-long contacts. There's no better way to get work than by having an ongoing relationship with people who have used your services in the past and will need them again. Ideally, your relationship with existing clients will create a steady stream of work, without costing you the time and effort of gaining new clients.

One of the essentials of keeping in touch with clients is good record keeping. At the very least, your records should have detailed contact information. However, it's also a good idea to keep information about the clients' business, the needs of that business, and the projects that you have completed for them. Your records should also show when you were last in touch with the client and when you're scheduled to make contact again. It's wise to keep track of which methods and techniques you used in your correspondence—you're not going to impress anyone by recycling the same form-letter email over and over.

Work on keeping in regular contact with everyone on your list. I discussed increased conversions as this concept relates to your webpage; the same philosophy applies to your contact list. Getting a larger volume of work out of your existing client base is infinitely easier than finding and courting new clients. (Not that we wouldn't like new clients too . . .)

It's a good idea to shop around for creative contact ideas. The best forms of contact will provide something that your clients need or want. Ideally, you'll remind them about your services and abilities in a way that doesn't at all look like you're begging for work—the business equivalent of the “thinking of you” card. They'll appreciate what you're forwarding, offering, providing, or mentioning. They'll be grateful, and they'll remember how great it is to work with you—oh, and the fact that they forgot that they needed a designer right now!

Holiday greeting cards are an often-used, but respectable and professional method of keeping yourself in the minds of your clients. This is an excellent opportunity to spread seasonal cheer, remind your contacts about your existence, and, due to the illustrative and graphic nature of greeting cards, to show off your design skills! Naturally, there are several points to observe. Be certain that your holiday cards are religiously neutral and politically correct. While it's a good idea to save time on addressing envelopes, it's not a good idea to skip personalization! You should sign each card and write a small personal note, whenever possible; this simple act will make an enormous impact. Cards become more flattering and memorable when your clients can see proof of your actual involvement. Finally, it really does make sense to design your own card. This is a perfect opportunity to set yourself apart from the crowd and showcase your unique abilities!

Freebies are nice; go ahead and send useful items such as calendars, pens or other office supplies imprinted with your logo. These types of items are almost always put to use and they'll be appreciated. Having items with your logo in your clients' hands and on their desks will help keep your name in the game.

It's definitely a great idea to let your clients know about occasional promotions; promotions give clients a chance to take advantage of savings, specials, events, and other items of interest. However, it's a good idea to use this type of contact somewhat sparingly—it's enough to send something every few months. There's a fine line between helping and hassling. Leave your clients impressed, grateful, and wanting more. Sending something every week can easily start to annoy your contacts. You want to seem like a busy, experienced designer who is extending a professional courtesy—not a vulture, circling around looking for fresh meat.

43. Monitoring Your Brand Online

Back in the day, people could send you a letter or maybe give you a phone call to let you know what they think, and if they didn't like their experience, they may not have felt they could do much about it. Today, however, is a whole different story! People are emailing, leaving reviews, tweeting, and posting on blogs; nearly everyone has access to an open forum to discuss the intimate details of their experience with brands, both good and bad. It's no exaggeration to say that a person who has a bad experience with a business can easily reach hundreds (or thousands) of people—tainting that business in the minds of all of their contacts!

The first step in monitoring your brand online is to have a handle on what people are saying about you. Reviewing the feedback is a great way to improve your business! There is no better, more direct method for you to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of your service. For example, if your customers are complaining that your work is good but that it's difficult to get in touch with you, you have a clear idea of how to improve your customers' satisfaction. Of course, it's always nice to hear good things too—everyone needs a pat on the back sometimes.

Another important reason to keep an eye on your reviews is because you'll need to reply to any negative comments as soon as possible. A single negative review could lose you a lot of business in a short amount of time. Although you won't be able to control what's said about you, if you want to protect your business against damage from negative feedback, you'll need to be on top of the situation. Leaving a negative comment unaddressed will compound the problem. If you don't address a customer's issue directly, you'll still have a disgruntled customer, but more importantly, potential clients will begin to perceive you as uncaring and disinterested. Conversely, if you respond quickly and kindly to negative feedback, you'll win back your unhappy customer and impress people with your generosity and diplomacy. Restaurants have been doing this for years; it's amazing how an apology and a free dessert can turn almost any situation around!

