

This page intentionally left blank

PRAISE FOR
BURN YOUR PORTFOLIO

“The straightforward and funny advice in Janda’s book is what most people learn only after toiling in the corporate trenches for years. (Um, how dare he share ALL our secrets?!) I hope he’s charging at least a year’s worth of school tuition for this book. Seriously, take copious notes on the practical suggestions offered here to help steer your own career, whether it’s your first job or your 75th freelance gig. The drama-free work approach and leadership style outlined in *Burn Your Portfolio* is what makes working with Mike and all the folks at his company, Riser, FUN and worthy of the cupcakes we send to celebrate each of our successes together.”

—Michelle Sullivan

*VP Digital, Kids & Family Publishing and Media,
National Geographic (aka 800-pound Gorilla Client)*

“This book should be a mandatory course at art schools...no, at *all* schools! The message transcends occupation; it’s about maneuvering through the unspoken rules and dynamics of various personalities in your workplace. Mike is a perfect person to deliver this message; his long-term relationships and success of his business are the true testimony of his skills on managing up, down, and sideways. Your talent alone will take you nowhere if your character doesn’t support it. If you want longevity in your field, this book is a must-read.”

—Jane Bhang

Consulting Art Director, Sony Pictures Entertainment

“I wish I could take every designer I’ve ever worked with and smack them over the head with this book...which would hurt, because it’s big! After that, I’d tell them to read it cover to cover, because Michael Janda will show them how to stop making the business mistakes nearly everyone in design is making.”

—Dave Crenshaw

Author of The Myth of Multitasking and The Focused Business

“*Burn Your Portfolio* is an enjoyable, substantive gallop through an inventive guidebook for designers and programmers who envision themselves with a thriving business. It should be on every designer’s must-read list. Michael draws in the reader by “showing” rather than merely “telling.” He gives the book a human, personal touch by sprinkling the text with his own adventures. And though he is primarily speaking to designers, his message about honing interpersonal skills is imperative for ANY enterprise. As a client, that, more than anything, keeps me coming back.”

—Cheryl Saban, Ph.D.

Author of What Is Your Self-Worth? A Woman’s Guide to Validation and founder of the Self Worth Foundation

“I went to school to learn to be a designer. I went to Mike Janda to learn to run a design business. He is incredible. I’ve never met anyone who literally understands everything that I’ve ever struggled with since the day I graduated from school. From freelancing, contracts, and proposals to making the best business decisions and standing up to any kind of client, Janda tells you everything you need to know. His life lessons are quick, in layman’s terms, and so amazingly valuable you will use something he teaches you every single day.”

—Lorilee Rager

Owner, Thrive Creative Group, LLC

“Do you want to supercharge your design career? Drop that Wacom pen and immediately pick up *Burn Your Portfolio*, and read it cover to cover. Michael Janda clearly outlines practical, actionable advice that will make your design business better, your clients happier, and your teams more productive. Even if you’re a freelancer just striking out on your own—no, especially if you are—the insights, truisms, and humor in this book will prove to be valuable tools in your design arsenal.”

—**Marc Siry**
SVP, Media Products, NBC Universal

“This one’s on fire! *Burn Your Portfolio* is hands-down the most entertaining, helpful, and hilarious insider’s guide for creative professionals out there. Janda is an absolute genius when it comes to managing client expectations, creating production processes that actually work, and running a thriving and vibrant design business. He and I used to work together at Fox—I owe much of my own success to his brilliant and zany methods.”

—**Allison Ellis**
Owner, Hopscotch Consulting

“Michael Janda is the one person you want to listen to when it comes to advice about succeeding in a creative field! He has more creative talent, street smarts, and people skills than anyone I have ever met. What this book presents the reader with is an inside-track to those secrets in an appetizing collection of goodness!”

—**Jeff Jolley**
President, Riser

“The starving artist cliché has never been in greater danger. *Burn Your Portfolio* gives creative professionals the tools they need to succeed in today’s competitive marketplace, a marketplace where many relying on talent alone have failed. Creatives...READ THIS BOOK!”

—**Mark Long**
Founder, RetouchUp/Hollywood FotoFix Studios

“I’ve worked with Michael and Riser for many years, and the thing that differentiates Michael and his team from other agencies is their ability to speak my language versus design speak! Michael and his company Riser are not only super-creative, they are total professionals. Communication is a big reason why Michael and his team are so successful at what they do. They are good at not only listening to a client who is not a designer and is trying to convey the details of a project, but also on working with the client to get the job done well, on time, and also on budget. I can’t think of a better person to give advice to designers who need to work with clients in the real world.”

—**Melissa Van Meter**
VP, Marketing & Advertising, TV Guide Network

“Wow! Mike Janda has delivered truly invaluable insight and real-world tips on how to be a rock star in the creative industry. He describes genuine experiences and conveys practical know-how—beyond what any web browser or art school could offer. With memorable detail and a sassy tone, this book will continue to inspire you for a lifetime.”

