

Bobi Leonard Presents...



9

Secrets

**That Make
You Money As An
Interior Designer**

**How to Build Your Own
Massively Profitable
Interior Design Business**



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LEARN FROM THE BEST!

You are about to learn from Bobi Leonard all the industry's inside secrets that will make you a million dollar designer! You'll read about exactly how top designers bring in the big bucks with simple tricks and techniques that you can start to use in your business today. Through this book, Bobi is going to empower you to realize your greatest dreams and highest aspirations as an interior designer. You'll reap the benefits of this information in every area of your business. As Bobi says, "Anybody can really make millions of dollars in this industry if you know the secrets. I want to share my decades of experience with all the new and up-coming designers. That's why I wrote this book."

Bobi wants you to see, as she has, that anything is possible. That means you're really out there, living out your passion, being an interior designer. As Bobi will tell you, "There are really simple, practical ways that you can learn to make money at it, I mean millions of dollars – like I did." If you follow these nine secrets step by step, you can't go wrong. Anyone can make money in this business! That means YOU.

James Roche

Director of Marketing

Los Angeles, December 2005

<http://www.InfoProductGuy.com>

BOBI LEONARD'S HISTORY IN BUSINESS

An innovative force in American interior design for nearly 30 years, Bobi also was a visionary pioneer in revitalizing Santa Monica's Main Street district. In 1973 she founded Bobi Leonard Commercial and Residential Designs amid missions and taverns of the struggling seaside town. Now a burgeoning enterprise with gross annual income in the millions, she helped transform the surrounding commercial and residential landscape and built a reputation as a service-intensive design firm. Her client list reads like the Hollywood "AA list," as do her international up-scale commercial projects.

Abandoning a pre-med career path after managing a friend's design studio one summer, and influenced by her Bahamian upbringing, she developed a signature style incorporating tropical elements into a highly dramatic and eclectic vision – as evidenced in her award winning full page advertisements. Versatility remains the key to her success, along with the ability to adapt to any style, from strict period design to avant-garde. The result is opulent and elegant, yet tailored to the financial needs of her clientele.

Long before the Designing Women TV series was created, Bobi had already set the design standard in Los Angeles. She's been a frequent guest on

television shows around the country -- Vicki, KTLA Morning News, Good Day L.A., Home Show, Hour Magazine, Live in LA, The Home and Garden Network and AM-LA.

In August, 1999 Bobi was one of three women awarded "Woman of the Year" by Women in Business for her contributions to the Decorative Arts. Her love of health and fitness compelled her to complete two Ironman Triathlons, and various tennis and surfing competitions. More recently she has founded Arcara Health Centers and is a distributor for an amazing line of cosmetic products. Bobi is the founder of Bobi Leonard Interiors on Main Street in Santa Monica.

SECRET NUMBER ONE: **CONNECT MONEY TO DESIGN**

1.1 DISCOVER THE RIGHT MINDSET THAT WILL SET YOU FREE

Let's begin our journey by looking at the *mindset* that will set you up for many, many years of happy and fulfilling interior design work. I'm going to begin this book with a bang. If you get nothing from the pages that follow, I want you to imprint in your brain the following mindset...

**You MUST begin to think of yourself as a
business owner AND interior designer**

This is essential. Too many designers come out of design school thinking they just want to design - as if the business is just going to run itself. Or worse – that someone else is going to handle all the money-making aspects of running a business. WRONG! If you want to succeed at this business (and I know you do because you bought this book), then you've got to start thinking like a business person, not just a designer. That's the **millionaire mindset**.

I learned this lesson the hard way. I spent my first year in business struggling because I thought I was only a designer. WRONG! The big shift for me happened one day when I started to think of myself as a business owner – not just a designer. That mindset shift set me up to make millions in the years to come.

I want you to shift the way you think of yourself. Sure, you are creative and “artsy.” You have a gift for creating things. But without a business person’s mindset, you might as well find another way to make money and just do design as a hobby. Because if you want to live a fulfilling life as a designer, you must start thinking of yourself as a business person.

This means asking for a fee worthy of your talent. It means paying attention to your finances. It means believing in yourself so that others respect and hire you.

You are about to depart on a wonderful adventure. You’ll have to face your fears and overcome any limited thinking that has kept you from succeeding in the past. But do you know what? It’s worth it. You’ll grow in ways you can’t even imagine right now. Thinking of yourself as a business person is the first step in your adventure. Are you willing to take that step?

Here’s a secret for you. Even if you are just beginning in this business and you don’t know how to be a business person, simply **act as if you are a business person**. Yes – you are allowed to pretend even as an adult. It may sound crazy to you, but you’ll be amazed at what you attract when you “act as if.” Every morning I invite you to pretend being a millionaire for at least 10 minutes. Really imagine yourself as having one million dollars (or more!) in the bank. What does it feel like? How do you behave differently? What are your habits? How do you think about what you have to do for the day? How do you interact with others?

This is a very important exercise to do EVERY morning. Pretty soon, in your day-to-day life, you’ll notice amazing things happen. You’ll attract the right people and opportunities to you. This isn’t just some California, new age

thing. Try it out for yourself and see what happens.

1.2 LEARNING BUSINESS SKILLS

Typically, designers are creative characters, and usually the first things they think about are creative things, not how to secure an income worthy of their talents. But actually, the first thing designers *need* to do is to learn to **connect money with design** by learning *business skills*. There are basic business skills that anyone can learn that make it simple to run a successful business. Remember, you must begin developing the mindset of a successful *business person*. Throughout this book I'll share with you many key skills that will skyrocket your business. But they all depend on your having a solid mindset as a foundation.

You can develop your business skills by simply asking the right questions. For example, when you bid for a new job don't just ask, "How can I re-design this room?" Don't just ask, "How can I get this design job?" Instead, change the way you think about every task in your design work. Always ask first, "How will this make me more money?"

Then make a list of all the ways you can profit from a particular job. Pretty soon you'll find yourself asking, "How will this make me money?" for every decision in your business. Think about it...when you are paying a bill, ask yourself, "How can I cut my expenses so I make more money?" See how it works? Begin today by looking at everything you do and ask how you can make money from it.

1.3 CHOOSING THE JOBS THAT MAKE MONEY

One of the more subtle business skills that you need to acquire (and that follows easily from your increasing ability to connect design to money) is finding the jobs that make you the most money.

To do this, you want to ask three questions:

1. How long will this job take me?
2. Can I keep track of the time that I spend on this job?
3. How much am I worth per hour?

Answer these three questions for every job you do. Add up the total and you'll know in a second whether or not a job can make you money. These simple questions will help you determine your true value and worth as a designer.

1.4 FINDING A MENTOR

Gaining confidence on your own may not always be easy, so I suggest you find a *mentor* to guide you. Having a mentor in this business is an excellent way to quickly “break into” the world of interior design. When you have a mentor, he or she helps you develop some of the skills that you need to have the full-blown **confidence** I mentioned is so important for your success. It's essential for you to have *somebody who believes in you!* When you have somebody who believes in you, there's almost nothing you can't do. (By the way - I believe in all of you! I know if you are reading this book you have what it takes to make it in this wonderful business.)

Finding a mentor is easier than you think. Most people feel embarrassed or nervous about contacting people that have been successful in this industry. I

really want to assure you that there are many of us that would be absolutely honored to help! I've had many calls through the years from people wanting to know what it's like to be a designer and how they can get involved. They want to know how they can make money. Now, with this book, you will learn my secrets!

1.5 BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

Before you take any road trip what's the first thing you do? Don't you begin by getting a clear picture of where you want to end up? That's what we are going to do now for your business – determine where you want to land. So let's start our journey together by getting a clear picture of your vision...

You've probably heard that word many times. Having a vision and a mission statement is vital. My mission statement and my vision have been posted on a wall in my office for 30 years! Everything you do becomes clear when you have a mission statement that serves as your north star. It's your compass that helps you determine what is and isn't true north for you.

My own vision and mission statement hasn't changed much in 30 years. Throughout your career in interior design you'll find that once you're committed, you're committed to success! We'll be looking more closely at commitment later.

What exactly is a vision, anyway? We hear this word often but few people are able to define what it can do for you. A vision is a clearly imagined goal, a place you want to go with what you're doing. For example, when I started, my goal was to make \$10 million dollar because I wanted to buy my mom a house. From the time I was 18, I knew that that was my real vision. I had a

clear and vivid picture of what it would be like buying my mom a beautiful house. Of course, as the years went by and I gained more experience, it changed slightly. But guess what? I did it! I bought my mom a beautiful house. That vision drove me to success. It was vital to my life because I clearly knew what I wanted. And once I realized that vision, I had another one – and another one. Once you accomplish one vision, you gain confidence in yourself and believe you can accomplish the next one.

And yet, while you may understand the concept of “vision,” you may still wonder, “How do I find my vision?” Again, asking the right questions is crucial.

To support you in finding your vision, answer the following questions...

What’s most meaningful to you?

What makes you happy?

What is something that you would commit your whole life to?

When you start a business of your own, it's not just eight hours a day. You've really got to be committed! So you have to ask yourself, "Is this what I want to commit my life to?" *You have to be able to visualize it.* It's like a marriage or like having a child. Vision derives from the same set of values that guides you in your most important decisions. Remember that!

What is the vision for your life in 3 years? 5 years? 10 years? What kind of lifestyle do you want? Who do you want in your life? Where do you want to live? Paint a picture and describe it below:

Three years from now...

Five years from now...

Ten years from now...

1.6 PASSION

Earlier I said you must connect money to design and start thinking in terms of the bottom line. But what's the point of earning money if you aren't passionate about what you do? Money is VERY important – and so is passion. Think of it like a marriage between what you love and what will make you money at the same time. If you just follow your passion with no regard to the financial outcome, well, let's just say, I hope you are already independently wealthy with the freedom to do design as a hobby. And if you just go after the money without loving the process...what fun is that?

The key is finding the right balance between your passion and your pocket book.

Yes, without passion, you have nothing. Passion is what makes you get up every day. It's what's kept me in this industry for 35 years and what led me to teach you how to be successful at this business. If I wasn't passionate about my design business, obviously I couldn't teach it with this much passion!

What are the top ten things you are most passionate about?

Some of them might be nice hobbies, but we want to focus on the ones that will make you wealthy as well. Once you've listed your passions, circle the items that you are willing to do whatever it takes to make money from as well.

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____
- 5. _____
- 6. _____
- 7. _____
- 8. _____
- 9. _____
- 10. _____

1.7 AUTHENTICITY, ALL THE WAY

I don't think you have to change yourself to be a millionaire in this business.

You actually want to play up what you already have. **Be *MORE* of who you are.**

Being authentic is all about listening. Because listening skills are probably the most important thing you can learn in this industry. Once you develop the skill of listening to yourself, you'll begin to listen to your clients better.

Listen to your intuition

If you're quiet enough to listen to yourself and your clients, combined with some basic business skills, you are certain to make a lot of money.

You can be (and should always be) **authentic**. Be authentic to who *you* are inside. Some people are going to love you and some people aren't. But it's even a step beyond that. It's letting people know who you really are so they can make their own decision.

This leads us to finding an outward voice for your authenticity and uniqueness. As you build your business foundation you'll want to define your hook, image and niche.

1.8 PLAY OFF OF WHAT MAKES YOU UNUSUAL

Design is the best industry for allowing a high level of individuality. As an interior designer you can almost look any way you want so create an image that is completely unique – one that's never been expressed before. There's no one else like you so the more you can allow your natural expressions to flourish, the more unique you will be.

Why should you do this? Because being different than everybody else is extremely important. If you just go along with the flow and you're like all the other people, why would anybody want to hire you? It makes no sense.

I was always an unusual person. Well, everyone is, right? But I tried to *express* it. I did all kinds of unusual things, from the way I dressed to the way I promoted myself. Especially back in the 70's and 80's, it wasn't very fashionable to be a woman in business. Yet the things which set me apart were the things that people most remembered about me. So don't be afraid to find out what's truly unusual about you. Not just different, but unusual. Each one of us is blessed with unusual qualities and idiosyncrasies. Well, I can tell you that you need to define what they are. Figure it out and use it.

A perfect example is one of my students who has a wonderful, sweet, and natural personality. She has very calming, demure demeanor. Yet, at first, she thought that in the rough and tumble world of business and competition, her calming demeanor would be a disadvantage. The truth is that it was a wonderful advantage for her because she linked herself up with very difficult clients and was able to create smooth relationships with people who were notoriously difficult to work with. She attracted people that were hotheads or impatient and she would work well with them. She had a way of being able to **mediate**. She never caused any conflict. She also was wonderful with the husband and wife situations.

I have another student that I really admire. She is what I would call avant-garde. She dresses unusually. She's always wearing some color that people usually don't wear. She also has a wonderful accent. And you know what? She's proud of it! She plays it up and works it! She creates a joyous vibe

around her and, consequently, people love to see the avant-garde side to her. They think she's "neat." And guess what else? She attracts clients because they know she's *comfortable* with herself. They sense her confidence and that is a major ingredient to trust. In addition, she is an excellent listener. So, on top of this avant-garde personality and visual acumen for design, she's a listener. I think what I do most of all in teaching is try to convince people that their God-given talents are truly what they need to play up.

1.9 FINDING YOUR HOOK

Wouldn't you love to be on vacation every day of your life? Wouldn't that be the best? Well, I used to design interiors based around *vacations*. I'd investigate my clients' taste ranges and whatever type of design they wanted. I would then interpret that to create an environment to make them feel as if they were on vacation all the time.

Have you ever gone to or seen one of those beautiful hotels in Hawaii or paid thousands of dollars to stay in this type of hotel anywhere in the world? Why not bring that luxury into your everyday home? Why not pick your favorite place in the world and just give it to yourself? I did that for many years. Of course, once somebody had a "vacation home" at home, imagine how happy he or she was with the work that we did! This technique became my trademark – one of my themes.

My point in telling you this is that every designer needs to find his or her own **hook**, or theme. And every designer has a different hook. Once you define what your hook is, you can really play on it, you can translate that into your own way of doing business. You can make people want you so much that you never have to call out for business.

I had a couple of different hooks throughout the years. First was my vacation hook. Then, in the later years, it was always about having unique merchandise, about putting things in people's homes that they couldn't get any place else. That tactic proved quite successful as well. Imagine providing people with the things that they really want but don't know where to get them! I had seven stores and every one of my stores had merchandise that couldn't be found any place else. Now, imagine how that felt for the customers who visited my stores. It was a feast for their senses that they wanted to take home with them.

But, and perhaps even more importantly for building trust, I always made sure that people could come to one of my stores just to visit. I didn't care if they bought anything, and they could tell this was the case. I wanted people to be able to indulge in our environments and enjoy them. I wanted them to just be there. Sit on the sofas and enjoy the art. Appreciate the flowers and the greenery.

