

Designer turns passion into business reality



by Tiffany Bonasera

There are those of us who plug away at our less-than-satisfying jobs resisting the urge follow our hearts and do what we love — and then there are people like 57-year-old Robert Watson who have turned their dream into reality. Fifteen years ago, Robert Watson was running a retail business in Cooma, a regional township at the gateway to the New South Wales snowfields. But when he and his family moved to Sydney in the early '90s, he snapped up the chance to forge a new career in photography, his passion.

After starting out in a small studio in Chippendale, near the CBD, a change in the industry forced him to re-evaluate the direction of his business — that change was the introduction of digital photography.

“When digital came in, photography became more of a job than a passion. It took the joy out of shooting,” he says. “I thought it wouldn't last, but it has.”

The change proved to be a catalyst for Robert, who sought a creative outlet in other areas, including website and graphic design. He now combines them with photography to form the three services offered through his business, Bigshots Design Studio.

“The first website I did was my own and my photography clients would ask me about it. So it started out as being supplementary to the photography work,” he says.

The business evolves

According to Robert, all three aspects of the Rose Bay-based business have essentially grown through word of mouth. He has also done some cold calling to businesses he thought would be receptive and has generated business through that, too.

There's never a dull moment with the interesting range of clients and jobs the business attracts.

“There's a lot of variety in the work,” he says. “I'm just about to start a site that sells women's lingerie and I also develop sites for financial institutions.”

One of the main challenges, says Robert, is making sure he stays on top of changes in technology and new applications. As customers become increasingly Web-savvy, he needs to be able to meet their expectations.

“The hardest thing is it [the industry] keeps evolving,” he says. “People see other websites and design elements and they want them too. It's finding the time to learn how to do that.”

Success in focus

While graphic design and photography are notoriously competitive industries, the area of website design is especially so as more and more businesses recognise the value of having an online presence. Being able to relate well with business people has been one way Robert's been able to differentiate himself in the market.

“There are two main reasons I've been reasonably successful,” says Robert. “The first is I've got a business background, I'm not just a designer, which means I can relate to a client as a business person.

But I can also turn the ideas into something visual, which is something many business people can't do.”

The combination of services Bigshots Design offers is another major selling point.

“The second is the business leverages across different fields of design. For example, I can shoot one photograph and it can be used in advertising, logos and stationary, then utilised in the Web design. You can't find this very often and it saves people going to two or three different places and dealing with different people.”

Love what you do

When you love what you do, it doesn't feel like work, says Robert, and that's the way he feels about his business. The long hours involved and weekend work are not considered a burden. In fact, Robert says he enjoys them.

“I do it quite easily,” he says. “If I have work over the weekend, it's okay because I like what I'm doing. Probably if you're working for yourself, if you do need to get away, you've got to get away altogether; that's the best tip I can give.”

There's still scope for flexibility during the day and for Robert this means being able to pursue his other passion when the rest of us are eating lunch at our desks. “The idea of going down for a surf at lunchtime is very appealing,” he says.

There isn't much Robert doesn't love about being a small business owner. “I live in the best climate in the world, I work for myself; it's idyllic,” he says. “I don't get a Christmas bonus but I can't get the sack either.”

What's next?

Robert mightn't have a Christmas bonus to look forward to but he still reckons he's pretty blessed with the way Bigshots Design is positioned in the market and hopes to build on that in the new year.

“I'd like to continue the way things are going now but mainly focusing on the website design, which is what I am aiming for,” he says.

Away from the demands of the business, Robert unwinds by immersing himself in visually stimulating environments, which he draws inspiration from when creating his own website and graphic designs.

“I go and look at current art exhibitions, go to the movies if there's something worth watching and my big passion is travelling,” he says. “I love India and I would go there at any opportunity.”

Robert's top tips for small business:

- It's important to have a sound knowledge of your target market.
- Think laterally: try to be distinctive. Don't get stuck in a formula. Make every project look different.
- Be flexible in your approach: in the area of design, for example, every person in the world has a different idea of what looks good.
- The customer is always right: ultimately, if they're paying money for a website or a brochure, you've got to tailor your design to meet their expectations.

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