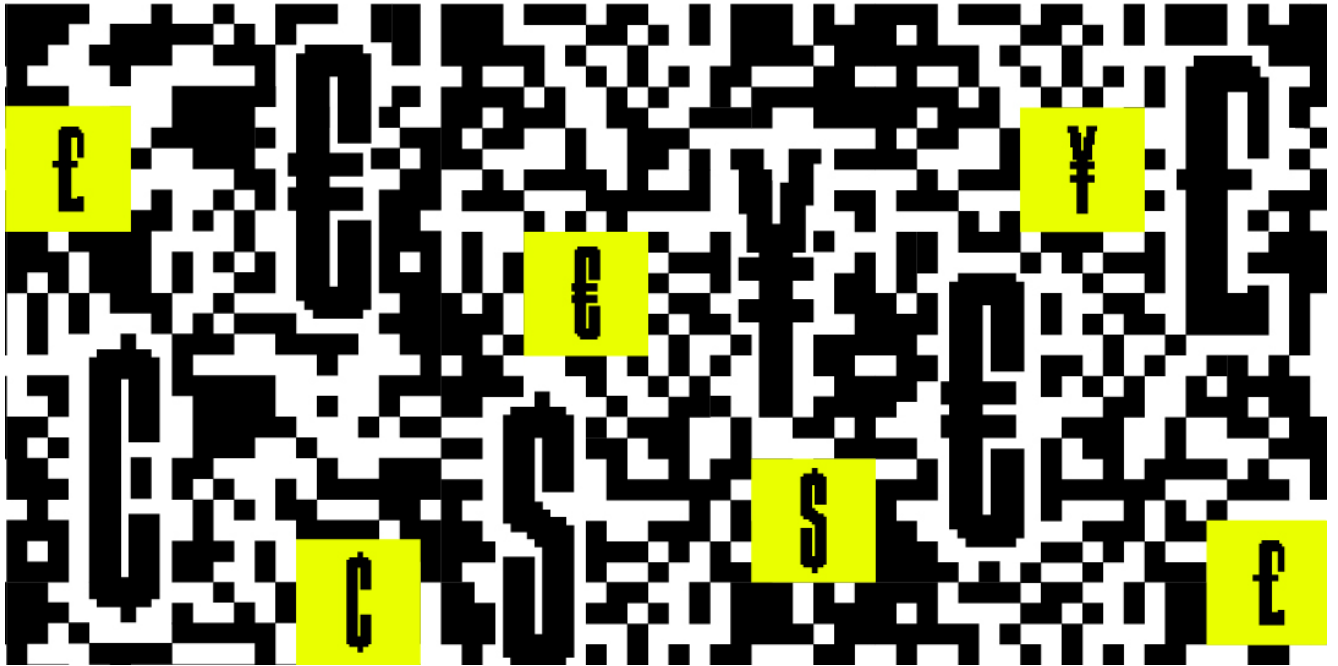


13 Ways to Make Money as a Graphic Designer in 2021



How do graphic designers make money? It may sound like a daft question. But if you're working as a graphic designer and there isn't much left in your bank account after rent and bills have gone out, it's one that's very much worth asking.

At Shillington, we've had decades of experience in guiding students through their graphic design career. There are many answers to the question of how to make money as a graphic designer, and we've seen them all.

So if you're wondering how to make more money as a graphic designer, read on, and we'll give you 13 pieces of solid advice. Follow these tips, and you'll soon be better off financially and able to focus fully on doing the job you love.

In the meantime, if you've yet to start your career, then first read our articles on [how to become a graphic designer](#) and [how to learn graphic design](#).

1. Ask for a raise

It's one of the most obvious ways to boost your income, but also the most difficult to navigate. You're so glad you have a great job that pays you to do what you love. So the idea of asking for more money seems rude and selfish.

The first thing is to stop thinking like that. The studio you work for is (hopefully) making good profits based on the great design work you're producing for them. There's absolutely no reason you shouldn't be well compensated for that.

