

WORK FOR MONEY, DESIGN FOR LOVE

Answers to the Most Frequently Asked Questions About
Starting and Running a Successful Design Business

By David Airey and The Design Community

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David Airey

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To everyone who has ever visited my websites, given feedback on my designs, sent a kind email, or offered encouragement.

To Cathy, Nikki, and everyone else behind the scenes for your hard work bringing this book to life.

To the contributors, for your kindness and generosity.

To my parents, for the love and support you always give.

To my wife, for choosing me back.

To you, for reading.

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Introduction

This is the book I wanted to read when I became a self-employed graphic designer. It's the advice I'd give my younger self—teachings that would've put me years ahead of where I am now.

Initially, the idea was to cover everything I know about the business of design, but it serves you better if I focus solely on the most important topics—the topics made obvious through the hundreds of questions I'm regularly asked by readers of my websites.

But it's not just me offering advice. These pages also contain a wealth of knowledge contributed by vastly experienced designers all over the world, designers with hundreds of years of combined business acumen.

Becoming self-employed was the best business decision I ever made, and this book was created to help make your decision just as beneficial. So here's to all the success you're going to achieve, and all the fantastic times you're going to have along the way.

It's a pleasure to have you here.

Chapter 6

PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

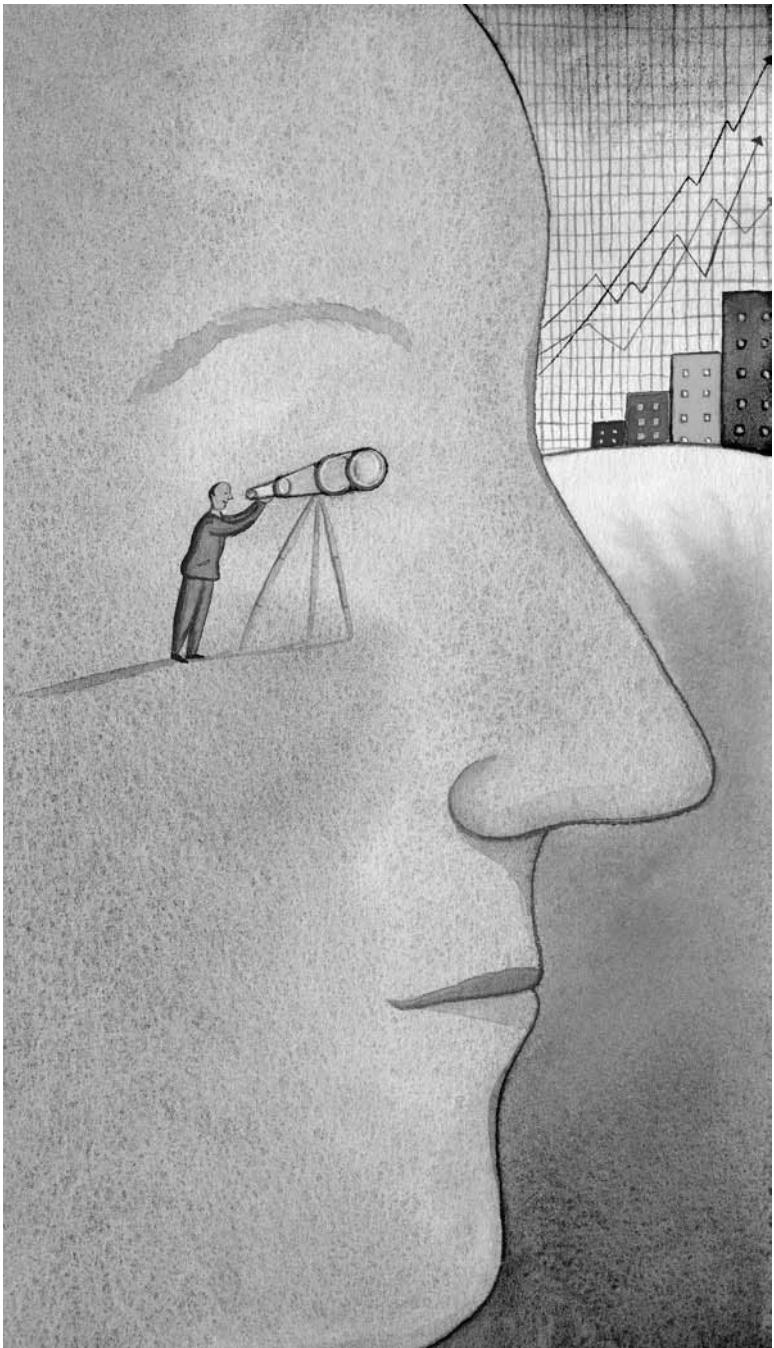
The late French writer and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupery once said, “A goal without a plan is just a wish.” In order to succeed in your new business, you need a plan, something that outlines your route, the resources you will need, and everything you hope to experience along the way. You need a business plan.

