Get Ahead: Advice from Female Industry Leaders

The shameful statistic that only 11% of creative directors in the design industry are female should never take away from the fact that there are a lot of incredibly talented women working in the industry —from those who have just graduated to industry leaders.

We asked twelve well-respected female industry leaders for one piece of advice for fresh graduates. Hopefully, their leadership, guidance, and encouragement can help shift the stats for the next generation.

1. Kate Galle, Creative Director, Design Bridge

> ***Seek advice from people in the industry, go to talks and events, sign up for portfolio reviews, then listen to what you get told and act on it.***

“Try not to be too precious with your work—you’ll likely become too close to your own work to be able to judge it objectively. In interviews you need to sell yourself as much as your work, so let your personality come across. Your work got you through the door, now they want to get to know the person who created it.”

Melissa: “Pay attention to the things you find yourself revisiting in your work and hone those instincts. If you enjoy making things by hand, are drawn to coding and UI or love retail and understand how to sell products, don’t fight the feeling. Practice and build a portfolio that reflects those interests. With that, you’ll be in great shape to find a job that won’t make you hate Mondays, or start your own freelance career/business with a really strong voice.”

Nicole: “I feel most comfortable straddling art, illustration, and design. This has made my career thread less linear. For a young aspiring designer, my advice would be to not worry so much about your path or title, you most likely will change course several times over the next few years, working in mediums and with technology you could not have predicted. I am all for goals but also an advocate for being open to unexpected opportunities. Ultimately, there’s no real concrete finish line to race towards.”

4. Tea Uglow, Creative Director, Google’s Creative Lab

“I don’t know what is going happen. None of us ever do. Even when you’re in charge. Certainty. Stability. Security—these are desirable in your life, but also unnatural. You have to work so hard for them and you will never really know if you have them.”

Whereas if you can embrace uncertainty and work with it, everything becomes much easier. No one really knows much after all.

5. Paige Hanserd, Designer, Philadelphia Museum of Art

“Trust your gut and try and not fit into a mold of what you perceive a good designer is. Your creativity is unique to you and it’s what will take you far!”

6. Cat Burgess, Strategy Director, Frost* Design

“Women are often credited with having better intuition than men. I’m not sure if that’s true, but I’m a big believer in trusting your instincts. When you have a feeling about an idea that’s super strong, throw yourself into it one hundred percent and don’t hold back.

Belief is contagious and when you really believe in something others will too. The same is true for developing your own confidence. Be truly expert in what you do because that way you will never doubt yourself and can be confident you’re giving good advice. Too many people these days want to cut corners and rise up the ranks too fast.

It’s important to stay humble and inquisitive without being a wallflower or self-deprecating, which are behaviours we are often taught as women. I heard Julia Gillard say recently that ‘men are judged for their potential, but women are judged based on what they have done before’. So be sure to build the experience that takes you where you want to go—and then don’t hold back on putting yourself forward.”

7. Verena Michelitsch, Freelance Designer, Art Director and Illustrator

“Be open to keep on growing, iterating and learning. Listen carefully to feedback from all sides and filter out the most valuable points. Also, create boundaries and have a strong foundation and reasoning behind the work you present. These days it’s not that hard to make things look good quickly and on a superficial level. The work that I find most interesting reflects the inherent character of a brand/product/matter in a particular way.

As a woman, there’s this expectation to be perfect which is put upon us from a young age, while men/boys were/are inherently given more liberty to fail. I definitely carry a bit of an imposter syndrome and still feel I’m not good enough at times.”

But the reality is that perfection limits creativity and failure is what you can learn from most!

8. Alex Naghavi, Executive Creative Director, Josephmark

“Embrace what makes you different. Why compete to do the same thing as everyone else, when you can find your niche and totally own it? For women and people from minority groups—particularly in this industry—we have the advantage of a different voice and perspective. Embrace that. Speak up. Be seen. And create work that challenges the status quo.”

9. Shannie Mears, Head of Talent,

The Elephant Room

“There’s so much noise in this world, but you have to remember you’ve got superpowers—all the things that make you different. Be proactive, never think anything is the end destination, work smart and be a nice person to the people you meet, because you never know when you might need them.”

10. Lauren Hom, Freelance Lettering Artist, Illustrator and Designer

“Follow your gut and make sure you follow through on it! If there’s something that interests you, try it. If you have an idea for a weird project, make it. If you don’t like something, change it or remove yourself from it. Try, learn, refine, repeat. You’ll grow the most by doing not thinking, worrying or dreaming.”

> ***Never forget that you are in the driver’s seat of your life and career.***

11. Amanda Ngozi Ogeah, Business Director, The Champion Agency

“There’s so much pressure on students to have a fool-proof plan for the future post-graduation—with teachers, parents and friends all chipping in with their thoughts and advice on how best to do this. In reality, it’s false to assume that what may have worked for them from a career progression perspective will work for you. Purely because we’re all so different in terms of our own individual passions, drivers and motivators.

So I guess my advice is to not listen to my advice (or anyone’s for that matter), but instead to make decisions based on what you think is right for you at that moment. And most importantly, to make this decision with your heart as well as your head.”

12. Maud Passini, Creative

Director, Maud Passini Studio

“Everything takes more time than you think. May it be reaching the goals that you’ve set yourself, or wrapping up a presentation you’re about to show, you have to be patient and give yourself time.”

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