BUSINESS OF HOME

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ARE YOU ATTRACTING YOUR

dream clients?

There's getting the job—and getting the *right* job. How to build a strong foundation, draw better leads and land the projects you want most.

PART ONE

Getting the Job

In the first installment of our four-part guide to building a better design business, we're going deep on what it takes to attract a new client and seal the deal. The secret? Before you start looking around, look within.

While polished photographs of her projects typically land on her Instagram grid, Jean Liu has shifted her design firm's social media focus to more ephemeral Story posts that offer a behind-the-scenes look at her work—part of a lead-generation strategy she outlines on page 30.

good attorney, and probably thought, "Kelly's going to attack this with the same gusto she did a big trial." She knew I would get it done.

Lawyers were the people I knew who had money—that's my network of people with disposable income. They're not the Rockefellers, but somebody I hired at my old firm is now in the process of building a $3 million home. I try to tell young designers who are coming up: This is a luxury service; it's helpful to know people who can afford it. —*Kelly Finley*

THE FACEBOOK FRIEND

Austin, Texas–based designer Sara Malek Barney of Bandd Design shares how a social media encounter led to her first client.

I was in the entertainment industry for a long time, but I had always wanted to do my own thing. The problem was, I didn't quite know what that meant. Then in 2016, I woke up one morning and had a lightbulb moment: "What if it's interior design?" So I started to take classes on the side, working toward getting a degree in design. As I was nearing the end of my time in school, I started to see these leads popping up on Facebook in neighborhood groups here in Austin. In one that was dedicated to buying and selling vintage furniture, people would post: "Does anyone have a recommendation on a great interior designer?" I started to reply, "Well, me?" Because you're interacting with people who you probably have Facebook friends in common with, there's a little bit of built-in trust there. I got my first project through a post like that.

The client was a woman who had recently bought a new house. I had absolutely no idea how to say what my services were or how to charge, but I threw out a number as a flat rate and then ran to tell my husband, "She accepted! All these thousands of dollars and she said yes!" And he was like, "Great, but you're going to need a lot of these to add up to a salary." That was a real learning moment.

The project itself was also a learning experience. I went shopping with that client all the time, but she never really wanted to hear anything I brought to the table; she mainly wanted me to say, "Yeah, that's cute!" She was also buying a lot of things secondhand—which, looking back, makes total sense because she found me on a secondhand furniture Facebook group.

Toward the end of the project, she tried to change things up, saying, "So, you'll go shopping and bring me stuff, and if I don't like it, I'll return it—and you're not going to charge me for that, right?" I replied that I *would* charge for that, and after that we parted ways. What I learned is to only take on clients who trust what we do and value the process—not someone looking for a personal shopper or a buddy to OK their ideas. I don't look on Facebook groups for work anymore, but it wasn't a bad place to get started. And funnily enough, that original client has kept recommending me to people over the years! —*Sara Malek Barney*

THE BIRD LADY

Chicago-based designer Kate Taylor tells the story about her unusual first client, who came from another designer's rejection list.

I've always been in design, but I didn't start my own firm right away. After design school, I had a job with Baker Furniture, I worked for Nate Berkus for a long time, and then I lived in New York for five years before I made my way back to Chicago. Suddenly we were in a less expensive city, and it was like, "This is the time—let's take the plunge!"

I had a good network in Chicago, so I started reaching out and letting people know I was starting a firm. One of my first clients I got through another designer. I had asked her to send any projects she wasn't interested in my way, so the first client I got was one that she had been smart enough to say no to—though, to be fair, I don't think she knew what I was in for.

The client had a two-bedroom apartment, and initially described the project as a refresh because she was thinking of selling it. But when I got there, I quickly discovered that there was another problem, which was that her apartment was full of birds. I'm not totally sure how many there were—it's possible that she fostered birds, if that's a thing people do? But there were around 10 of them, and they weren't always in cages.

The project quickly turned into organizing her bird situation, consolidating all the cages into one room, which freed up the other areas of the house. We painted a little and organized things; it wasn't so much a traditional interior design project as a space-planning job. Whatever it was, it was stressful. I'm not an animal person, and the birds were loud and smelly. There were always things moving in the background, and sometimes a bird would land nearby and startle me.

I stuck with it because she was my only client at the time, but eventually I did end the relationship—not just because of the birds! She had my cell phone number, which meant phone calls and text messages, and she sent lots of emails, continually asking me to come back and tweak things, but then not wanting to pay for my time. It taught me a lot about setting boundaries with my clients and what red flags to look for—and for me, a house full of birds is one of them! —*Kate Taylor* ■

BIG IDEAS

The Price is Right

Designer Noz Nozawa makes a convincing case for dispensing with the mystery surrounding industry pricing—and with the notion that design is a zero-sum game.