A business plan is both a touchstone and an aspirational document. By consulting it frequently, you will be able to keep track of where you are going and know if you are making progress. Additionally, if you need a business loan to help kick-start your venture, the business plan will be the foundation on which your bank manager (hopefully) approves the loan.

The plan will change along the way to meet fluctuations in the market and changes in your life. The first iteration of my plan said absolutely nothing about blogs and about how they’d prove to be the cornerstone of my business. (I wish it had, though; if I had planned to launch a blog from the very beginning, I’d be a year ahead of myself in terms of progress.).

Of course, the best-laid plans can come unstuck, and they sometimes will (see chapter 14 for instances of firing the client, to name just one dilemma), but it’s the formation of these plans that greatly aids a project’s success rate. They will help get you back on track. And just like when you study a map before driving across the country, you’re less anxious and you get there quicker, with fewer dead ends and less wasted energy.

Your business plan is a comprehensive document that contains information about your marketplace; what your definition of success is (what personal income you would like to earn, for instance, or the date by which you can hire an employee); what to do when Plan A fails; your financial



projections; and anything else relevant to your business. It's a fluid document you can update when situations change, but do keep the original intact so in the future you can look back to see how far you've come. Obviously, if you're using the document for outside investment in your business, it'll need to look the part, but you're a designer—that should come easy. However, do have at least one other person check it for typos.

There are entire books and software packages that can help you generate an effective business plan, and it would be wise to consult one. What I'd like to offer here is how to tailor a plan to fit an independent designer like yourself. Marketing guru and blogger Seth Godin offers particularly good advice. In one of his posts, from May 2010, he recommends five distinct sections in your business plan: truth, assertions, money, alternatives, and people. I'd suggest keeping the sections in this order.

Truth

Here's where you cover everything you know about the state of the design profession: about why there's a demand for your skill, about those who are succeeding, about those who have failed (and why). It's where you show how much you understand about the business you're getting into.

A sample fact (please note that these are just examples; don't base your business decisions on them): You might say that 56 percent of respondents to the "2011 Design Industry Voices" survey (conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research) were intending to leave their agency; that 35 percent had been in their job less than a year; and that in the next 12 months 58 percent were intending to change their employer. With such a high staffing turnover and with

a scarcity of jobs in the current economic climate, there will likely be more designers entering self-employment, and therefore greater competition for you. These facts might also affect your ability to retain your best employees should you choose to expand.

You might follow up with information like this: Rachel Fairley, lead author of the “Design Industry Voices” report and managing director at Fairley & Associates noted, “Over half (58 percent) of respondents told us their agency is employing less permanent staff, and 55 percent that they are using more freelancers.” So although there is likely more competition between independent designers competing for clients, the flip side is that it opens up new avenues to be subcontracted by agencies.

You might also talk about how the design profession has exploded during the past few decades, partly due to the decreasing expense of hardware and software, as well as the expansion of the Internet and the ability to work from any location with an Internet connection.

