



# INSIDE *the* BUSINESS *of* GRAPHIC DESIGN

*60 Leaders Share Their Secrets of Success*

# CATHARINE FISHEL



## **Section 3: Running a Business That Doesn't Eat Your Creativity for Lunch**

### *Staying Sharp Creatively and Administratively*

A strong, vital business is the goal of any design firm principal. But a thriving business can sometime start to sap a designer's energies—particularly if that person is not especially fond of administrative duties. After all, why did we get into this business: to research the relative merits of dental insurance plans or create great design?

The four firms featured in this section have each found unique ways to be good administrators and good designers. One side of their work doesn't take away from the other. Finding one's balance is the key.



## GEE + CHUNG DESIGN

### Listening to One's Heart

*In Earl Gee and Fani Chung's perfect world, running a design studio—in their case, twelve-year-old, award-winning, San Francisco-based Gee + Chung Design—would have no business aspects at all. Of course, deal with business they must. So they handle those aspects as efficiently as possible so that they can do more of what they want to do—design.*

*Gee + Chung Design is one of those unique firms that have found ways to stay consistently sharp creatively and administratively. Its principals' methodologies could be called simple common sense. But what makes it all work is that, unlike so many other harried business owners, they really do listen to their hearts.*

Earl Gee tells the story of a trophy client for which his and Fani Chung's team performed miracles. This was an extremely reputable client, with generous budgets and a strong record of corporate design.

So when the client approached Gee + Chung Design and asked if its creative team could produce a twenty-eight-page book in just three weeks, they said, "Yes, we can do that." The project was thick with technology, all of which had to be made approachable and human. It required the assistance of seven different illustrators and photographers, and content was developed on the fly.

"We were working day and night. Designers were laying on the floor taking naps at 2:00 A.M.," Gee recalls. "We got it done on time, and we were very proud of the result. We were rewarded handsomely. And the client was very appreciative."



On all fronts, the project seemed to be a smashing success. But the firm's principals decided that they would prefer to avoid that kind of project. "You can get a reputation for performing miracles. You and your staff can only take so much of that," Gee says.

Earl Gee and Fani Chung both have extremely calm demeanors that speak volumes about how they stay sane in an insane business. Much of their philosophy on being happy as businesspeople and as creatives springs from their upbringings. They believe in staying healthy, eating well, and getting enough sleep—not exactly earth-shattering stuff, but it's the kind of common sense that people in a big hurry usually forget.

"When we started our firm in 1990," Gee says, "we realized that to focus on creating the best design for our clients, we had to succeed in business as well. Without clients and budgets, you simply don't have the opportunity to design. Succeeding in business has allowed us to focus on design, not administration."

The partners offer ten tips that have not only kept them above water, but help them enjoy the swim as well.

**1. Ready or not.** When Gee was pondering whether or not he was ready to start his own business, he asked Paul Hauge, his former Graphics Department chair at Art Center College of Design, for advice. Hauge told him, "You'll know when you're ready when you're ready."

This sage, Yoda-like guidance was true to the core, Gee says. He realized he not only had to master designing and producing a job, but also selling, estimating, and invoicing the job as well.

**2. A division of labor.** If you are fortunate enough to have a partner, the duo says, dividing up business duties can allow both partners to focus on design as much as



possible. For instance, Gee is responsible for sales, while Chung is responsible for finances.

**3. The business instinct.** Chung's father ran a highly successful restaurant in Hong Kong, which employed more than a hundred people and gathered accolades from publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Time* for its twenty variations of squab. When she was young, her father would talk to her about the relationship between the base price of squab, the proper markup needed to turn a profit, the competition, and economic conditions.

A design business is no different, Gee says. There are fixed costs such as overhead, equipment, and materials that must be covered, while labor, competition, and the economy are intangibles. If you do a good job, you get repeat business. Chung grew up around business, so she has a strong business instinct and a knack for pricing her firm's services.

**4. Good money for great work.** The most important thing a designer can do to stay sharp creatively, Chung and Gee believe, is to learn to charge enough to enable yourself to do your best work. This allows you to have the proper amount of time to really understand a project and create a unique solution.

This strategy also enables you to avoid taking on certain types of projects just to meet overhead. And the better the work you do, the better clients you will get and the better budgets you will receive.

**5. Sometimes it's not about money.** The company's first identity project was for a great client, Sun Microsystems, but it had a very limited budget of \$800. Still, the project received more than twenty awards and led to



many other successful identity projects over the years for which they were well compensated.

