

CorchiaWolinerRhoda [white paper]

The following abridged text, notes and questions are from Todd Rhoda's speech to students of the Design Department at Indiana University.

Good morning, I'm Todd Rhoda, a 1983 graduate of IU.

I'm the Managing Partner and Co-Principal of CorchiaWolinerRhoda which is a web, print and identity design firm in midtown Manhattan. Our clients include: Hertz, Deloitte Consulting, Rolex, New York Life, Toyota, Barron's, Business Week and The Wall Street Journal.

Our moderator, Matt Collins gave me a list of topic questions to cover that will be relevant as you move from being a student to the work world.

Before I get started, I just wanted to say that I'm one of those people who loves their job and can't wait to get to my studio each day. Creating for clients means something new everyday. I enjoy both the design side and the programming side, because I've discovered that when you treat them as equally creative activities, interesting things can happen.

We seem to have insurmountable challenges each day and there are definitely compromises with clients—but a vast majority of the time, smart creative wins.

Typical Day

The first topic I've been asked to discuss is, "Describe a typical day."

Thankfully, there are no "typical" days. Clients need good work done rapidly. The technology of the web seems to change almost weekly.

As Managing Partner, my day is broken down into four fairly distinct sections:

1. Clients
2. Design
3. Programming
4. Administrative

"CLIENTS"—

"Clients" means that we are either in the planning stage or the execution stage of a project. The majority of my day is spent working in these two stages with the client. Without clients, I don't have a studio to run.

The goal with clients should always be:

- designing well
- programming intelligently
- project managing adroitly
- budgeting so both sides are happy

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The key to running a successful business is to get repeat work from the clients you already have.

"DESIGN"—

I'm the Creative Director so it's my job to ascertain what the clients needs and problems are and then to take that information to our designers and programmers where we come up with a plan of action. That goes from the smallest logo assignment all the way through the largest database-driven web site.

With the advent of web design--which obviously has been the biggest change in design over the past decade--too many designers fell in love with only designing web sites instead thinking about addressing the potential that any one client may have several different types of design needs. The reason that we've stayed so strong in the design community is that we didn't forget where we came from—a very strong design background.

The biggest point I want to make today is this: You must be able to design in all three disciplines--web, print and logo--or you simply won't make it. Too many designers in the past few years have put all their stock into designing web sites foregoing print and identity because it wasn't hip enough for them. That's turned into a huge mistake because communication for corporations surpasses the website.

True, the website is very valuable in terms of putting a face on the corporation electronically. But what about a corporation's logo? Isn't the logo the graphic element that encapsulates the entire corporation? What about brand building? Everything from the signage in hospitals to annual reports to direct mail to advertising?

All of this is fostered from design.

Programming...

We have some very intelligent programmers who understand the countless intricacies of problem solving by coding. One of my roles is to meld the design and programming together.

The most important aspect of programming that we've found is that we can be creative with it. We've gotten pretty much to the point where we can say, "If you can dream it. We can program it." And when we combine it with great design, it's astonishing.

What's also helped is that so many web design firms heavy-up on programmers and while their sites are very functional, the design of them is pedestrian to the point of ennui.

Also unlike designers and programmers at other firms, they work together. Our designers have a better-than-average understanding of programming and our programmers have a better-than-average understanding of design.

We do a majority of our programming in ASP, XML and SQL as well as HTML and Flash.

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Administration...

This, by far, is the most frustrating aspect of the workday. It's all the things I loathe to do: paperwork, selling, marketing and proposal writing. All of it can suck up a huge amount of the day.

Time wise, as owner and principal, a sample day for me is:

- Get on the train as early as 6am and write/return emails or go through my "In" folder
- Get into the studio and review work and do administrative garbage before everyone gets in.
- Throughout the day its going through the four aspects I just noted and that can range from: reviewing designs on an identity campaign, meeting with a client on a new web site, working with one of the designers on the animation patterns in Flash, work with one of our programmers on database issues, and so on...

I very rarely get home before 8pm, so it's a pretty long day.

Schooling...

The next topic I was asked to discuss is "Do you feel schooling helped prepare you for your job?"

The simple answer is, "Yes..."

