GRAPHIC DESIGN BUSINESS

Essentials to focus upon when starting a one-person graphic design business

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this thesis is to seek to answer the question 'What are the key elements to focus upon and keep in mind when starting a one-person graphic design business?' The chosen method of research is a literature review combined with a case study implemented by the author, as a graphic designer seeking to successfully start their own design business.

The literature review identified nine main headings, to answer the thesis question. The headings were as follows: *company brand, legal papers and accountant, working environment, discipline and working habits, professionalism, communication, pricing, continual learning and networking,* and *personal side project.*

The ensuing case study, sought to implement these aspects that were identified in the literature review. The elements identified were found applicable and useful in the case study of starting and running a one-person graphic design business.

It was concluded, that the nine headings resulting from the literature review – although others could be identified – serve as a helpful and important guide to focus upon when starting and running a successful one-person graphic design business.

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Key words: graphic design, business, company, start-up, case study

CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to look at the key elements of successfully starting and running a one-person graphic design business. The aim is to provide a thesis that will be a helpful reference for other graduating students who are considering starting their own business. This is especially relevant in the current economic times, where finding a job at a corporate design company can be very difficult (Elmansy 2011). Therefore, setting up your own business can be a solution and provide a way of successfully working as a designer.

The thesis is a result of a literature review and an ensuing case study of my own experiences of starting up and running my own one-person graphic design business. The aim of a literature review is to gather and evaluate the existing knowledge on a certain subject (Machi & McEvoy 2012, 2). I was able to use the information gained in the literature review to assist me in setting up my own company and in attempting to formulate a case study intended to help others. The case study research method provides examples of real situations, rather than just listing abstract principles and hypothesis, it puts them into action painting a much clearer picture to the reader (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, 289), hence the reason why I chose this methodology.

The main question I seek to answer is 'What are the key elements to focus upon and keep in mind when starting a one-person graphic design business?'

I started with the hypothesis that the key elements to focus upon when staring a one-person graphic design business would be *professionalism*, *time management*, *the company brand*, and the importance of the *working environment* (i.e. the studio).

The first part in my proposed hypothesis was simply the word 'professionalism'. With this I wanted to communicate and set myself the goal whereby I should strive to act in a professional manner in all my actions concerning the company, whether it be how I should respond to client email, prepare an invoice, or how and what I might opt to post on my company Facebook page.

The following part in my proposed hypothesis was 'time management', and in many ways I felt this would be the main challenge for me when working independently. The reason for this was there would not be any co-workers watching me or a boss telling me what to do and specifying a time frame in which to complete it in. I realised that when working alone I would have to learn to become more disciplined with myself and in the way I managed my work-time.

The third part of my proposed hypothesis was 'the company brand' and 'image'. I realised this would be an essential and important part of my company, since this would be the factor by which people would most readily relate to my company. It is essential to get it right and try and make a memorable and long lasting image that people can associate with the company.

The last part in the hypothesis was concerning the 'working environment', especially in light of the fact that I would be working from home. This point also relates to the first point of professionalism, for example, I thought to myself if I wish to work as a professional it would be hard to do so by simply laying in bed while wearing my pyjamas and trying to get some work done on my laptop. Instead, I would have to seek to create a working environment that would be likely to motivate me towards working in a professional and disciplined manner.

This is the working hypothesis I planned to implement, although my detailed understanding of the different aspects was still very limited and in need of improvement. Therefore, instead of simply implementing my – not so well grounded – hypothesis based solely upon these albeit 'key elements' of identified importance, I decided it would be best for me to first undertake a literature review. This was so that I could learn from and evaluate existing knowledge from well respected and experienced designers who share their insights and what they have learnt from working alone and how to run a successful graphic design business.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

I was quite confident that my four point hypothesis was not too far off the truth, but to gain more knowledge and understanding in how to work as a graphic designer and run my own business, I decided the best way forward would be to study books on the subject written by knowledgeable designers who were willing to share their insights.

There are many books available on the subject of working as a graphic designer. For my research I decided to focus in-depth on a few well recommended books that also deal with the aspects of working on your own from home, or working as part of a small-scale design company. I selected my main research books based on relevant content for graphic designer start-ups, the trustworthiness and experience of the authors, and the reviews and recommendations I found of the books online, mainly on Amazon.com. As the key areas to focus upon became apparent I used additional books and articles to research several areas of particular importance/relevance in greater depth.

