

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

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For over two decades, Richard has developed high-performance creative solutions within a wide range of work experiences from freelancing with design studios and agencies, to working in-house for corporate departments within the public and private sectors. This has afforded him with versatility and a diverse exposure to various markets, personalities, processes and working environments.

His role as senior designer at YRT/Viva oversees the design and production of marketing and communication initiatives ranging from marketing collateral, reports, presentations, fleet graphics, wayfinding signage, apparel, cartography, art direction, illustration, photography and brand standards development and stewardship.

He is a graduate from Humber College's Advertising & Graphic Design program and Sheridan College's Illustration program and has written articles on various aspects of design-related issues for publication.

Recently, I finished an RGD portfolio review at Georgian College. I briefly talked with fellow RGD colleagues how the industry has changed; in some ways for the better. We remembered some of our educational resource challenges in the 80s and 90s. How fortunate students are these days to have industry support behind them and events such as Creative Directions to assist grads with their transition to the work world.

When I graduated, co-ops were something relatively new. They proved to be as valuable an opportunity as they are today. If graduates did not find employment immediately, they would utilize their time in libraries researching companies. After acquiring contact information of companies, they would drop-off their CVs and portfolios in hopes of getting a call back for an interview. Some graduates would go to agencies to see about potential work placements. It was a different time in terms of job search methods. Speaking of time, a lot of it was spent cold calling or travelling door-to-door. Sometimes there was an opportunity to meet with creative directors, art directors, and even senior designers. These meetings offered a chance to demonstrate what value you brought to their table. It was perhaps more personal than an email for sure, but it was a long, painstaking process.

These days, the logistics are not so much a factor. Grads have a farther (global) reach with web technology, emails, blogs, etc. Now there are many more ways of connection than in the past. Granted it does come with a price. It becomes that much more demanding to stand out from a bigger crowd. Filled inboxes may not even yield the opening of a hopeful email with the deluge of applicants for a single position. So, connection still remains a challenge.

Once a connection is made, then what? This was a question I asked myself while I thought of the upcoming portfolio review. I asked myself, "Would grads find it useful to have some advice they could take away with them, like some tips to improve their success as they journeyed into the workforce?". I pictured myself in their shoes... writing notes in rushed scribbles as the reviewer spoke. Then, trying late to recall the perspectives gleaned from what seemed like a lifetime of experience jammed into a ten minute window. The next challenge was what to include, improve or leave out of my portfolio. It's a great opportunity for any design student, but a lot to take in all at once.

So I decided beforehand to develop tips for grads and organized them into three distinct areas: Career, Portfolio and Interview. Some of the tips are common sense ones you can find on any career advice website or blog. Others are more specific to the design industry, but all come from my own experiences and reflections through the years. It is my hope that these insights will help others in a way that the people I've met and known along the way have helped me.

10 TIPS FOR YOUR CAREER

1. Don't presume to know it all. No matter how long you've been in the field, you can always learn something new from the oldest veteran to the youngest grad or even people not in the industry who make you think about design in a fresh way.
2. Never leave your professional development in the hands of others, whether a colleague, boss, or mentor. Ultimately, learning will always be your decision and responsibility. Do not rely on any one source to stay informed.
3. Talent doesn't win the race alone. Focused effort, adaptation, knowing the tools of the trade, dedication, people skills and networking are just as important as talent. Do not be discouraged by setbacks.
4. You are only as marketable as your last job, so choose them wisely. In addition to the type of work you enjoy doing, look at cultural fit and know what works for you and them.
5. Show, don't just tell. There is no business without show business and not everyone can easily discern what you have to offer. Showing people what you know and do is more convincing than telling people what you know.
6. Avoid spec work. Never take people at their word when they offer spec work or work in exchange for credit, for your portfolio, a possibility for future work, or entering a design contest in hopes to be chosen. This degrades the profession and the value you offer paying clients.
7. Play well with others. The client is not always right contrary to popular belief. They can sometimes be misinformed (though rarely when it comes to their business if they are experienced), hard to please, indecisive, and contradictory. But, give them the respect they deserve by listening, weighing, researching, verifying and helping them. Stay humble, but do not be afraid to speak up either.
8. Many channels can lead to success. Tools like social media (i.e., LinkedIn), freelancing, blogging, co-op work placements, registering with a talent agency and meeting industry people at networking events can aid your career. But look first at the value you offer people and "fit", not the other way around, when approaching prospective employers.
9. Pay it forward. Contribute back to your community as a way of honouring those who have helped you along the way.
10. Stay original. Simple, clear, epic ideas last a long time. If you think you've created something you've seen before, chances are someone else has seen it too. Do not copy other designer's work, claiming it as your own. It's a small industry.

10 TIPS FOR YOUR PORTFOLIO

1. When it comes to selecting what is in and what is out, edit ruthlessly and thoughtfully for quality, consistency, growth, focus and distinctiveness.
2. Stay curious. Originality can spring forth from both strategic approaches and creative experimentation.
3. Keep current. Don't keep work from five years ago.
4. Your portfolio should align with your passion and career goals. Do not include work you don't wish to pursue. You get, what you project.
5. Be aware of the limits and stay within them. Do not show every piece you have created. Include 10-12 tops with interesting, value-added stories behind them. In the event that the interviewer wants to see more work samples aligned within their business sector, then have a few more projects on hand.
6. Let the work speak for itself and avoid being apologetic. If the work is not strong enough, why include it?
7. Always keep the business objectives of your work in mind. Especially with self-promotion. Substance, not just style.
8. Show the quality of your thinking, research, understanding of the audience needs, market competitors, customer needs and priorities within your work.
9. Find a presentation format that is not cumbersome, is well-maintained and appropriate for the audience. Always have a backup, if your digital presentation fails to function.
10. Don't forget a memorable, relevant leave-behind.

BONUS TIP: Industry award-winning work is nice to have, but helping your clients and creating value for their audiences is the best reward.

10 TIPS FOR YOUR INTERVIEW

1. Don't fidget. Relax and stay focused by being prepared ahead of time.
2. Don't bad-mouth previous employers, co-workers, or even teachers. Words travel farther than you may know and it leaves a bad impression about your professionalism.
3. Don't forget manners, including cell phone etiquette. Turn off your phone and put out of sight.
4. Give only as much detail as the interviewer requests. But, provide enough detail to strengthen your chances of being considered for the position. Too much may be boring; not enough may sell you short. Take your cue from the interviewer. But keep it real. Do not embellish or stretch the truth.
5. Stay confident. If you are offered the job and want it, say so, graciously. Show interest in the position by demonstrating you have done your homework researching the company and markets beforehand.
6. Be punctual. Always. This reflects on your reliability and time management skills.
7. Stay flexible and positive. If offered a second interview or candidate test, give it a chance.
8. Have an interesting story or two about the work you've done, a problem you've helped solve, or even a passion or interest you have that makes you stand out (memorable). Employers see dozens of candidates sometimes and it is easy to get lost in the crowd.
9. Be patient, but not passive. Ask if it's okay to occasionally keep in touch. You may not get hired by them. Ever. But they may know someone who might be looking to hire at some point. In the meantime, continue developing other contacts on your own.
10. Thank the interviewer for their time and consideration.

BONUS TIP: No industry or employment setting is perfect. There will always be people, processes, projects, environments, and worklife choices you don't feel are a proper "fit". Understanding this balance will help you make the decision that is right for you.