Let's discuss several of the best websites and tools you can use to monitor your brand online:

Google Alerts—this Google tool will scan the internet for your search terms and inform you when information of interest occurs. For example, you can enter your name or your business name as the search term, or use Google Alerts to monitor your industry or your competitors. The tool allows you to select news, blogs, updates, videos, and/or discussions as the source or sources you would like to monitor. You can choose to receive updates daily, weekly, or as they occur, and Google lets you select whether you would like to receive all updates or to have the tool filter out only the best.

Majestic SEO—provides extensive reporting on backlinks into a site, allowing you to check what links are coming into your competitor's sites. If you subscribe, you can have the advantage of getting the most detailed information about your own links—letting you monitor what sites or individuals are connecting with your site.

Yahoo Link Domain—use Yahoo to find backlinks into any site. Typing *link:http://example.com* will show all the pages that link to a certain page. Typing *linkdomain:example.com* will show all the pages that link to a certain domain.

CustomScoop—is a full-service online monitoring service that can scour social media in search of your search terms. CustomScoop can customize a service package that includes online news clipping, monitoring reputation, brand monitoring, press release monitoring, competitive intelligence, industry news, and social media monitoring.

Monitter—is a Twitter monitor. You simply type in the keywords that you want to search, and relevant tweets will appear. This service is free, and you have the option to sign up for an RSS feed for your search. Another nice option of Monitter is their widget; if you embed the widget into your website, tweets about you will automatically appear on your site!

CoTweet—is a more advanced method of tracking Twitter comments. This suite will manage large numbers of keywords, multiple accounts, and schedule tweets. CoTweet gives you an

extensive variety of options in the frequency and method that you use to receive reports and data.

BoardTracker—this website is a tool that searches and helps you monitor your keywords as they are used in forum posts. It is a free service that also provides more advanced options for a fee. This is a great way to track useful feedback from another social media niche.

SpyFu—this service advertises its ability to spy on your competitors, their links, keywords, and ad words. SpyFu's extensive selection of free video tutorials will help you make sense of the data and use it to your advantage.

LinkedIn—is similar to Facebook but with a professional focus. LinkedIn is a great way to see who's working for what company, to watch career pages, and search for job openings. Use LinkedIn to increase your contacts and networking, to discover inside connections, and get advice.

There are a lot of applications for the information you can gain from these kinds of opportunities. Your brand name is important, so watch it closely!

44. Monitoring Your Competitors Online

The only thing that's as important as monitoring your brand, is monitoring your competitors! These two things go hand in hand. If you aren't watching your competitors, it's easy to be trumped! Are you blogging about exactly the same topic that they covered last week? Are you posting a software review when a new version just came out? Are you offering full price for an item or service while they're offering two for the price of one? Oversights like these can make you look like you're out of the loop and ruin your credibility.

Ideally, you'll always be one step ahead of your competitors. You want to be in front of the pack, if possible. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to think originally! If you follow your own path, creating new ideas and being ahead of trends, you'll start to become an industry leader. You'll know that you're ahead of the game when others start following you!

Needless to say, not everyone can be the trend-setter, and it certainly doesn't happen overnight. Until the time that you break out in front, you should keep a close eye on the design industry and your competitors! Fortunately, we just covered several excellent intelligence-gathering tools in the previous lesson. Setup alerts and watch their brands using the same tools we mentioned to monitor your own brand online! Google Alerts, Majestic SEO, CustomScoop, Monitter, CoTweet, and BoardTracker can all be used to keep tabs on the competition. One tool, SpyFu, markets itself as being specifically designed for monitoring your competition online!

Another option you might explore is called Compete. This service offers free competition intelligence, allowing you to analyze your competitors' keywords and learn their search strategies. Compete will also help you identify the sites that your rivals use for links and as affiliates—allowing you to pursue them for your own SEO and link building.