—**Lynda Hodge**
Freelance Graphic Designer

“Mike Janda knows that a successful career isn’t built on talent alone; that it takes certain skills to actually stay in business. With this book he shares the fruit of his experience in a fun, concise, and memorable way.”

—**Lawrence Terenzi**
Director, Product Development, Crackle

“It takes more than just mad skills and skinny jeans to thrive in this industry. Finally, a book for creatives with tangible and proven ways to be a successful designer. After 13 years of professional design, this book makes me feel like a newb; I am recommending it to all of my designers and developers.”

—**Josh Child**
Vice President, Creative, Riser

“As a design professional with over 16 years of experience in the industry, I can speak to the importance and wisdom of the principles addressed in this book. Not only do they help designers early in their careers but they also apply to those who have been in the industry for many years.

There is a lot more to being a creative professional than simply having talent. This book will help you make an honest assessment of your abilities and discover areas that need improvement. As you implement the things Michael talks about in the book, you will find that your creativity and problem solving will strengthen a lot just by improving some of your non-design-based skills such as client communication, business strategy, and work ethic. All of these things are connected. I learned a lot about myself during this process and have been able to create a game plan that has helped me connect better with my clients and employees.

I have always had a great deal of respect for Mike Janda as a seasoned creative, strategic thinker, and successful business owner. After reading this book and hearing him speak about the things he’s learned throughout his career, my respect and admiration have only increased. I recommend this book to any creative professional regardless of medium of expertise or level of experience.”

—**John Thomas**

Principal/Creative Director, Blue Tractor Design Company

“This is much more than a book; it is a survival kit for creative professionals. In its pages you will learn how to create and run a successful creative business that is both creative and a business. Each chapter is replete with practical, hands-on advice that anyone, in any business, can apply to make their business more successful.”

—**Kris Kristensen**

Senior Director, Global Learning, Alexion Pharmaceuticals

“I’ve known Mike Janda for over 13 years. I’ve seen his company grow from a small mom-and-pop web agency to a full-fledged industry-leading agency. I can still remember the first time I met Mike when he was our creative director, and I was a fresh-out-of-college intern. My boss at the time sent me to retrieve a booklet from Mike. To this day, I can still remember my conversation with him. He treated me with the utmost respect and sincerity. He didn’t have to be nice to me, but he was. And he most certainly didn’t treat me well based on my job title. And that is why I believe Mike has all the qualities that all bosses should emulate. He is honest, smart, responsible, and most importantly, conducts business with a smile. In such a fast moving industry, it’s hard to find people you trust—but I’ve always trusted that Mike has had my best interest in mind. It’s not a trade secret to be nice, and you can’t buy or download that in an app!”

—**Thuy (Twee) Tran**
Senior Content Producer, ABC Family

“My introduction to Mike occurred as he interviewed me for a job. He immediately proceeded to deconstruct my portfolio and find the nuggets of talent contained in it (small), and then on the fly proceeded to help me formulate my pitch to him. Somehow I still got the job. From Mike I learned everything I know about beating the procrastination monster, along with so many other useful things, all skills I use to this day. And fortunately for the rest of the design world, Mike has put all of these tips into a designer’s guide to getting along in the real world, with all his humor and insight intact.”

—**Ray Woods II**
Director, User Experience, NBC Universal



BURN YOUR PORTFOLIO

STUFF THEY DON'T TEACH YOU IN DESIGN SCHOOL, BUT SHOULD

MICHAEL JANDA

Burn Your Portfolio: Stuff they don't teach you in design school, but should

Michael Janda

Peachpit Press

www.peachpit.com

To report errors, please send a note to errata@peachpit.com

Peachpit Press is a division of Pearson Education

Copyright © 2013 by Michael C. Janda

Editor: Nikki McDonald

Production Editor: Danielle Foster

Design Manager: Charlene Will

Development and Copy Editor: Jan Seymour

Cover and Interior Design: Michael Janda

Illustrator: Nick Jarvis

Proofreader: Emily K. Wolman

Indexer: Emily Glossbrenner

Notice of Rights

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher. For information on getting permission for reprints and excerpts, contact permissions@peachpit.com.

Notice of Liability

The information in this book is distributed on an “As Is” basis, without warranty. While every precaution has been taken in the preparation of the book, neither the author nor Peachpit Press shall have any liability to any person or entity with respect to any loss or damage caused or alleged to be caused directly or indirectly by the instructions contained in this book or by the computer software and hardware products described in it.

Trademarks

Many of the designations used by manufacturers and sellers to distinguish their products are claimed as trademarks. Where those designations appear in this book, and Peachpit was aware of a trademark claim, the designations appear as requested by the owner of the trademark. All other product names and services identified throughout this book are used in editorial fashion only and for the benefit of such companies with no intention of infringement of the trademark. No such use, or the use of any trade name, is intended to convey endorsement or other affiliation with this book.