When undertaking my literature review I quickly concluded that there are many different aspects that play an important role in the success of a design business, and to cover all these aspects in-depth would be beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore the scope of this literature review will be limited to the aspects that were the most helpful and applicable to me as a designer starting and running my one-person graphic design business.

Graphic designer David Airey (2013) starts his book 'Work for Money, Design for Love', with a chapter called 'Essentials Traits' where he gives a list of characteristics that he identifies as being shared by all good design business owners. The list includes curiosity, empathy, confidence, management skills, discipline, motivation, professionalism, balance, and eagerness to learn more. I have decided to format my literature review under several headings similar to those offered by Airey. (Airey 2013, 4-14.)

2.1   Company Brand

The literature has identified many different aspects to consider in relation to the company brand. For instance, designers often tend to only think of their business name, logo, website, and stationary design as being their brand identity. Airey (2013) however, states that it is much more, especially when you run your own company, he explains that your brand identity also encompasses the language you use, the way you answer the phone, and how you talk about other people and companies you have worked for. It is also reflected in the sign on your door, the car you drive, the clothes you wear, the text on your website, and the promises you make to a client that you should always keep. (Airey 2013, 79.)

Web designer Kayla Knight (2009) adds to the proposition by Airey, commenting that one of the differences between a successful freelance designer, and one who is barely getting by, is that successful designers understand and pay close attention to branding their business, even if it is only a one person business. She continues with explaining that a good brand builds credibility and client loyalty. (Knight, 2009.)

The literature clearly identifies that branding is just as important to a one-person graphic design business as it is to a corporate graphic design business. Los Angeles based graphic designer Eric Frommelt claims it is very important to see yourself as a brand when working on your own, he supports this claim by reasoning that the better you communicate yourself as a brand, the more likely you are to get more work and clients who respect you (Frommelt according to Wollenberg 2013, 74). Anderson highlights that in being a one-person graphic design business, it is important to realise that you as the designer become the brand, and you need to present your abilities with an attitude of confidence (Anderson according to Fisher 2005, 62).

An essential part of any company brand is the name. Marketing experts Ilise Benun and Peleg Top offer the simple advice to take your time in considering what to call your company and not rush into making a hasty decision about your company name (Benun & Top 2008, 47). Benun and Top also write about the importance of realising that the brand is more than an image and the hype, and that it needs to be founded on substance and value (Benun & Top 2008, 43).

The literature also identified that another important aspect of a company brand is the way the company is perceived by outsiders, especially relating to the size of the company – if it is a large, medium or a one-person business. Creative business author Cameron S. Foote advises self-employed designers to create an impression of size and stability for their business, he also advises to reflect this in the business name by adding the word 'company' or 'associates' thus making your business look larger (Foote 2006, 39). Foote does go on to explain that you should not attempt to mislead clients, but instead rely on the impression they have of your company, while adopting the 'if they don't ask, don't tell' attitude concerning the true size of your business (Foote 2006, 39).

However, Airey (2013) strongly disagrees with the view proposed by Foote (2006). Airey (2013) shares his personal story of how when he started out as self-employed graphic designer, he tried to portray himself as a design agency with a full staff, and even wrote all the website texts in the third person as to create an impression of size. "What an idiot" he remarks concerning himself and how he tried to portray his business, and goes on to explains "to put it bluntly, I was basically lying about who I was and how I worked" (Airey 2013, 135). After critiquing himself and how he wrongly tried to portray his business, he seeks to offer a more positive way of looking at the alternative, "In hindsight, I should have embraced being in a company of one, because there are many benefits of being small." He explains some of the benefits as the following, the personal touch of the designer, one person in charge of the design business, quality control and passion. To sum it up, the advice Airey gives is "In short, be honest. Be who you are: a talented designer who has plenty to offer". (Airey 2013, 137.)

In addition, a somewhat in-between view is presented by Benun and Top, as they advise the usage of 'we' or 'I' in describing a one-person company to be dependent on the clients you seek to reach and what they need from you (Benun & Top 2008, 62).

As can be seen, the literature has identified several areas to consider in terms of company branding. Firstly, it must be seen that company branding is rather more than just 'name and logo', it is required to portray professionalism and can also effect the clients confidence in the company. Time needs to be taken to consider an appropriate name and logo design that is not something just to create hype but instead demonstrate substance and value. There are also contradicting views on how to present your company in terms of numbers, with some authors arguing to create the illusion of a big

company as to portray size and stability, whilst other authors arguing it best to be truthful and transparent about the size and nature of the company.