These programs can help you learn what pages are linking into their websites. You can use these tools to monitor whenever your opponents are mentioned in news articles or publications. They can help you stay aware of what people are saying about your competitor's services in blogs and tweets. It can be beneficial to see what others in your field are doing, achieving, offering, and planning. Furthermore, monitoring comments about your competitors will give you the advantage of learning from their successes and failures. It can give you the chance to see what qualities their customers most desire, appreciate, or even what they most dislike! It's a good idea to always watch what they are doing.

Certainly, there are a lot of high-tech options for intelligence gathering. If you'd prefer not to delve into online espionage, there are simpler ways to keep tabs on your competitors. A great way to track your competition is to sign up for their newsletters. These newsletters (if they're doing their job) will contain information about their business achievements, awards, upcoming projects, in-house personnel (including any changes or job openings), and whatever else is important to them. Most businesses are happy to provide this information to their subscribers, and it's a lot simpler than a wire tap.

Similarly, try reading their blogs whenever possible. This is another great (and easy, and free) way to stay on top of what other industry professionals are doing with their careers. Reading your competitors' blogs will help you ensure that you're informed of all the latest news, events, updates, awards, competitions, and technological advances. If they know it, you'll know it!

45. Optimizing Your Site and Increasing Conversions

After your website is constructed, it's a good idea to perform some usability testing before you make your site public. Usability testing will give you constructive feedback about how users feel about your site—ensuring that you present the best possible website to your visitors when you're ready to launch.

Elements of Usability

To conduct usability testing on your site, gather a bunch of willing victims. The following is a list of possible usability testing victims: anyone who has a lot of free time, anyone who owes you a favor, friends and loved ones, people interested in your subject matter, students, and know-it-alls who love to share their opinions.

Your usability testers will simply use your site for 15 to 30 minutes (depending on the size of your site, the amount of content on your site, and how much feedback your testers provide). If your site is wonderful, users may only gush about how great it is. However, if there appear to be issues with the site's usability, the feedback may become extensive.

Usability covers a wide variety of angles, but they all lead back to one simple question; how much do your visitors enjoy using your site? One of the first factors of usability is how visitors respond to the visual elements and overall design of your site. Oftentimes, users know within a few seconds whether the site is a destination where they would like to remain or if they want to move on.

Are there too many ads or links in proportion to the site's content? This can give the impression that a site exists only to generate advertising income, rather than to convey useful information or represent a legitimate business. Does the site lack contrast? Pages that are overwhelmingly dark or light can lose appeal—particularly if the lack of contrast leads to eye-strain. Similarly, is the site too busy? Is it smothered in wallpaper and flashing things? One of the first features your usability testers will notice is whether they like the look of the site!

Does your site provide ease of learning and efficient use? Visitors should find your site's navigation easy to understand and remember. If your navigation is simple and natural, and your layout is consistent and logical, then users will be pleased. These elements may be like a good foundation—visitors won't necessarily notice them unless they've gone wrong! It only takes one or two wrong turns or dead-ends for a visitor to leave your site forever. There's nothing more frustrating than a site that promises to take you somewhere but doesn't. If your site is efficient and easy to use, visitors will quickly learn how to get around; furthermore, they'll develop a sense of trust in your site when it behaves as expected. Here is a list of the elements that will be present in a good website:

- Recognizable purpose
- Simple and natural navigation
- Visually pleasing and consistent layout
- Consistent format
- Ease of learning
- Efficient use
- Easy memorization
- Absence of errors
- User enjoyment
- User satisfaction

Feel free to ask your usability testers for their feedback in these areas rather than relying only on their self-generated suggestions. Testers may hold back on criticism for fear of "nit-picking." Asking them specifically about certain aspects will help them feel more comfortable about giving their true opinion; it will also ensure that you feel you have a complete picture of the strengths and weaknesses of your website.

Increased Conversions

Website conversion rates are the grail quest of the Internet. Certainly, many webmasters strive to increase visits to their sites; however, many webmasters strive to get more “conversions” out of the number of visitors they already receive. A conversion can mean different things depending on the purpose of a website; conversions can be sales or purchases, requests for information, forms completed, or newsletter subscribers, among many other things. Site managers know that they get more return on their investment if they increase their conversion rates. For example, in your graphic design website, your goal may be to have a visitor fill in a request for quote form—this is the desired goal or conversion. Let’s say your site gets 100 visits a month. Rather than spending a bundle trying to get more people to the site, but not having any of them actually fill in the quote form, you might prefer to optimize your site so it encourages a higher percent of conversions from the amount of visits that you already get.