Quote on page 127 from *READY FOR ANYTHING* by David Allen, copyright © 2003 by David Allen. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Quote on page 180 from *THINK AND GROW RICH, REVISED AND UPDATED* by Napoleon Hill and Revised by Arthur R. Pell, copyright © 2003, 2005 by JMW Group, Inc. Used by permission of Jeremy P. Tarcher, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

ISBN 13: 978-0-321-91868-0

ISBN 10: 0-321-91868-1

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in the United States of America

This book is dedicated to my family,

Jodi, Max, Mason, and Miles.

*Thank you for your amazing support
and allowing me to chase my dreams.*

*I love you more than my Jeep
and the Chicago Bears, combined.*



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Burn Your Portfolio...Really?	xix
Acknowledgments	xxi

SECTION 1: HUMAN ENGINEERING

Behavior, work ethic, and social prowess have as much to do with your success as your ability to beat Photoshop senselessly into submission.

1) The Big Fat Secret	2
2) The Extra Mile	6
3) Soak Up Advice	9
4) You Are Not Your Work	11
5) Be Nice to Everyone	13
6) Drama Is for Soap Operas	17
7) No More Flying Solo	19
8) Gripes Go Up	22
9) The Stress Bucket	25
10) Two Types of Grandpas	30
11) Be a Wall Painter	33
12) Every Position Can Be Electrifying	37
13) Lead or Be Led	40
14) Half the Victory	42
15) The Value of Downtime	44
16) I'm Not a Writer	47
17) Toot Your Own Horn	48

18) Don't Work in a Vacuum	51
19) The Graphic Design Megazord	53
20) Live as a Team, Die as a Team	55
21) Everyone Does Something Better Than You	57
22) You Are Responsible for Your Own Time	59

SECTION 2: ART SMARTS

The best designers take “luck” out of the equation. Smart processes, strategies, and techniques will help you create a masterpiece every time.

23) OCD Is an Attribute	62
24) Polishing Turds	66
25) Hairy Moles	69
26) This Is Not Verbatimville	71
27) Shock and Awe	74
28) Art Is Meant to Be Framed	78
29) It Is Never Too Late for a Better Idea	81
30) Filler Failures	83
31) A River Runs Through It	87
32) Comps or Comprehensive?	89
33) Design Like the Wind	91
34) Type Fast	96
35) How to Eat an Elephant	97
36) The Venus Initiative	102
37) Process-a-Palooza	107
38) Hiking Your Way to Successful Projects	111
39) Solving End-of-Day Rush	122
40) Why Projects Blow Up	124
41) The Lo-Fi PDA	127
42) Bring Out Your Dead	130
43) Shake the Bushes or Get Bit	134

44) Red Flags and Extinguishers	137
45) Brainstorms Are 90 Percent Bad Ideas	149
46) The Communal Brain	150

SECTION 3: TWO EARS, ONE MOUTH

Sometimes a creative professional will actually have to take off their headphones and interact with another human being.

47) The Ultimate Email Formula	153
48) Beware the Red Dot	158
49) Email Black Holes	159
50) Even the Lone Ranger Had Tonto	162
51) Canned Communication	164
52) Tin Can Phones	172
53) Vicious Vernacular	175
54) An Army of Support	178
55) Friendly Updates	181
56) Deadline Ballet	184
57) Big Brother	187
58) The Domino Effect	189
59) Avoid the W.W.W.	192
60) Be Afraid to Click “Send”	195
61) The Tragedy of Time Zones	198

SECTION 4: HAPPY HEAD HONCHOS

Everyone has to answer to someone. It might be a boss. It might be a client. It might even be your mom. Learning how to handle superiors tactfully will open the doors of success.

62) Designers Are from Mars, Clients Are from Venus	202
63) Let Your Client Leave Their Mark	206
64) “Forgiveness” Points	208

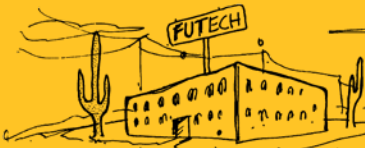
65)	Let Your Client Be the 800-Pound Gorilla	211
66)	Do Your Genealogy	213
67)	Never Give Your Client Homework	215
68)	Assume That People Are Clueless	218
69)	Long-Term Relationship Value vs. Single Transaction Profit	222
70)	Oddities at the Start Mean Oddities at the End	225
71)	Don't Be the Desperate Girlfriend	228
72)	Stand in Manure, Smell Like Manure	230
73)	Never Fire a Client?	234
74)	"We Decided to Go Another Direction" Means "You Suck"	236
75)	There Are Such Things as Stupid Questions	239
76)	You Can't Get Mad at Math	241
77)	You Have 65 Seconds to Land a Job	244
78)	How to Ask for a Raise Without Asking for a Raise	246

SECTION 5: MIND YOUR BUSINESS

Working as a designer without any business training is like jumping from an airplane without parachute training. Something bad is going to happen.

