7 tips from a junior designer on breaking into the industry

Considering your first job in design? Here are seven tips from a junior designer that'll save your life.

With college and university terms soon coming to an end, thousands of design students are facing the age-old question: what next? Whether you're planning on taking some time out or jumping straight in and applying for your first internship or full-time job, there's a lot to consider.

Two years ago, I was in this position, coming to the end of a three-year Graphic Design course at Norwich University of the Arts. Today, I'm a junior designer at Here Design in east London. Here's what I've learned along the way…

1. Don't underestimate the impact of your degree show

At the end of the course you'll have an opportunity to showcase your work at a portfolio and degree show. Not only is this a chance to celebrate the culmination of your time at university and a chance to be noticed by press outlets like Digital Arts for grad show write-ups, but there's always the chance that it could open the door to a job opportunity.

Here Design was always one of my favourite studios, and at the end of our course we found out that they were going to come and talk to the students. Unfortunately, due to tenancy issues, I had to leave Norwich before they arrived and was really disappointed.

Luckily, the team saw my work while visiting and mentioned to my tutor that I should get in touch. Straightaway, I got in contact and sent them my portfolio. A four-week internship

followed, which then became an eight-week internship…and a full-time job! To say I was thrilled would be an understatement. It just goes to show how important these shows are in helping you to the next stage of your career.

2. Internships matter

I undertook quite a few internships during my time at university, and it was great to be able to experience working in different studios. Nobody works quite the same but it meant that when I came to Here Design, I knew it was the right place for me.

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3. Start early on your applications

Make sure you get your foot in the door quickly. There are going to be lots of design graduates applying to agencies so contact them as soon as you can and try to be as personable as possible.

Do your research and see whether you can find the right person to contact rather than applying to a generic e-mail address. Also, make sure your e-mail is well thought-out. It’s worth mentioning a project that’s impressed you and why you like it. Showing an interest can really make you stand out.

4. Don’t rush your portfolio

Although it’s good to apply early, don’t rush your portfolio. Remember that first impressions matter and wandering into an interview with a scruffy portfolio with pages falling out isn’t going to do you any favours.

It’s worth making the effort to get it printed to a good standard, and really think about the work you’re putting in

there. Also, remember you’re going to have to talk about your work, so make sure you know it inside out. Ask a friend or fellow student to ask you questions so that get a chance to practice out loud before presenting to studios.

Hazel Oguz

5. Think big when it comes to agencies

When you’re making a list of agencies that you want to apply for, don’t limit yourself. You might think that you want to specialise in packaging design but it’s still worth going to meet a branding agency as it could surprise you.

Here Design doesn’t work purely on packaging – we do a wide range of other things too, like books, in-house projects, brand identities and product development. I’ve learned a lot from seeing a side to design that I didn’t have much knowledge of before starting here.

6. Don’t forget studio culture

It’s also important not to wholly focus on the work you might be doing. You’ve got to find a studio culture that you’re going to feel comfortable working in. Think about the size of the studio. Are you happy working at a large corporate firm or would a smaller agency make you feel more valued? What kind of team and interaction would you learn best from?

Then there’s the added extras. At Here Design we have talks from industry professionals, cook each other team lunches on Fridays, and have a culture club where we discuss a book or film that we’ve enjoyed. So there are lots of opportunities to socialise and also to learn new things and meet interesting people, which was really important to me.

7. Be prepared for a change of pace

A good degree course will gear you up for the industry – working on lots of projects and learning how to respond to briefs – but in truth I wasn’t quite prepared for how quickly things move in the real world! With some projects in the studio, we might only have one or two days to conduct our research, and then we’ll be presenting our initial ideas to a client three or four days after that. At university we’d have maybe two weeks, so it’s quite a contrast.

I was also shocked at how quickly I was working on projects for big brands. Having been given an exciting new project in my first week at Here Design I remember feeling nervous about it. Luckily, the team were so collaborative and happy to

answer all my questions, I always felt supported and the nerves didn’t last long. If in doubt, always ask!

By Hazel Oguz, junior designer at Here Design

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