And so if you've been in a role for a year or more, and you feel you've improved the quality of your work and made your studio's clients happy, then there's no harm in scheduling a meeting with your manager to discuss a way forward.

The best way to approach the question of money is to frame it from your boss's perspective. Stress how much you're enjoying working at the studio, but how you're ambitious, and you'd like to do more going forward. Discuss a possible salary rise in concert with taking on extra responsibilities that will help make the company more money, so you sound more like a partner and less like someone asking for a handout.

And if they don't, or won't, play ball? Then it's time to start looking for other, better-paying jobs, and there's no harm in that. Moving to a new position with a new employer is good for your career and portfolio anyway, and is often the best way to make more money as a graphic designer, especially early in your career.

2. Calculate the average salary for your job

In polite company, people don't tend to talk about how much

money they earn, and companies don't like sharing those figures. So how do you know whether or not you're underpaid and deserve a raise at all?

One method can be to ask your followers on social media. People who haven't met you personally, and maybe haven't even engaged with you online beyond a follow and the odd like, are often much more willing to share their salary details than close friends and colleagues. Especially if it's anonymously in a DM.

That's not exactly a scientific approach, though, as your sample is probably going to be pretty small and random. So you should definitely supplement any such enquiries by checking out relevant salary surveys, as well as perusing the jobs boards for the latest salaries that employers are actually advertising. For more advice on finding out how your salary ranks, read our article [The Complete Graphic Designer Salary Breakdown \(2021 Update\)](#).

3. Go full-time freelance

These days, most full-time graphic designers make money from freelance on the side. But the simple truth is that you'll almost certainly make more money as a graphic designer if you go freelance full-time.

Doing the 9-5 limits the time you have to freelance to evenings and weekends. And apart from meaning you have no life, this is not the most productive or creative way to work. If you're tired after a long day, your freelance work is unlikely to be your best work, and that's going to have a knock-on effect on the kind of work you're offered in future.

Speak to anyone who's switched to full-time freelance, and you'll invariably hear the same story:

Freelancing gives you the ability to, over time, find better

and better clients, and raise your rates accordingly. This will bring you more income than going through the much slower pace of getting salary bumps or moving jobs.

That doesn't mean freelancing is for everybody. There's a lot to be said for the stability and security of a full-time job, not to mention the social aspects. But if we're purely talking about maximising your income, then freelancing offers you the best chance in the long run, as long as you're prepared to work for it.

4. Don't stay in your job too long

Graphic designers are often wary of going freelance too early in their career because they naturally want to learn as much as they can while working at a studio. But there's nothing to actually stop you going freelance early on, or even right at the start of your career. Many have indeed done so, and made a success of freelancing.

Plus, in this post-pandemic world, most designers are still working from home most of the time. And they'll probably continue to do so for years to come. So it's questionable how much you're going to learn working "in a studio" anyway, and freelancing is definitely worth considering, at least.

5. Know your true worth

How to make more money as a graphic designer boils down to one simple thing: knowing your worth. That means that if you've been working for some time now, improving your skills and insight, and producing better and better work, then you deserve better pay than when you were green and first starting out.

That might seem like an obvious point to make. But in practice, so many freelance graphic designers fail to up their

rates over time and keep charging the same, despite the cost of living rising around them.

The same goes for salaried designers stuck on the same wage rate. So in that sense, they're actually earning less rather than more.

Knowing your worth is also about knowing the value you add.

So dig deep into the companies you're working for, and try to calculate how much of a contribution your work is making to their bottom line. The answers you come up with will help you grow in confidence about charging more.

6. Raise your graphic design game

Another way to raise your salary or freelance rate is, quite simply, to offer more to your clients or employer. This could mean providing a broader range of services.

For example, are your clients or employer going to other graphic designers for branding advice or copywriting services? Perhaps you're providing them with 2D illustration, but others are filling in when it comes to 3D work or animation?

Widening your skillset is, of course, only one path open to you when it comes to upping your game. You could alternatively choose to go deeper into your current skillset instead: improve your knowledge, develop your core design skills and build up a more impressive and confident portfolio.