79)	Do What You Love; the Money Will Follow	251
80)	A Business That Looks Orderly	255
81)	Making Cents of It All	257
82)	How to Calculate a Burn Rate	264
83)	The Fixed-Bid Pricing Dartboard	267
84)	Beware of Line-Item Pricing	272
85)	"No Charge" Doesn't Mean "Free"	276
86)	How to Flush Out a Budget	279
87)	Twenty-Piece Chicken McNuggets	282
88)	Nonprofits for Non-Profit	286

89) The Code of Fair Practice	289
90) Contractual Mumbo Jumbo	294
91) “Etcetera” Has No Business in Your Business	296
92) You Don’t Have to Sign Off on This	298
93) B.A.M. Lists	302
94) One Line That Changed Everything about Collections	304
95) A Business Is an Organism That Wants to Die	306
96) If I’ve Got a Dollar, You’ve Got a Dollar, but No Partners	310
97) If You Want to Win the Game, You Have to Know the Score	313
98) There Is No Such Thing as a “Meet and Greet”	316
99) How to Make a Capabilities Presentation	319
100) Floods Happen	323
101) Flexibility, Not Freedom	326
102) Never Do Undocumented Work	329
103) Next Worry Date	331
104) Nickels and Dimes Are for Lemonade Stands	335
105) Only Terrorists Like Hostage Situations	337
106) Oh Where, Oh Where Has My \$100k Gone? Oh Where, Oh Where Can It Be?	339
107) Don’t Do Anything You Can Pay Someone \$10 Per Hour to Do	345
108) “Skin in the Game” Usually Means “Free”	348
109) Three-Month “Lifetime” Guarantee	352
110) “Being Your Own Boss,” Whatever That Means	356
111) How to Bite the Bullet	357
Index	363
About the Author	376



BURN YOUR PORTFOLIO...REALLY?

With my diploma still warm from Indiana University, I grabbed my enormous, faux-leather student portfolio and hit the streets. I knew my destiny would land me at a hoity-toity agency where I would be a star designer, dazzling clients on high-profile campaigns for the most recognized brands in the world.

One tearful month later, after the humbling task of job hunting—applying to agencies, getting a few interviews, and landing nowhere—I accepted my first job in the industry: prepress coordinator for the local AlphaGraphics copy center. At nine dollars per hour, I was the star designer all right. Nobody could center text on a perforated sheet of business cards and feed them into a photocopier better than me.

With a Midwest work ethic and a motto of “OCD Is an Attribute,” it took me four short years to progress from my illustrious copy center job to a senior creative director position at Fox Studios. At Fox, I managed the design, development, and editorial elements of the Fox Kids and Fox Family websites.

The dot bomb and the dismantling of our division at Fox launched me into a four-year freelance stint that would provide me with an income level well beyond any expectations I had upon finishing my college degree and that afforded me all of my “wants” as well as my “needs.” When the freelance load became too much to handle on my own, my wife forced me to hire people. Seventeen salaried employees later and over a decade of history, my acclaimed agency, Riser, boasts clients like Google, Disney, NBC, National Geographic, and Warner Bros.

I have been privileged to interview, manage, and hire hundreds of designers and programmers throughout the course of my career. One thing I know for certain is that your graphic design portfolio is a critical element to get you in the door of prospective employers and clients. Design schools know it and spend 90 percent of their efforts teaching students the skills they need to put together an awesome portfolio prior to graduation.

The other thing I know for certain is that, while a design school spends 90 percent of their effort making students capable of creating a killer portfolio, once you're in the door your portfolio is not 90 percent of what will make you actually successful in a creative career. In fact, it isn't even close to the only thing that will lead you to success.

Teamwork, client skills, communication, social aptitude, production speed, and business savvy all play a GIGANTIC part in what will make you successful as a graphic designer, whether your aspirations include freelancing, working for an agency, or managing your own firm. This book is dedicated to teaching those types of skills...the stuff they don't teach you in design school, but should.

Burn your portfolio? OK, so maybe that statement is a tad extreme. However, the lessons I've learned that are contained in this book are every bit as critical as your ability to create award-winning design. Learn them. Apply them. Couple these techniques with your killer portfolio, and find a new level of success in the real business of graphic design.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I walk down the memory lane of experiences that led to the creation of this book, I see faces attached to moments in time. A few of these require mentioning here.

First and foremost to my wife, Jodi, your undying support of my addiction to ambition has not gone unnoticed. In the brief moments that you have not been consulting with me on every aspect of my professional life, you have been managing our family, allowing me the freedom to achieve my successes in life. I would not be who I am without you. “Thank you” is an understatement. I love you.

To my parents, Dennis and Nancy, thank you for teaching me good principles, instilling in me an expectation of success, and encouraging me to do something I love for a living.

My in-laws, Gary and Connie Allen, you both have taught me life lessons that are referenced in the book. Thank you for supporting me as “one of your own.”

Alan Rogers, in my early twenties I learned to be a leader, teacher, and manager under your great example and tutelage. Much of my success has come from the foundation you helped me establish.

Sara Robbins, my high school art teacher, you made art so much fun I chose it as a career.

Several coworkers (past and present), family members, and forever friends require mention. Jeff Jolley, Rachel Allen, Kris Kristensen, Marc Siry, Ray Woods, Thuy Tran, Grandpa Zwick, Eric Lee, Darrell Goff, Derek Ellis, John Thomas, Josh Child, and Mark Long: You drive me and inspire me to much greater heights.

