

Interview: Tim Lapetino

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2 COMMENTS

1. When did you realise you wanted to be self employed?

I had been itching to run my own studio since my first job out of college, but knew for a quite a while that I had a lot to learn before I would be able to do it well. That, and the fact that I didn't know very much about the business side of design. I did dabble as a freelancer for a few years, then went to work at a couple different firms in the Chicago area. Those were great experience, as I really learned tons about building teams, growing a business intentionally, and what it meant to have great relationships with clients and vendors — all while doing excellent design work. My time at those firms also helped crystalize a vision in my mind about how I'd like to craft a firm — what things I wanted to do, and also, what mistakes to try and avoid.

2. How did you get started and what was the biggest hurdle you overcame?

One of the firms I worked at was a victim of the recession, and one by one, each of the designers were let go — myself included. I felt like this was the perfect time to strike out on my own for good, and this circumstance was the God-given kick in the butt I needed to finally make the dream a reality. I already had version 1.0 of the [Hexanine](#) logo ready and some additional work under my belt. The final piece of the puzzle was reconnecting with my friend (and current business partner) Jason. Right around that time he was wrapping up a bunch of publication and magazine work, and was looking for a new challenge.

We started off just keeping each other abreast of the work we were doing, and it quickly evolved into a partnership. We then took the plunge and set up parallel shops in Chicago and Los Angeles, and we've been doing it ever since. Our biggest challenge to date was probably starting a new business at the bottom of the economic downturn. It was a real challenge to drum up work and new clients in the worst financial climate in decades, but we weathered it and quickly built ourselves a good reputation that has outlasted those tough times. That scratching and clawing really made us stronger, and we appreciate the good times even more so now.

3. What's been your most successful way of getting clients?

It might sound like a cliché, but word-of-mouth has been very fruitful for us. We've found that the best business and work grow out of strong relationships we've built with others — when they really recommend us, and know that we'd work well with this person or that person. The best recommendations come from our efforts to intentionally build our networks, getting to know people wherever we are. Both Jason and myself are executive board members at our respective AIGA chapters, and that has allowed us to meet and work with some awesome people.

We also make it a point to be involved in the community, talk to lots of interesting people, and keep our fingers on the pulse of design and culture. I also speak at design conferences and colleges, which is a great way to reach a wider audience and get our name out there. We have found some interesting projects when people seek us out as well.

4. How do you get clients to stay with you and use you for more work?

That's a good question. Client relationships are a two-way street, and initial projects are like dating. We're always trying to deliver the best, most powerful and beautiful work for our clients, but those first projects are also a good time to see if the working relationship is going to be a long-term one. Do we resonate with the client and vice versa? Can we, as a firm, add value in a way that really moves the client's organization forward, and also utilizes our strengths? Are we a crucial part of the strategy moving forward? How well do we connect as people? Do we enjoy working together? And most of those questions come back the other way from the client as well.

We can be a little picky, and have turned down some opportunities, because we have specific criteria about the kind of work we do, and who we do it with. We have strong feelings about the value and power of the work we do, and want to make sure that our clients get their money's worth, because we're not cheap either.

5. Do you ever have issues with clients paying late? How do you manage that?

It has happened to us on occasion, but it's relatively rare. We try and avoid situations like that by having clear agreements, invoices, and legal language in place — to do things well, and professionally. Some years ago I asked a mentor who was his 'dream client' — and he said "One that pays on time." That was a little too extreme for me, but I now understand the sentiment, at least.

6. What does your typical work day look like?

I barely know how to answer that question, because every day is different. But that's one of the things I love about design. We are always doing interesting and different things — whether it's creating strategic plans for clients, fussing the details of a logo, meeting new prospects, tweeting interesting things, writing, or whatever. It's a huge grab bag of new challenges, learning new things and figuring out stuff we've never even dreamed of before. And if you're helping run a design firm, you can double that. But to give a more specific answer, I usually spend time working through the deluge of email, putting out fires, reaching out to people, then reviewing current projects and diving into them.

As a partner in the firm, I spend a lot of time reaching out to prospects, meeting with potential clients, writing proposals, paying bills and reviewing finances. It might not be glamorous, but I like it because it's crucial to doing what we do. All of that supposedly un-sexy stuff allows us to do what we love, which is design beautiful, functional things while solving problems for our clients. We do spend time doing that as well. 😊

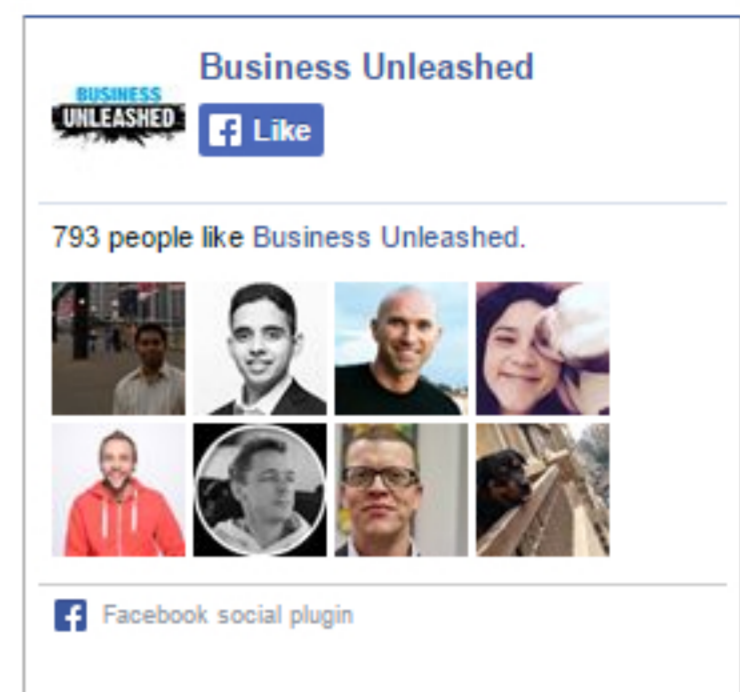
7. Any piece of advice/wisdom that you'd like to give the readers at Freelance Unleashed?

Yep. I'd say a couple things. Be a designer because you love it. This profession is a little crowded with people who thought design was just cool, or who believed that this was a more practical path to an artist's life. But Design with a capital D needs people who get jazzed about strategy and beauty combined. We need more people who are passionate — not about being rock star, prima donna Creatives — but about being advocates and support for their clients, creating great messaging and identities for organizations to improve what they do. We help create meaning for clients, and often times that isn't a front-and-center role. It supports the mission, vision, messaging, and culture of some other organization — and that's cool. Learn to embrace it.

Finally, I'd say don't be afraid to merge your passions with design. There are a lot of ways to be a designer, and tons of flavors and ways to work. Put yourself out there, developing your outside interests, and feel the freedom to combine those with the greatness that is design. It's fun, challenging, and if you do that, it will never feel like you're dreading this thing called 'work.' In the years since we started Hexanine, there have been very few days where I felt like I was going to a job. ALL the rest we felt like an exciting adventure.



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