But not as you might think. I wasn't a design major or a fine arts major like most people in design studios. I was a liberal arts major--my degree is in Political Science--so I took a little bit of everything from Math to Physics to Russian to Debate. It's funny now that running a studio that has clients as diverse as Deloitte Consulting to Toyota to Rolex to even Red Hook Reads, being able to shift topics has really helped me.

My background was advertising, so that really helped me look at our design work as campaigns instead of over-focusing on one aspect of design. To look at something from concept through design, delivery and beyond.

Master's Degree...

What are your thoughts on getting a Master's Degree in Graphic Design?

It's interesting because two of my designers have left to get their Master's degrees and teach, one at University of Illinois and the other in Italy. I tried my hardest to talk both out of it saying that you hone so many more skills working--and especially at a place like ours where we do web, print and identity. (Though both found the grad school experience enriching.)

I think it's very, very difficult to show a worthwhile return on investment of time, money and effort of going to grad school as opposed to simply working.

I guess my answer would be: Don't go if you think your skill level will go way up. Only go if you want a wider breadth to what you design, for example adding package design to your repertoire.

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Career Goal...

What was your career goal in college?

I'm from a small town in eastern Indiana, so I didn't get exposed to a whole slew of career choices and certainly not design. I came to Bloomington wanting to be a lawyer. Luckily, by my senior year, I lost a lot of steam on my legal ambitions.

I always had a entrepreneurial streak and I was willing to take the risk as a business owner.

Just be sure that you keep options open. You weren't the same person you were ten years ago; it's unlikely you'll be the same person ten from now.

Getting started...

How did you get started in this profession?

I was the lowest low-level junior executive in the Advertising Department at PaineWebber in the mid 80s. I was very, very fortunate to report to two people who turned into fabulous teachers. One was brilliant strategically and one was brilliant tactically. They taught me about treating design not so much creatively, but conceptually--to see the end user first and satisfy their needs... To turn creative into a process with some discipline, not some big bang inspiration. (Though there is definitely big bang inspiration in what we do.)

One of them really took me under his wing and was a real mentor to me. To this day, I can still hear his voice, "Now, learn from this..." Having a mentor like that was invaluable.

I always tell people that my dad taught me about business and how it should be run, and my mentor taught me all about the business I am in. So I was lucky.

That and seventy hour work weeks.

Likes about your profession...

What do you like about your profession?

I think that designers can affect great change very quickly. Think of something recently that had a great impact on you. Was it something that you read? Or something that was designed? Most often, it's something that's designed. An image.

Dislikes about your profession...

What do you dislike about your job?

Designers, who use the computer to design, instead of--as they should--use their intellect, talent and savvy and having the computer be a tool.

We have a guideline in our shop that you MUST SKETCH solutions before even dreaming about going on the computer.

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Skills...

What skills are necessary in your job?

Fundamentally, your design tools should include: Photoshop (to design sites), Illustrator (for identity work) and Quark (for print collateral). You need to show skills in problem solving and project management. Remember, I don't have a design degree; I started in advertising where we worked with a team from concept focused on several problems that went far beyond just design.

What is it like to own your own shop?

It's funny. I live in a town that is made up of lawyers and bankers and brokers—but very few entrepreneurs. I get a lot of "You're crazy for having your own shop...wouldn't you rather have the regular pay check?"

I've really enjoyed assembling a group of brilliant, indescribably creative people. I also like that the challenge is there every day to perform—to do the job well. Because if it isn't done well, the whole enterprise fails and there's no one to blame but me. And destroying a business that bears your name might be about the worse thing you can do in business.

In conclusion, advising a design student...

What would you advise a college student who is interested in your profession?

Four things:

1. Really make your portfolio be something special--whether it's print or electronic.
2. Do whatever you can to get work outside of school, whether that's an internship or freelance. You need to show potential employers that you can design in a work environment.
3. Get a mentor. Don't be afraid to ask a billion question, even if most of them are stupid. Talk about design. Form opinions and always keep learning.
4. Work hard, work smart. Hard work simply means that you put in the time. There are thousands of designers who do. But how many of them work "smart"? Can they be decisive on what they've created? Or, is it tweaked and tweaked and nothing ever gets done? Can they use resources around them to maximize the effort put in?

Thanks for your time today and good luck!