To begin this process, first identify your website conversion. How easy is it for your visitors to do what you want them to do? If your conversion is a completed contact form, do you have a large and attractive “Get a Quote Now” button? Is this button on every page of your site? If a visitor clicks on your button, is the quote form easy to fill out, or does it require extensive, unnecessary, and possibly private information?

Split Testing

Once your website is launched, you can still optimize it. Split testing (also known as A/B testing) is a way of isolating important elements in the site and testing two variations—it’s likely that one variation will produce better results. Here is a list of some of the elements that can be refined through this experiment:

- Headings
- Sub-headings
- Opening paragraph
- Images
- Call to action
- Appearance or location of submit button
- Offers
- Hyperlinks
- Colors
- Location of elements

Ideally, this form of testing will help you to increase your conversions. Experienced web designers are often amazed at the small changes that can translate into bigger conversions. Although this detail may seem insignificant, something as small as the appearance or location of a button can make a huge difference in the behavior of your visitors! Optimizing certain elements on your pages can result in longer visits, more interaction, more quote requests, and more WORK! Split testing can be easily arranged using Google Website Optimizer.

When webmasters create their sites, they can be too close to the subject or too close to the site itself. It’s remarkably easy to forget a step or overlook a major element. It’s difficult to simultaneously keep track of all the details while perfecting the big picture. Usability testing is the only way to be sure that your site functions flawlessly and to guarantee that visitors will have a great experience!

46. Website Analytics

Once your website is live, you will want to install Google Analytics or similar data tracking software. Launching your website was just the beginning! Now you'll begin the regular routine of monitoring your site and analyzing its success.

Analytics Tools

In the world of analytics software, it's hard to compete with Google Analytics; it's an extremely powerful piece of software. Best of all, it's free! Google Analytics will track nearly anything you'd want to know about your site. The software can tell you who your visitors are, where they are located, how they found your site, how they navigate through your site, how they came in, and where they go when they leave. It tracks page views and the time spent on the site. It can provide information about your strongest and most valuable geographic regions. It tracks trends over long and short-term time periods. It can tell you everything you need to know about your conversion rate—reporting on your conversion rate by region and for certain keywords.

Google Analytics can help you optimize your website. It gives information that can help you customize landing pages—designing them specifically for your audience. It tracks the “conversion funnel” that moves visitors into your conversion—letting you know how many and which type of visitors are leaving your site before they achieve your goal. Google Analytics can advise you on design and layout issues in your site and help you fix obstacles to conversion!

Google Analytics is easy to install. Even if your site is brand new, Google Analytics will begin collecting data immediately. While it may take awhile for a new site to accumulate enough data to report trends, it's best to start as soon as possible! The software will become essential once your site has been around the block a couple times.

Although Google Analytics is my top pick, if you're interested in browsing the competition, here is a list of other excellent analytics software options:

Coremetrics—a division of IBM, Coremetrics offers the same sort of information that is provided through Google Analytics; however, Coremetrics focuses on providing usable advice in a visual format rather than offering complicated, cryptic reports.

Mint—this software touts itself as a simple, friendly way to track your site's visits and referrers. It focuses on helping you find what is popular and positive in your pages.

VisiStat—this company offers real-time website monitoring! Their tracking provides data on all forms of online advertising. It provides a round-the-clock website down-time alarm. Most interestingly, VisiStat tags your website visitors and can even provide you with contact information for companies that are viewing your site; they call it “Website caller ID.”

ClickTale—not only does ClickTale provide conversion analytics and marketing analytics, but it also offers behavior analytics. Visitor session recordings, mouse move heatmaps and click heatmaps tell you everything about how visitors use your site. I'm a little nervous that they could tell you what your visitors are wearing.

CrazyEgg—receive hourly reports tracking your visitors' usage patterns. CrazyEgg's unique visual data reporting shows you exactly where the action occurs on your pages.