And to all the Janda Design Company, Jandaco, Riser Media, and Riser employees past, present, and future: Thank you for enduring the rough times when we had yet to solve all the challenges that faced our growing company. Sorry for the times we weren’t perfect...I was always striving with good intentions.

Nick Jarvis, thank you for the wicked illustrations and collaboration on the design of the book. You are a rare talent.

Jannah Mitchell, thank you for the first round of edits. You drove this book in a better direction.

Jan Seymour, the development and copy editor on this book, you are amazing. You epitomize the “OCD Is an Attribute” principle.

Finally, to the rest of the team at Peachpit Press and Nikki McDonald, thank you for believing in this book and convincing me not to name it “Polishing Turds.” :-)

SECTION 1

HUMAN ENGINEERING

BEHAVIOR, WORK ETHIC, AND SOCIAL PROWESS
HAVE AS MUCH TO DO WITH YOUR SUCCESS
AS YOUR ABILITY TO BEAT PHOTOSHOP
SENSELESSLY INTO SUBMISSION.

1 THE BIG FAT SECRET

Ask anyone who I've worked with over the course of my career and they'll all probably say the same thing: "Michael Janda is absolutely, without question, one of the most talented creators of mediocre graphic design work the world has ever seen." To which I would wholeheartedly agree.

When it comes to design, I'm all right. I am definitely above average, but I know many designers who can design circles around me (fortunately, I employ some of them). However, I don't know many designers who have had the good fortune of finding the level of "success" in their career that I have been blessed to achieve. Why do some amazing designers struggle to accomplish great things and other mediocre designers find great success? Hard work? Being in the right place at the right time? Sheer blind luck?

The truth is that in the graphic design industry (and nearly every other occupation out there), your creative design and technical skills account for only a fraction of your value to a client or to an employer. I have no doubt that it is your interpersonal skills that get you that success. One of my favorite books of all time is Dale Carnegie's 1936 masterpiece, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*, and it is my heartfelt belief that this book should be required reading for everyone in the world. Many of you have likely read this gem; I have myself purchased, read, and gifted this book countless times.

The book's introductory material explains the purpose for which it was written based on research conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as well as the Carnegie Institute of Technology. Following Mr. Carnegie's quote in which he believes that only 15 percent of financial success is due to technical knowledge, while 85 percent is due to personal skills and an ability to lead people, he continues a few paragraphs later with the following principles: The person headed for higher earning potential is the one who not only

has the technical knowledge but who can express ideas, lead people, and develop enthusiasm in those people.

He continues by noting John D. Rockefeller's famous quote that states that the ability to deal with people is a purchasable commodity equal to sugar or coffee, and that he himself would pay more for that ability than all others. With this, Mr. Carnegie would imagine this to be a critical topic to be taught in college. But as he points out, he has never seen a college course such as this in all the land.

I've already admitted that my design skills are far from otherworldly. And I would not be so arrogant as to say that I am a master people manager (plenty of my ex-coworkers would quickly agree on this point). But I do openly posit that my success as a graphic designer has more to do with my ability to get along with others—bosses, clients, employees, and teammates—than it has to do with my design and technical abilities.

This can also be seen in the way I've put together the team at my agency, comprised of hand-picked, quality individuals that I know contribute to our success. As I think about the current team, based on Mr. Carnegie's research it is no surprise to me that the person with the largest salary is not a designer, not a programmer, and not even a project manager. Rather, the person linked to the highest monetary value is my right-hand man who currently serves as "president" of the company. Perhaps, though, a more apt title for him would be that of "Head Schmooser."

He is the one who walks the tightrope of communication between our clients and our employees. He is absolutely indispensable; our clients love him and our team respects him. He doesn't own one share of stock in our company but I openly share company profits with him. Even though he couldn't design his way out of his own garage, he is a great people person—and that translates to great company interaction with our clients and to the resulting great end products. So it follows from Mr. Carnegie's research, these interpersonal skills are critical to success not only for myself as agency owner but for those coworkers surrounding me.

This book is not the platform for sharing all the secrets to managing and relating to people. There is plenty of information out there on the

subject that comes from people much more qualified than I. The format of this book is, however, the appropriate place for me to say that I believe your finely tuned graphic design skills will get you only 15 percent of the way to success in your career, rather than the 90 percent of the way that the design schools lead you to believe. Begin working on your people skills today to ensure that you achieve your full measure of success.

Ultimately, I believe that if you want to succeed in your career as a graphic designer, you need to focus time and energy into developing your interpersonal skills. The more you can get in tune with the needs of your clients, bosses, and team members, the better off you will be. People will rave about your stellar service, and you will begin to enjoy the fruits that come from the tree of hard work and jobs well done.

IF YOU WANT TO SUCCEED
IN YOUR CAREER AS A
GRAPHIC DESIGNER,
YOU NEED TO FOCUS
TIME AND ENERGY INTO
DEVELOPING YOUR
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS.

