

When Beauty's Not Enough

Top Tools Design Solopreneurs Can't Live Without

If you thought this would be just another version of “The latest and greatest applications for designers in 2021”, you should *definitely* keep reading because you're in for a surprise.

Introduction

In the world of solopreneurship, clearly, there is a need for a designer, (just like everybody else), to use the right programs and software to compensate for lacking a dedicated workforce. A solopreneur must build an infrastructure to automate and efficiently manage, *on their own*, the amount of data that is commonly entrusted to a small organization.

A few of these basic tools involve things like [accounting software, [customer relationship managers](#), task managers, market research tools, marketing, and sales assistance], and the list goes on. Additionally, a designer also requires any number of his own [design, testing, and rendering software] to bring his ideas to life. All of these things are certainly indispensable tools, but what I'd like to focus on are not *the tools that are used by the designer* but what it is *about the designer* that makes the tools profitable. In other words, I'm going to explain the “tools” that are “part of” the designer.

There are many articles out there that tell you what software you should use or what templates are the best, etc... in fact there's a couple here on Webflow already... [here](#) and [here](#)... But I've not set out to make software recommendations or talk about what makes a *design program* great, I've set out to explain what it is that makes the *designer* great... What it is that makes *you* great at what you do...

A painter is more than his brushes...
A designer is more than his software...

Just like how a painter uses paint brushes, and yet even without them, he's still an artist...there are many software and applications that a designer uses that are not actually what make him a designer. Unlike “latest trends” and “best practices”, what I'm talking about is timeless and it applies to an extraordinarily broad range of “designers”... Whether you work in graphic design, web design, UX design, or any other flavor, this article is written for you.

If you're a successful designer, it's not because you're an expert at using the Adobe suite, it's because you have something powerful and unique *that is a part of you* that can be expressed through that medium.

As a fellow designer and creative, I'd like to celebrate and inspire these unsung virtues of designers without which even the most powerful software is useless...

Here are the top five "tools" that are integral parts of every great designer.

1. An Eye and Hand for the Beautiful



Designers routinely incarnate abstractions into reality and bring ideas to life.

This first tool kind of goes without saying, but it's worthwhile to mention because it is certainly underappreciated even though it's a gift that few have innately. Just about anyone can look at something and tell if it's beautiful or not. But not everyone can tell you "why", and even fewer can take those principles and replicate them in a creation of their own.

It's taken for granted that a designer is able to make things look good... But there's a lot that goes into that statement, especially since most designers are working with a vast array of varying markets, industry standards, and target markets... not to mention little details like color schemes and client preferences. Essentially, a designer must have an understanding of the principles of *balance* in color, size, proportion, shading, position, layers, etc, and apply them *dynamically* to **any given project**. Additionally, no two projects are identical. Not only must they have the understanding, but they also have to be able to *recreate* it themselves. They need to

know what colors work and which ones don't, how to draw attention to one thing while shifting others to the background, how to balance images with text, or content with space.

Here are two easy ways to hone this gift and put it into practice:

- **Design Audits** - find designs that work and analyze what makes them work, what they've done well, and why. Conversely, if you come across a design that you can immediately tell is bad, diagnose it... Investigate into what exactly makes it bad. Is it unbalanced? Do the colors clash? Are the calls to action flat or boring? Is the website organized poorly? Is the app functionality complex and counter-intuitive? Taking note of all of these things will help you train your brain to adopt the good you find and avoid the bad.
- **Experiment** - be bold and try to replicate the good designs you've seen. Try to create from memory a design you knew was good and make it something of your own. You could also challenge yourself by taking a bad design and trying to fix it.

As the title of this article indicates, having an eye and a hand for the beautiful can make you an artist, but it doesn't make you a professional designer. There are a few more tools you need.

2. Empathy/Salesmanship



Designers facilitate connections and bring people together.

Believe it or not, these two things go hand-in-hand. The only way to be a good salesman is to be empathetic. After all, being a salesman is nothing more than provoking an exchange of goods by connecting someone with a need to someone that satisfies that need. To do that, you have to understand who your prospects are, what they want, what they need, how to get it, and how they need to be persuaded to get it. Such an interaction is impossible without empathy,

It's not enough for a designer to make something beautiful. Art is beautiful for its own sake, but those who design professionally have other motivations.