2.2 Legal Papers and Accountant

The literature review regarding legal matters has identified two key points to bear in mind when starting up your own one-person graphic design business. Firstly, several designers including Jacob Cass advise the use of a working contract with every client and project (Cass 2012, 47). Design instructor Valerie Martin Stuart explains that every semester when she introduces her students to a discussion on the business of graphic design, she makes sure they understand this one important thing "Never do work without a contract" (Stuart according to Fisher 2005, 124). Designer Jonathan Selikoff also advises – after himself learning this the hard way – to always have a contract (Selikoff according to Airey 2013, 204). Heikki Jokinen also recommends the use of a written contract, at least in bigger and continual work projects (Jokinen 2003, 40).

It does appear that some designers have voiced concern over using the term 'working contract', Fisher advises to use the word 'agreement' instead of 'contract' if the designer feels like the word 'contract' could scare potential clients, he also informs that his own working contract is called a 'project agreement' (Fisher 2005, 122). Oregon based designer Von Glitschka also agrees with Fisher in his preference of the word 'agreement' over 'contract' (Glitschka according to Airey 2013, 202).

The second key point identified is the need to make sure your legal paper-work is kept in order, with many advocating the use of hiring an accountant to help with the business taxes. Melbourne based designer Simon Bent offers as one of his key pieces of advice to starting designers "get a good accountant" (Bent 2012, 11). Fisher agrees when he shares what he learned during many years in the design profession "I came to the conclusion that only a fool would do his own business taxes" (Fisher 2005, 130). Foote also makes a similar statement when describing the accountant as the most valuable outside asset of any business owner (Foote 2006, 41), and continues with giving this simple advice "you shouldn't even consider making your own taxes" (Foote 2006, 42). UK based designer Radim Malinic also strongly advices to get a good professional

accountant, even if it would cost you more than someone who could possibly do it as a hobby (Malinic 2012, 27).

As it can be seen the two main things to consider when starting up a new business in terms of legal matters are the importance of a working contract/agreement and also getting an accountant. A further help in legal matters can be found on a country specific basis. For example, I started my company in the UK, therefore resources offered by UK officials dealing with setting up a business in the UK (GOV.UK 2012) and starting a business (HMRC 2012) proved to be extremely useful.

2.3   Working Environment

Certain aspects, concerning the importance of the working environment for a graphic designer have changed due to the advent of smartphones and laptops that enable the designer to be much more mobile. Instead of having to work in an office where all the equipment is located, the designer can now choose to take the laptop and work, at least for part of the day, at a coffee shop or indeed almost anywhere else. In spite of these technological advancements, the physical studio environment still plays an important role in the design industry. In the book 'Studio Culture: The secret life of the graphic design studio', Tony Brook from London based design studio Spin – when responding to a question of how important the physical working environment is – writes "The layout and style of your studio supports the tone and attitude you have to your work, and the way it is made. It also puts you in the right frame of mind" (Brook according to Brook & Shaughnessy 2009, 211). Nicola Place from design studio Build, also interviewed in the same book, gives a similar reply and explains that a good working environment contributes to good work, and that by getting rid of unnecessary things in the working environment helps you from being distracted (Place according to Brook & Shaughnessy 2009, 58).

It is also important to consider working ergonomics, Airey reminds designers that they will be spending a lot of time sitting, and therefore recommends to invest in a good chair, and also sit in it properly – not leaning forward, but resting against it comfortably (Airey 2013, 97). Concerning the lighting of the working environment, Russell Townsend – founder of the Birmingham based interactive agency Custa – advises

designers to make sure they have a suitable working environment with good natural light (Townsend according to Brook & Shaughnessy 2009, 23). When seeking to create a clearer distinction between work and home life, Benun and Top offer the following simple advice "Create a separate physical space for your work. And be able to close the door. That allows others to give you the privacy you need to work as well as closing the door behind you when you are finished working" (Benun & Top 2008, 258).