Either way, seriously upping your game requires dedication and focus, and for that reason, formal study can be a great way to do so. That's why many graphic designers who are already working in the industry apply for Shillington's graphic design courses; they're not just for fresh graduates.

7. Raise your freelance rates

The question of how to make money as a freelance graphic designer has one simple answer: charge the rates that will provide you with enough income to live a comfortable life. And over time, that will inevitably mean raising your rates.

One of the main difficulties in raising your rates can be convincing your existing freelance clients to actually pay the increased rate. If you make your case succinctly and with confidence, though, most will probably step up.

It helps to give them a period of notice, so that they can plan ahead as they doubtless have cashflow issues of their own to deal with. Even if your client is a big company like Apple, this can apply, because every department will have their own budget to stick to (that's how a company like Apple stays profitable, after all!).

8. Drop your cheapest clients

Unfortunately, when you raise your rates as a freelancer, some clients may push back or outright refuse to pay you more. At which point, you need to have the strength to simply walk away.

If specific clients are holding you back, you shouldn't be afraid to do so, and make room for better-paying ones. After all, it's always much easier to charge a higher rate to a new client than one who's used to paying less. And once you do so, you're unlikely ever to miss that low-paying client ever again.

That said, we all have to pay the bills. So unless you have a large private income, it's normally best to drop clients one by one rather than en masse. That way, you can keep the cash flow going while you search for new work.

9. Seek out new clients (even if you're busy)

It's an unfortunate truth that most freelance graphic designers don't look for new clients when they're busy. It's understandable why. Firstly, you think: 'Why make the effort when I've already got enough work to be getting on with?' And secondly, should a client offer you work, it seems like getting off on the wrong foot to say, "I can't start anything for six months".

The answer to the first question is simple.

It's worth making an effort to find new clients because it's easier to charge them more money than your existing ones.

New clients may also offer you fresh opportunities to develop your skills in exciting new directions and broaden out your portfolio more in a way that makes you more desirable as a freelancer generally.

And if you're too busy to actually take on new work? Then rather than emailing prospects directly, it's best to lure them in by more subtle means.

For example, you should be posting new work regularly on social media—not just Instagram but more business-focused networks like LinkedIn and The Dots. Mention that you're open to new opportunities—but keep timings vague. Then if people do get in touch and try to commission you, you have the choice of doing a few extra late nights or weekends (if the client is truly exciting you), or simply telling them when you're next available (as you haven't actually promised anything).

Even if that's six months from now, then don't worry: that'll probably make them just want you more. And if it doesn't, well, you haven't really lost anything.

10. Upsell your service to existing clients

While you have an eye out for new clients, remember that your existing range of clients may be a potential goldmine you're not fully exploiting.

The best way to get more frequent commissions is to simply remind them that you're there. That's partly about being active on social media, but also send out a regular newsletter telling clients what you've been up to lately. People who commission work are usually time-poor, and if your name is uppermost in their mind, that's often all it takes for them to choose you over another freelancer.

Whenever you're actually on a call or in the room with them, always try and upsell the kind of work you do for them. For example, if you're designing a brochure for a client, ask whether they need help with their email newsletter, social media images, or website illustrations too.

From the client's point of view, they should welcome this because the amount of work involved with dealing with one contractor rather than dozens will make their lives a lot easier. And if they know they can trust you with one thing, they'll sleep easier at night knowing you're in charge of the other, rather than a new and untested freelancer they have no experience of.

And if they offer more work than you can handle? Maybe consider teaming up with a fellow freelancer or even taking on an apprentice.

11. Build up a network of contacts

The old saying 'It's not what you know, it's who you know' might be overstating it.

But in practical terms, having a wide network of contacts both within and outside the creative industry really does have an impact on the number of lucrative opportunities you're offered as a graphic design freelancer.

Building up that network, though, isn't always easy.