Webmaster Tools—Google and other search engines provide their own versions of Webmaster Tools—free software that can supply you with even more data! Webmaster tools, for example, can give you information about how the search engine crawls and indexes your site. They can give you control over the content in the index and help you optimize for each search engine. Webmaster tools give you the power to add or block URLs. As another benefit, webmaster tools can give you information about redirects, malware, viruses, and exclusions that involve your pages.

These tools are very easy to install. They should be setup right away and monitored often. Be sure to install webmaster tools for the major search engines—Google, Yahoo and Bing all offer them.

47. Preparing for Downturns in the Economy

There's a lot of sense in the old adage, "hope for the best, prepare for the worst." This saying may, in fact, be one of the best philosophies for preparing for downturns in the economy. Basically, if you're having a great run and jobs are flowing in, it may be a good idea to consider the possibility that there could be something less stellar around the corner.

The absolute, all-time best method for insulating yourself against downtimes is to save money. Financial experts advise that we each have at least enough savings to cover two months of expenses. Personally, I like to save 10% of each check. I find that it's fairly easy to part with this amount of money; oftentimes, it feels like it's not enough to bother saving, but trust me, it's worth it! If you've ever been unpleasantly surprised at how "insignificant" purchases added up to a major portion of a budget, then you should be able to see how the reverse could work in your favor! It's much better to save small, manageable portions of your income on a regular basis. Build it into your routine—like brushing your teeth. If you don't save small increments regularly, the only alternatives are to not save at all or to try and save huge chunks of money—possibly affecting your operating budget (and your morale) in the process. You may feel that 10% is too much or too little—everyone's financial situation is different; however, I strongly recommend that you find a percentage that works with your goals, needs, and budget—then stick with that rate!

Another way to prepare for economic downturns is to pay off or pay down any debt as soon as you can. Reduce credit card balances. Try to pay more than the minimum monthly payment. Doubtless, you've heard these things over and over for most of your adult life. Now is the time to make a difference. Payments on debts can easily add up to a significant monthly cost. When times are good, pay a little extra principle. In your monthly budgeting, take your debt payments and round up—set that amount as your monthly payment. Feel good about yourself when your balance and your minimum monthly payment start dropping. Still pay the higher amount even when your minimum payment falls—feel like a rock star of debt repayment!

Finally, be prepared to cut non-essentials from your budget; tighten up your expenses if needed. It's not a bad idea to sit down and make a worst-case scenario plan. Let's say your income took a terrible hit. Which budgetary items could you absolutely not live without? Which budgetary items could you drop easily? Oftentimes, we get used to the status quo and we assume there will never be any change—this is a mistake. While it may seem depressing to look at worst case scenarios, the truth is that most of us are hiding these dire thoughts away in the back of our brains anyway. Only when we look at what could happen and PREPARE for it will we truly free ourselves from the hidden stress. Oh, and while you're looking at things as essential vs. non-essential, perhaps there are some clearly non-essential items that you could drop now? You could consider using that money for savings or debt reduction!

Never Stop Marketing

As much as it can seem like marketing and advertising can be a financial drain, they are actually one of the most vital business investments. Major corporations ALWAYS have a permanent staff of marketing specialists! Why? If a business isn't investing in getting new clients, then it's on an inevitable path to a slow, languishing death. For example, let's say you have five clients that provide you with enough income to cover your expenses. You may think that that's enough and you feel secure—that is, until one client goes out of business, one changes hands, one changes their focus, and one decides to send their design work overseas. One of the realities of business success is that you need to constantly throw an ever-widening net. Never stop marketing.

Having just said that marketing is essential to your business success, let me say that we all know it's not cheap! If times are tough, it can be very difficult to find the funds to get promotions underway. One method for controlling costs and ensuring that this critical task gets done is to plan promotions ahead of time. Not only does planning ahead avoid you the extra expenses that come with last-minute planning, but it gives you the opportunity to schedule and pay for promotions when your cash flow is good.