By offering exclusive items I was filling a niche that no one else was filling. When you have things that people want that nobody else has, you've got a built-in clientele. (More on niches later.)

What makes you so unusual? What sets you apart from others?

We often don't want to have that question asked of us because we're comfortable being part of a status quo. We like to fit in. We want to be like everybody else, right? Well, in the design industry that's not so important. It's more important that you set yourself apart from the crowd. When you find that one thing about yourself that's exciting and beneficial to others (and I'm not

talking about looks), lo and behold, you have found your **image!**

In creating your hook, you must find your image, play it up, and work with it. This is what I did with great success throughout all my business years. And there's no need to remain static. As you grow and change, so will your hooks and the image you portray.

A little later you'll have an opportunity to answer some questions that will help you identify your hook.

1.10 YOUR NICHE WILL MAKE YOU RICH

There are hundreds of different types of designers. The key question is where do *you* fit in? Therefore, the first thing you need to do is to decide what kind of designer you really want to be. There are many different facets to consider when making this decision. Most importantly, however, is that you want to make sure to ask yourself the really key questions about what you *love* most about the field.

Once you decide which type of designer you want to be, you are on your way to figuring out the easiest, best way to make money at that type of business. And this is true for any business actually.

Focus in on what it is in design that makes you happy, that you're passionate about, and then tie that to money. Begin to imagine all the different avenues of this particular business that you are most passionate about. In other words, find your niche, or the area that you're going to specifically work within. You absolutely cannot be a designer of all things for all people. So, in order to connect design with money, the first thing you need to do is find your niche

and repeat to yourself that your **niche will make you rich!**

To find your niche, you may need to explore your options for a while. That's okay. Ask yourself what part of design you like best. Do you like working with companies or home owners? Is there a specific geographic area you prefer? Once you've found the area you are most passionate about, stick with it – hone your skill in that one area so that you become an expert in that area. Word gets around once you are perceived as an expert in a specific area and you'll find people pounding down your door wanting your business.

Here are just some of the design niches you can focus on:

Administrative Headquarters

Some designers niche within a company to improve the work flow and social interaction among workers.

Apartment and Condominiums

Some interior designers only work on apartment layouts. They also focus on lobbies, social areas, computer rooms and athletic areas.

Art Consultant

An art consultant searches for and commissions art suitable to a specific interior. They support their clients in making good investments and design decisions.

Commercial Design

This includes everything that isn't residential: retail, businesses, offices, laboratories, factories, and all other commercial spaces.

You can niche even further within only one area.

Medical Design

This includes all types of doctor offices, including dental offices. There are lots of design considerations – lobby, placement of equipment, work flow, etc.

Feng Shui

The Feng Shui Designer serves multiple roles – designer, healer, artist, business consultant, and matchmaker.

Home Office Design

As the number of home businesses grows, so does the need for excellent home office systems. The office may be small and next to living areas. The designer must consider the needs of the business as well as the design.

Lighting Design

The importance of good lighting can't be under rated. A lighting designer needs to know the technology and artistic placement of good lighting.

Real Estate Upgrading

There's a growing need for designers to "fill" an empty home so it sells better and more quickly.

Residential Design

This is what we typically think about when we talk about interior design. It requires knowledge of human behavior within living

spaces, communication skills, and respect for the client.

The options for you are almost limitless. Later you'll do an exercise to help you choose what kind of designer you want to be.

1.11 REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES

I have a couple of great stories that demonstrate how my students found the perfect niches for themselves and began to develop their business skills. In every case they achieved enormous success.

One of my favorites is the story of this wonderful student of mine, Jonathan. When Jonathan first came into my classes he was very shy and timid. He didn't want to talk about business and didn't want to express himself. I could tell there was a lot going on inside. But I didn't want to push him, so I waited. Gradually as class progressed I realized that as he went through my program, his whole mode of living was changing. I'd watch his clothing change. I'd watch his smile become more prevalent in class.

Curious, one day I sat with him and asked him some questions about what was changing within him. He said that he had decided that he didn't want to just be any old interior designer. He discovered the part of design that he loved most was writing books about design. I smiled at him. He had found his niche! Interestingly enough, he now has a great book deal to do three different design books.

Why did he succeed where others struggle? He focused on what he knew could make him the most money in this business and what he loved doing most.

Another one of my students that I'm so proud of is Jennifer. When she first came to me a few years ago she would fall apart every time I asked her about whether or not she could ask for money for her time. She loved design work, but she only felt right if she did free design work for her friends. She felt that charging for her services was not a very nice thing to do because she was doing something she loved. It took me a few months to convince her that she was worthy and that she could make money for what she loved. Once she got that little principle -- oh my goodness! I've now created a monster! She's actually making six figures and she loves it.

Why was Jennifer such a huge success?

The big shift for Jennifer was realizing she was worthy of getting paid for her craft. It doesn't mean that you're taking advantage of people to charge for your services. It means people will respect and appreciate you for that. **Confidence** is a major component to your success.

1.12 WHAT MAKES YOU SPECIAL?

We are now going to determine your hook, niche and image (and a lot more!) I want you to take these questions very seriously because they will open up many doors for you personally and professionally.

Begin by asking **other** people three simple questions. You'll want to ask these questions to least two people who know you well and at least one person who doesn't know you well:

1. **“What is the one thing you noticed about me when we first met?”**
2. **“What do you see in me that sets me apart from anybody else?”**
3. **“If you had to pick a business I had to be in, what would it be?”**

I want you to journal now about what is unique about you. Your answers will help you define your hook, image and niche. To make this exercise easy for you, listen to your heart. Tap into your intuition and write what naturally comes up.

Before you start writing I want you to look at yourself in the mirror. Literally stand there for a few minutes and say to yourself in the mirror, “What about me sets me apart from other people?” You could be extra tall. You could be extra short. You could be of a certain nationality, but whatever quality it is, you need to look at that and say, “I like this about myself. I know that I can find lots of people out there that would appreciate this about me.” You want to be sure that people see these qualities in you and that you’re proud of it. There’s nothing more wonderful for people than their being able to see your tremendous confidence in your very appearance. (Yes! That’s very important in this industry.)

What do you think sets you apart from other people?

What is it that makes you get Goosebumps? *(The purpose of this question is to explore what really excites you – what’s most meaningful to you. Think of the times you got Goosebumps – what happened, what set them off? Recognizing this will help you discover what’s most important to you.)*

What is it that makes you enraged? *(This question is similar to the previous because, again, we are looking to identify what you really passionate about. Think about it...would you bother being enraged if something very meaningful to you wasn't being offended? Look behind the rage to expose why you are enraged. What are your core values that were challenged or offended?)*

What aspects of your personality do people always compliment you on?

What aspects of yourself do you feel you can leverage to your advantage in your design business?

What is the image you want to cultivate?

What are some of the key benefits you provide for people?

Looking at everything you've written, what is the one Hot Undeniable Benefit you provide? What is your hook?

Finally, what is your niche?

SECRET TWO:

LISTEN TO WHAT YOUR CLIENTS MEAN

2.1 BECOMING A SORT OF THERAPIST

You are much more than just a designer. In the last Secret I suggested that you also start thinking about yourself as a business owner. But there's more...

One of the keys to your success is realizing that you also must become a sort of therapist for your clients. I'm not saying you practice psychotherapy, but you must learn how to listen to the meaning *behind* what your clients say. Look into the psychological nuances of what your clients tell you. For example, in interior design you must talk color, and your clients will tell you, "I love black" or "I love blue." That's all well and good, but what you need to listen for is *why* they love those colors. What are they feeling or thinking about when they say they love this or that?

How do you gauge this? The answer again is: Ask Lots of Questions! I actually have a questionnaire that I've created for my students to use. I've provided it for you below. At first you want to memorize these questions so you can ask them conversationally during your first meeting. If, however, you are dealing with a family or multiple people, you can have each person fill out a printed questionnaire with these questions on it. These questions will help your clients probe deeper into their feelings about the specific design results they are looking for. And even after a client has completed this questionnaire, continue to ask questions, trying to seek out his or her true desires. The key

is discovering what's behind their answers.

What do you most fear about working with a designer?

What is most meaningful to you about the design of your ____ (home, office, etc, whatever it is you are designing)?

Who's going to be making the design and buying decisions? (Which family member, etc)

What are the top 3 most important things in your life?

Is this house for spec (real estate investment) or for you to live in personally?

You want to go through these questions because, to be blunt, most people don't know how to communicate what they really want. It takes time and a lot of talking for their vision to solidify. Therefore, what's most important for you as a designer is to get into your clients' worlds. Find out what makes them tick. Your ability to ask the right questions and glean their visions from what they're saying will actually help *them* explain themselves and communicate better. Asking them a lot of questions and showing them that you're really curious about them is what brings that out.

You'll notice these aren't design questions like, "What color do you like or what fabrics do you like?" No. While design questions are important, you also want to ask people about themselves and what makes them tick. They see that you're interested – and what do they do? They open up!

Listen for the *real* feelings and thoughts of your clients. In a very real sense

you are not only your client's designer, but his or her friend. And *that's* the most meaningful part of a relationship in *any* business. It not only feels good to connect with your clients as human beings, it also helps in building strong working relationships – and THAT'S what leads to more referrals coming your way.

2.2 IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

The stronger your relationship with your clients, the more strongly your bottom line will be affected (and in a significant way!) A strong relationship is built when someone *trusts* you.

Here's how you build trust...

- Be there for your clients
- Under-promise and over-deliver
- Make it clear that you care more about your clients' lives and not just their matching lampshades
- Listen, listen and listen some more
- Address their concerns with compassion and confidence
- Make your clients' homes not only beautiful but a full expression of their inward self
- (Did I mention to listen?)

If you do these things you WILL see the big money rolling in because your clients will appreciate the care and concern you display and will reward you handsomely by writing those big checks.

I had a client (and I won't mention names, because this person was quite

famous) who was very, very “difficult,” shall we say. He was impatient. He always only had minimal time to spend with me. He seemed to always be angry. And on top of that, he had already fired many other designers.

Now I could have reacted indignantly to this person and probably been fired with the rest – but I didn’t. Instead, I became interested in him. I started asking him questions about his life. Instead of giving in to his surface aura of negativity, I focused on discovering what made him tick. ***I didn’t take his rants personally!*** Instead of reacting to his anger, I just got curious. Together we explored what made him happy and what made him sad. And sure enough, as it went along day by day, he started to soften up and not effect such an angry or impatient attitude.

Later, I remembered that the designers who worked with him previously told me that this gentleman is somebody I’d never, ever be able to work with. But after about one month, he and I became friends. It turned out to be quite a lucrative client because he referred many of my celebrity clients to me. He was amazing. The secret was that I started the relationship making it clear to him that I was someone who truly cared about him as a person.

2.3 FOCUS ON YOUR CLIENTS' PROBLEMS, NOT YOUR OWN

Most people that are doing business in any way should know that the people they’re doing business *with* aren't there just for the price. Price is only a small factor for most people. What’s more important than price? People want to know that others care about them. If you’re going to be an interior designer, you have to face one thing: you’re not just a designer. You’re also a family therapist. You’re a marital therapist. Most importantly, you’re a one-on-one therapist.

The reason I'm sharing this with you is because you have to be sure to **focus on your client's problems, not your own**. Not that you can't have your own issues and frustrations, but when you're with your clients, **do not** focus on your own circumstances. You're there to *listen*. And you're doing this because the relationship you build together is what provides you the information you need to do your job and do it better than anyone else could.

Remember, when people know that you're interested in their problems, concerns and well-being, you become *meaningful* to them. Your genuine interest may even give them goose bumps! Because what happens is that suddenly they realize that you're what? **You're their friend**. You're somebody who listens. You're going to be there for them when they're at their most fearful or weakest moment. You elicit confidence from them. I think at that point, when you let them know that they can trust you, you're able to create a powerful relationship with them; a relationship that's not just powerful, but profitable, for both of you.

I have a great story about really listening to people and going behind what their words say. A woman who called up my office was talking to my assistant one day. She was extremely mean and nasty to my assistant. She was outright demanding and said, "I want to speak to the famous Bobi Leonard." My assistant came up to me and said, "Bobi, you really *don't* want to talk to this woman."

But something in the back of my head said, "You know what? I'm going to call this lady. I'm going to find out what's most meaningful to her. So maybe I can help her." I dialed her number thinking that she would be very impressed that Bobi Leonard was calling her! But when she picked up the phone and I said, "Hi. This is Bobi Leonard. I'm hoping to be able to help you," she was just as

mean, just as difficult, and just as impatient with me as she had been with my assistant.

But after a couple of minutes of listening to her being difficult and demanding, I asked her one question. I said, “Have you had any bad experiences previously with designers?” She proceeded to tell me about this horrible experience that she’d had. Somebody had taken advantage of her. The person didn’t care about her. So she was on the offensive this time. She needed a designer, but her trust was shattered. Once I listened to her and related with her and proved that I was compassionate, all of a sudden, she became friendlier. She dropped her guard. And, in fact, she went on to become one of my best clients. Not only did she hire my company to do her work, but she referred many clients.

So remember this: **there’s a lot of power in really listening.** You wouldn’t think that as a designer you would have to develop the skill of listening. But it’s actually one of the keys to hitting the million dollar level as a designer. I call it getting out of the first person perspective and getting into the second person perspective.

2.4 THE SECOND PERSON PERSPECTIVE

Let’s go back to the techniques to find out what’s most meaningful to your client, but from a slightly different angle. Look at the way things are in our world today: the hustle-and bustle, the ever-increasing desire for a better material existence, the pressure to constantly improve physically, emotionally, and spiritually. All this makes us somewhat self-centered in this world. But when you’re building a relationship with a client, you absolutely must let this self-centeredness go.

When you're trying to create a trust-based relationship with somebody, what is it you're going to do that's going to enable him or her to know that you're not acting from a self-centered position? Well, that's about being *really* interested in your client's concerns. You can't fake it. Many of my students come to me and they say that they're not getting connected with their clients. They don't know what it is, but their clients don't trust them and they're not really giving them the big bucks. After really interviewing my design students, I found that they had never really asked their clients about themselves. They never really found out what makes them tick.

That second person perspective is really about stepping outside yourself and striving to understand what makes your client who he or she really is. It's like really standing in your client's shoes and seeing what the client has to deal with. This comes with a caveat: **don't give up** trying to build that trust by finding out who your client really is. Because your clients may not know how to design, they may not know you and feel trusting towards you at first. Typically, in fact, they're *fearful* about entering into relationships with designers. Why? Because designers have frequently had bad reputations for being overly expensive. But you must realize from the outset that you have to educate your clients. In short, take the time to let them know three things:

1. They can trust you.
2. You'll never take advantage of them.
3. Your prices are fair and equitable.

When your clients know you're serious about these 3 things, they'll begin to put their trust in you and open up to you so that you can get the information you need to do the best design job they could imagine.