1 THE EXTRA MILE

When my career was still in its infancy—a mere two years old—I was privileged to experience firsthand how the act of exceeding the expectations of your employers can greatly advance your career. The year was 1998, and a children’s toy, game, and book publishing company located in Phoenix hired me to create a new corporate website.

The dot-com era was heating up and our nation had never seen excitement around an opportunity like the Internet since the California Gold Rush 150 years earlier. The ambitious CEO who employed me had a grand vision of what his maiden online voyage could become. He envisioned users coming to his site and finding a bookshelf loaded with books. The user would click a book, turn the pages to sample it, and then be able to buy it right off of the virtual shelf.

Fortunately for me, I had invested considerable personal time learning an early version of Flash and had experience with some 3D modeling software. I suppose the competition for the job was light due to the newness of the technologies, but I was certainly grateful to land the opportunity.

Going the extra mile was second nature to me, as I seemed to have been born with a deep-rooted desire to please others. From day one I began to build more than the CEO had asked. He wanted a bookshelf—I 3D-modeled the inside of a virtual store with a bookshelf in it. Then I imported the 3D assets into Flash and “programmed” some interactivity (at the time, Flash allowed only some basic functionality by using drop-down menus).

After the room loaded, the user could click the bookshelf, which would load a zoomed-in view. In the zoomed-in view, the user could click a book spine; the book would then fall from the shelf and open to display the sample pages. The 3D store also contained some little interactive elements that engaged the user. When the user clicked a sign, a ball bounced across the screen. When the user moved their

mouse over certain items, a tiger from one of the books popped out of the side of the screen with a word bubble prompting the user with what to do next.

I also signed up for a rudimentary shopping cart system and loaded it into an HTML frame so that when the user clicked something, they could buy from the site. All in all, it was pretty rough by today's standards, but at the time nobody else was doing anything like this.

Needless to say, the CEO was blown away at the expected bookshelf becoming a virtual store. After promptly giving me a raise, he talked about adding another feature to the store: a room where the user could go to learn about the company. I got to work. At first I added a door to the virtual store. The user would mouse over the door and it would open. When they clicked the door, it would load the new room where they could learn about the company. But I knew if I wanted to continue impressing my new boss, I needed to exceed his expectations. I 3D-modeled the outside of the virtual store, so that when the site loaded, the user was presented with the front of the virtual store—it was a quirky, brick building that was sure to capture the interest of their target audience.

When I unveiled this to the CEO, he was again amazed at what I was building. He expected an additional room—I gave him an entire building. This time he asked me to hire someone else and to add more rooms to the virtual store. I found a very talented person and our little team began working on a town (of course, the CEO was expecting only more rooms). When he told us to add more buildings to the town, we created a world with different climate zones (arctic, jungle, tropics, and so forth). He asked for more climate zones—we began adding to the galaxy.

Over the course of the next year and a half of exceeding the CEO's expectations, I had amassed a team of approximately a dozen employees dedicated to the creation of oKID.com, The Online Kid Site. It was one of the first virtual worlds on the Internet. oKID World now contained online games, cartoons, educational content, sponsorship opportunities, an online club, and of course, an e-commerce section (the original intent for building this world). The oKID cast of characters was a unique group

of kids whose names all started with the letter “O”. Owen, Olivia, Oscar, Orchid, and O-dude were just a few of the colorful characters we created.

Every morning around 7:30 A.M., I would get a call from the CEO to walk him through the new things on the site. Our team had self-imposed daily launches, all with the goal of exceeding his expectations. The CEO was parading the site around to interested parties and bringing millions of dollars of investor capital into his company. I had nearly doubled my salary in less than two years, and was gaining the experience and a portfolio piece that would shape my professional future.

With every client and every project, the best graphic designers regularly and purposefully exceed their clients’ expectations. If the client expects two comps, send three. If your boss needs something at 3:00 P.M., have it ready at 2:00 P.M. Always try to be one step ahead of their needs and work to exceed expectations every chance you get.



3 SOAK UP ADVICE

The graphic design industry is filled with critiques and advice. I realize that I may be in the minority of people who actually thrives in this type of environment. I can barely design for fifteen minutes without asking for someone's opinion, and I can't remember a time in my career when I didn't have my nose in a self-help book searching for advice from people who have walked life's paths before me. Perhaps the fact that you are reading this book puts you in the minority of those who are actively searching for ways to improve. Or, maybe you are reading this book because your boss or teacher put a copy of it in your hands. Either way, I am glad you picked it up and started reading.

I often tell people that in college I learned how to learn. But I didn't really learn the skills and attributes I needed to succeed until I had graduated and started my career. I never had a mentor, and I have spent more of my career managing than I have spent having people manage me. Most of what I know has come from independent study, as well as times of trial and error. My hope is that by soaking up the advice in this book you can avoid some of the pitfalls I have endured, and find increased success in your career.

Over the years, as I have scoured books on design and business strategy, I have found that most books contain as many gems of advice as they do unreasonable duds. As you read this book, I invite you to apply what reasonably works for you and disregard what doesn't. These are merely the strategies, philosophies, and experiences that have led me to find success in my career as a graphic designer.



