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**How Pros Source Products
NKBA's Design Competition Winners
A Look Back at KBIS 2019**

Better Business



Think Smart to Work Smart

**Pros share what it takes to
improve your bottom line**

THEY SAY THAT IT IS BETTER to work smarter than harder, and that is true for all types of business ventures, including creative ones. As the principal of a design business, you may be a project manager, a marketer, a content creator and an ecommerce agent in addition to someone who knows all about backslashes.

In fact, running a design firm is just 20 percent the fun and creative functions and 80 percent working on the business, according to LuAnn Niagara, co-owner of Livingston, N.J.-based Window Works and host of the podcast "A Well-Designed Business." But thanks to the digital marketplace, there are strategies that can help you bring in more revenue, leverage your relationships and maybe even plan for your eventual exit, as long as you have your brand and business defined first.

CLARIFY BRAND & PROCESS

Working smarter begins with clearly understanding and defining your brand. Don't start by thinking about how or what you do, start with why you do what you do.

By **CARRIE WHITNEY**

"It is important to figure out who you are in business and who you want to serve and then keep going for it," said Veronica Solomon, CEO & principal interior designer of Katy, Texas-based Casa Vilora Interiors and interior design business mentor at Veronica Solomon University. "I truly love what I do and believe that everyone deserves to live in a beautiful, functional and comfortable home that supports their lifestyle. I have diversified my services and allow some flexibility in how clients can work with me."

If you are new in business, defining your brand could take a few years. You can start by asking yourself which projects you most enjoy working on, and do not be afraid to change your focus. Once you know where you belong, put yourself in the lane where your clients are.

"As the saying goes, your vibe is your tribe," said Kimberley Seldon, principal of Toronto-based Kimberley Seldon Design Group and advocate-in-chief for Business of Design. "Clients are attracted to designers who have the value and level of service they crave. Your fee structure, for instance, will attract or deter a client. That's as it should be."

After determining which types of services you want to offer and to whom, putting clear, duplicatable processes in place is key.

"The only way to run an efficient, effective business is to create systems, strategies and protocols that allow you to complete jobs on time and on budget," said Seldon. "Stand out from the crowd by offering a better experience, and you'll never have to look for work – it will find you."

DEVELOP YOUR BUSINESS & RELATIONSHIPS

Invest in the tools you need to make your business run better and more profitably, advised Claire Jefford, a Burlington, Ont.-based interior decorator, business coach and vlogger. This can include anything from design software to good photography of your projects. Ensure that you have your trades in place – they should be trustworthy, high quality and reflect your brand and mission statement. Build relationships with suppliers and manufacturers.

"It goes back to making sure you find people who are compatible with what you stand for," said Jefford, who explained that aligning with brands and manufacturers can be beneficial, but it must be authentic. "For me, everything is a long game. It's more of a marathon than a sprint. Everything takes time."

Getting to know manufacturers at trade shows allows you to tell clients that you know the people behind the brands. And when you know them on a personal level, it can help you sell those brands. Social media tagging offers designers a way to let brands know when they use their products in projects. Finally, know which brands support designers in their pricing.

Not shying away from discussing money with clients, tradespeople or suppliers shows the type of business acumen smart designers possess.

"Even though numbers are not your thing, it's not okay to not understand the numbers side of your business," said Niagara.

Being smart enough to hire a bookkeeper is just the first step. You also need to monitor him/her and meet with your accountant on a regular basis.

EMPLOY DIGITAL MARKETING

Your business' digital presence can be a significant asset if fashioned properly. A designer's website should be an extension of their marketing efforts and clearly represent their brand. In addition to project images, the site must include important pieces of information about you, such as your first and last name, the city and state where you are based, a phone number and a professional headshot. Blogging can be useful for boosting SEO and provide a way to connect with brands via links. ↓

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Beyond the website, smart business owners utilize the variety of social media platforms available from Instagram to LinkedIn and Pinterest, as well as sites like HomeAdvisor and Houzz. It's a layering process, but that doesn't mean you need to overthink it.

For example, Jefford started a YouTube channel initially to create educational videos about color and design. Topics were based on frequently asked questions she had been receiving. Although some designers might worry about giving away too much information, Jefford found that the videos helped her communicate with and secure clients.

"They actually gave me a lot of leverage," she said. The informational videos often showed potential clients how much there was to know – presenting the designer's value proposition and allowing Jefford to educate clients and manage their expectations on the front end of a project.

Rather than simply implementing marketing and social media efforts, pay attention to metrics. Know where your leads come from and which translate into sales. For many designers, most leads come from word of mouth, and because business is business, you need to be mature enough to let something go if it does not translate into ROI.

ACTIVELY SEEK PASSIVE INCOME

Once your brand, process, relationships and digital presence are in place, you can take advantage of the opportunity to generate passive revenue with complementary digital products.

"A smart strategy is to include the development of multiple revenue streams for your business," said Leslie Carothers, CEO of League City, Texas-based The Kaleidoscope Partnership, and co-owner, Savour Partnership. "It still requires work, but it doesn't require the same kind of work."

Developing online products like courses, shop-the-look boards and e-books can bring in revenue 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and you do not have to be present after the initial set up. However, creating the products is just the first part of the plan.

"The key to passive income strategy is to be able to drive traffic to your website," explained Carothers. Social media and online advertising provide two important avenues to your site.

"Strategically, all designers should be thinking about multiple streams of income and how to create this piece on their own website," she added.

Because you own and control your website, unlike Instagram and Pinterest, you have the opportunity to make it an income generator. But don't leave out social media – you can promote affiliate links on your social channels, which can bring you a commission when visitors purchase from vendors they reach through your links. In addition

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to increased cash flow, these revenue streams can have long-term benefits as far reaching as exit strategy.

"It makes it much easier to have an asset you can sell at the end of your career," said Carothers.

THINK SMART & THEN ACT SMART

If creating an e-book and promoting your website to sell it sounds daunting, start by considering the possibility and getting help if you need it.

"Before we can achieve anything, we first have to believe it," said Catherine Davin, principal and founder of Pittsburgh-based Davin Interiors. "Push yourself beyond the boundaries that are often self-created."

She outlined five key factors for business success, and the first is imagination. She also explained the importance of considering failure and success as a continuum, having an attitude of gratitude, building a support team and taking a "no excuses" approach. Davin suggested having an accountability buddy who is willing to call you out when you are making excuses.

In the end, building your most profitable business is up to you.

"Decide to be excellent," said Nigara. "When you hear good advice, act on it. Don't leave it in a notebook, actually do it." ●