SECRET THREE:

DESIGNER BEHAVIORS THAT BRING IN THE BIG BUCKS

3.1 SET YOURSELF APART

In the last secret we explored what makes you unique and how to leverage that to attract more clients. There's still more to do if you want to set yourself apart from the crowd – you can show with your actions that you are a professional. In this Secret, we'll discover what some of the designer behaviors you need so that your reputation is stellar. These behaviors are skills that anyone can develop and if you integrate them into your everyday business practice.

With designer behaviors, I'm speaking of those traits that reflect people who are a step above the standard designer that you might meet on the street. These are skills that enable you to **set yourself apart from all the others** so that people will want to hire you again and again. The benefit of having these traits is the fact that you're going to get that check that's a half a million dollars when somebody else isn't. You're going to find that instead of signing up the small apartment or condo jobs, you're going to be able to sign a hotel. That's the difference right there.

3.2 DESIGNER BEHAVIOR: CREATING HARMONIOUS FAMILY RELATIONS

Remember in Secret Two we discussed developing the skill set of a family therapist? You're not just a designer, you know. You are a person that has to really be able to *merge* everybody in the family, their personalities and ideas, and come up with one solution that makes them all happy.

For example, when you're hired by a parent, they want their children to be happy too. Or it could be their aunt and uncle or whoever lives in that environment with them. It's important to be sure that, as a "family therapist", you're able to get everybody's input and decide how to solve or come up with the one solution that will make them all happy.

If it sounds like **consensus**, you're right! You have to find a consensus within the family. But how do you actually do that? Everyone has different tastes and, as we know, opposites attract, so often you'll find the husband and wife have *totally* different tastes. How do you find that consensus, or that marriage, between the two tastes?

Again, it comes back down to asking the right questions and listening for the information that might not be on the surface. Use the same questions from Secret Number 2 to hand out to each family member.

Interestingly enough, once they answer these questions, even where their tastes and opinions seemed opposite at first, you'll find there's always some kind of union or tie; a balance, and a connection that brings them all together. It might be a color. It might be a fabric. It might be a material. You'd be surprised at how often they have one single thing that they all have in common. That thing is your gateway into creating a harmonious working

relationship and a harmonious living space for the family.

So the behavior for you to learn here is that of a **mediator**. Learn how to listen to all the family members in such a way that honors everyone's opinion and taste. It's then your job to find a solution that everyone will appreciate.

3.3 DESIGNER BEHAVIOR: BECOME AN EDUCATOR

In addition to being a family therapist, you also must take on the behavior of an **educator**. Being an educator means helping clients to really understand the design field and why they're paying the money they are for you to do this work. Often clients initially think it's easy to be a designer, but, as we know, it's not. There's a lot of work, especially detail work. When you educate them as to how complicated it can be, they really are happier to pay you the money. And it's not just because you've solved their design problems. It's more about the fact that they begin to realize how hard you have to work to realize their dreams and fantasies.

Somebody comes to my mind whenever I talk about educating clients. I had a gentleman client who was extremely wealthy and who hired me quite a few years back to do his vacation home in Malibu. He had a fairly good budget to do the job but he kept saying to me that the job should only take a couple of weeks. He felt I should be done on June 1st because he hired me on May 15th. So I sat down with him and said, "You know what? I'm going to explain to you what goes into my being able to make this happen."

He was interested, so I went on, "This is how it works. We sit down and we do a floor plan. We do color boards. We have to find out what makes you really happy. We put it all together. We let you approve it." After going through this

process step-by-step with him, he said, “Boy, I tell you...I don’t ever want to be a designer! I totally get it now. Please don’t worry about it. You can make my deadline September.”

That was much more realistic, but at first most people just don’t get it. They don’t understand that it takes a lot of work, a lot of planning. More importantly, it takes a lot of pleasing them to get the job to come off right.

Your creativity definitely plays a role in your client-education too because there’s no real standard way to educate them. I can’t give you a formula. It’s an art. It’s about finding out what’s most meaningful to them. Each case is unique and you must address it as such.

For example, some people are very averse to giving designers money for hourly time. They think that if you’re going to charge them an hourly rate they’ll be taken advantage of. That’s open-ended money. But if you explain to them how you can cap your hours at say 30 hours, or 20 hours, or whatever the magic number is, they realize they’re never going to pay over a certain amount of money. By understanding how you manage your time, they understand the benefit of your working method and fee schedule. They get it.

It’s about **reassurance**. Education is what I call the absolute, consummate insurance. Now, after you’ve done all the work to see what makes your clients tick, give them the information they need to understand what makes *you* tick. Help them understand what you need (like time and money.) This is why I say you are like your clients’ friend; because your relationship, like a friendship, is best when it’s balanced.

They understand and are sensitive to why they have to cut that check for so much money; because you’re working extremely hard. Not only are you

working extremely hard, but the real key is that there are few people that have your talent. No one is like you because, as we mentioned, you've worked on developing your unique self and style. You've created a niche for yourself that hasn't yet been filled. You provide something they can't get anywhere else.

If they want the outcome that they envision in their mind, or they want what they saw in a magazine picture, and say, "I want my house to look like that," you must help them realize that *you're* the singular vehicle to make it happen. You are the sole person that makes their dream happen! The benefit for them is they don't have to work so hard to make their dreams come true.

The behavior for you to learn is being an educator. Practice explaining things in a way that your clients see what's in it for them. (Remember, everyone is tuned in to WIIFM – What's In It For Me?) The more skilled you become at telling benefits and explaining how to realize their dreams the easier your client relationships will be.

3.4 DESIGNER BEHAVIOR: HELP YOUR CLIENTS SEE THE DESIGN

In the design industry, one of the unique qualities I've developed in myself, and what has helped me develop a stellar reputation, is my ability to help the client see the design. I believe that if you can help clients see and envision the total, complete design job as if it's finished, they become powerfully connected to the end result. They "see" what they are getting from you. I think that's probably the most important part about doing design for someone.

**Let the client envision the completed project
themselves**

Now, a lot of your clients won't have a visual sense. Some people relate to the world by feeling or through sounds, but not everybody has the same kind of artistic vision as an artist does. So I developed something that I call the "Bobi Leonard Color Board." What I do is prepare two, three, four, or more color boards. These boards contain materials such as photos, paint samples, actual pieces of surfaces that they'll be putting in their home. I create an overall vision that the clients can connect with. It's not so specific that you zone in on a chair you're going to sell them, but it's an overall *feeling* of the house or condominium or whatever you're doing. It gives them a sense of it, but I think much more importantly, it gives them the *feeling*.

Now, all designers use color boards, but your board should be composed in such a way that a client who looks at it gets a tangible connection to the house or the environment that will result from your work together. It's the most awesome tool. We find that 99% of the clients that see our color boards cut a check at the time they get the presentation without even knowing how much the whole budget is going to be.

So let's talk about how to create these money-making boards. First of all the size of the board doesn't matter. Choose your own size. It's more important to display the boards the feeling the client really wants. And you can do this because you've asked a ton of questions! You've found out what makes your client tick. Things begin to really flow for the client. Now you're producing results that the clients see as benefits to them. These are the fruits of the relationship you've been building. Your boards need to convey the feeling you've teased out of your questions and conversations.

For example, if you're dealing with a couple and they've decided they want an

ethnic design, you want to make sure the board feels ethnic-related. You do this with your selection of materials, photos, and surfaces. The board needs to feel like what they want their house to feel like.

What's great about these boards is, once the clients see them, if there's something about them that they don't like, they're going to point it out to you. Not only do you get to see the things that they do like, but now you get to see the one or two things they definitely don't like. It really gives you the ability to precisely define what they're looking for. Your color board also helps you educate your client about costs. It should also show them how much work you've actually done to begin the planning stage for their project.

3.5 DESIGNER BEHAVIOR: DIPLOMACY

Another designer behavior that you must assume is that of a **diplomat**. Being a diplomat is different from being the family therapist. Allowing clients to voice their opinions so they participate in the process is very important. So many designers make this mistake. They go out and interview with a client. The client might say, "Oh, I love the color red." The designer might say, "Oh, that's terrible. You should never have red in this house." Well, I think you're pretty much losing the job at the moment you communicate that.

Why?

Because every person who hires you has to feel that he or she is actively *participating* in this process. Perhaps you might feel that the color red isn't right for that particular environment. It's something you need to communicate, but it's the way you broach that with a client that's important.

Always allow them to voice their opinions, and if you strongly feel that you cannot pull off a job of high quality given that choice, when you offer an alternative you must show them how it will *benefit* them more. But never, never, never tell them that they can't participate! It comes back to their knowing that you're their **friend**. Once they realize that you really care about their opinions and not just your own, that's it. They'll trust you and they'll turn over the real control to you.

Many people, especially young people, have come to me initially feeling very strongly about doing very contemporary-style environments. For example, just a few years back, it was very fashionable to use lots of bright colors. I would often relate to my clients that using trendy colors may not be a good idea. Why? Because trendy colors are things that are going to go in and out of style. If you pick red, orange, green or blue at that time, and you know in the next couple of years those colors may go out, then you're setting your client up for a disappointment.

A design job can only be good if it offers longevity. It's just like buying clothing. Or, remember those green shag carpets from the 70's? And the olive green walls that match them? I never once used bottle green carpets. But I will always neutral shades of carpet.

What's important is allowing the younger people that you work with to voice their opinions and their tastes. I would then convince them that there are alternative ways to look at it. Perhaps we could do colorful accessory pillows that could easily be tossed away but still give the *feeling* of a monochromatic environment. That's the kind of diplomacy I'm talking about. Because then, in five years, they won't have to replace all of their out-of-style furniture. Instead, they can just replace a few inexpensive throw pillows. And I win them over

because in three or four years when they have to change those pillows, whom do you think they call? They won't be calling Ghostbusters! They call my company!

3.6 DESIGNER BEHAVIOR: THE SELF-ASSURANCE TO FIX ANY PROBLEM

The next behavior you need to work on is developing the self-assurance to fix any problem. You simply must be secure enough to take responsibility for your decisions.

Here's what I used to do back in the old days: if sometimes clients had reservations about buying something, I would let them know that if they really didn't like it, I would take it back. Being self-assured meant that I was 99.9% sure they would love it. I, therefore, could take that kind of a risk. Taking those kinds of risks always paid off for me.

But does that only have to do with your skill and experience as a designer? Well, it's obviously important to have some experience, but I think it's more important to have enough confidence and belief in yourself that you'll make it work. This assumes that you have a trusting relationship with your clients – that they listen to you with a different ear. They know that, yes, it's good to listen to my designer because she knows what she's doing. And they know this because you have taken the time to **educate** them about what goes into your work, how much work it is and why it attains the prices it does.

3.7 DESIGN BEHAVIOR: HONOR YOUR COMMITMENTS

The other important thing is this: **any time you make a commitment, always come through.** Make sure your word is golden with every client. Once you've established that, you can't lose. If you ever turn back and don't do what you say you're going to do, you've lost that connection. Your reputation and your integrity are more important than any individual job. They effect the bottom line.

You make the big bucks by being dependable

Towards this end, **do not make commitments you can't keep.** First, evaluate the commitments you can keep quickly. When you're thinking on your feet, things happen. Sometimes somebody will ask you to do something and you want to respond right away. But take that extra two seconds and think about it before you do! Think about whether or not this is something that feels comfortable to you and that you can pull it off. Use that intuition you've been developing. Follow the business maxim:

“Under-promise and over-deliver”

3.8 DESIGNER BEHAVIOR: DEALING WITH INDECISION

A common problem a lot of new designers face is how to deal with clients who can't make up their minds. They're *locked* in indecision. What's the particular behavior that you can use to help alleviate this problem for them? It comes back to building a relationship with your clients. With a trusting relationship you can help clients feel as though they are making the right

decision. This skill is what sets you apart from most designers. Give your client the confidence to know that you're standing behind them.

Think of it in steps:

Step one involves letting them know that you won't always agree with their choices.

Step two is making sure they understand there's a trust factor between you. If, for some reason, they don't like what you've come up with, you'll come up with options. (You don't want to come up with *too many* options, but you'll come up with more than one option).

Step three is discussing with them the fact that if they are really undecided what they might want to do is to take a night to sleep on it. **Never push them into making the decision.** Give a little bit of time and space and they'll always come up with the right answer.

But how do you guide them if they're really stuck? How do you massage it so they get unstuck? Well, I show complete design photos, which is something I love doing, because they represent a job that's completed. It's satisfying to see what's possible because it breaks dead-lock. You want to dangle that "satisfaction carrot" in front of your clients. I have found it's great for them to look through design books. I always say to my indecisive clients, "You know what? If you really don't feel decided about this, why don't you look at some other options in a book?" A lot of times I'll bring magazines, too.

Frequently, indecision results from their just wanting to be part of the

decision-making process. Naturally, they're kind of hesitant at first. But their knowing that you're patient and also that you can offer the right options for their particular and unique needs always reassures them.

I remember back a few years ago when we had a client who could not make the decision about the color of paint in the interior of the house. Oh my goodness, it was some experience! We had all the furnishings picked. We had everything completed: lighting specified, surfaces specified. But the color of the walls was just absolutely beyond her. So to help her make the decision, I took her to a museum.

As you know, in many museums the walls are often colored differently throughout the space. I allowed her to sit and sort of meditate in rooms at a museum that had different shades of color. Instead of just looking at swatches or paint chips, by sitting there she could really get the feeling of being *within* the color. After she came out of the museum that day, she was certain that she wanted a particular color. She felt most calm in a soft blue room. She was able to actually be in a room, feel and sense it and even live in it for a period of time. That was one of the tricks I used and it worked so well I used it over and over again after that. That's the designer who goes the extra distance, who shows her clients how much she cares about their well-being, about their making the choices that are right for their needs.

3.9 DESIGNER BEHAVIOR: PROFESSIONALISM

Being professional at all times is extremely important. Being a professional is what sets you apart from both the small designers *and* the big designers. But what does being professional really mean?

The first thing is that **you are always on time**. Never make commitments for a time that you cannot meet. If you say you're going to be some place at a certain time, always show up. I don't care what it takes, because this is a main key to people's gaining trust in you.

The second thing is **how do you look when you visit a client?** Do you have a certain image or a certain way that you dress that makes them respect you, or are you coming out sloppy or with clothes that don't look appropriate? You must be yourself, and of course there's a range that is acceptable. You must be neat, and clean in appearance. This job is all about appearance and aesthetics, after all. Even if you're at an airport – what's the image you're portraying? You may be sitting next to a potential, high-end client and you want to look the part of a professional designer.