This section doesn’t express an opinion. It simply states things as they are, in as much detail as is necessary. The point of the section is to be clear to yourself (and to potential investors) that you know how the design business works. You can include spreadsheets, reports, surveys, market analyses—whatever it takes to paint an accurate picture.

Assertions

This is your plan A, what you want to happen. You’re getting into business because you want to do something. You want to do X and Y is going to happen. Here’s where you detail the steps you’ll take and what you hope to achieve.

Talk about the niche you're targeting (see chapter 3), about how much of your earnings will come from working directly with clients and how much from being subcontracted (see chapter 5), about how you're going to brand yourself to stand out from your competitors (see chapters 7 and 8), and about what you'll do to attract and retain clients (see chapters 10 and 11).

To give you an idea of what this section might be like, I've created a sample that I might use for myself, given the experience I've already amassed, if I was starting my business today.

I am David Airey, a Northern Ireland-based graphic designer. I will focus on creating brand identities for established companies. My target client is a medium- to large-size company that has been established for more than ten years. The client has been growing steadily but has been working with an outdated visual identity and is in need of a new design to reach the next level and to bring all departments together with cohesive visuals.

I will operate as a sole proprietorship from my home-based studio in County Down, Northern Ireland, and will grow to profitability by month ten.

My company's primary goal is to boost clients' profits by creating brand identities that help attract and retain the ideal customer base. Although measuring this is not an exact science, client profits will be recorded for three years either side of the identity relaunch.

Clients will fall into two distinct groups: medium-size companies that are typically 15 to 50 employees, and large-size companies of 50+ employees.

Clients will be attracted through my strong online presence, through referrals from 100+ previous design clients, through a highly targeted and tailored self-promotional mailing delivered to companies I aspire to work with, and through my knowledge of search-engine optimization coupled with highly visible websites. One aspect of my websites that helps set them apart from others is the focus and in-depth featuring of the process within brand identity design projects.

The first client account will be established by the end of month one, with three further accounts secured by the end of the second quarter. The first year will bring eight new client accounts.

Money

Let's look at some of the costs I'd incur if starting anew:

- Office furniture, including a large desk, a desk lamp, an ergonomic chair, a large bookshelf, a filing cabinet, a sofa, and a coffee table.
- A 27-inch iMac, a MacBook Air, an A3-size color printer, and the following software: Adobe Creative Suite, font management utilities, Microsoft Office, iWork.
- Development of my online portfolio, which will include my own design and development time.
- Utilities, including gas, electricity, telephone, and Internet.
- Assorted office supplies.

- Business stationery, which includes design time by me, and third-party print costs.
- An up-to-date library of creative magazines, journals, and reference books.

I'd go on to mention how much cash is needed in reserve to cover outgoings during quiet spells, because (as I now know) throughout my self-employment there will be months when I'm inundated with quote requests from potential clients, and then the next month will pass without a squeak.

Purchasing type fonts is an expense I hadn't considered at the beginning. I've since learned to absolve this cost into client invoices, but when my charges were much smaller than they are now, this could easily eat away at my profits. If there was a plus side, once the font license was bought, it was available for any appropriate future projects, so font purchasing could be seen as an investment of sorts.

Don't forget, earnings need to cover the more mundane expenses in life, such as office rental if needed, dental costs, car maintenance, health insurance, and so on. And it would be great if you could pay yourself a salary.

In addition, this section of the plan includes how much clients will be charged and answers questions such as: How will you accept payment? How will you spend your income? What will the balance sheet look like for the first three years? (More info on pricing and bookkeeping in chapter 16.)

Alternatives

This is your Plan B. What happens when X doesn't result in Y? What happens if your earnings plan doesn't work out as you had envisioned? What happens if you are not able to

attract the sort of clients you wished for? At what point do you decide that your original plans aren't working? What do you do if a client won't pay?