The question of considering whether to start working from home or pursue a studio environment with other designers was also identified in the literature review. Designer Corey Holms (2013) advises to be very honest and first ask yourself the question of how well you know yourself, especially concerning your ability to work alone or in a group. He states that even though working from home might seem like a dream job, it certainly is not for everyone. Holms continues with more questions and explains why this is important to consider before making a choice "Are you a procrastinator? Do you tend to faff about? If so, you're going to get 'fired'. Do you need the company of other people to keep your energy up?" If the answer is yes, he suggests that maybe a studio environment with other people is a better way to go, instead of starting your own business and working alone from home. However, Holms also mentions that even though a studio environment with other designer can be very important to help in being focused on work, it also can become another kind of distraction if the fun of joking and conversation prevents you from getting work done on time. (Holms 2013.)

Again the literature review identified the need for professionalism and how this too can be related to the working environment. Fisher (2005) identifies the 'glamorous' and often unrealistic expectations many design students have about working in a design studio. Fisher then connects the point of professionalism and public perception to the studio space of the designer, he writes "Undoubtedly, the space in which any designer works does play a part in the professional image – or the public perception of that image – for the individual or firm." (Fisher 2005, 93). Airey (2013) also makes the connection between the working environment and professionalism but from a slightly different and more personal angle, he shares his own experience of starting his design business and working in the corner of his bedroom, and how this sometimes affected his professionalism. He concludes "So although my clients couldn't see I was working from my bedroom, my less-than-professional surroundings were affecting my ability to have the necessary confidence in the skills I was selling." (Airey 2013, 91).

Adrian Shaughnessy, co-editor of the book Studio Culture, explained in a interview done for the Computer Arts Presents: Design Studio Handbook, what he learned from interviewing a long list of the most successful design studios around the world. He says the main thing he learned from producing the book, was that there is no single way of building and running a studio. He concludes with stating that "the most important thing when running a studio is to be true to yourself. Don't try to be someone – or something – you're not." (Shaughnessy 2011, 25.)

The literature concerning the working environment identifies the need for a well thought out design allowing you to be in the right frame of mind and not easily distracted. Considering the ergonomics such as lighting and comfortable seating is also important. You also need to identify your own personality to see if working from home or working in a shared studio space would be best. However, the literature review does conclude there are no set and hard fast rules, it is an individualist approach.

2.4   Discipline and Working Habits

One thing that quickly became clear to me whilst reviewing the literature is that one of the most fundamental aspects of successfully working alone as a designer is the subject of discipline and working habits, and especially how it relates to working alone from home. According to Fisher, if one is going to succeed in the design industry, it will require passion, dedication and determination (Fisher 2005, 18). Creative legend Ruedi Rüegg states that one cannot achieve complete creative freedom without having complete discipline in working habits (Rüegg according to Laufer 2013, 48).

Foote states the importance of discipline very clearly when he writes "working discipline is the single most important determinant of freelance success" (Foote 2006, 76). He then continues with strongly emphasizing that this sentence should be remembered every single day when working for yourself, and that the first day this is forgotten will be the first day of the decline of your business (Foote 2006, 76). After stating the importance of it, Foote then proceeds with giving some practical advice on different aspects that constitute a good working discipline. He summarizes them under the following headings: *Work regularly*, *Value time*, *Always meet your deadlines*, *Make work when you have to* and *Don't forgo relaxation.* (Foote 2006, 77-81.)

To the aspect of working discipline, Airey (2013) sheds some light by sharing a personal and very practical situation where its importance can be seen in the daily working life of a home based designer. He writes:

> When my wife has a day off work, her morning is usually spent lying in. So during the short winter days, when it doesn't get bright until 9 a.m., when the house is a lot colder than normal, and with no boss waiting for me at the office by a set time, it takes a good deal of discipline to pull myself out of a warm bed. (Airey 2013, 10.)

London based illustrator Sophie Henson advises home based designers like herself to approach their day in 'work mode' and explains that one way that she has found very helpful is to leave her house in the morning and go for a walk and then return home just like you would be arriving at your office (Henson 2012, 25).

Robert Bowen (2011) contributes that time management is a very crucial aspect that the designer needs to prioritize for the sake of a successful business and also the designers own sanity. He continues by offering the advice of scheduling working days effectively and then actually holding to that plan. If this is achieved, then success rates are higher in a freelance business and it also helps to maintain a professional edge and remain competitive against larger established companies. (Bowen 2011.)

Web designer Jared Latigo (2011) shares his experiences and emphasises the importance of having breaks every hour or so. He explains that this can be ten minute walk outside or simply standing in the kitchen for a while and having a drink. (Latigo 2011.)