It's very important to **have a certain visual that you always project**. Consistency is valuable, in both your behavior and your appearance. That visual has to be one of a professional. Being a professional is about a certain energy/image that you project.

When you're a professional, you always act like a professional

That means that no matter how upset you are, how tired you are, how impatient you might be, you always act calm and neutral. One of the things I've taught many of my students is the "Zen" quality. When things seem to be most out of control, when there's a big crisis such as the sofa doesn't fit or the job isn't getting done quickly enough, or one of the subcontractors didn't show up, that's when you really have to pass the test. How calm are you?

Calmness is synonymous with professionalism

Now, I know this can be difficult because I'm not the calmest person in the world. I wasn't born that way. I tend to be kind of fiery, actually. (Shocking, I know.)

So, I found a little trick to calm myself down. It sounds small, but it's really huge. I do a trick with my forefinger and my thumb. Whenever I feel unnerved, I would put these two fingers together. It creates a certain level of peace that helped me a great deal. The thing about it is the ritual aspect. Ritual is something that you perform repeatedly and which, therefore, you can come to rely on for results. So, even something as simple as pressing two fingers together can help create an anchor associated with calmness.

The other technique I use is repeating a mantra quietly to myself. I would simply say, "It is going to be fine. It is going to be fine." This sends a message to your unconscious and your body that has a magical effect. You can find your own mantra or something that rings true for you. When you use a mantra, it helps you be calm in stressful situations because it gives you something small to believe in. Belief is important! Feelings create thoughts. The minute you feel that you're calm, you are! And when you're calm, you can handle those really extreme situations.

3.10 DESIGNER BEHAVIOR: INTEGRITY

A lot of what we're talking about here is integrity. That's another one of my tactics for when something goes completely wrong. (And it will!) Rest

assured, there will always be something in the design business that goes wrong. It's how you deal with it that sets you apart. It's how you handle it that defines you as a professional. It's very important that you maintain your integrity. This either makes or breaks you in business.

Integrity is always doing what you say you're going to do

People know that there are a lot of sharks out there in business. Some people don't have integrity and yet they seem to make money. But for how long? The key to my business, remember, is longevity. I had long-term goals to achieve; they were part of my mission that I mentioned earlier. Thirty-five years in the industry is a long time!

So, if you want to make the big bucks then **think what you're building for the long haul**. The integrity you build your business on will last a long, long time. This is an ethic you must *live* by. Especially because the design industry has been well known for many years for *not* having integrity. Therefore I have become a strong advocate of this.

In fact, what makes something last a long time *is* its integrity. If you build a sofa that's poor quality, how long will it last? You can ask yourself the same question about your business. If you build it with a shaky foundation or lack of integrity, how long do you think it will last?

Tap into the power of your integrity by making the *decision* to do it. Just choose to be that way and stick to your commitment to yourself. When the hard decisions come along, **do the right thing**. Even if it costs! Because you will always get it back. It will always come back to you.

I built a giant house about 10 years ago in Malibu. It was a \$2 to \$3 million project. I made a decision to give up some of my profit to build a very strong roof on this house. I could have put in a roof that was not so strong with maybe a 10-year guarantee. I had a decision: I could have made an extra \$35,000, or put in a very strong roof that was guaranteed for 25 years. I decided to forfeit some profit.

This simple decision probably saved me my company.

There was a pretty serious accident on that roof after the house was built. But the roof had integrity. It was strong and there was absolutely no liability for the people that owned the home or for my company. We had put on the finest roof that we possibly could. If we had put anything less than the best roof on that house we all would have been sued. You can see how it always seems to come back to you in the long run.

3.11 DESIGNER BEHAVIOR: YOU CAN ALWAYS LEARN MORE

When I interact with my students, one of the things I always emphasize, one of the behaviors I always bring up, is that **you can always learn more**. Why is it important to always be in the learning mode? Isn't there a point when you kind of know it?

No!

You *never* know enough. Times change. Trends change. People change. You have to *adapt* to that change. If you're a know-it-all or if you think you've got it all together and you're not going to go with the flow, then you're not going to

keep up. I even had to change my mode of operation in the last few years because the trends have changed.

There are two things here that you must really consider. One is...

...if you stop learning you stop making money

The second is **be a visionary**; you want to always look to the future. The only way you can look to the future is be open-minded to learn more. As you learn, you become flexible and able to adopt to change. As the world changes, you change. And by adapting to the changes in the world, you're always able to make more money in the long run.

I've been blessed to have been known as a visionary for many years. I realize that when I look to learn about the possibilities for the future, it actually allows me how to make more money *now*.

Imagine talking with some of the greatest minds in the world or the greatest money makers in history. They'd all tell you that they see ahead. You'll find that consistently. They'd say, "Well, I could project what was going to happen three years from now or five years from now." Now, imagine being in the design field and realizing that trends were going to change five years from now. How great would that be? You'd be able to specify sofas or materials or colors that nobody knows about. That makes you innovative or entrepreneurial. It means you're becoming a real business person and, of course, you always make bigger money that way.

How do you keep up with the trends and educate yourself? Read. Read. Read. I know the Internet's great. You can check out lots of new things and

do extensive research on the Internet, but there's something that's extremely valuable in books. There is nothing I don't read. I read everything from *Fortune Magazine* to *Newsweek* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Why do I do that? Because I watch people and what's going on in the world; that way I'm better able to see what's really happening. I've been able to keep my company five years ahead of the game because I read so much.

It may surprise you, but I also read a lot of spiritual books. I think spirituality is essential to living in the modern world. For one thing, it enables you to be calmer, and being calm is one of the hallmarks of a professional. I also read a lot about relationships. I've learned a great deal about having relationships with my clients from those books. They aren't even necessarily marriage-related books. I learn about relationships with people in general.

Going to the library or bookstore can be so enlightening. Take a look at some of the books and magazines that are out there. And don't limit yourself to certain types of magazines. Don't just read design magazines. You also need to read clothing magazines and paint magazines and contracting magazines. You need to read anything that shows you where trends are going. I also often shop in all types of stores just to see where the trends are headed. Remember, when one trend begins all trends kind of catch on.

For example, about six or seven years ago we saw this great Asian flare start in the fashion industry. Surprise! Three or four years later, an Asian look also became very influential in design. Because I'd been doing my research, I saw that coming, so I went to China and I imported thousands of Chinese goods. I increased my business substantially during that time.

We've been looking into some very important aspects of designer behavior that you need to adopt in order to become a truly successful interior designer. Things like family harmony, becoming an educator, methods to maintain integrity, lessons in diplomacy, and lifelong learning...these are all valuable assets towards increasing your income, all qualities and values which you can add to your repertoire to improve the bottom line. But what about those things that you should *avoid*? We also need to talk about what *not* to do. So let's move on to Secret Four....

SECRET FOUR: **AVOIDING PITFALLS**

While it's true that you can learn from your mistakes, and of course you'll make plenty of them in your career, there are still some major foreseeable, often repeated mistakes that you can easily avoid if you know about them in advance. This will also help you to build a solid foundation for your **reputation**. Some of these pitfalls are things we've already discussed, but I want to look at them again through the lens of **things to avoid** so that they'll really stick!

Note: I also want to come back to the idea of finding a mentor in relation specifically to avoiding common pitfalls, because when it comes to making the *right decision* at a critical moment of risk, if you can meet with somebody on an ongoing basis who has actually experienced these mistakes before you have, you can avoid actually going out of business. It's that important.

These are the five things I want you to really grasp. I'm going to list them out for you. Take time to think about each one on your own terms.

4.1 NEVER MAKE PROMISES YOU CAN'T KEEP

Let's talk about the promises that you *can't* keep. Whenever I quote a client an estimated time of arrival (ETA) for a custom ordered item, he or she may continue to ask me, "Oh, when do I get it? When do I get it?" Because I want to under-promise and over-deliver I add on two to three weeks longer in my quotations. Keep this in mind whenever you're ordering anything for clients

too, even if you think they may not buy it. If it's a custom ordered piece of merchandise, the odds are **it's always going to take longer than you think**. But when they *do* get it early, you become a hero!

That's the sort of strategy that makes them say, "Wow. My designer has made me so happy." Whereas, if you quoted eight weeks, and it took 12 weeks, then you're no longer a hero. By the time that piece of furniture comes, even though it may be absolutely beautiful, you've already tarnished the trust you've been trying to establish.

This is very much connected to when to say no, which we'll discuss below.

You have to be really clear on what you can deliver

You must ask yourself, "What is it that I can really give this client based on my expectations?" I frequently use to suggest that my students sit down and make up a list of the expectations that this client has of you and your company. Then you can answer realistically: what can you really deliver? I reiterate this over and over again. Under-promise, over-deliver. That's the motto of every reputable interior design company. It's fundamental not only for staying in business, but also for making your business grow.

4.2 LEARN WHEN TO SAY NO

This is something that we naturally wince at when considering dealing with clients. We want to make them happy, we want to make their dreams come true, but we also know that **with every job, there are limitations**. As we discussed before, we have to make sure the family members agree. We have

to use our knowledge and design acumen, and sometimes that may conflict with our clients' desires. They may want red, but red may not work for the job. There's a mindset that helps you develop the ability to actually say no...

I suggest this strongly: it concerns taking care of yourself, following your intuition, your heart, and your sense of integrity. Basically, you must slow down and take the time to ask yourself what is going to keep you from going crazy. What is going to keep you from feeling uncomfortable? Once you make a list of those things, you're going to find that it will allow you to realize that you can make a choice between saying no and losing your cookies, losing a job or stressing yourself out needlessly.

Knowing when to say no means having an attitude in which you refuse to become overwhelmed. Ahhh, being overwhelmed! I've seen so many companies that don't even address these common pitfalls. And they especially don't address the relatively simple concept of saying "No."

Designers, again, have a tendency to want to make everyone happy. We're creative people. And we creative types generally are pretty giving. The joy of our creativity is being able to freely share it. But you can't share it properly without setting limits. It's so important to always know...

There's going to be a time where you've got to set boundaries and just say no.

Remember, you are a creative individual, but you are also a business person. You are learning the art of connecting money and design. It's like tending a garden. The gardener might say of her weed problem, "Well, these plants were meant to grow, why should I deny them?" But as we all know, a weedy

garden may be alive, but it won't be very beautiful or well-maintained. You *have* to pull those weeds. You have to be able to say “no” to them!

4.3 USE PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE WHEN DEALING WITH DISGRUNTLED CLIENTS

One question that my students ask me over and over is, “How do you make people feel better if they’re becoming disgruntled?” While that often seems like the most impossible situation to deal with, I'm here to tell you that you *can* nip it in the bud and prevent it from getting worse. And that ability, once mastered, could mean that you don't have to give people their money back.

It's important to realize that sometimes people have issues with designers. First of all, as we've mentioned, many people are very skeptical when entering into a relationship with a designer. They're scared. Perhaps they've had bad experiences. They don't know whom to trust. They never have had clarity about what designers are and aren't supposed to do. And that's intimidating to them, because they're putting a lot in your control. Along the way, unless you're very clear from the onset, you're going to have a little problem here or there.

I'd say 75% of the time some client is going to get disgruntled along the way in a job. You must be sensitive to the fact that this is an emotional process for your clients. It is redesigning some aspect, or the entirety, of their house or other place where they spend a lot of time. They want to be comfortable with the design and with you. It's said that moving is one of the most stressful times in a person's life. But interior designing can be just as bad. People become emotional, (and sometimes, they don't quite realize they're doing it.)

And so, sometimes the designer gets the brunt of their stress. Therefore, you must *understand* your client so that when he or she does become emotional or unhappy, you're prepared and know how to handle the situation because you *know* your client well. Getting on top of it before it gets out of control is the most important part of this -- not allowing it to get any further before you let your client know it's going to be okay.

Now, let me give you a couple of secrets here. Let's just say somebody gets upset because whatever you're doing is "taking too long." That seems to be a pretty common complaint in this industry. You've heard someone say, "Oh, I ordered my sofa ten weeks ago. What's the problem? Now the fabric is out of stock. I want to cancel. I've had it. I've got to cancel!" You will hear this even if you have set a realistic schedule and everything is moving along according to schedule.

Well, here's something that can really help you: the minute you find that somebody is getting impatient, talk to him or her about how what he or she has selected is really going to be **worthwhile in the long run**. Focus on the benefits for the client. Waiting that extra time is really important because your client is going to get exactly what he or she has dreamt of for so long!

We had an experience in our company where a woman had selected a fabric that was a very unusual color. It was purple. We did everything we could from the onset to talk her out of this purple fabric because we knew it was going to be very difficult to get the exact shade of purple that she wanted. We ordered three, four and five strike offs of this fabric. And lo and behold, every time it came in, it was some strange color, like crimson, and then it was red. Then it was plum, and then it was something else. By the time we were done, we were into this selection period for almost 12 weeks. Now, as you may know,

every time you order a fabric strike off, you wait for it to come.

Here was the secret. When she selected the purple fabric, the moment it was selected, we explained to her that it was going to be difficult to get and it could take up to three months.

In other words, we over-prepared her for this selection process. I spent the time needed to educate her about the process. And you know what happened? We finally got the purple fabric! Actually, we got it in two months and 14 days. By the time my client received her purple fabric she thought we'd done a heck of a job. She said, "My goodness, you got it early."

Now, three months is not early to get a fabric. But we had actually allowed her to be part of the education process. We allowed her to be *aware* before she got disgruntled. But even if she had become upset, because I'd taken the time to inform her (to over-inform her) about the fabric selection and ordering process, I would have been able to say, "I've already made you aware that this could happen." Sometimes, you do need to do a little recall for the client. Be gentle! It works!

Here's another example: I remember one particular story about a client that came to us to redo a house. It was a wonderful job in Malibu. When they came in, they wanted the job done in eight weeks. They asked us, "If I give you this job, can this be done in eight weeks?" I told my designers on staff "Do not commit to that. Tell them it could be done in five months. Even if we lose the job, it's better to be honest from day one." Now, guess how long it took us to do that job? We got it done in eight weeks! Not only were they ecstatic and surprised, but they hired us to do their other house immediately. We, again, under-promised, over-delivered.

4.4 GETTING THE RIGHT EMPLOYEES

At some point in your design career, you're going to have to decide that you're going to learn to delegate. Because you want your business to grow, right? Eventually you're going to need an assistant, a helper or maybe even somebody to run your office. But, how do you get *good* people? How do you know that you can trust those people? And, here's the big one: How do you know how to hire somebody legally nowadays? Each state has its own rules and regulations. If you're not truly aware of what they are, you can be in trouble before you even begin. So let's talk a little bit about getting the right employees.