A Designer Needs to Create Something That is Both Appealing *and* Compelling. It Must Captivate and Convert a Prospect.

In this way, the designer has to combine his perception of beauty with his understanding of salesmanship to produce something that will simultaneously attract and persuade a prospect. There are plenty of designs out there that are strikingly beautiful, but a design that properly captures beauty and salesmanship is a rare find.

3. Flexibility



Prove your skill and professionalism in your response to suggestions, criticism, or adversity.

This is a quality of the designer that might be interchangeable with patience. Especially as an entrepreneur or solopreneur, it's an absolute necessity since you'll be dealing with many a variety of clients without little to no backup.

As a designer, you know the good and the bad along with the “dos and don'ts” of tasteful and effective design. With each new job you have to do extensive research into the particular industry you're working for, mix that with your knowledge of good design in general, and then take into account the wants and needs of the prospects, since they're the ones most intimately interacting with what you create. To top it all off, it's ultimately the people who are paying you that will approve your design, which means that you will have to integrate their desires and preferences as well... as irksome as that might be.

It's actually quite a lot to balance principles of good design, industry standards, needs of the prospects, and wants of the client. It's a lot for a designer to take into account when creating something that must be both attractive and profitable. There may be times when revisions seem endless, and things are never quite right... But it's a quality of a highly-skilled designer to persevere taking all of this into account and rendering something that is beneficial and satisfactory for all.

4. Innovation



“Our ancestors have invented, we can at least innovate.” — Amit Kalantri

In many cases, there are several ways to do the same thing, depending on the circumstances, the pros, and the cons, you might choose one over the other. Or perhaps new technology surfaces, new problems arise, or new expectations become part of your job description... As a solopreneur, you may find that your job description encompasses quite a lot. And you'll be required to develop new skills and discover solutions to problems you never knew existed. **Necessity is the mother of innovation!** The digital world is in a constant state of flux. Change and improvement are simply part of the deal. Designers must stay on their toes.

We have to recognize rising trends and take the good and avoid the bad. We should never be afraid to constantly seek the best way to do... well...everything.

Complacency breeds mediocrity.

What kind of designer really wants to settle for mediocrity?

Innovation is crucial for a successful designer because one of the easiest things to recognize as outdated is a layout or design. Whether it be a logo, website, print ad, or obsolete app construction... We all cringe when we visit a website that looks like a personal blog from the early 2000s.

In my explanation of the first tool, “A Hand and Eye for the Beautiful”, I mentioned that just about everyone can tell you whether something is beautiful or not. In the same way, anyone who frequents technology will be able to spot something outdated, even if they can’t explain why.

It’s the job of the designer to stay ahead of the game and ensure that everything he creates is current, or even better, cutting edge.

5. Initiative



Fortune favors the bold. Trust in your skills and experience and get the job done.

There are many times when a designer has to do a lot of detail-oriented work with a lack of specific instructions. We’re given a *general* idea, *general* direction, and *generic* preferences, but the end goal is concrete and very specific...

Make something that satisfies everything the client needs/wants...
Preferably cheap and fast too...

Ugh. Since most people don't have the power of mind-reading, the burden of bringing this dream to life falls on the designer's best intuition. We may ask our clients as many questions as we like, but they may not have the knowledge, talent, or even the interest to tell us exactly what they want. Part of this may stem from either the client's lack of understanding or a great trust in our professional practice. Regardless, as designers, we have to take what we're given and do the best that we can.

This requires a good deal of effort and groundwork on our part, not to mention skill and lots of past experience to make up for the lack of direction. **The key here is initiative.** Oftentimes designers have the job of giving clients what they want even when they themselves are not exactly sure what they want. That's when we take the bull by the horns and do what we do best.

Keep Designing

The single most important thing a designer must do is *keep designing*. It is the surest way to acquire and develop these necessary qualities that separate good designers from great designers. Challenge yourself, experiment, practice, invite constructive criticism, embrace adversity as a challenge, never stop improving, and always take pride in your work.

There's a lot of good designers out there, but if you make an effort to develop these tools you can stop being good and start being great.