How to
Grow as a
Graphic
Design
er

Catharine Fishel

Defining Yourself

Earl Gee and Fani Chung

GEE + CHUNG

Self-promotion is one of the very last things that Earl Gee and Fani Chung, partners in Gee + Chung Design, want to undertake. For their office, it feels almost unseemly. But this is not an attitude adopted out of conceit. They simply believe that if an office has a reputation for doing quality work for quality clients, success will be a natural outcome.

Gee and Chung view every piece of client work they do as having the potential to be an effective self-promotion. Every project is given the utmost care and effort. Applying this philosophy means that they can produce twenty to thirty quality self-promotions in a year.

Conventional self-promotional efforts demand time and energy. The designers would rather preserve all of their

resources for client work. Anything that interferes with their focus jeopardizes their version of success.

"Many designers have had instances where their workload gets ahead of their ability to maintain quality. We don't mind working fast, but we need time to develop the right solutions for clients. We don't try to short-change the design process and then wonder why the design is not as good as it could be. We would never want to be defined by our worst work," says Gee.

Aggressive self-promotion also means that an office must define itself in a finite way; sometimes it means promoting "a look." Gee + Chung wants neither constraint. They want intelligence to be apparent in their portfolio, and that intelligence may take many different forms in many different projects. A single promo piece, a high-profile speaking engagement, or judging a show couldn't possibly represent everything that they can do.

This much they acknowledge: refusing to run the traditional foot race means that their office will never become a multi-million-dollar conglomerate. Workflow is not always steady. Sometimes they will even turn away very attractive projects because the schedules presented are too extreme.

But Chung and Gee are comfortable with their position. It offers them other, less obvious satisfactions. While they regularly employ four to five designers at any time, they are not slaving away to keep them busy, nor do they have outrageous tax or benefit plans to feed. They are not constantly busy hiring or dealing with personnel issues. Diligently pursuing and completing quality projects means that their employees are kept happy as well.

"Good employees are far more valuable to us than a client who does not respect our time," Gee explains.

The partners are also very conscious of keeping other team members happy. Gee cites a recent project where a lengthy brochure was needed in three weeks. Their office was able to handle the design and get it to the printer within two weeks, but due to a holiday, the prepress department did not have as much time as it should have had, and the images in the design suffered. Ultimately, the job had to be reprinted.

"You don't want to be creating landfill fodder," Gee says. "Everyone has to do his or her best, not his or her fastest. We have to give everyone a reasonable amount of time to ensure quality."

The key is to be able to tell a client "no" when necessary. If there is a problem, such as an inadequate timeframe, Chung or Gee will tell a client outright that they don't feel they can do the best possible job. However, they may offer the client options that help share the responsibility for a successful outcome. For instance, they may ask if the client can get the project to them sooner or if the deadline can be extended.

When details can't be worked out, Gee does not look at the instance as a missed opportunity. In fact, he discovers that their honesty breeds respect in clients' minds. "They will come back to us later with a project with more time," he notes. "Consider it an act of self-preservation: they will never come back if we do a poor job the first time."

Like life, design is all about choices, Gee adds. As a business owner, he would like to be in control of choices that affect his personal and professional life. Abdicating responsibility for maintaining a sensible pace with client needs upsets the balance of life for many people. Having control of the pace of

one's life, combined with a talent for design, is a lovely combination, one that pleases the partners a great deal. But it is also a combination that yields power.

"Some designers may feel that they do not have much to contribute but designs on paper. We find ourselves constantly applying design skills in our everyday life. You can coordinate an efficient event, or help a political cause by crafting a compelling message. You can enrich your own life as well as the lives of others," Gee says.

But finding balance is important in all parts of life. As the studio's workload dropped off after the dot-com boom, Chung found more time to make her personal health and fitness a priority. She benefited greatly from exercising on an elliptical trainer, enjoying it so much that she eventually injured her knee. (Perhaps this was a sign to ease back on exercise and return more to work.)

Neither endless workouts nor self-promotion yield complete satisfaction. Gee says the designers should not look to clients or fees or awards for validation. "What should motivate designers is a sense of self-satisfaction because you are providing value," he says.

It's all about balancing dreams and energy with reality. And all designers need to be realistic, Gee says. "Not everyone can be the best designer, but everyone can certainly give their best effort. You never know how good you can be until you try. If you do not take projects with the best time frames and budgets, you are not setting yourself up for success."

Here's what some of today's hottest designers have to say in *How to Grow as a Graphic Designer*:

This essential guide features in-depth interviews with more than forty leading designers and reveals how they stay motivated, creative, and satisfied in their lives and careers. Filled with real-life anecdotes and advice, *How to Grow as a Graphic Designer* tackles such topics as:

● What makes a designer special as a creator and a person ● The meaning of success ● What sustains designers spiritually ● How to embrace change and roll with the punches ● Building a business from the ground up ● Setting professional goals ● Balancing a hectic work schedule and a personal life ● How designers define quality of life

"Joy is the engine of growth. Exploit the liberty in casting your work as beautiful experiments, iterations, attempts, trials, and errors. Take the long view and allow yourself the fun of failure every day."
—*Bruce Mau, Mau Design*

Written by a leading design writer, this book provides philosophical and practical guidance for designers of all business sizes, personality types, and levels of experience.

"A hack is someone who has ceased to take his work personally. Every good designer needs to figure out how to come away from a rejection smarter and better."
— **Michael Bierut, Pentagram**

"We question clients' motives all of the time. Why won't we do that for ourselves?"
— Sean Adams, AdamsMorioka

"The only way to keep inspired and feel relevant is to constantly seek change."
— Matthew Carlson, Design Continuum

Catharine Fishel writes about design for many leading publications, including *PRINT, ID, Graphis,* and *Communication Arts*. Known for her insightful coverage of today's design industry and culture, she has interviewed hundreds of designers and illustrators, and is the editor of LogoLounge.com. The author of *Inside the Business of Graphic Design* (Allworth Press), *Paper Graphics, Minimal Graphics, Redesigning Identity, The Perfect Package,* and *Designing for Children, LogoLounge I and II,* and *401 Design Meditations,* she lives in East Peoria, Illinois.