Whenever you're looking to get the right employees, it's important for you to ask yourself questions about what suits your needs. Once again, you should make up a questionnaire so that you can pick a potential employee's mind even before your interview. I've got a great 20-question questionnaire that any employee I've ever hired has had to fill in for me before I even interview. Some of those questions are ones that you would never think to ask an employee.

For example, you should ask a potential employee, "Are you a morning person? Are you a night person?" What if you hire somebody who's a morning person and you're not? That wouldn't work very well, would it? Second, you ask potential employees how they react under stress. In this job, people can easily get stressed out. And if your assistant, associate or employee can't handle that, then you'll have to find someone who can. The other question I ask, and this is one that I think is so important, is what his or her vision is for the future. Where does he or she see him or herself in two years, five years and ten years? The reason I ask this is because...

Your vision and your employee's vision have to match up

You don't want to be surprised when a good employee needs to leave you after a year because she wants to have a child!

It comes back to **communication**. It's really about clarifying what somebody else is thinking about when they imagine working for you. It's funny, because being conscious of another person's consciousness is really important here. Another question I always ask is "Why did you leave your last job? What was the *real* reason?" You're going to find a lot of information in that answer!

You can use my Applicant Questionnaire found on the next pages...

APPLICANT QUESTIONNAIRE

NAME:

ADDRESS:

PHONE #:

1. Are you self-motivated? Explain.
2. Do you like a boss that watches over you?
3. Can you run your own business?
4. How would you describe yourself?
5. How long will you have to commute?

6. When can you start?

7. Are you willing to use your car for errands?

8. How do you feel about overtime?

9. Why did you leave your last job?

10. What do you really want to do in your life?

11. What do you expect to be earning in:

One year _____ Two years _____

12. How much is your bottom line hourly?

13. Do you want to be an independent contractor or an employee?

14. What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?

15. What major problem have you encountered and how did you deal with it?

16. How do you work under pressure?

18. What are your expectations regarding promotions and salary increases?

19. What are the two or three things that are the most important to you in your job?

4.5 AVOIDING LEGAL PROBLEMS

This is monumentally important. It's easy to teach people how to match lampshades. It's easy to find sources. It's easy to get fabrics that match. It's even easy to make clients happy. But what is not so apparent is how necessary it is for you, the business owner and designer, to be aware of the legalities in this trade. You must know what you can and cannot do by law.

Here's an excellent example: one common mistake I see over and over again in this industry is that designers will frequently take on construction jobs when they are not supposed to get the money directly. Clients must always pay the contractors or the subcontractors directly. Never, never, never perform the work of a contractor if you are not a licensed contractor. When you accept money from a client, that automatically puts you in the loop.

What's most important here is to **get valid contracts from your clients**. I personally don't like to call them contracts. I like to call them **letters of agreement**. It's much softer. It's less intimidating to your clients. To create an iron-clad letter of agreement, you must have one of two things available to you. One is a great mentor who's already had a design business, and two is a design attorney. You need a mentor to look at your contracts! You want them to give you some small notes about what it is that's important in a contract. You want to go over some of the details.

You'd be surprised at all the things you wouldn't think of. Little things like -- you're not responsible for the livelihood of plants that you install in a job. This alone can save you thousands of dollars in headaches. Or -- you need to have your fabric orders paid in full up front. *All* fabric houses require you to pay up front or Performa.

These agreements are not just something you should speak about, they're things that need to be specified and agreed upon *in writing*. Little things like that in the contract can make your life so much easier.

You're in a position where, when a client reads this, even though it might be a little intimidating to start with, you'll never have a dangling question mark between you and your client. You're pretty clear that all parties understand what is going to happen when they hire you.

Also, I always suggest that you have a letter of agreement that's updated. You need to have an updated letter of agreement to present to your people.

I know I keep pushing the notion of getting a mentor, but in legal matters, you do have another option, and that is to get in touch with a design attorney. I don't mean just any old attorney but an attorney that actually has experience in design. Make sure they have a list of the new and most recent laws that are applicable to design before you go into this with them. Be sure they cap their fee to do contracts for you. Here's a little key. Always be sure you let an attorney know, "I only have this much money. Can you do a set of contracts for me that allows me to be able to protect myself in my business?"

I also suggest that you get insurance. When your clients learn that you're insured, then much more trust will grow between you.

Remember, you are a professional! Designers that work without any form of a letter of agreement are setting themselves up for failure. They're probably going to be working a lot of extra hours just to make up for things that weren't communicated in the first place, such as the misunderstandings between

what clients thought they needed and what the designer thought. The important key word to this business is **clarity**. You *can't* over communicate in the design business. And the written part of that communication is what really seals it. Believe me, you can talk to people ten times a day, and if it's not in writing, they may not get it!

SECRET FIVE:

TURN SMALL JOBS INTO BIG JOBS

Every design job you get should be thought of and approached as if it's going to be a big job, even if on the outset it seems small. There are nine very practical strategies for turning small jobs into big jobs.

5.1 THE ACCESSORIES FORMULA

Usually people who are hiring you for a design job are really relying on your *imagination*. They themselves don't have as well-developed imagination skills as you, obviously—that's part of why they need you.

This results in a situation where, when they buy sofas or chairs from you, they never know exactly how the pieces are going to look once placed in their proper positions in a room. And most often what people really want from their designers is not just furniture; they want a complete, what we call, “turnkey” look. A beautiful sofa and living set must also be dressed with lamps, lampshades, frames, and any other items which help the furniture to express its “mission.”

Therefore, in my specifications, I would add in a small or a large budget for accessories. Don't feel as if these things are unnecessary additions. Because people are always so excited about the accessories. They love them. And they love them because they *complete* the look, they make the job, so to speak.

How do accessories make you money though? Well, let's just say somebody signs up with you to do a living room. They're committed to spending \$25,000. That's great. That'll cover the furniture such as the coffee tables, sofas and possibly even the lamps. But to achieve the turnkey look, you want to do an accessory package that goes along with it. It might include things like pots or plants or even rugs. **Without these items this is not a complete job.**

As I said, what's funny about the public is that they don't realize that accessories are often the most important part of a room or a home. They're what give it its character. But very often your clients don't even consider them in their initial bargaining with you. So, when you come in prepared with the accessories, they know that you are efficient, well-planned and what? **You are a detail-oriented designer.** You are thorough!

The money is in the details. Designers who are able to finish a job with exquisite details gain their clients' faith. They believe you more when they see that *you* see the big picture. It's not just about placing the furniture for them, it's really about: "This is my home. It's the nuances and special little things that fulfill my dream."

For example, I always went for the "Bobi Leonard Look." That included fresh orchids in wonderful hand painted pots with beautiful moss cascading out of them. I always had beautiful hand painted silk pillows, wonderful rugs and skins for the floors.

One thing that is most memorable to me is when a client sent me a thank you letter. In the letter, she specifically thanked me for taking her on a trip around the world. Of course, I couldn't figure out what she meant by that, until I

realized that I had actually placed over \$13,000 in accessories that came from all the different countries in the world like Indonesia, Bali, Thailand and China, in her home. That goes back to my “Vacation Designer” hook. She just went home and was so happy because there she was traveling right in her own home! I hope you are starting to see how all these things tie together!

5.2 ALWAYS PROVIDE OPTIONS

One of the things designers must provide to their clients is lots of options. And while you are always aware of their budgets, it's best to provide options with a wider price range than what might seem to be within the budget initially. In other words, **always offer more expensive options**, but of course, options you know the client will love.

Let's just say *you're* my client. You decide you want a sofa, but you only want to spend \$1,500. I come in prepared to give you a presentation. It's so important that I'm sure to give you not just one option or even two options in that price point. Instead, I'll give you six options. I'll give you two in your price point, two in a medium price point and maybe even two in a really high price point. (Yes! I'll give you options in a more expensive price point.)

Why? Because by doing this, people see that you've done a lot of work. Also, that you've researched the quality of the merchandise. Perhaps most importantly, your clients can tell you've given them the opportunity to educate themselves in furnishings and/or accessories or whatever you're selling them by giving them the alternatives to choose from. And often you'll find that the beauty and quality of the higher price-point items sell themselves.

This is true *especially* if you learn to educate them at the time you present to

them. Remember what I said about becoming an educator. In terms of accessories, this means you explain the inside of a sofa. You explain why it's made the way it is. How long it will last. Is there a warranty attached? By being well-informed, you are able to sell your clients on the benefits of that piece of merchandise. It makes a big difference and they respect you for that. By doing these things, you're tapping into *their* vision for their home and you're really presenting to them other options that enhance that vision. This flows well into our next strategy which is...

5.3 EDUCATE, EDUCATE, AND EDUCATE ON QUALITY

Again, let's try to imagine that you're buying furniture. You have the expectation that it's going to last for 25 years. Let's just say the quality of the furniture you're giving the clients is only going to last five years. Well, the most important part of this whole business is to let your clients know what they really can expect. They may opt to have a piece of merchandise that's going to last longer or shorter period of time based on the price points.

In educating them honestly about quality, they respect you for that. Really, what you want to find out from clients at that time is **what's most important to them**. Is longevity important? Some people say, "No." People who have children growing up in those homes may say "Yes" to you. They don't want to replace their furniture every five years.

Your job is to provide practical solutions

And you can do this because you're their friend and their design "ins-and-outs" teacher!

To put it another way, it's like you're nurturing them. You're nurturing them and you're becoming part of their life. They know how much you care. That means that they realize you're really an educator that's been brought in to them to give them everything they need to hear about what they're purchasing. You're the go-to person for all of this. You're the guru.

How do you exactly present to a client how the quality will affect their purchase? Well, here's one thing that I used to do that was really important: I used to show them the longevity of a piece of furniture based on life events. I would look at their family and say, "Okay, let's talk about this. This furniture will last you until your son goes to high school." Or you might say, "This lamp is trendy. After a few years it's no longer going to be the style, are you still willing to purchase this item?"

Really, education is about your knowing everything there is to know about the merchandise that you're selling. That's again why you *must* keep up with your reading. You know the longevity of a piece *both* in terms of style, as in, how long you anticipate a particular trend to last, *and* in terms of quality, as in, how long a piece will retain its solidity and function given the demands placed on it by the living situation of your clients, whether there are children, whether there are pets, etc.

5.4 TAP INTO SPONTANEOUS BUYING

I know this sounds familiar to you, and that's because it's one of the major laws of retail marketing. For example, when I'm in the grocery store I often see some cereal or something that I hadn't intended to buy when I went in. I'll

say, “Oh, I’ll have that!” That’s spontaneous buying. It’s what everything in a retail environment is geared towards. It’s why the produce is on one side of the market, and the dairy is on the other. In between, you’ll see all kinds of products you might not have thought you wanted or needed, but that tempt you along the way.

Even though your design business may not be centered on a single retail location, you can still take advantage of the spontaneous buying mechanism of your clients. This especially ties in with accessories, but it also pertains to larger purchases as well. If you’re able to bring a lot of different options and merchandise to a client and they’re in the buying mode, which most of them will be, you have the possibility to tap into their spontaneity, *especially* if you’ve already figured out what their real personality traits are.

To find out their shopping habits, it’s perfectly acceptable, in fact it’s necessary, to ask your client, “Do you love to buy things quickly? Do you like to buy them slowly? What is really the best way to deal with you on these issues?” When you find somebody who likes to makes decisions and purchases quickly, then it’s your responsibility to offer them a lot of options quickly. If you have somebody who’s very impatient, you want to make sure you specify merchandise that’s easily available. People don’t want to wait 16 or 18 weeks anymore in design. Be sure you take that into consideration before you do a presentation for a client. You have to figure out the buying strategy of your client.

Along with learning your clients' various buying strategies, you also must be aware that certain people are more visually oriented, while others are more auditory, and still others are kinesthetic, or, they like to touch and feel things. Still others need to think things out in their heads. They need to analyze,

ponder, and examine against criteria. For example, when people buy cars some go by the looks, some go by what people told them about it, and some need to know the facts. They say, "Show me the facts and the statistics." In design, people may want all of these things: the visual, the feel, and the facts—everything!

Now, the design field is a little different than buying a car. It's a little more personal. We're talking about people's homes, where they live every day. It's a very personal thing for people. Address every level of what they're getting, all the while offering a plethora of options at every price point. And offer those things they may never have dreamed of having, but suddenly those things fit perfectly with their visions and dreams. Then you're creating a dynamic, *living* process and a lot of excitement is generated.

It's like you're guiding them through a little wonderland of options, almost like Willy Wonka! Remember, when all those children ran into the Chocolate Room, they were very spontaneous, choosing any candy that suited their whim, fancy, and personality! That's the kind of excitement you can generate when you tap into spontaneous buying.

5.5 MAKE THE SERVICE FEE APPLICABLE TO THE MERCHANDISE

There's a little, special secret that I honed in over the years to increase customer satisfaction. There are a lot of people out there, 30%, 40%, maybe even 50%, that really have a hard time making a decision. They don't mind paying your fee up front. But they're a little concerned about making that first decision about buying that \$2,000 sofa.

Well, I devised this little system. If you take your initial service fee, or part of

it, and say, “You know, Mr. Smith I am more than willing to donate a portion of what I’ve collected from you as a service fee toward the cost of this piece of merchandise.” Now they feel like they’re getting something for free! And you really don’t wind up losing money on it. All you have to do is mark the product up just a little bit more. The client is always going to be happy in the long run as long as you maintain integrity and stay within reasonable limits. Of course, you also have to be sure that you supply them with what they’re looking for.

After all, wouldn’t you want what you’ve already paid out applied toward the cost of something you need to buy? This is probably the one secret that kept the designers in my company busy all the time.

For example, we had an attorney that hired us to do a very large job. He paid us quite a substantial service fee to come out and do specifications for paint, floors, the lighting. But when it came to the actual furniture purchases he always said, “You know, I can get a sofa cheaper” or “I can get a chair cheaper here and there.”

Now, here we’ve done all this work and it was important for us to finish the job. You want to maintain control over quality, because your name and your reputation are at stake. So we said, “You know what Mr. Brown, we’ll be more than happy to kick back \$1,000 out of our fee toward your furniture.” That was the catalyst right there. “Ooh, that’s exciting. That means I get \$1,000 towards another purchase?” We said, “Yes.” Lo and behold, that was actually the real key to his spending over \$150,000!

5.6 DEDUCT SERVICE FEES FROM THE COST OF GOODS

This may seem very similar to five, but let me explain to you how it differs

slightly. Deducting service fees from the cost of goods means that you can actually come in and take *the total service fee*, not just a portion of it. Tell your clients that if they're willing to spend a minimum amount of money (meaning they're willing to specify a minimum budget of say \$50,000, and commit to that budget up front), then you'll take your entire service fee and deduct that off the bottom line. This is an exciting thing for people because it means that they're getting the designer for free.