4 YOU ARE NOT YOUR WORK

Graphic designers can be a sensitive lot. Or perhaps it is artists in general who have thin skin. Either way, there is something about right-brained people that reads like a prescription drug bottle: “Caution: Do not mix with sleeplessness, constructive criticism, subpar coffee, or well-meaning advice.” In order to succeed in the design industry, however, it is imperative that you remember that you are not merely the sum of your work. If you interpret design critique as a character critique, you are setting yourself up in a defensive position that will impede your ability to improve your design skills and adapt to different creative environments.

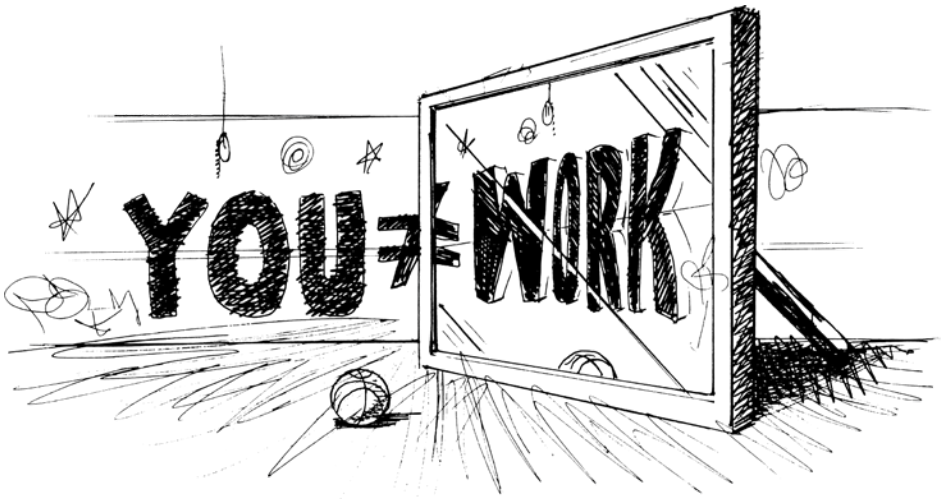
Some time ago I walked past one of our designer’s desks and glanced at the design she was working on. It was pretty rough and headed down the wrong path. I knew this designer was a little sensitive, so I tried to choose my words carefully. “So, you’re getting started on X project? Be sure to review the example designs the client sent over that illustrate what they are hoping to achieve.” That was all I said. I walked away, confident that I had handled the exchange tastefully. Later that day, a few of my employees who sat near her told me that after I left she went into the restroom and sobbed. She didn’t just “cry,” she “sobbed.”

I wish that she had taken what I meant as a gentle nudge in a better direction as a good thing rather than a bad thing. If I did not know without a doubt that she was a skilled and capable designer, I would not have hired her in the first place!

In order to grow in your design skills, you have to hunger for critique and advice from wherever you can get it. Feedback is critical when it comes to being able to push your design to higher levels. If a colleague were to say to you, “Why don’t you try reducing the size of the logo a little bit,” you shouldn’t interpret it as them saying to you, “You call yourself a designer? You suck, you’re ugly, you smell like the back of a 747, and your momma wears combat boots!” You have to

realize that your work does not define you as a person and find it inside yourself to say, “Thank you. That is a great suggestion. I’ll give it a try and see how it looks.” Then you must work to truly feel grateful that your design is being pushed and that your colleague felt comfortable enough with you to be able to offer caring, professional advice to help you look better in the long run.

Give the feedback you receive a try; if the new work looks better, keep it. If it doesn’t, then go back to what you had. One of the keys to growing in your skills is to learn not only to welcome feedback but to desire it from anyone who will give it to you. The greatest designers surround themselves with people whom they trust both as individuals and as creative advisors.



5 BE NICE TO EVERYONE

We've all heard the Golden Rule, which essentially states: "Treat others how you want to be treated." Throughout generations and across the globe, numerous religions and philosophers have echoed this universally acclaimed sentiment.

Christianity

"Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

—Matthew 7:12

Confucianism

"Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself."

—Confucius Analects XV.24, tr. David Hinton

Hinduism

"That man who regards all creatures as his own self, and behaves towards them as towards his own self, laying aside the rod of chastisement and completely subjugating his wrath, succeeds in attaining to happiness."

—The Mahabharata, Book 13: Anusasana Parva: Section CXIII

Islam

"Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you."

—Muhammad

Greek Philosophers

"Do not do to others what would anger you if done to you by others."

—Isocrates

"What you wish your neighbors to be to you, such be also to them."

—Sextus the Pythagorean

"Do not to your neighbor what you would take ill from him."

—Pittacus

I was taught the Golden Rule in my youth and have always strived to act accordingly, but it was not until the past few years that I realized how critical this principle is to a company's practices.