If times are tough, networking is always one of the best ways to gain new clients. Furthermore, networking can be one of the least expensive methods of marketing. Many online networking sites cost NOTHING! If you find yourself in the situation where jobs are scarce and money is scarcer, put your free time to good use by drumming up a lot of interest through networking. Down time is a great time to make contact with your associates. If you aren't otherwise engaged, this can be a good time to do favors for others—then you'll have some favors due to you when you need them.

Try to create multiple streams of income as a way to insulate yourself from market downturns. For example, if you have a single employer or a single client, you are completely dependent on that income source. Losing that client means you've lost 100% of your income. However, if you have 20 clients and you lose one, that's only 5% of your income; you still have 95% of your earnings intact! You can create multiple streams of income in two ways: either by broadening the base of clients providing you with work, or by widening the variety of services and type of jobs that you perform. Both methods are highly advisable. These methods just make good business sense. The more work you do and more clients you have, the better your chances of getting work when you really need it!

48. Ways to Maximize Your Income

Work smarter, not harder! There are a lot of ways to maximize your income—some of them don't have a thing to do with taking on more design projects! First off, consider signing up for affiliate programs; web hosting is one example. If your web design clients need hosting, you can have them sign up through you. Affiliate programs pay you a commission for each person that purchases web hosting through you. The commission can range from \$70 to \$150 per sign up. Some affiliate programs even pay you a percentage of the total sale for each new client (this includes upgrades and extras on top of the hosting). Many programs will pay you again when your signees sign up their own signees! If you decide to join an affiliate program, shop around for one that has good commission prices, but also one that has good conversion rates. It's nice if the program has a long referral period, so you receive your commission whether the contact signs up immediately or takes a month and a half to commit.

Another great way to pad your coffers is to sell digital files, either in your own online store or through an existing network. The [Envato](#) marketplaces are one example—offering WordPress themes, background music, After Effects project files, Flash templates, vectors, add-ons, icons, isolated objects, design templates, and textures (just to name a few choices). Sell prints. Sell t-shirts. Create your own products, themes, and eBooks. Basically, if you can design it, then you can sell it!

If you have a blog, sell ad space on it! It's possible to make thousands of dollars a month through blog advertising if you get a good amount of traffic. Depending on how popular your blog is, its page rank, and the number of unique visitors that you receive each month, your prices can range from \$5 a month to thousands of dollars a month. Popular blogs often make it easy for interested parties to find their advertising costs and they have a media or press kit readily available. If you wanted to capitalize on this income, it wouldn't be a bad idea to set up a little fancy report that illustrates why it's worth every penny to advertise on your blog.

If you've got some writing skills and a little information that deserves sharing, consider writing tutorials or guest posts for blogs. There's money in both of these services. Blog owners are often interested in fresh perspectives (or tired of writing their own content) and are willing to pay guest writers. Tutorials are another option; people need these, so if you have an area of expertise, you may be able to cash in!

You always have the option to offer consulting services. This sort of work is highly flexible and can be very lucrative. It's a great way to get some extra cash, and it's likely to lead to networking opportunities. Consultants can charge \$50 or more per hour, depending on their level of expertise and the competition in their area. There's also an option to charge a flat fee, such as \$500. Needless to say, this can turn into very easy money. Decide what niche you'd like to target—what area (or areas) you feel you know best. One of the delightful things about consulting is that you call the shots. You're not, generally, responsible for carrying out the advice you give. You're just there to give advice—and get paid for it!

49. Expanding Your Business

As I mentioned previously, if your business isn't growing, then it could be on the path to the slow, languishing death. Maybe it's hanging on, but it's not thriving. There's no end to the expansion and success that could occur for your business; just think of Sam Walton—turning a single Wal-Mart into an international . . . um . . . phenomenon. On the other hand, there is a definite end for a business which doesn't expand—it's called "Going out of Business."

One of the best ways to expand your business is by increasing your networking. Have I made it seem like networking is the answer for everything? Well, it IS! There's no better way to gain new business opportunities than by increasing your brand awareness and improving your visibility among people who can play a positive role for you, professionally. It never hurts to set some goals. Are there certain clients that you'd like to attain? Which individuals would be in a position to help you win that client? Are there particular design jobs that you'd like to do? Who is responsible for hiring on those projects? Do some investigative research—who are the key industry players in your area? Sometimes good contacts happen by accident; however, to really get ahead, you'll need to set some targets.