Remember though when you get a client to commit to certain amount of merchandise you're going to be making money off the merchandise. You're going to make a certain amount of profit right there. If its \$50,000 and your markup is double, 30% or whatever it may be - figure those numbers out. If you get that minimum budget you can't do anything but make money. That's a great business tip!

Let's go back for a minute. How many people do you know that hire designers and who have a real fear about spending money on furniture? Maybe as much as 65% to 70% of the people. They all think furniture is made in your back room in an hour by little people that just make it happen. Well, in fact, that's not the case, is it? It takes a lot of work. It's very expensive.

People who are very wealthy are frequently people who are frugal. They want to know that they're getting everything that they paid for at the best price. This is good for you because it's another place to prove to them that they can trust you. If you're willing to give up a fee, or a percentage of the fee, they know it's a benefit for them every time. I think deciding whether somebody is frugal in their thinking, which is okay, or overly generous in their thinking, is the key to deciding whether you're going to use this trick. For somebody who's generally pretty generous, you wouldn't necessarily talk about marking down your

service fee. So I *don't* suggest that you bring it up automatically. I think it's important when people have two problems: one, they're frugal thinkers, or two, they're having a really hard time making a decision. So this secret motivates them to take that extra step and move forward. It's a motivational technique.

5.7 ALWAYS SPECIFY A COMPLETE JOB, DOWN TO THE TOILET PAPER

Yes! Even the toilet paper is sometimes included! I remember a job from many years ago with a very famous celebrity. I'll never forget it. I went in the day before he came home and added my special surprise...

We'd been working on the project probably six months and I decided that I was going to really surprise him. I went in with my crew and we filled his refrigerator up with food! We knew the kind of things he loved. We did other wonderful things, too, like buy towels for him and put them in his bathroom.

The funniest part of all is we selected very soft toilet paper for his bathroom. Of all the millions of dollars in stuff that we actually supplied him in merchandise, guess what he most admired? Just guess what was most important to him and won him over?

The toilet paper!

It's the small things that sometimes make a huge difference

I think you can determine what's *most* important for each and every client. For

this particular man, I knew the toilet paper would matter. He didn't have a wife. He didn't have a family. He wanted to be taken care of. Why have him come home and see beautiful furnishings, accessories, plants and all the art, and yet, not have towels, food or toilet paper? I don't think that would have made him happy.

Use your intuition to pick up on the subtle details and nuances. Always remember to listen to people. They'll tell you everything you need to know. That will lead, as it did with this man, to a very satisfied customer who's probably going to refer you out and bring you more business!

5.8 ALWAYS COMPLETE THE JOB WITH FRESH PLANTS AND FLOWERS

Living things are so important. And yet, often people are afraid of plants. They're always thinking, "Oh goodness. I can't buy a living thing. It may die!" or, "Do I need a plant service?" or, "How much do I need to water that?" But without living things in your environment, especially nowadays with all the stress we're under, it's just not finished.

Really, none of us wants to go to a place that has a lot of silk flowers or dead plants. It is the *living* things in our environment that make us happy. As a designer, you want to educate yourself and your clients about how is easy and therapeutic it is to take care of plants. There's that key word again. You need to **educate** yourself on what goes into placing plants in a home, how much wear and tear they may take and what's entailed in your clients' ability to maintain them.

And since you know your clients so well, you're able to choose the right plants. Some people are extra-busy and need plants that are easy to care for.

Others can handle something a little more challenging.

Finally, I think the most important thing in completing a job is to walk out and call it finished *only* after you've left fresh flowers on a table. That should be your gift. Again, it's those subtle nuances.

That's what made the difference in my life and in my business. It was something that set me apart for years. People used to say, "You know that Bobi Leonard left me a vase of fresh flowers," as though it cost me a million dollars to do that. In fact, it was very inexpensive, yet they never forgot it. It's a token of your gratitude for their allowing you into their life and home. It's a symbol of their trusting you to help them express their desires in ways they could never have dreamed of without you.

5.9 KEEP THE BIG PICTURE IN MIND FROM DAY ONE

Because people are often afraid of designers, they will often say to you, "Oh, I just want you to do my living room" or, "Oh no, no, no. I just need to freshen up my bedroom." If you've been in business for any length of time, you've likely already heard this many times. But the truth is, that's not all they want. They want everything renovated or they want a whole new look - but they're afraid.

So if you learn this and **present to them the big picture**, then you've almost got a lock on the fact that they're going to buy more merchandise and do more work in their home than they expected in the beginning.

This same concept applies with office spaces. Your client may come in and say, "Oh, I only need a desk and a lamp." But can you imagine how exciting it

would be for an attorney or a doctor to have a piece of art on the wall, a beautiful Chinese rug or things that make their lives better in a more holistic fashion than just a desk and lamp can?

Again, here's that word, educate, educate, educate! Big picture. Show them all of their options. Let them decide. Let them do their own budgeting. Let them see that you've done your work. Let them decide on what they want to do.

You're helping your client dream the bigger dream

Often I say to people when I interview them on our first appointment, "If you could have any dream you want fulfilled in your home or office, what would it be?" You're going to find that people often say, "Oh, I would *love* to have my whole house done like I saw in this magazine."

SECRET SIX: **BECOME A STORYTELLER**

6.1 WHY STORYTELLING IS SO IMPORTANT

Just imagine how exciting it would be if you were the designer and you came into my home, and you were selling me a \$5,000 art piece. Along with the art, which looks so perfect in the space, you gave me the complete story about what made it so valuable – not just monetarily, but in terms of the value it provides towards making the space feel like home.

You want to convey that it's a great investment. In the next ten years its value might increase by ten times. Maybe the artist is a famous architect now that designs buildings all over the world. Maybe it's a piece of art that is so important because it makes your house more valuable to live in. You see, educating clients about their merchandise and literally being able to give them a *story* about it is what makes that piece of merchandise so valuable to them. When you tell them the story behind the piece, you're taking education to the next level.

Telling stories is very important because people want to know that there's something *special* about the merchandise they buy from you. When it's just a plain old piece of art or a plain old lamp it just isn't exciting. But if you're able to tell somebody *all* about that lamp, about the man or woman who made it, where it comes from, how it's unique, you are telling them why they should have it no matter what and how important it would be in their home.

It's the dealmaker. People also love the fact that you've gone to the trouble of learning all of this information. They see that if you're this serious about a piece and its *human* value, then maybe they should be equally as interested.

Now, where do you find the information on the merchandise that you buy in order to tell these stories? Actually, I make efforts to find unusual vendors and people that get merchandise from all over the world. Why just buy from a local person? Nowadays, you can go out and find vendors that have warehouses behind warehouses that carry merchandise from every country.

What's wonderful is when you get the right vendors, people who really care about their merchandise and work with integrity, *they* want to educate *you*, just like you want to educate your clients. Aha! They want to tell you the stories behind the merchandise. They want to sell it to *you* with the story, too. See how it works? Now we're making some real connections!

Here's a perfect example. In the 80's I spent tons of time with vendors from all over the world who literally just sat with me. Part of my deal with them was that I would buy from their company if they gave all my designers an education on why their merchandise was important. That education included where it came from, what made it valuable, and how it was made. I can't even tell you the difference in my designers' sales!

Imagine telling a client that the rug they're purchasing was made by a family in Indonesia as opposed to, "Isn't that a beautiful rug?" Instead it's the grandmother, the mother, the father and the children that participate in making this rug. It adds humanity to it. It's wonderful. People love you for it. They think you're a hero because how could you know these things? It sets

you apart! And as we've been stressing, if you want to be a really successful designer, that's the key. **Set yourself apart from other designers.** Take that extra step and make the difference in people's lives.

6.2 STORYTELLING TIPS

Sometimes we used to do a very special thing to add on to the story. We would actually make up a written description and frame it. When you install the piece of merchandise, we'd also install the framed description with it. Just like when you go to a museum or a gallery and you see this beautiful plaque that says, "Indonesian Lion made in Jakarta" or "Tibetan Carpet made by the Monks in a village." You can add a date too.

Again, automatically, it becomes not just another nick-knack or statue, but a piece of art. Then, people realize if you're charging the big bucks for those items, that they are important and they are worth that money. It really enhances the perceived value of the item. I used to also put little plaques next to statues that sat on a fireplace mantelpiece.

You can take this idea even further. A lot of our clients already owned pieces that they'd already purchased themselves. We would take these pieces and frame them, or mount them in acrylic boxes, and in doing so we'd also put a little description plaque inside the boxes. By hanging them on the wall, what did it make them? It made them valuable art, because we were taking something that they had purchased and selected on their own and integrated into our design work. Nothing is more valuable than that!

Your clients will love you for it because that shows that you recognize that they have great taste (after all, they did choose *you* as their designer!) Even

heirlooms or mementos that people pick up in their travels can be framed. What's more, framing protects the item. We had a client who came to us with these pieces his grandmother had woven. We took the pieces, framed them, and mounted them in his children's rooms. It was very moving for them when they saw these beautiful pieces that their grandmother had made mounted in their room as art. The pieces took on a far greater significance to them because they were framed and protected. Eventually many weavings or art will fall apart unless mounted or framed. So this is how to kill two birds with one stone. You take something that's valuable to them, you protect it, and it becomes art to them.

While all of this sounds very creative, and it is, you're not only a creative designer. You're also very creative on how to make money. Because all these little things add up to the big bucks. In fact, if you forget any of them, any one little thing at any given time, it could make or break the design job.

It could also make or break the next referral. Don't forget that. They remember all these things that you do. When they're talking to their neighbor or their friends what do they say? They probably say something like, "That designer cared about me. He put toilet paper in the bathroom. He put the toilet paper in!" I remember hearing that for a long time.

6.3 HOW TO TELL A STORY

Some of you may still be asking, "How do you tell the story? What's the process of storytelling?" Well, the very first thing is to link in to something that they're going to relate to. For example, if they've traveled. You might ask, "Have you been to Indonesia? Have you been to France or England?" Such a question opens up the door for them to tell you whether they like art from a

particular area. Asking those kinds of questions will allow you to discover what they like. Then, you can relate it to the piece of merchandise you're trying to sell to them on some level. You'd be surprised. There's always some little thread that you can tie in.

For example, take a statue or image of an Asian lion. The perfect thing to say is, "Do you know anybody who's been to Asia? Have you been to Asia? Have you ever wanted to go to Asia?" Here's another good one. Is a lion significant to you? Is it meaningful to you in some way? You'd be surprised at the answers you'll get with these questions. What's most important is be curious about them. That's the key to storytelling. What is it that you can *link* from that piece of merchandise to your client?

I like to ask the really fundamental questions before. I don't waste my time going out and selecting merchandise that they're going to hate. If somebody said to me "I just hate Chinese art", there's no way I'm going to bring it. Let's say they do love it and they also love lions. You then can present this beautiful piece and find the thread that ties it into their lives. Here's an example. What if they have a big family? You want to relate that these particular pieces are made by families in Indonesia.

If the client is hesitant to buy a piece, a story can make the bridge between the client and the piece. I always used to open my stories up with something like this: "Mrs. Smith, I know this might be something that you normally wouldn't consider. Let me tell you the story behind it. It might make you understand why I think this would fit in your home so well." See the difference? Then, after presenting your intriguing and informative tale, always ask the question "Is this something that you could love? Could you live with this item?" They'll tell you. If you ask a question, they know that you're not just

pushing something down their throat. You want their opinion to contribute to this thing, right? That's very important!

SECRET SEVEN:

BUILDING A TEAM AND DELEGATING

Delegation is now my middle name. But when I first started, it was my nemesis. It was the thing that was most difficult for me. Yet I knew, at a certain point in the first couple of years, I had a choice to make. Do I learn this process or do I lose my mind? It was very simple for me. So, I learned the process.

Learning to delegate will definitely make the difference between your being able to stay in a business, longevity-wise, or not, because you don't want to burn yourself out, right? You only have so many hours in a day. So you have to build a team and delegate if you want to build a larger, successful business. And more important than that is, as you become more successful, should *you* still be doing the small things, the things that don't bring money in the door? You don't want to do that stuff anymore!

But most designers, because they love what they do and they're passionate about their business, don't want to let go. They don't want to ever think that somebody else can do a job. But I'm here to tell you that yes, in fact, somebody else can. Not only will it give you more time, it will allow you to be more creative, take vacations, have a family, and have a balanced life.

Part of the challenge a lot of designers face is letting go of being a technician, of trying to do all the things yourself. How do you let go of that desire and take the next step into being a manager and a leader?

The first step for creative people to get better management skills is to **make**

the decision to learn it. Make it part of your daily or weekly or monthly education and design. Put time aside just to learn to delegate. And the most important part about delegation is learning *not* to micromanage, but to manage.

Micromanagement. Well, we've all heard those words. We all hate being micromanaged. There's a way to watch people that are working for you and delegate without killing their creativity.

I have hundreds of designers working for me now. When you have as many stores as I do and as many designers as I do, how in the heck could I ever oversee all of them? The first and foremost thing was making myself accessible to them. I allowed them to communicate with me - primarily in writing. That's the key. This verbal stuff is great, but how many people can remember or be held accountable for verbal communication? Very few.

So my suggestion to burgeoning design professionals like you is having what I call a "cheat list." This list contains typical tasks with check boxes that the designers can check off as they perform the duty. Underneath each box is an explanation of what's happened or when the deadline is for that particular task. Your employees can then fax you, email you, drop the list off to you - however they communicate with you at your office. This allows you to get ongoing communication about the status of everything you've given them to do.

Team Member: _____

Task to Accomplish	Date the Task is Assigned	Date the Task is Due	Reward	Consequence

Here's how it works...

As a project progresses, I assign more tasks to a team members list. They mark when I assigned the task and we are both clear when the task is due. I then assign a consequence/reward if the task is or isn't done on time. Sometimes the consequence/rewards are made up from multiple tasks. The idea is to have a system of accountability. You'll find some people are highly motivated by the pain of the consequence, while others are highly motivated by the reward. Either way, they are motivated!

When a team member hands you this form you can look at it quickly. You can decide if things are being done in a timely manner or not. And you can communicate back to them the same way. Also remember, **learn about the people who work for you**. Again, find out what their personality traits are. **What is it that makes them comfortable to communicate with you?**

Often we think a leader should be the person who sets the rules. But not

always. I think a lot of people are challenged by delegating because they want to be people-pleasers, they want to make sure that everyone is feeling good, they feel like they don't want to let go of control. But there's the ticket.

Learning to let go of control can empower you

Allowing other people to learn with you and work with you allows you to grow as a human being and as a business person.