I have worked with a lot of amazing people throughout my career. Being nice to everyone has always seemed a simple task. Los Angeles is notorious for abrupt exchanges. People seem always to be in a rush... no time for chit-chat. My wife and I decided that the fast-paced lifestyle, cost of living, and horrendous traffic has caused this cultural issue in L.A., but I am proud to say that I never gave in to it. Years ago while serving as creative director at FoxKids.com, I received a knock at my door. In poked the head of Thuy, an intern in our marketing department who was finishing up her schooling at UCLA. She had been sent to my office by her boss to pick up some style guides.

Just being myself, I decided to chat with her for a few minutes. During my brief interrogation, I asked how school was going, how she was enjoying her internship, and other friendly but light conversation. After this experience, I assume that we passed in the hall a few times but I have no recollection of any other conversations.

I didn't think much of this experience until many years later after Thuy had become one of my first "big-time" clients. You see, after Thuy finished her internship, she landed a job at ABC Family. This was right around the same time that I started my own business. While at ABC Family, she sent project after project to our company. I eventually had to hire several people just to support the load. I added it up once and realized that in a four-year stretch of time, Thuy had been responsible for sending over \$1 million dollars of business to my company. One day we were having lunch together and she said, "Hey MJ, you know why I'm such an advocate for you, don't you?" I responded, "No, but I sure appreciate it." She said, "Do you remember that day at Fox that I came to your office to get some style guides?" I replied, "Yeah." She finished by simply saying, "You were nice to me and talked to me."

To this day I still have close ties with Thuy, and I have had the privilege of returning a fraction of those favors by providing



recommendations for her for employment opportunities. That day that she came to my office and I was “nice to her” planted the seed for a business relationship that would far exceed my wildest dreams or expectations.

I belong to a business organization called Corporate Alliance. The intention of their organization is to help business leaders build relationships through luncheons, retreats, and other events. They do a great job. One of their mottos is “Avoid relationship arrogance.” Relationship arrogance is when you make an assumption that a relationship with someone has no value to you. This is an easy mistake to make, and is one that I could easily have made with Thuy. (Think, “I am MIGHTY CREATIVE DIRECTOR and you are peon intern.”) Fortunately, this thought never crossed my mind. If it had, I know now that the cost of that backwards thinking would literally be counted in millions of dollars.



You never know when the junior designer sitting next to you may hold the keys to your next huge freelance project. You never know when the receptionist at your least favorite client’s office may refer you to your next job opportunity. You never know. The only safety measure you can take is, “Be nice to everyone.” And not only is it important for the sake of your professional career...in my opinion, it is just a better and happier way to go about your day.

Here are some simple strategies to help you be nice to everyone:

- Smile at people
- Express gratitude
- Call people by name
- Have a daily conversation with a stranger
- Practice random acts of kindness
- Be yourself

One thing that is absolutely critical in this process is to be “real.” Most people can tell if you are being nice or if you are being fake. You have to be genuine and sincere in your kindness toward others in order for your actions to truly have a great impact. Begin practicing this today so that tomorrow it becomes a natural behavior.

YOU NEVER KNOW
WHEN THE RECEPTIONIST AT
YOUR LEAST FAVORITE
CLIENT'S OFFICE MAY
REFER YOU TO YOUR NEXT
JOB OPPORTUNITY.

6 DRAMA IS FOR SOAP OPERAS

I admit it. During the summer of my fourteenth year, my older brother and I watched “Days of Our Lives.” The dramatic story of Bo and Hope, the conniving Viktor Kiriakis—it was all too much to deny. There were gang wars, love stories, and everything in between. The soap opera drama provided an entertaining release from real life. Unfortunately, too many people take that level of dramatics into the work place. This can be a relationship killer.

Some time ago, we met a client for lunch who began talking about another agency he uses. He compared our agency to this other group and said that he appreciated that we were a “No Drama” firm while the other group, on the other hand, was the “Drama” firm. As an example he gave, if there happened to be a text change needed on one of his websites, he would call the other firm and they would immediately have a disproportionate response to the situation, such as, “You need a text change? Let me get a conference call set up so we can talk about it. We’ll need myself, three programmers, the company president, and our office manager on the call to discuss the logistics of changing that text. How does 3:00 P.M. work for you?”



While soap-star-worthy reactions may be fun at home and with friends, they are neither respected nor tolerated in the real world. Here are some ways to keep drama at bay in your dealings with others in the workplace:

- Take a break when you feel like being dramatic. Oftentimes things fall into perspective after you’ve stepped away and looked at them later with a refreshed set of eyes.
- Have someone read your dramatic email before you send it. I rewrite and rewrite and rewrite emails to make sure the tone is just right. The last thing you want is to have your client read between the lines and get the wrong message.

- Have only the appropriate people on the call or in the meeting. You don't need to fill a room with people to discuss a simple tweak to the copy.
- Use a coworker to get things off your chest instead of venting in a lengthy email dissertation. When a client is getting dramatic, it is frequently helpful to complain, blow up, or freak out to your coworker first. This will help you calm down and then prepare a proportionate response.

When you feel yourself slipping into drama-queen mode, take a deep breath, count to ten, drink a pot of coffee—whatever it takes to get your mind back into focus and to stop reacting in a dramatized and often inappropriate fashion.