Take on new types of projects. Don't be afraid to widen your scope—you may find that you discover a type of work that you really enjoy! This is one of the easiest ways to expand your business and increase your money-making potential. If you were only doing graphic design, adding web design can easily double your marketability and income. Is there a niche that you've been thinking about? Can you incorporate photography into your list of services? Would a focus on band posters increase your market presence and your bottom line? Ask yourself if you have skills that you can incorporate into your business or if you have other interests that can help you gain an advantage for a particular market.

Raising your prices is a good way to increase your income, and it can lead to expansion as well. Although it can seem greedy to raise your fees, you'll have to do it at some point. Imagine that you have a 30 year career as a freelancer and you never once give yourself a raise; this is not smart business. Increasing your fees will certainly lead to increased revenue. Oddly, although it seems like clients would be drawn to a less expensive designer, this just isn't the case. Higher prices imply a higher level of quality and professionalism. Higher prices may be just what you need to capture higher profile clients and bigger jobs! You'll never know until you try! Even if your new prices don't help you catch the big fish, you'll still be enjoying your raise.

Invest more in marketing; remember why we call it an investment. If your goal is to increase your number of clients and expand the amount of work produced by your business, then it's time for a little extra push in the marketing department. If you had a monthly budget for marketing and advertising, consider raising that amount permanently. Alternately, you can also choose to spend a burst of money on targeted promotions and marketing campaigns. Buy yourself some exposure and get the attention of new clients.

Establish partnerships. Individuals, other businesses, and corporations can all be considered for advantageous relationships. Is there a non-profit to which you can donate your services in exchange for promotion? Are there local businesses that could mutually benefit from an affiliation with you? For example: schools, wedding planners, local organizations, and event venues all use graphic design services or deal with clients that need them. Is there a way that you can offer discounted services or commissions to these groups in exchange for an exclusive provider relationship?

In conclusion, once all of your efforts towards expansion are paying off and your phone rings incessantly, be sure you can handle the new work. Having more work than you can do IS a good thing, but only if you're prepared! The last thing you want is to snag a bunch of high-profile, high-income clients and then fail to produce under the weight of your staggering work load. Remember, you always have the option to outsource your work overflow to someone who needs extra income. Try and keep a list of possible candidates who can step in at a moment's notice. Keep on good terms with other professionals who could help you out; be sure you're prepared to reciprocate the favor! Design students might be another group of willing assistants, ready to work anytime for a little pay and a lot of industry experience. If all goes

well, it may even be time for you to find someone who's looking for an entry-level job! Then you'll REALLY be the boss!

50. Final Thoughts

Remember that creating a successful design business doesn't happen overnight. It will be very important for you to plan out your goals and follow through on them. In the end, you are only limited by your own imagination and your own initiative!

To be your own boss means that you are the only one calling the shots. There's no one above you feeding you a mission statement. No one will dictate your work hours or your dress code. You can pick and choose the jobs and tasks that you perform, the people that you work with, and the people that you work for. You can advance at anytime; you have endless opportunities for promotion! You can have anything you want from your business, but you'll have to know exactly what you're aiming for and be willing to work for it.

Through this eBook, I have strived to provide you with an outline of the steps and stages that you'll need to take as you establish your own business. Each stage is described for you so that you can evaluate and undertake it. As you moved through each section, you will have had the opportunity to examine your own wishes and intentions. Every section is designed to help you understand your own vision of your ideal work scenario and aid you as you define your goals. I hope that our discussions have steered you away from situations that you'd like to avoid and helped you determine what you would truly enjoy. Only when you have a clear picture of what you would like, will you be able to begin to make that into your reality.

Each small goal that you accomplish is moving you steadily toward your big goal—to work from home as a designer, to be your own boss! When you see your goal clearly and you know the steps to getting there, it will be just a matter of time before your dream becomes a reality! I sincerely wish you all the best in your venture! I hope that this eBook will unlock your own ability to attain a professional life of satisfaction and happiness—the life you've always wanted!