The difference between my first years of delegating in my business compared with my tenth year is huge. Now I'm able to do three or four hundred jobs at a time, whereas in the first couple of years, I could only handle one or two. Now, you tell me, what's the smartest way to go?

If you feel hesitant about telling other people what to do, let me ask you a question. Don't you think it's important each and every day in your business life to grow? Isn't it important to learn more? Isn't that what your employees expect? I bet your answer is "Yes." Well, alright, then **you have to set the example for them to follow!** If you're not allowing yourself to step out and take the challenge and learn to grow in this area, you can't expect them to. If you're not willing to empty the trash, don't expect anybody else to do it.

Look at it this way: you're a mirror for them. I've been lucky to mentor so many people, and I realize now that for years, people have been watching me and watching the steps I take, watching how willing I was to delegate or to let go of control. Often the people I mentored would say that they admire that part of me. One of the beautiful things about teaching as much as I do in this particular business is that I watch them watch me, and it helps me reach my highest goals.

You, as a leader, have to be the one to set the standard. As you grow in success you're watched even more. Then you've got to be really careful, because you are the prime example for people to follow.

On a more practical level, here are several strategies involved in effective delegation...

7.1 FIND THE RIGHT PERSON TO WORK WITH YOU

Remember, it is very important to be able to mesh personalities with your employees. You must figure out what kind of person best suits your personality. What kind of person best suits *your employee's* personality? There are several personality tests available today that not only tell you your own personality traits, but also indicate what types of people get along best together in various situations, including business relationships.

Make sure that when you make the decision to hire someone you've evaluated your compatibility carefully. For example, if you're a morning person, do you want to work with somebody who isn't? Of course not. You don't want to work with somebody who wakes up at six o'clock at night when you're ready to go to sleep.

7.2 DECIDE WHAT YOU'RE WILLING TO PUT IN

In creating strong employee relations, you must decide at the start what you're willing to put into your people. How much time? How much effort? Once you've made that decision, commit to it. Give them a period of time to work at what they're doing, proving themselves. Don't be impatient. Don't give

up on them. Allow them to make the mistakes. You're really giving them the space to be who they need to be, whether they're learning or they're adjusting to working with you.

7.3 MAKE SURE YOUR VALUES CORRESPOND

I used to have a lot of designers working for me and still work with many. I often found that some of my designers were getting together as buddies or associates. Inevitably there would be little arguments or disagreements, and I would be called to step in as a mediator. What I found is that, a lot of times, people that have certain issues are drawn to people that have opposite issues. It's also said that – and I think in business it's very much like our personal lives – we're drawn to people that force us to heal our childhood issues.

You know, all that “stuff” we carry around, well, we find people that can push our buttons. We almost seem to *attract* them. We know that in relationships and now we know it in business. So, I think it's important at this point to really say to yourself, “Can I spend eight hours a day with that person? Can I *marry* that person?” Because in theory, if not quite in practice, it's a marriage. “Can I respect that person and his or her decisions?” Of course you want them to respect you, too.

Here's an example: there was a couple that worked for me for many years that were actually in a relationship, and I was worried. I thought, “Oh, goodness. This is not a good thing. If they break up or it doesn't work out, personally, how would it affect their business skills?” So, I made them make an agreement in writing, again, here's the key, in writing, that no matter what happened, they would stay a team. It was interesting, because I found that

after a couple of years they actually did break up as a personal couple, but because they'd made that core commitment, that written commitment, they stayed a great working team. I was impressed with that. The other thing was that both of them had tremendous integrity. Going into it, of course, I'd felt that they were both the kind of people who would stay committed to their overriding responsibilities. When people put something in writing, it's then embedded. It becomes something that's important to them too, usually, because it's not just spoken. Written agreements act like a seal on spoken agreements.

7.4 BE CLEAR ON HOW TO COMMUNICATE

How can you be sure that the people you work with understand your communications? You might say, "This fabric is white," and what the person registers is, "This fabric is cream." A lot of times that makes or breaks a deal with a client. I didn't make up this system, but **mirroring** is a wonderful tool for ensuring clear communication.

I don't know if you've ever tried this process, but it's probably the most miraculous process that you can use in this business. It means your co-workers repeat the words you've said to them. Thus, you have the ability to understand both what you've said and how they've taken it in. It's like they're standing in your shoes. Think about it from that viewpoint. They're able to clarify to you what you said and what their understanding of what you said is. After telling someone something, ask them, "What did you just hear me say?"

I would say 50% of the time you're going to find when they mirror you back, when they literally repeat the same things that you've said, you're going to find that they didn't get it the first time around!

But when they repeat what you've said, you can say, "No, that's not what I meant or not what I said. What I really said was...." All you have to do is ask them to mirror back to you. It actually saves you a lot of money in the end. But it also saves you a lot of heartache.

Inform your workers that you'll ask them to repeat what you say. Don't surprise them, don't shock them, and don't freak them out. Say, "You know, I'd like to try something a little different here. Would you be willing to mirror what I'm communicating to you?"

At first they might be a little bit confused, but then you explain it again. What you're going to find is they actually like it. It's actually sort of fun. They like to know that you're hearing them, and they like to know that they're hearing you with the correct information. How many times I've said to one of my associates or my assistants, "What did you hear me say?" and they'll repeat it and it's not even close. So, we go over it again until it's clear and in so doing we have prevented a possible heartache!

7.5 BUILD A GREAT TEAM

The very first step in building a team is **interview, interview, and interview!** When you put together a team of people, don't just interview one or two people. You want to take the time, be patient, and find the *right* people. That means talking to a *lot* of people!

Make up a pros and cons list for every person you interview. When the pros outweighed the cons, see him or her for a second interview. Again, my questionnaire system gave me excellent insight to my potential employees,

and I challenged them to fill it in. It took them sometimes 25 minutes to do so. But then I could determine, based on the pros and cons list and the questionnaire, which person would be the right person to work with me. Use the questionnaire found in Secret Number Four.

But once you have a great set of people, the next step is to make them a real team, and the real key to this is building their **enthusiasm**. How do you keep your team members enthusiastic when they may be kind of new and they're not making the big bucks yet? Well, I've devised a lot of little fun systems for people to make big money.

One of the things I used to do is when people first came into the company with me, the first few months I'd put them on a Bonus System. It went like this: if a job actually profited (and I mean net profit, not gross profit) a certain amount, at the end of the project they got a piece of that on top of their salary.

It was great for two reasons. One, they learned about what net profit meant. Many employees and people you work with have no knowledge that there are expenses that come out of the actual gross profit, like taxes and salaries and G and A expenses, and things of that sort. They don't get that part. But, also, you're honoring them by teaching them to be better business people as well as putting real money into their pockets.

The second thing I do is I don't always bonus them on just profit. I bonus them on *commitment*. When I'd see that person who would come in and work the extra time, the extra hours, and give that extra little bit of effort, I'd put together a Thank You Gift. I would slip an envelope with \$25 or a free lunch certificate or a voucher good towards a vacation. And so many times I found my employees became even more loyal because I did that little extra thing for

them!

You'll find that for any company, it doesn't cost that much to take that step. **That's really building camaraderie.** It's a way to increase commitment to a level that you would ordinarily not get. I think the other thing to emphasize is that it's **generosity**. It's *nice* to have people look at you like you're not just making millions, but you're a generous boss – a generous leader. And we all know the world can always stand to have more generosity!

SECRET EIGHT: **FINDING CLIENTS**

This secret alone is worth spending thousands of dollars to find out! I'm going to give you five different techniques you can do that are monumentally important in getting clients, especially in your first few years of business.

8.1 CHARITY

You may be surprised that I list this one first, but that's how important I believe it is. Giving back to the community that supports you goes a long way.

A perfect example of how beneficial this can be is the story about the church on the street behind my office. When I first opened my business, I didn't know anybody, I had very little money, so I decided to open some doors by giving back to the community. I thought giving to a church would be a good place to start. Why not? Right around the corner was this little, very poor, church that had been there for many years and needed some renovation. So, I got a few of my vendors together that were easily swayed into donating some fabrics and wood and paintings -- things like that, and I spent my time. I donated the design for a church!

After I did that, I can't *tell* you how many people from around the community called me. They visited the church and saw the nice work I did. They would say, "Oh, I love that fabric on that pew! Could you help me with my house?" or "Geez, it's so wonderful that you're so giving. I want you to be my designer."

And this level of response from the church project *went on for years*. By the way, they really never changed the design in this place, so for the next thirteen or fourteen *years*, I got calls because people were so impressed with what I had done. One of the great things about this particular church was I said to them, “If I donate all this time and get all these people together, would you mind if I put up a plaque that says, Design Done by Bobi Leonard Interiors?” They said, “Of course, of course!” That was just one charitable event that my company got involved in.

I didn't stop there, either. After that, once a year, no matter what was going on, we always participated in either building an abuse center or giving of our design time to a children's center, or we worked on a hospital. It's always going to pay you back, so I say charity is number one!

Right now, especially where I'm at in my life, I make sure that 30% to 40% of all the work I do is done with contribution efforts. It pays back every time. Now, you certainly couldn't do that starting off, but one project a year would be more than enough.

How do you find charity projects to take on? Find the one that's closest to your heart. Find the thing that gives you goose bumps! It could be something for animals, which is something very close to me. I would do anything to help an animal charity. Or a church, depending upon what your nationality or religion might be. Look for the church that most supports you and that you feel good about. You'd be so surprised at how much more *passion* you'll have for this thing you're doing for them when you're really truly involved from your heart.

You can also get tremendous PR when you do these projects. For example, I

once did a large event at my design showroom for an animal charity. I believe it was “Actors or Others for Animals.” I cannot even tell you how the press covered it and how many celebrities showed up. Even the mayor of Los Angeles, Mayor Bradley at the time, showed up for this one. Actually, I didn’t even know that my cause was that well affiliated with these types of people, but because I had given so much, they were very, very gracious. The event brought tremendous coverage. It’s vital to give back. It means so much on every level, from financial rewards all the way up to spiritual ones.

8.2 NETWORK

Getting clients is always something that people have a certain fear about. You know, “Oh my God, where’s my next client coming from?” That’s why my second strategy is networking. Networking means that you spend time with other people that have like interests to yours, whether it’s business oriented people or people in the design trade. Networking has actually become kind of a trendy word or a little bit trite even, but you cannot believe the amount of groups that have been established in the last three to four years that are all network-based. You must take advantage of them, because they can totally benefit you.

Networking is really about building relationships and finding out what makes other people tick that have the same kind of interests as you. More importantly, it’s about being affiliated with people who are going to help support your business, *because you’re going to help support theirs*. You really leverage your network base because they know so many people that they’re going to refer to you. It’s all about relationships!

As I said, when I first started in business, there weren’t that many networking

groups. Now, they are everywhere. But how do you find these groups? Use the internet, referrals, and simply ask around. One that I personally think is excellent is Women's Referral Service. They're one of the best because they've helped so many people. The Chamber of Commerce is also wonderful. People think they're kind of old-fashioned or fuddy-duddy, but the truth is, the chamber can help people a lot in business. They have a program through which you can meet people who are retired professionals, like CPAs and attorneys, who will help you free of charge.

Now, when you're standing in front of somebody who's new to you or whom you meet at a networking group, what exactly are you saying to communicate that you need clients? What's your mindset when you first stand in front of that person?

The first thing you want them to know is that you care about them. It's not just about, "Oh, I need clients." Never, never, never, never! *First*, create a relationship with somebody. If you do that, it will automatically come to their mind to help you. When you ask for help, I think it's important that first you let somebody know that you care enough to be his or her friend.

Take the first step in creating relationships. I recommend creating what's called a one-sheet. A one-sheet is one piece of paper. That piece of paper describes in detail what you do, how you charge, your availability, and how to contact you.

I recommend that you create your image on the one-sheet: what it is you want people to see about you and know about you? Once you're talking to somebody and you hand him or her a one-sheet, it saves a lot of energy. Your contacts can keep that piece of paper, and when they look at it, it

enables them to know a lot about you without your having to put excess energy into it.

Find something in what you do that's going to pique their interest. Keep in mind that every person that you meet will be interested in some facet of what you do. For example, if you meet a woman you know is in the art field, what would be the first question you might ask to get to know her? "What kind of art do you prefer?" or "Are you a collector?" or "I have a division in my company that sells art. What kind of art do you sell?" See that connection?

Or, what if it's just a gentleman who's dressed in a suit. Now men and women sometimes see design differently. Men might see it from an architectural standpoint. They might see it from a landscaping standpoint, but they have a more cerebral way of thinking of design than women do. Women have the heartfelt thoughts. I've learned that when I meet a man, and I zero in on what makes him tick, I frequently find it's something very cerebral. He might like the architecture of a house, or he even might be a person who wants know more about how he can be successful in business by utilizing some of what you do!

Here's a story about what a little networking can do for you. I once met a real estate agent. He had no knowledge of design and he didn't *want* to know about interior design, but I asked him if it would it be possible for me to maybe link up with his company so I could go in and kind of spruce up the homes that he was selling.

Sometimes they were \$1,000,000 homes and up. Wouldn't it be beautiful to be able to give him "staging" and make a house easy for him to sell? You'd be so shocked at how quickly his little ears perked up. He said, "What do you do? You're kidding. You can do that for me?"

That little question actually opened up a whole new avenue of business for my company. We actually devised a real estate division in our company. We would go out to real estate companies and create relationships with people then “stage” their homes. Staging is something that in the last 10 years has become very fashionable. It’s where you have a house to sell, and the house is empty. How difficult is it to sell a house that’s \$400,000 or \$500,000 or even \$200,000 that has nothing in it? Because people don’t have a lot of imagination. It’s very difficult to describe to a real estate agent what this house can look like, but if a designer can go in and renovate a house, and make it look like a real home, even with just minimal add-ins, you’d be so surprised at how much more exciting it is for somebody to consider buying that house. Suddenly the buyer can see the possibilities!

We found that it’s really important for real estate agents to have contacts in the interior design world who can do this work for them. We found that often we can go in and do six and seven houses at a time with just staging, and guess what? We devised a system where we get a small percentage of the sale of the house. See how you use little threads there?

That’s the benefit of networking. And, because you have a relationship with your fellow networkers, it’s not just about another business card that they’re going to slip in their pocket.

Networking is *not* about walking away from the meeting with a bunch of business cards. It’s about forging deeper relationships with people. When you make an impression on somebody you meet, that person not only remembers you, he or she may want to be your friend. And what’s the best source for referrals? It’s your friends! And that’s actually tip three here...