As a graphic design freelancer, you're going to spend much of your career working from home, relatively isolated. And there's a lot that's good about that, especially when it comes to focusing on your work and improving your productivity. But it does mean you're going to be pretty isolated unless you do something about it.

At least, though, you're not starting from zero. Even if you're just at the beginning of your career, you'll already have some sort of network of contacts, even if it's just your old tutors and classmates from college. Along the way, you'll build up more.

Everyone who you email or chat to online about anything design-related can be a potential contact, along with people you meet at physical events (as long as you get their business card or social media handle). But you have to be active about it.

In essence, the difference between a 'contact' and someone you once had a one-off conversation with is frequency. Follow up on your conversations regularly, and over time you'll turn a single encounter into a relationship.

That isn't so hard to do: people like people and everyone likes attention. You just have to keep it relevant and avoid crossing the line into stalkerdom.

So, for example, if you discussed doing some work for a potential client but they ultimately "went in another direction", there's no harm in sending a quick email three

months later asking how their business is going. They'll doubtless be flattered, and you're sure to crop up in their minds next time a lucrative freelancing opportunity arises.

12. Design and sell your own templates

With normal client work, you craft a design and get paid for it once. If you design a template and sell it online, though, you can potentially get paid for it over and over again.

Some in the design community can be sniffy about templates based on their experience of poor quality templates from cheap and poorly thought-out websites. But these days, there is an increasing number of respectable websites selling high-quality templates, crafted by top designers for top designers. Not least House of Mockups, a premium service set up by Shillington's own managing director, Anthony Wood.

Good places to sell your own graphic design templates include Etsy, Canva, Creative Market and Design Bundles. Of course, with so many templates available online, you'll need to work hard to stand out and promote your templates online.

First, ask yourself what kind of templates you're going to produce. That might be, for example, Instagram templates, eBook templates, business planner template, presentation slide deck templates, brochure templates... the list is potentially endless.

Then try to specialise further into that niche. Think about both in demand and a market that's not being widely served, or at least, where the average quality of templates is something you feel you can improve on. Yes, it requires a lot of thought and a fair amount of work. But it's worth it because ultimately, you can get to the point where you are literally earning money while you sleep.

13. Sell your own prints

Another great way of generating passive income is to sell your own prints. Whether you enjoy illustration, 3D modelling or do cool things with typography, it can be incredibly rewarding to create graphic works of art that aren't for a specific client or functional purpose, but simply nice to look at on a wall. And you may find that people are willing to pay good money for such work.

There are two ways of doing this. Firstly, sites like Society6, This is a Limited Edition and Caseable allow you to upload your work digitally, and customers then pay to use it on prints, T-shirts, iPhone cases, and so on. These websites take care of all the production, shipping and so on, saving you work.

You will, however, have to read the small print carefully to find out how much of a cut the site takes, whether you retain copyright and whether you're restricted in selling your designs elsewhere.

The alternative is to take charge of the entire operation: set up your own website, produce your own prints, and send them out yourself. This route obviously gives you ultimate control, and potentially maximises your profits, although it is going to be a lot more work.

That said, it's the kind of work that will boost your skills, enhance your business experience, and often opens doors to new opportunities, so it can potentially supercharge your career in general as well as earning you extra coin in the short term.

Conclusion

How can a graphic designer make money? In reality, there are many strategies you can follow, and as long as you put time

and effort into making them work, you're sure to ultimately succeed.

Know your value, both in terms of what the market is paying generally, and what you specifically have to offer in terms of the value you provide. Be confident, sell yourself, build your skillset and seek out extra responsibilities. Develop a plan for getting your employer or freelance clients to pay you more, and then pursue it rigorously. Start a side hustle, and develop new skills that will help you in your main career too.

In short, focus on your financial goals, and you'll be sure to eventually get the kind of rewards you deserve.

Want to earn more as a graphic designer by taking your skills to the next level? Shillington's graphic design course is the perfect way to hone your skills and take your portfolio to the next level—in just three months full-time or nine months part-time.

<https://www.shillingtoneducation.com/blog/how-to-make-money-as-a-graphic-designer/>