“By doing good work, you are investing in your future, earning a ‘deferred’ payment of clients to come,” says Gee.

**6. Have you eaten yet?** Westerners often greet each other by asking, “How are you?” Chinese people greet each other by asking, “Have you eaten yet?” It is imperative to keep themselves and their staff well fed in order to stay sharp and to do their best work.

**7. Sleep on it.** It might sound obvious, but it is amazing, Gee says, what one can accomplish when a problem is viewed fresh in the morning. It can be very helpful to finish a presentation, for instance, a day ahead of time to allow yourself to view it with fresh eyes the next morning, as the client will.

**8. Why rent when you can own?** The partners say that buying their own space several years ago was one of smartest things they ever did to stay focused on design. During San Francisco’s dot.com boom, some of their colleagues were forced out their spaces because of the high rent.

“Owning your own space is an investment that can grow, where renting is an expense which is unrecoverable. When you retire, you can either sell the space, rent it out, or start a new business—perhaps a coffee house for retired designers,” jokes Gee.

**9. See the world.** Travelling is truly one of the best ways to stay sharp creatively, Chung and Gee believe. Observing different cultures teaches one to look at a creative problem from a totally different perspective.

**10. Never be satisfied.** The only way to grow creatively and administratively is to stay committed to learning.



A good designer is constantly looking for new ways to do things, to never repeat him- or herself. Chung's professor at Yale, Paul Rand, viewed the designer as being in a constant, difficult, uphill position: He or she must keep moving in order to go forward. The partners believe in this tenet, that there is always room for improvement.

The one thing that Gee + Chung will never do is accept any amount of money for a boring project or a boring client. A good relationship with a client, interesting work, and adequate compensation are the firm's priorities.

"That's one of the best things about staying small," says Gee. "You don't have to keep feeding this giant machine to keep it running. If you are doing things that you enjoy and that make life better, that's about all we can ask from ourselves. September 11 gave us a serious dose of reality. It made us all ask, 'How can we be more useful, relate to others better, and make the world better through what we do?'"

The most important business lesson Chung learned from her father was his strong belief in treating people with respect, whether they are customers, employees, or vendors. To Gee + Chung Design, a successful business is all about the people you work with. Good relationships allow you to work well together as a team, to do great work for your clients, and have fun doing it.



"Didn't you always wonder how other design studios do it? How did they start? How did they change and why? And how in the world did they ever cope with fame and success? Where else do you get sixty heads of design studios to tell you their management secrets, inner workings, and how they treat their employees? You were afraid to ask? Well ask no more, just read."

—Steff Geissbuhler, partner and principal, Chermayeff & Geismar Inc.

"Fishel makes business personal, offering valuable insights on managing a studio from an impressive array of top designers."

—David Womack, director of new media, AIGA

"Everyone immersed in the running of a design business or contemplating the starting of one needs this book: It's not just informative; it's reenforcing and therapeutic."

—DK Holland, Design Issues editor, *Communication Arts*

"Nothing is better than going to the source, and Catharine Fishel takes us there. The voices in this book are practical, insightful, and inspirational. Design needs this now."

—Dorothy Dunn, head of education,

Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution

**T**his unique volume casts a precise and realistic light on the risks, requirements, and rewards of the graphic design business. Leading design writer Catharine Fishel has interviewed principals and founders from a myriad of design firms, transforming their firsthand accounts into a prodigious collection of sixty essays. Voices from fledgling studios, growing companies, and prestigious firms collectively provide up-to-the-minute advice on every facet of the business, including:

- Leaving a firm to start out on your own
- Setting short-term and long-term business goals
- Developing and maintaining a distinguished reputation
- Balancing creative impulse with practical management
- Restructuring after the loss of a client or creative
- Charting new territory while fostering your original client base

Both novices and veterans of the design business will find this captivating and compellingly human portrait of today's professionals inspiring and indispensable.

**CATHARINE FISHEL** writes about design for many leading publications, including *Print*, *ID*, *Step Inside Graphic Design*, *U&Ic Online*, *Editorial Eye*, and *Design Net*. Known for her insightful coverage of today's design industry and culture, she has interviewed hundreds of designers and illustrators, and her editorial services are much sought after by design agencies and firms. The author of *Paper Graphics*, *Minimal Graphics*, *Redesigning Identity*, *The Perfect Package*, and *Designing for Children*, she lives in Morton, Illinois.

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