8.3 REMEMBER YOUR FRIENDS

Many times, we're so busy and it's sometimes hard to find the time to get together with your friends. Your friends may not be aware of what you're doing. They may not really know, for example, that you need clients. And they don't know you'd like them to help you unless you tell them! I know a lot of us have a hard time asking for that. But I recommend that the first area that you hit in this industry is your friends, because they're built in, and you can count on the fact that people like to help!

After all, your friends are people that care about you and *want* to help you. I've found that many times when I mentor people I'll ask them, "Are you utilizing your friends for business?" They'll say, "No, I didn't think of that." But that's your basic network. If you count your friends, you already have a network when you come in. And they already love you, hopefully! And you can sweeten the deal for them by actually offering a referral fee. That's actually strategy four...

8.4 USE REFERRAL FEES

Remember, there's nobody in the world that doesn't appreciate receiving a referral fee

When you send somebody a small amount of money for a referral, what do you think it says to that person? It says, "I appreciate you. Thank you." It's a gift! And I believe that in this world right now, we really don't give enough of those. We don't take the time to say "Thank You."

Referral fees are a great way to express your gratitude, or maybe you can offer a trade out. In cases where you can't afford a referral fee, try the idea of trading out. Ask, "Would you like me to help you with your home? Would you like me to help you select something for your home?" It's that giving spirit. And I love that part of business probably more than any other.

Now, do you see that the main theme throughout all these ways of getting clients, is **giving**? Often, when you're listening to business tapes or going to school to learn business, this part is left out. But it has been absolutely instrumental in making me so successful. To go from where I was, with \$500 in the bank, to where I am now, which is a multi-million dollar designer, I can tell you I could *never* have done it without giving.

8.5 TRADE

Most people think that trading is not a great money maker. In truth, trading is wonderful. Let me start with a great example. There's an electrician in our community, a wonderful guy who's owned and operated his company for 30 years. I called him and I said, "Would you like to trade with us? We need some electrical work done and we'd be happy to do some design work for you." He said, "You know what? Interestingly enough, I've got a bedroom in my house that my son's moving back home from college and I really need to renovate". So, I said, "Okay, great. This works out perfectly".

So we did his design work and he did my electrical work and everybody was happy. But what's more, less than 30 days later I got a call from another client. He said, "Oh I heard you did a great job over at James' house and that you're a wonderful designer." I said, "Really?" and he said, "Absolutely. He

was so impressed with your work.” And I said, “Well, how did you know I did the design work there?” He said, “Well, he hasn’t stopped raving about you because he didn’t have to pay for it”. Interesting, isn’t it? It was the fact that we’d traded which gave me that extra bit of name recognition!

Now, I’m not saying the new client is thinking he or she is going to get work for free, but remember, when somebody gets to trade, it’s *kind of* a free deal, so that person is going to be much more apt to be bragging and be excited about your work because you did this free of charge. Those people become your voice.

Who, you may ask, do you approach for trades? Well, primarily other vendors and people whose services you need in your own work. You’d be surprised at how many services you can trade for. Painters, for example. Everybody needs a good paint job in the office or home.

Another good thing to trade for is *advertising*. Everyone in business needs advertising, but often when you’re just starting out, you can’t afford it. So advertising is a wonderful thing to trade because you can call someone and say, “Look, I’ll do your offices or I’ll renovate your home if I can get a quarter page ad in your magazine or your newspaper.” During the first couple of years in business, that’s how I got *all* my advertising.

Most everybody at some time in life will need a designer: painters, advertisers, electricians, roofers, carpenters. It’s non-stop. The only thing I’ve had a hard time with is groceries! Even then, I’m still working on that. You’d be surprised. We spend money every day of our lives, and we never ask, “Would you like to trade this?” You don’t even have to train the people you trade with to be your bullhorn, to be your spokesperson. In my experience,

the people with whom I've traded did this on their own, as I have for them. **It's the law of reciprocity.** You can trade with people in the community, and that's always a good way to go, because they're going to recommend you time and time again. Communities support communities.

8.6 NEVER LEAVE A JOB WITHOUT LEAVING A GIFT

I mentioned earlier when I said how important it is to leave something after a job's all done. This is something you don't charge for. It's a gift. It could be flowers, or plants, or food, but it should also have your name or your company's name on it. Because people you work for will always refer you and be impressed with your work when you make that last little touch, when you leave that last little thing with your name on it.

As an example, we had some beautiful plants with little labels of our company name on them. For the first five years of my business, everybody got a free plant at the closure of a job. I've had calls in the last few years from people from 20 years ago. It would just shock you. They've said, "I have a tree in my yard that's growing because you left me a little plant." So, for an investment of \$1, in those days, I can't even tell you the amount of referrals we've gotten off of that. Gifts are great. They stay in people's minds, and yards, for a very long time!

SECRET NINE:

HOW TO DEAL WITH CONTRACTORS

As you may know, you hire a general contractor to come in to do any form of construction. They, in fact, are the people that run the subcontractors. When somebody says to you, "I need an electrician" or "I need a plumber," you go to a general contractor who, normally, will bring in a full crew. If you decide you don't need a general, that's okay, but you need to be certain that both the contractor and the subcontractor are licensed. If you're building a house, or doing some really big-time construction work, always hire a general contractor. That keeps you safe. It keeps the job under control, and if they're a good, licensed entity, it keeps you protected from liens that may later be put on the home.

9.1 CHECK LICENSES

Always be sure to check your contractor's licenses and insurance. A large percentage of contractors are not licensed or they haven't updated their licensing. If you check the Internet, and by the way you can call the contractor's state board as well, you can find out if somebody is valid or not. Get their contractors' license. Call and check.

9.2 CHECK REFERENCES

You also need to check the contractor's references. A lot of people just don't even bother with that. It seems like too much work. I'm not talking about personal references. I'm talking about real jobs that they've done recently,

within the last one to three years. In addition, you must talk directly to somebody that they worked for, and it's got to be a client, somebody that's paid them. How do you find those references? You get them from the contractor. Don't hire a contractor without making sure you get those references.

9.3 CHECK FOR INSURANCE

Check for workmen's compensation and liability insurance. Understand that when you bring a general contractor into a home, if they're not licensed or they don't have workmen's comp, or they don't have liability insurance, who will get sued if, God forbid, there's a problem on your job? You will!

How do you protect your client if you're a designer and you bring a contractor in? Make sure that your general contractor has the appropriate insurance. Always, always, always. All you have to do is ask them for a copy of their insurance. Ask for a copy of their workmen's compensation. They have to supply you with that before they start working.

All professional designers should do this. That's one reason why I've actually done this book, because I feel that there are so many designers that don't have the opportunity to learn the fundamentals. If they knew them, they could stay out of trouble.

9.4 PUT EVERYTHING IN WRITING

This is the **I-Don't-Want-to-Get-in-Trouble-Concept!** Everything, everything, everything in writing. *Never* assume. In fact, I have a plaque on my wall at my office that says, "Never assume anything." When you talk to somebody, when

you communicate with a contractor, even if there's a small change in some of the work that you've specified, it must go on a **change order**. It must be in writing. If it's not, you will be held responsible.

A change order is a document to specify and agree upon any changes that are decided upon after the job begins. Let's just say, hypothetically, you're doing a bathroom redo and suddenly you decide that you want to put a steam in your shower and it's after the fact. The shower is almost done. It's paid for and the budget's already set. Well, you've got to be sure if you decide to do the steam that you clarify first how much it's going to cost and how long will it take.

You have to ask, will it prolong the time that it's going to take him to finish this work? And, more important than anything is, what kind of a steam do you really want and what are the downsides to getting that steam in your shower? *All in writing*. Everything in writing that you both sign on a change order form.

9.4 CONTRACTS SHOULD BE SPECIFIC

Next, make sure that the contract between you and the contractor and your client is *very* specific. If you have a door knob being changed, it needs to say *brass* door knob or *chrome* door knob or *four and a half inch* door knob, any detail you want to be sure is actually taken care of.

Many people forget the details, so, specifics are important. After all, do you think that if you're not clear on a specific item or aspect of an item with a contractor that your clients would be happy if one little detail is not to their liking? Of course not. They're going to want you to be responsible to change it.

You're the liaison to the contractor. You are the one mediating between the contractor and the client. However, this does not apply to payments.

When it comes time for the contractor to be paid clients always pay contractors directly

9.5 THREE-DAY CANCELLATION NOTICES

Let's just pretend that your client has hired the contractor and you are moving forward, but, all of a sudden, the second day after hiring him, your client gets cold feet.

You want to have that little bit of margin in there to be able to think the contract through and be able to get out of that contract in three days. After that, I understand. You're stuck, but you've got to make sure you've got that three day cancellation clause.

9.6 MAKE A WARRANTY BOOKLET

Make sure you get *all* your warranties from your contractor and for each and every appliance or faucet or anything that requires a warranty for your clients. Then, you can actually prepare a warranty book for them.

I would prepare this for my clients. I'd make a folder for the bathroom, the kitchen, etc. Each piece would have a header including the manufacturer's name, the dates of purchase and model numbers, and inside was a warranty on every single thing that was installed in their home. I don't know any

designers who do this except the ones I've trained. But it acts as a form of insurance for you. You won't have clients calling you in three months when an appliance isn't working properly. Their warranty booklet will show them how to take care of it.

9.7 CONTRACTS SHOULD SPECIFY START AND COMPLETION DATES

Make sure the contract specifies an approximate start and a completion date. How many times have you heard, "Oh my God, I had the contractor from hell!" (Excuse my expression). "It took two years to do my kitchen. I hate my designer because she didn't make sure that it got done quickly." Remember, everything that this contractor does reflects you, no matter what it is, even if it's not your fault. If you specify dates, then the contractor is also beholden to them.

9.8 BASE CONTRACTOR PAYMENT SCHEDULES ON PERFORMANCE

Let's just say you start your job and you give your contractor a 25% deposit, which is pretty common, and they begin the work. If you have no idea when to give them the next payment or when you're supposed to give them the balance or, how about this one, when are they going to be half done with this project, then you're kind of out there in limbo land.

You're kind of wondering what's going on. So, if you have a payment schedule, and your client has it, and your contractor has it, and you have it, you've eliminated any possibilities for problems right there, because everyone knows what to expect.

The other thing is I want to suggest as a caveat is that you make sure the

balance is not paid at the completion at the job, but it's only paid after 10 days, so you have the time to check all the work thoroughly. There's not that one little thing that didn't get done and you're out there trying to find the contractor who's got the balance already.

9.9 KEEP A JOB FILE

This is going to make your life a lot easier. Make sure to keep a job file. Organization is your middle name here. There's nothing more impressive to a client than your keeping a full notebook, with dividers, on this job, and making sure that a copy of each drawing that's been approved, each contract, each specification for whatever they're buying, each proposal, is in a wonderful binder with the client's name on it.

It shows you care and that you've paid attention to the details. It shows two things. It shows that the contractor is under, not so much your control, but under your watch. The second thing is it shows your client that you truly care about running the job and overseeing the job.

It's being a professional. If you follow those basics, and I'm sure there's something else you can remind yourself to do, they can keep you out of that what I call contractor hell.

As you may realize, if you find good contractors, you develop relationships with them over time and keep going back to them. In some ways, your vendors and your contractors are the most valuable part of your company. I had a contractor, a general, who worked for me for almost 20 years. I could send him out on a job and I could say, "Bill, just get this work done. I need it done in three weeks. Can you do this? Can you do it for this price?" You know

something? Our trust was so solid I didn't even have to check the work very often.

Your relationships with vendors are equally, if not more, important than your relationships with your clients. Keep this in mind - your vendors are a representation of you and your company.

5 BONUS SECRETS!

Before we finish, I want pass on five more very important considerations for your career as an interior designer.

1. KNOW ALL THE INS AND OUTS OF STARTING A NEW BUSINESS

Make absolutely certain that you know how to start a business. Take careful stock of the advantages, the disadvantages, some of the licensing you might need, etc.

2. LEARN HOW TO SET UP A REAL DESIGN STUDIO

Whether it's in your home or whether you're going to open an office, all designers should have a work studio. It's a place where you can tend to hiring a staff, keep all your office equipment, those kinds of things.

3. MARKET AND SELL

I've hit on that several times, but I want you to understand that it's so important for you to focus on this area and to never slacken your efforts to promote your business. You can get a lot of new jobs by learning how to get PR going.

4. CHARGE FOR YOUR SERVICES!

Remember the story I related earlier about my student who was afraid to

charge for her services because she felt like it was wrong to charge people for doing something she loved? Well, if you have this attitude, it's now time to change it. I assume you want to, or else you wouldn't have purchased this book. But you must remember that you are worth every penny you charge. Your education, innate talents, connections, and good heart mean that you are allowed to make an excellent living at what you do! This includes keeping up on how to sell, how to close, how to negotiate, how to do contracts, proposals, vendor agreements, etc.

5. FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Most creative people hate to address aspects of financial management. This includes writing a business plan, cash flow management, accounting, profit and losses, insurance, establishing credit, and getting loans. This is connected to avoiding pitfalls. If you do this, you'll be able to set up a chart that you can follow so that you learn every aspect of the business. What happens is that you have a much stronger foundation for your company, not just to start, but to go forward with, and to stay in business for a long time!

CONCLUSION

The number one thing that disheartens me about the design field is the sad fact that many designers go into business and out of business in the first year. So many talented folks just haven't been given the right information they need to maintain the business side of things for the long haul. That's why I've decided to go into education.

I ask that you really think these things through. All the information in this book, if attended to and heeded, will be great value to you as a new design professional. Like I said, most important, get a great mentor that's already *been there, done that*.

You may even be interested in mentoring with me. I'm available at different times of the year to do mentoring. Feel free to call me at 310-403-2308. I always take on the people that are really interested in making it in this field. It doesn't have to mean that you can afford a lot, but it means that you're serious and committed, and you're passionate about it. I'm happy to help people like that.

Also, in addition to this book, I've created a 300 page workbook. I believe it's the only one of its kind available out there. I did it after 30 years in this business because I realized that nobody had ever done it before. With the workbook you can go through each and every stage of developing and really establishing a business in design. And, by the way, how to make money doing it! Contact my office at 310-403-2308 to find out more.

Finally...

Don't Ever Give Up!

Tenaciousness is so important in this business! If you get the right formula or the right recipe, as I often call it, anyone can make it in the field of interior design. Just get ready to work hard, commit yourself, and have a good time.

Because that's really why we do this, isn't it? To have a good time and be creative and really have fun in our business and making a lot of money. For anybody that comes to learn from me, all I ask for is for that person to **pay it forward**. So, if you get to learn all this information, all I ask is that maybe you share it with somebody else who's trying to make it in the industry, and once you're successful, the commitment you should make is to step out and help someone else.

I made that commitment when I first went into this industry that if I ever made it, I would share it with others. It's been my distinct pleasure to share it with you!