BY MARINA FELIX

Noz Nozawa, who transformed this San Francisco firehouse into a vibrant family home, argues that transparency is the secret to a healthier design industry—for clients and designers alike.

PHOTOGRAPHY: NOZAWA INTERIOR, COLIN PRICE; PORTRAIT, NICOLE MORRISON

THE INTERIOR design industry has long been comfortable with a certain degree of opacity, keeping the particulars of the trade—notably, price tags—hazy in the minds of the general public. There are good reasons for that, ranging from inertia (It's always been this way!) to the fact that talking explicitly about money risks cheapening the magic of the process, and more broadly, the fact that Americans are typically shy about discussing the cost of luxury goods. But what if instead of protecting the profession, all the mystery is stunting its growth?

A growing number of young designers are starting to wonder if that might just be the case. Noz Nozawa, founder and principal of San Francisco–based Noz Design, is one of them. Prior to founding her firm in 2014, Nozawa worked in marketing at at Houzz—an experience that opened her eyes to the dearth of information available to homeowners about the cost of interior design.

"Everyone accepts that nicer things cost more when it comes to categories where everybody knows what everything costs."
NOZ NOZAWA

"There are so many people not working with interior designers because they don't understand the value or the cost, or they hear the number and are surprised," she says. "When you feel uninformed about something, the immediate reaction is to withdraw because you are uncomfortable. If the notion of even being allowed to ask what an interior designer charges makes you feel that way—'Am I going to be perceived as a cheapo client if I ask that too soon?'—it's an intimidating amount of question marks."

The point of taking away those question marks isn't just about making clients more comfortable. Transparency, Nozawa argues, could unlock a wave of new clients eager to invest in design: "In the same way that someone says, 'I've made it, I bought my very first BMW,' I think our industry would be bigger and stronger if hiring a designer was the other thing that felt necessary when you're killing it in life."

That won't happen at scale without a lot more clarity around pricing. Anyone with Wi-Fi can find out how much a Tesla costs. The same goes for other luxury sectors, whether it's travel, fashion or cosmetic procedures. When consumers know the cost of the object, they can begin to strive toward that thing—from there, the investment takes on more meaning, becoming not only a personal milestone, but a point of pride, which plays a large part in luxury spending. The fact that everyone knows a Rolex is expensive makes it more desirable to own one.

"Everyone accepts that nicer things cost more when it comes to categories where everybody knows what everything costs," says Nozawa. The same can't be said of design, which is much more like sitting down to dinner and confronting the unknown of a market-price menu—the lack of price can be more of a deterrent than the actual cost, leading many to presume they can't afford the meal. In the design world, professionals are also likely to turn the tables on their clients by asking, "What's your budget?"—a question they may not be equipped to answer. Those unknowns can compound on one another, discouraging many would-be clients from pursuing work with a designer.

"From my first day in interior design, I felt a competitiveness and this sense that opportunity is zero-sum—that there's only so many wealthy clients, only so many beautiful homes," says the designer, describing a perceived scarcity that ultimately pits designers against one another in the competition for good projects. "Our *actual* competition is the total landscape of discretionary spending categories: vacation travel, luxury services, fashion, sports cars, the list goes on."

The conventional thinking is particularly ironic in the era of COVID, where a thoughtful home has never felt more important. If more people viewed interior design as an achievable status symbol, would there be more room at the table?

For that to happen, says Nozawa, designers have to come together to break through long-held taboos and macroeconomic forces alike. "The history of interior design has been at odds with retail, the internet, and making information about our trade resources more accessible—everyone needs to be on the same page about what it costs," she says. "We as an industry can continue to bemoan greater consumer access to trade-only resources, or we can be at the head of these conversations, explaining how what designers do is so much more than sourcing product."

There's no silver bullet, but Nozawa says a good start would be transparency of fees. If potential clients understand how much a service costs, they'd be more comfortable making inquiries. With more inquiries would come more projects—and more awareness of what design actually *is*—which in turn would lead to more projects for everyone. A virtuous cycle.

"Our industry is chiefly interested in catering to people who are already clients, not educating people who could *become* our clients," says Nozawa. "A lot of [my prospective] clients are working with a designer for the first time, so even if we never work together, I walk them through how I bill and how other designers might bill—I try to help them feel more empowered. If we would think bigger-picture about opportunity, I think it would raise and elevate the reputation of what interior design is to every person who lives in a home they care about." Here's hoping. ■

UP NEXT

BOH's spring issue will tackle the intricacies of the client relationship—everything from setting boundaries (with your contract and your conduct) to wowing them with your presentation. Plus, you won't want to miss our breakdown of common homeowner hang-ups during the design phase.