Tips for developing and building a freelance illustration career
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Patience is a virtue

As a new graduate you need to appreciate that it can be a long road to a sustainable illustration career. Of course, some are lucky and land their first commission straight after graduation, but most of us have to spend hours putting the hard graft in building networks and getting our work seen by those that might offer us work. Like any freelance occupation, illustration is very much 'famine or feast' even after you are established. It take time to build those client and contact lists. I would recommend investing in a recent copy of the ***Writers & Artist's Yearbook*** which, as well as offering advice to writers and illustrators/artists also lists the names and contact details of all of the UK's newspapers, magazines and publishing houses.

Then it is a case of identifying where you feels your illustration would be suited and start contacting potential clients, art directors etc. If by email always use a contact name (not Dear Sir/Madam) and make emails personal (don't send the same one to multiple addresses). I would recommend sending hand written letters to those clients you really want to work with as this strategy can make more of an impression. It is also important to make sure everything you send out has your contact details, website url and branding.

Don't take rejection, or being ignored, personally; it seldom is. People will tend not to get back to you unless they want to give you work straight away. But don't lose heart, some clients may not reply to your initial contact butmay get back to you with work a lot later. For this reason it is also a good idea to send something branded with your illustration that they are likely to keep.

Consider a temporary job whilst finding your feet

You are not a failure if you have to take a salaried position whilst you are establishing yourself as an illustrator. You will have bills to pay, food to buy etc. so having a regular source of income will take the pressure off a little whilst you develop your portfolio and build a professional network. There is nothing wrong with needing a day job to cover your overheads, it takes time to establish yourself as a freelance creative so stick at it; if you want it badly enough it will happen as long as you work at it.

Work hard

This is the bottom line for all business endeavours, and if you are freelancing you are a small business! A career in illustration is not a divine right to anyone just because they are good at drawing. You will probably spend several years developing and fine tuning a professional personal portfolio before you are in a strong enough position to 'go solo'.

You will need to spend evenings working on personal briefs, sending examples of your work to potential clients, talking to other creative professionals and taking part in exhibitions. By doing this, and listening to the feedback you receive, you will start to learn which work is popular and what isn't working. Think of it as 'paying your dues' or learning your trade and the hours you put in at this stage will never be wasted.

People sometimes talk about successful creatives as being 'overnight successes' or 'lucky to be in the right place at the right time.' You will usually find that those labelled as such have always spent countless hours putting themselves, and their work, in a position to take advantage of those 'lucky opportunities' when they arise. You will need to put in a lot of 'overtime' to develop your work and research potential clients so that you will one day be in a position to take advantage of that '*luck*'.

Actively engage with industry

If you want to be a part of an industry then you need to research it, learn about it and engage with it. There are numerous useful resources online that you can take advantage of. Sites like www.creativeboom.com , www.creativeblog.com and www.itsnicethat.com have plenty of articles, interviews and blogs that will give you an insight into the practical side of being an illustrator, but remember that you are also a part of the wider creative industry so you also need to be aware of other disciplines in the arts; design, theatre, film music etc. Exposure to as wide a range of creative channels as possible will inform your work and stop it from becoming derivative; it may also lead to opportunities that you may not have otherwise considered.

Find out who is doing the best work and who is working for the best clients, then dig deeper and try to work out how they got those opportunities. Follow your favourite artists and designers on social media and subscribe to mailing lists of trade journals such as the ones mentioned above (links to a more comprehensive list at the end of this article).

You also need to learn about the business of illustration; associations like The AOI www.theaoi.com offer help with licensing and contracts and also put on helpful seminars about issues illustrators face. Talk to other illustrators and don't be afraid to ask for advice, they were once in the position you are now. You will also need to have a good knowledge of intellectual property rights, www.gov.uk/intellectual-property-an-overview has plenty of jargon free information and advice. Organisations such as www.dacs.org.uk actively campaign for the rights of artists, familiarise yourself with who they are and what they do. You will need to negotiate contracts, licences and be happy with the terms of the projects you are working on so any help will be invaluable. Again, other illustrators may be able to offer advice and help you navigate some of the issues you will face so, as I said before, don't be afraid to ask.

You are a creative business

As a freelancer you are, in effect, a small business so you need to act like one. Just because you are passionate about, and enjoy, what you do doesn't make it less of a business. Be serious about what you do, not just the creative side but also the business side. If you want to make money you are going to have to research where your work fits in and create work that solves problems as well as looks good. Look for gaps in the market where your illustration may add value, other businesses may not appreciate how professional illustration might help them communicate more effectively so see it as your job to educate them. Call yourself what you are; a **professional illustrator** and be proud of it, own it! If you want others to take you seriously then you will first have to take yourself, and what you do, seriously. Yes, consider calling yourself an '*aspiring illustrator*' if you want people queuing around the block asking you to work for free! If, however, you want to earn a good living you need to recognise that you are a creative professional who has trained and perfected their craft over many years so you deserve to be rewarded financially for it.

You will then need to actively promote and advertise your services; just having a professional website and social media presence, though essential, is not enough, you have to actively drive potential clients to it – they won't find it by accident.

Know and value what you are selling

When you are creating work for a client it is important that both parties know exactly what it is they are selling or buying. The illustration industry operates on the licensing of works. As an illustrator you are granting a licence to a client, which allows them to **reproduce** your image for a specific use, territory and duration. A licence is separate to selling an original artwork or a print, no rights transfer and no licence is granted for such a transaction. You are selling the right for the client to use your illustration(s) in a specific way, in a specific place for a specific length of time; if they subsequently want to use that same work in another way, place or timeframe they need to negotiate a new licence with the author of the work (that's you, the illustrator).

