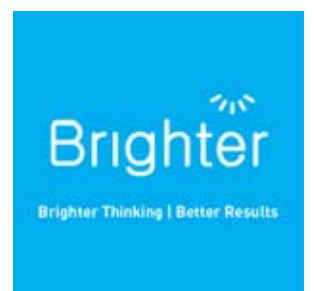


# How to get your first job in graphic design

16 designers tell you how they did it  
(plus a whole bunch of other good stuff)



**Sample**



**“The chances of getting a job as a graphic designer are poor due to more people graduating each year with graphic design qualifications than there are jobs available for them to go into.”**

Careers NZ website  
<http://www.careers.govt.nz>

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# Contents

Introduction.....	5
5 things I learned the hard way .....	6
Orientation: who does what in the industry.....	9
My first break in Graphic Design: 16 Designers Tell Their Story .....	12
What Recruitment Agencies think about you.....	22
The Case for Employing You .....	24
How to Leverage this Opportunity .....	25
How to make money (and keep making it) without even getting a job .....	26
Frequently Asked Questions about Graphic Design Jobs .....	28
Self Protecting Resource 1: Sample Terms and Conditions.....	33
Self Protecting Resource 2: Invoice example.....	34
Recommended Reading.....	35
Useful Links .....	36
Feedback.....	36

# Introduction

Thank-you for buying this e-book. Inside you'll find first hand accounts from real designers from all over the world on exactly how they landed their first job. Additionally you'll find tips and advice you can use to help you secure your very first foothold in what you'll know is a highly competitive industry.

This idea came to me while teaching. For 4 years I taught Graphic Design at Media Design School, then later at Massey University School of Design. After guiding hundreds of students, I wanted to help answer the question they had all asked me: now I've finished this course, *how do I get a job?*

At the time I could only share my personal experience. But I soon realised that if other designers did the same, it would provide a useful and reassuring resource for graduating students and others.

So I set about contacting designer friends, colleagues, employers and ex-students to ask for their version of events. Within these pages you'll discover the details of how they transitioned from struggling graduate to paid professional – and provide insights on how you might do the same.

These designers have a range of specialisms, from traditional print design to web design, moving image and television. So you'll definitely find something relevant to you. They also have a range of opinions (some of which conflict) so take them on board but ultimately you'll need to decide what are the best strategies for your situation.

With stories from the USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand, read on to get a true world view of how you might tackle the challenge ahead.

The best of luck to you all.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Phil Roberts', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Phil Roberts  
Creative Director  
Brighter Design

November 2012

# 5 things about the design industry I learned the hard way

Before you launch into the stories (though feel free to flick straight to them, they start on page 11) I'd like to share some things I wish I'd been taught at university.

The real world of graphic design is very different to the academic bubble you have been living in for the past 3 or 4 years. It would have really helped me if someone had explained the points that follow before I left Uni. Some of these may be obvious to you but at the time all of them came as a real shock to me.

## Go, go, go!

I graduated from prestigious London art school with both a Bachelors degree and a Masters degree. I certainly felt optimistic about what was to come. I'd been to a well respected institution. I was in London. I had two degrees. I was pretty handy on a Mac. This was going to be easy.

## Lesson #1: Nobody cared that I had 2 degrees

After writing (yes, writing. Remember that?) 50 or 60 job applications and receiving an equal number of rejection letters I realised that my MA sounded grand to me but didn't impress potential employers in the slightest.

With no experience I hadn't really got a chance. I even got rejected for a job as layout designer for a porn magazine (and that's not really design, is it?)

**Lesson learned:** industry experience is the most valuable thing you can have. The more you have, the more favourable the odds of you getting that job. That said, it has to be *relevant* experience. 2 weeks working at a signwriters is no help if you're going for a web design job.

## Why experience is so important

Because employers simply cannot afford to spend time showing you the ropes. It's a massive financial risk for any business to take on a new member of staff. Put yourself in their shoes:

- You have to be paid. i.e. you cost them money.
- Spending time babysitting you takes them away from to doing their job meaning less billable hours. i.e. you cost them more money.
- They are hiring to lighten their workload, not double it. i.e. you give them a headache.

