Dream of running your own design studio? Here's what you should know

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New year, new you. You've probably already heard this countless times but its safe to say that you'll hear it a whole lot more as you make your way through the five weeks of January. What this actually means for each individual is obviously very different. For some, its gaining financial freedom, achieving a health goal or learning a new skill. For others, it's fulfilling a professional dream – like owning your own business.

For many creatives, those who work in art direction or copywriting, the thought of running one's own design studio sounds like a dream. And for the most part, it can be, but like everything in life this dream brings with it a number of challenges and unforeseen hurdles that require long hours and hard work to iron out.

Figuring out whether business ownership is for you is no small feat. To point you in the right direction, Rogan Jansen, co-founder and creative director at Cape Town based design studio, DashDigital, shares his insights, experiences and advice on running a successful design business in South Africa.

Perfect your juggling act

"Running a business is all about being able to juggle a multitude of tasks that go way beyond the actual service you provide," explains Jansen. "And its important for budding business owners to quickly forget the 9-to-5 schedule. Your dream will demand a significant investment of time and effort, particularly in the initial years."

Rogan Jansen, co-founder and creative director at DashDigital

Early mornings, late nights, work on the weekends and a new level of stress will become part of daily life for any business owner. But what you put in, is what you get out, so the overall experience is often incredibly rewarding.

As Jansen elaborates: "The thrill comes from building something meaningful, expanding a team and being hands-on in all aspects of your business. What's even better is that it's also a continuous learning process, offering you the chance to take on new skills and tackle different issues – whether it be economic, people-related or just another part of the daily grind."

Strike the right balance

Although you're doing what you love and the potential rewards are great, it must always be remembered that running a business is all about finding the right balance. To survive, your business must generate revenue and when it comes to running something like a design studio, keeping your job pipeline filled is an ongoing consideration.

"What many don't realise is that owning a design studio involves ongoing selling efforts," says Jansen, "and this is to ensure that you have a continuous flow of work for the months ahead. Unlike software as a service or retainer models, businesses like mine need new projects and clients to fuel our business growth."

At the other end of the scale is sharing the load and making sure that you don't try to do too much on your own. Hiring and building a great team is another immense reward of business ownership but the process can be taxing. Finding the right people who align with your vision, culture and work ethic takes time and shouldn't be underestimated.

"At DashDigital, we are particular about the people we bring into our team," says Jansen. "We seek out individuals who fit in seamlessly with our culture, skillset and attitude. And it's because of this approach that we have an exceptional team of people, all playing a pivotal role in the success of our studio."

Always listen and learn

A lot of the time, the success of a business and its products or services hinge on a team's ability to visualise the end result before starting. This is particularly important in a design studio, where research, inspiration and concept development lead the charge.

"For me, success starts with asking the right questions and seeking insights from the right places," says Jansen. "And this involves close communication with clients, involving them in every step of the process, truly understanding their challenges and of course, always producing work that you are proud of. Nothing leaves the DashDigital studio that isn't in line with our high standards or isn't something we're thrilled to share with the world."

Have the right mindset

When it comes to building and maintaining great client relationships that result in more work and referrals, it's important to agree upfront what your client service strategy will be.

"We approach our clients as partners rather than mere service providers or a means to pay the bills," explains Jansen, "and I believe this way of thinking has been the driving force in our successful client relationships and resultant projects."

Viewing these relationships as a partnership can empower you and your team to share victories or losses, see work as collaboration and help to strengthen alignment on visions, projects and plans. And although you and your client may not always see eye to eye, this kind of relationship can be incredibly beneficial in helping you to pick battles wisely and make important decisions down the line.

"Ultimately, running a design studio or any business comes down to having the right mindset and evaluating all decisions, and this starts the minute you begin thinking about going out on your own. My advice to all of those thinking about taking the leap this year is to scrutinise why you want to start a design studio, ensure it actually aligns with your aspirations and make sure you're onboard with the reality of hard work and long hours," concludes Jansen.

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