12 tips for becoming a great designer

Becoming a great designer is about genetics and talent. It's about who your parents are; if they're artists, or, better yet, graphic designers, you've lived in the art conversation your whole life, and design will be easier.

But it's also about doing a lot of work in the right environment. Paula Scher did hundreds of album covers for CBS; Lou Dorfsman did all the advertising for CBS radio and then CBS TV through the 1950s and '60s. David Carson did magazine design. If you want to do good work and are surrounded by people who want to do good work or support good work, you're going to get better.

With that in mind, here are some tips for putting yourself in the best place to do great design.

1. **Shoot for a GREAT school, the best you can get into.** Don't just apply to the school in your neighborhood, the school in your nearest city. Do some research, find the best schools for what you're striving for and apply there. The students in those schools ought to set a really high bar, and they'll push you to be that much better – their work will inspire you, and your work will inspire them. You will also get entré to internships and jobs from going to top schools that you may not get any other way. If you can't get in a great school now, hone your book at a two year college, and then apply.

2. **Build your reputation.** Graphic design is based on doing good work and doing it on time.

• **Put down that phone!** Science shows that there is no such thing as "multi-tasking"; you are either distracted or you're not. If you think you are *great* at multi-tasking, research *proves* that you are just more deluded and distracted than those who don't think the can multi-task.

• **Do your work!** You might not like a project, but you're being graded for your ability to make deadlines and you'll be fired for your inability to make deadlines. Part of life is learning to get enjoyment even from things you don't want to do.

   If you are reliable and responsible, your teachers and employers will vouch for you and make your life easier. (If you have issues with authority, get help.) Being responsible is how you build a reputation, and a reputation is how you get work.

3. **Put together a GREAT portfolio.** Start to collect people's work that really excites you. Find out what employers are looking for in a portfolio. Then do your interpretation of that work. And then do them again. Like doing reps in the gym, the more times you do design the stronger you get. And the more practice you have, the smarter your mistakes will be and the quicker and more gracefully you'll recover from them.

4. **Come up with as many ideas as you can, and pick the best one.** Coming up with one idea and polishing it endlessly doesn't make the idea better. Don't spend a week on your first idea and find out it isn't working.

5. **Critique, critique, critique.** Ask your teachers for critiques, and make the changes they suggest. You get better through repetition and by people pointing out where your thinking or your designing could have been stronger. Critiques are not a personal attack, they're a contribution to your improvement.

6. **You are in a team with your teachers and your fellow students.** Ask them questions. Ask them to critique your work – they'll often be flattered. Teachers are not against you. They're working professionals who want you to succeed. And your fellow students are asking the questions you should be asking.

7. **But don't wait for your teachers – learn on your own.** There is more information on graphic design available on the web right now than was ever available to design students before. In public school, I was always waiting for teachers to spoon feed me information. Stop waiting for that spoon – reach for it; if you want to know about something discussed in class, like typography or what a target market is, look it up.

8. **Take business classes.** Graphic design is all about designing for business. The more you know about business, the better you can help your client, and the better you can communicate with your clients, who don't understand the difference between a serif and a sans serif font, but do know the difference between in-

vestment and ROI. It will also be helpful to you if you decide to start your own business.

9. **Subscribe to design magazines.** Part of learning on your own is to get a subscription to *Communication Arts* or *Print* or *Graphis*. These magazines have the best design and advertising work from around the world in them – look at it and learn.

10. **Make friends with the best design students.** Eat lunch with them, talk about what you're learning, review your projects, brainstorm. More than two heads are astronomically better than one – one person can have HUGE blind spots about their work; two, three, five people make it much more difficult to hold on to those blind spots. (Besides, many great design studios – and many great rock-n-roll bands – have started out from design school friendships.)

11. **Get internships.** Yes, multiple. You want to have a new internship every semester, and you want to have them at the best design studios and ad agencies you can get into. (Which requires a good portfolio, and being brave and calling up and asking for internships, or asking your teachers or other contacts to help.)

There are three reasons for this:

- *There is no way teachers can teach you everything you need to learn in the two or four years we're working with you.* Having an internship means you are working that many hours a week in the field you are learning about. Malcolm Gladwell, in *Outliers*, makes the case that it takes 15,000 hours to become an expert at something. Since no teaching program beats actually working in design, collect those hours by really doing graphic design.

- *You will meet people.* The job market is tough. If you call and are lucky enough to get someone on the phone, or return your e-mail (they probably won't reply to your resume), you might get an interview, but probably not. If you're just a resume, you'll have to call them back, be persistent. But if you intern with someone, and you do the best job you possibly can, when you call them and they'll return your call; if there's an opening, they'll hire you over someone they don't know; if they know you're looking, they may even help you look for that job.

- *Versatility.* The more internships you do, the more you'll know, the more versatile you'll be, the better you'll know who you want to be

when you grow up, and the more people who'll return your calls when you get out of school.

12. **Get involved with your local design association.** Whether it's AIGA, AdClub, the local Art Directors Club, GAG, Illustrators Club or the local Chamber of Commerce, it's an opportunity to meet people. There might even be one on campus.

- *Go to meetings.* Ask questions and learn. Talk to the people next to you and find out what they do. Be really interested in everything.

- *Get involved with their committees.* Often the committees consist of people really dedicated to the industry. And often they are people you would never know existed if you didn't meet them on committees.

- *Get involved in their awards competitions.* They give you unqualified access to seeing all the design being done in your area, as well as getting to meet nationally-known designers you would be scared to call and talk to.

- *If there isn't a local design organization, start one.*

Early in your career you'll want to be involved with design organizations. Later in your career, you'll want to be involved with the associations of your target market. Either way, you need to do the best job you possibly can for the organization. Follow through on everything that you say you will do. Be friendly and personable, and your committee members can become job contacts as well. (From personal experience, DO NOT take on assignments and get scared and disappear. Show up, do the work, ask for help, or you'll get a reputation as someone who can't be counted on.)

13. **Look for opportunities to manage people.** The way to build a career is to take on bigger and bigger challenges. And the way to do better design is to work with better and better teams. Often the best way to build those teams is to put them together yourself. Also, you are only as good as your portfolio. Become an art director, put together a great team, and their work goes in your portfolio. It's a different way to build a portfolio, but equally valid, and puts you in a better position for later in your career.

As a student, you want to be going a million miles an hour on your career. You're young, you're healthy, you're full of energy and new ideas, you have more options for survival while working for nothing. Think of it as an adventure!