Possessing experience does away with 2 out of 3 of these and makes you a less risky option for them.

## **Lesson #2: I should have courted the industry sooner to lay some ground work**

Even though I'd spent 5 years in London, I'd done absolutely nothing to make any contacts in the industry. It was probably a combination of procrastination, embarrassment and the fact I thought I was too bloody busy doing a degree!

I remember hating those who found an "in" because of a contact they'd cultivated. Surely it was about the work and my work was brilliant, so why did they get the job? Well, they got the job because they worked at building a relationship and rapport with someone in the industry – and that's what matters. It shows you are making an effort. It shows you are focused on succeeding and that you understand the game and how it must be played.

Word of mouth is as strong in the design industry as any other. Around 60% of jobs are never advertised so building relationships with working designers is also a smart longer term strategy for getting a job. Why? Because people go to who they know first. People they know, like and trust to be precise.

**Lesson learned:** its about who you know then who you are. Your work is probably third.

### **If you don't schmooze, you lose**

Its vital you get amongst it as soon as you can. These days its incredibly easy to talk to working designers. Start a conversation on Twitter or via LinkedIn. Attend seminars like Design Assembly, We Can Create, Semi Permanent. Go to events chaired by DINZ (Designers Institute of New Zealand) or CAANZ (Communication Agencies Association of New Zealand).

Talk to the designers who present. Don't hero worship them, but make intelligent comments and ask them some less obvious questions. Learn some networking skills, even if you hate it. Fortune favours the brave.

## **Lesson #3: My current knowledge of the industry was flaky at best**

I should have taken the time to research the industry I was about to enter. To have followed the burning issues, the key players and the trends would have allowed me to start conversations with industry professionals. Conversations that would build rapport and demonstrate my knowledge of the industry.

More importantly it would have allowed me to have discussions with professional designers that didn't just centre around the question "Have you got a job for me?".

**Lesson learned:** Do your homework and keep a finger on the pulse of what is happening. It's easier now than ever and you should be regularly consuming articles on the latest developments to build your background knowledge.

## Lesson #4: I didn't know where I wanted to work or what type of work I wanted to do

I never considered exactly where I fitted in the design landscape, what type of company I wanted to work for or what field of design I loved the most. Without this sense of direction I wasted time with a scattergun approach and had lots of everything in my portfolio. I was too broad, too general and mostly too irrelevant.

**Lesson learned:** trying to be all things to all people gets you nowhere. You should have at least a loose idea about which way you'd like to go.

Use the career stepping stones concept: think about the job you'd really like then work backwards to figure out how you might get there. E.g. say you love magazines and food. So perhaps in a few years time you'd really like to be working as a designer at Dish magazine. Your stepping stones might look like this:

Designer at Dish → Designer at other food/lifestyle magazine → Junior designer for food/lifestyle/fashion mag → Mac op/ad makeup for any magazine (start here).

Its not your official career path just something to give you half a clue. If you don't know how to get there, ask someone who actually does the job you want exactly how they did it.

## Lesson #5: Being a designer wasn't all about me (the hardest lesson)

When I eventually did get a job there were many occasions when I took things too personally. I'd baulk at requests to "make the logo bigger", "put it in a starburst" or "change the font to Arial". I got frustrated as these requests spoil *my* beautiful aesthetic, *my* lovingly crafted design that I made *me* feel good.

I later came to understand that design is a small cog in the much bigger machine of *selling*. Primarily, the sales numbers are what matters to clients not how wonderful your design is (even if it is really wonderful).

Although good design makes stuff attractive, prettiness alone does not sell. Recognizing your role as designer in the context of a bigger marketing landscape is an important acknowledgement.

So, if you have to sacrifice your amazing design to make room for a bigger call to action or special offer starburst then deal with it. Design is not all about you.

**Lesson learned:** stop being an egotistical little shit. Design is a service industry. Go be a penniless artist if you don't want to play with the grown-ups.

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