You can't address every single eventuality that might befall you. But your alternatives should at the very least address every assertion that you have made earlier in your plan.

For instance, if client work dries up for a month or more, these quiet months are ideal times to proactively market yourself (see chapter 11) or to create passive income streams (see chapter 20). Add your latest projects to your portfolio so those next potential clients can see your strongest work. We all improve with time, after all, so show yourself in the best light possible.

Here's another example of when a Plan B might be needed, an actual and unfortunate incident from my life. How to promote myself is definitely part of my own business plan. A big part of that is online promotion, through my blog and website. Everything was going swimmingly: My website had been pulling in more than 2,000 unique daily visits. Not a massive amount, but for a one-man operation, 700,000 annual visitors can generate a healthy amount of new design business.

Then someone took me offline while I was away on holiday. Five days before my trip was over, I got some worrying emails from friends that told me my website had disappeared and that my domain name (www.davidairey.com) was now redirecting to a random website. I was confused and anxious.

Long story short: A Gmail flaw allowed a hacker to abduct almost my entire self-promotional plan and all of the value it had built for my business. I had no backup plan for this,

especially being away from home. I called upon the close contacts I'd made within the design community to ask for help.

I received an enormous amount of support from thousands of others: Several days after my arrival home, my story was mentioned on the *New York Times* website, accumulated thousands of "thumbs ups" on Digg, was on the front page of Edinburgh's *Evening News* (I was living in Edinburgh at the time), and was blogged about on hundreds of websites. This flood of publicity prompted GoDaddy (where my domain had been transferred to by the thief) to give almost immediate help in returning the domain to my possession.

I was lucky. Very, very lucky. Like I said before, there's almost no way to predict that something so random might happen. But if my website was so valuable to me, I should have had a plan in place to either quickly replace, repair, or otherwise protect it.

A further occasion when you'll need a plan B is when you've spent many weeks crafting work for a client, and now it's time for the presentation. It flops. The client just can't see how it's going to work for his or her business, despite previously agreeing with the general idea when you did a walk-through in a face-to-face meeting. Now what? (Have a look at chapter 17 for terms and conditions that must be agreed upon prior to the designer/client working relationship.)

Or what if you're in a bad accident and can't work for six months? If it's just you taking sole responsibility for the business, how are you going to survive? So include those passive income streams from chapter 20 in your plan. They can prove vital to the long-term success of your company.

People

To be as successful as possible, you need to build and develop relationships with a host of others, and I'm not just talking about your clients.

We talked about subcontracting in chapter 5, but not the kind I'm referring to here. This is where *you* do the subcontracting, where *you* assign specific elements of a project to other creatives. Doing so has benefited me in a number of ways:

- I'm able to offer my clients a broader range of deliverables, making the client's task of outsourcing easier to handle.
- I get to focus on the creative work I do best and enjoy most.
- The elements of a project that I don't specialize in can still be completed by specialists, rather than me attempting to learn on the job, therefore keeping the quality of work to a maximum.

In this section of the plan, you'll show what kinds of specialists you're going to build relationships with, as well as how you'll do it. For instance, the comment threads on my websites have proved invaluable for developing rapport with designers and developers. When people leave comments on a blog post and add a link to their own websites, I make a point of clicking in order to learn more about them. They obviously have an interest in the creative topics I'm writing about, so there's a good chance they'll specialize in work similar to my own.

Although it might be too big of a leap for someone just starting out, it's also worth at least considering how you might

expand in the future with the addition of employees. Perhaps, like me, you'll find you prefer working as a one-person company, or perhaps you're in it to grow beyond my current situation.

How long?

You're probably wondering how long your business plan should be. Deficiencies in plans are more likely to be qualitative than quantitative, but if you're searching for a business loan, and if the plan is for the benefit of investors, aim to record the necessary information in 20 to 30 pages. If it's for your eyes only, you can work with fewer.

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