You also need to price accurately as this is mutually beneficial to both client and illustrator. Don't give 'ball park' quotes, even if asked by the client. And don't work for free, this undermines the industry as well as your future career and income potential. Be very wary of clients that say things like *'It'll look great in your portfolio', 'We don't have a budget this time, but it could lead to more work in the future' or 'it will give you great exposure!'* You can't feed yourself or your family on 'exposure' and if you don't value your work then nobody else will either.

Having said all of that there will be times when you will need to compromise, by this I don't mean working for free but listening to enquiries with an understanding of what your client wants. You may be able to offer different outcomes to suit different budgets, or you may be able to better explain why one outcome will cost more than another. It is all about conducting yourself professionally and educating your client (who may not have the first idea of what being an illustrator entails). If they haven't got the budget for what they are asking you to do offer alternatives that they can afford, but don't be afraid to walk away from clients who aren't prepared to pay a fair price for your hard work.

You are communicators so communicate

As an illustrator your primary focus, and a lot of the advice you have had in the past, may understandably be your illustrations (style, medium, experimentation etc.) but you need to put just as much energy into establishing a good network. Of course the quality of the work in your portfolio is important but your main source of work will be through the contacts you make. Don't be afraid to approach people and don't discount anyone out of hand, you never know who they may know. Don't be afraid of putting your work 'out there' and actively promoting yourself, ask industry professionals for feedback and listen to what they say. A professional personal website is a must, but these days a good social media presence is equally important. You don't have to be present on all of them but do your research and ascertain what channels your target market is active on. Currently Instagram seems to be the most popular for visual creatives but don't discount others: LinkedIn is great for researching companies and finding art directors, www.the-dots.com is currently billed as LinkedIn for creatives! Twitter can help build networks that can refer you for relevant work. The likes of Behance are great for building an audience and newer sites such as www.dayflashapp.com could also be worth investigating. Find channels that suit you and then make sure that you are regularly posting content and remember that this shouldn't all be self promotional; nothing will make followers leave you more quickly than a constant stream of me, me, me! Think of yourself as a curator and offer relevant content that will be of interest to those following you; writing about your passion and offering tutorials can be a great way of sharing your skills and connecting with people and building a community, which leads nicely on to...

Build a creative community

Illustration can be quite an isolating profession so it is important to connect with other creatives. This will be mutually beneficial. You can share experiences and tips, collaborate on projects and even refer each other for work opportunities. Don't think of other creatives as competition think of them as creative partners. Engage with wider creative communities; follow blogs and podcasts, go to talks, connect with others on social media, meet up in the 'real world'. Some great networking events to try are www.glugevents.com and www.creativemornings.com but there are plenty of others, search out ones that will be enjoyable and beneficial for you.

What is it you offer?

What is it you do and what are you offering potential clients? What is your USP (unique selling point)? This could be an illustration style, a medium or media, a genre (such as concept art), an industry (publishing, entertainment, games, advertising) or a specialism (such as calligraphy). If you can clearly categorise your work you will make it crystal clear for those who want to commission you (and avoid any unpleasant surprises come deadline time). Do you work in one consistent style or several? If you work in one style this needs to be

consistent – remove any work that doesn't fit this style as it will only confuse and may lead to a loss of potential work/clients. If the answer is several styles you should categorise each one separately so there can be no confusion when someone is offering you work. Whatever your answer is you need to push your style(s) to the limit; apply it to different subject matter and different formats (advertising, editorial, packaging for example). If you need to do personal projects in order to display your versatility, and how your style can be applied to the different categories, it is well worth doing to get the work you want to get. And as I have said numerous times throughout ***don't be afraid to ask for advice***! The benefits of this are twofold; firstly you will get help and advice from experienced professionals and secondly you will further build those valuable networks that will be vitally important to you throughout your career. Remember the old saying *'it's the squeaky wheel that gets the oil!'*

Experience and intuition can be equally important

There will be times in your career that a job that initially looked good on paper starts to feel a little 'off' when you start working through it. Whilst it is important to trust your clients, and be tolerant of any indiscretions, if negative patterns persist sometimes it is better to just walk away from the job. With experience you will start to recognise which clients are just time wasters and which are worth investing time in. '*Time is money'* is particularly relevant where freelancers are concerned and you should protect yourself and your time. Trust your own judgement when it comes to clients and also to the advice that you will receive throughout your careers, you don't have to listen to, and act upon, it all; what was right for someone else will not necessarily be right for you.

Learn to ignore your inner critic

It is a fact of life for all creatives that there is a nagging voice that is always whispering in your ear; 'your work isn't good enough', 'you don't know what you're doing', 'you're just making it up as you go along'. You will never feel like you have truly 'made it'. There will also be times when you feel that you are getting nothing done even though you have been incredibly busy. It is important to treat yourself with kindness and compassion in the same way you treat your clients and customers (even though there may be times when you want to strangle them). Being a freelance creative can be a very 'fluid' career full of *highs and lows*, *peaks and troughs*, *swings and roundabouts* or whatever other metaphor you care to use, and you should never take the work for granted – you will need to constantly work at getting new clients as well as keeping your existing ones happy. But it can also be an incredibly rewarding one; you are your own boss and as long as the work gets completed on time it doesn't matter when you do it (if the sun's out you can spend the day at the beach and then work into the early hours when it is cooler and there may be less distractions).

It is also very tempting to compare yourselves with others; there will also be illustrators that you perceive to be doing better work, or getting commissioned by bigger clients. But sometimes it really is just down to perception – they are not going to share their worst work and they will not be broadcasting the countless rejections and knock backs they have had so be comfortable knowing that you are doing something that you love, and are good at. Stick to it and work hard and eventually the rewards will come.

With time your inner critic will just become a slightly irritating friend who you can choose to listen to or ignore.