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KNOW YOUR NICHE

Former interior designer Michele Chow represents a new breed of creatives challenging the dynamics of industry professions. Chow reflects on her decision to change the direction of her career, and how blurring the vocational lines has contributed to the success of her Australia-based start-up business, Dessein Furniture.

You were previously an interior designer, what prompted this career change?

Design is such a broad church, the various professions are getting increasingly interconnected and the boundaries are becoming more and more blurred. In such a young and dynamic country like Australia, it isn't uncommon for designers to move within their field or even to step into completely different spheres of design.

What would you say your niche is, and how did you develop it?

The vision was to identify a gap in the market that would allow for the rise of a brand of furniture that was contemporary, Australian designed, pluralist in approach while maintaining a common design ethos with sustainable ethics, and would fulfil the need for (what we perceive to be) an under-appreciated, design-savvy and aspirant consumer base.

Having been a professional specifier but also a consumer myself, I have been lucky enough to hear the views of a broad cross section of clients, friends and colleagues who wish to furnish their homes with reasonably priced, desirable contemporary pieces that respond to their design aesthetic that the current furniture market appears not to respond to.

A common observation that arose during our market research was that the market appears to be oversupplied with either highly priced foreign imports or mass-produced poor quality replicas of classic European or American designs. This is not to say there isn't choice out there, however it appeared that there wasn't much that appealed in terms of Australia's contemporary design aesthetic, its quality of product, sustainability and very importantly a reasonable price point. This was and is our niche.

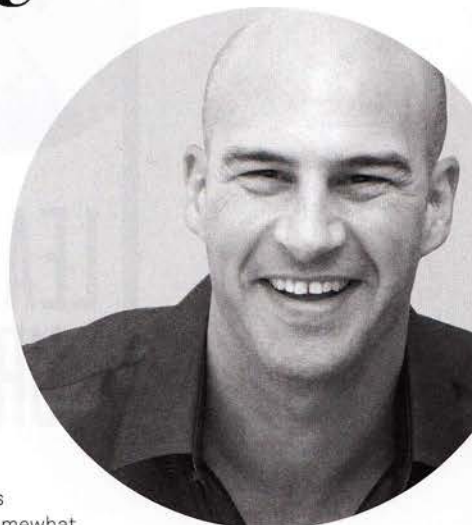
What were some of the challenges in establishing a new business?

The first challenge was to understand that this was a business, and my role was to run and manage that business. While I am a designer – and while these skills are vital to the business, they are not the prime driver for my role. I have seen many new businesses fail because their leaders have found it hard to take their 'hands off the tools' and focus on their business plan and strategy.

The key to survival demands focus, responsiveness and being pragmatic in managing the business. You have to be prepared for what you are getting yourself into, never become complacent. **●** *Dessein will launch its first furniture collection, with custom designs by Adam Goodrum, Jon Goulder and Justin Hutchinson, at Sydney Indesign 15 – 17 August.*

Clockwise from top left / Prototype from Dessein Furniture's first collection; (inset) Michele Chow; Andy Chevis

Valuable advice



The term 'business mentor' can be somewhat ambiguous. What is it? Where do you find one? Why is it relevant to you? Here, Sydney-based business mentor Andy Chevis talks about mentoring for creative industries, and how the mentor-designer relationship can facilitate business growth.

What is a business mentor?

Business mentors can take many different forms from subject matter experts to multi-discipline consultants. However, the one thing all business mentors should have in common is their ability to work closely with an organisation, helping them to identify how they would like the business to operate in the future, where they are now, and the steps they need to take to achieve their future vision.

Good business mentors enable individuals to define their own solutions and effectively become self-sufficient. Great business mentors help you gain clarity on what you want to achieve, what you need to do to bridge the gap, and most importantly how people will behave along the way.

How are business mentors relevant to creative enterprises?

Business mentors can help shape strategy, grow the organisation and put in place robust processes that help with efficiency. Businesses that exist in the design space tend to rely heavily on innovative and creative people, and this is where business mentors can really come into their own. In the current market it continues to become increasingly difficult to find and develop talented people who can work well together. An organisation that

depends on their people to build effective working relationships can really benefit from an expert in this field.

Business mentors can help to achieve exceptional results through approaches including one-on-one coaching, and group and team interventions. They will help individuals raise awareness of their impact on others and develop the skills to effectively get the most out of working together. The result is significantly improved performance and is often the missing ingredient when it comes to business success. ◉

5 Ways to Find a Business Mentor

- Google the following terms: "business mentor", "business coach" or "organisational consultant"
- Ask your network for personal recommendations
- Invest time to get clear on how a business mentor could assist you and what you would like to achieve from hiring a one
- Meet with a number of mentors before making your decision
- Before committing, ensure you have agreed terms and fees so you don't get any nasty surprises

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