Airey (2013) also reminds designers about the importance of looking out for their own personal health. He agrees with Latigo (2011) and offers similar advice to help in the daily work life of a designer, he warns against sitting too long and encourages standing up and stretching every 20 minutes or so. (Airey 2013, 97.) He also writes about the importance of drinking plenty of water during the day, he explains the he has adopted the habit of having a continually refilled glass of water on his desk. The main reason for this being, according to Airey, is that the slightest dehydration affects your concentration. (Airey 2013, 98.)

As it can be seen the literature review highlights the importance of discipline, working habits and time management. Many different designers also offer their personal insights into how to be disciplined when working from home and also on how to remain healthy.

2.5   Professionalism

The term 'professionalism' was highlighted several times in the research, and as has already been seen, some aspects of professionalism also relate to the previous sections concerning the company brand and working environment. This section relates more to portraying a professional image to clients, having a website, and ensuring your work is professional.

Stuart offers this simple advice to all young designers "A professional designer needs to keep one very important word in mind: professional" (Stuart according to Fisher 2005, 101). This aspect also relates to the previous point of discipline, since to strive to be professional in all your dealings will require a lot of motivated discipline in your work. According to Fisher, presenting an image of professionalism is not so much concerned with having an expensive office space, as it is with the actual way the designer works (Fisher 2005, 100). Wendy Constantine defines professionalism as "taking responsibility, meeting deadlines, understanding client needs and wants, owning up to your mistakes, and presenting inspired work that communicates (the client's) message" (Constantine according to Fisher 2005, 100).

One very practical way to communicate a more professional image to clients – in many designers opinion – is to refrain from using the word 'freelance' when describing your work as a designer, and instead describe yourself as an independent designer or explain to people that you run your own design firm. Fisher writes that in his experience this seems to make people take you more seriously as a business person (Fisher 2005, 53). Foote (2006) agrees and similarly advises designers to avoid using the term 'freelance'. He explains that to many individuals in the organisational world, the word is often perceived as synonymous with unemployed and unreliable. (Foote 2006, 39.) Texas based designer Barton Damer comments on the negative aspect of stereotypes concerning self-employed designers "no one believes you when you say you're a freelancer, they just assume you can't get a job" (Damer 2012, 15). It seems that there is

a quite clear agreement amongst most designers to withdraw from using the term 'freelance' to describe a self-employed designer (Benun 2011).

Another aspect identified in the literature review was the importance of having a website for your business. According to Benun and Top, if you seek to be taken seriously as a design professional, it is imperative that you have a website for your business (Benun & Top 2008, 101).

One final but important aspect that needs to be mentioned as a result of the literature review in terms of being 'professional', is of course the ability to actually produce professional design. It is no good merely to act in a professional manner if the work you produce is not professional. Benun and Top write "It goes without saying that the work you do must be of the highest quality" (Benun & Top 2008, 61). When considering what constitutes professional or good design, one helpful resource to consider is Timothy Samara's (2007) book "Design Elements: A Graphic Style Manual" where he offers twenty basic rules for making good design. The list includes headings like: Have a concept. Communicate – don't decorate. Speak with one visual voice. Pick colours on purpose. If you can do it with less, then do it. Treat the type as image, as though it's just as important. Be decisive, do it on purpose – or don't do it at all. Look to history, but don't repeat it. (Samara 2007, 8-29.)

2.6   Communication

An essential trait that often seems to be overlooked by many designers is the area of communication, both written and verbal. This aspect also ties in with the previous point of professionalism. Good communication is very essential, especially how it relates to serving your clients in professional manner. Fisher gives the advice that even if you are too busy to properly answer an email from a client, you should still send them a quick reply letting them know that you have received it and that you will write a lengthier reply as soon as possible (Fisher 2005, 85). Doug Oliver also states that by simply returning phone calls promptly "you'll be way ahead of 90 percent of designers" (Oliver according to Fisher 2005, 65).

Finnish graphic designer Esa Ojala (2004) emphasises the importance of being able to communicate and interact with different people in different circumstances. He also states that in his view a graphic designer should have a good general knowledge, and preferably also some language and writing skills. (Ojala according to Seliger, Helala, Torvinen-Määttä, Marjo Väisänen 2004, 21.) Graphic designer Chip Kidd also emphasises the importance of language and writing skills for any creative person, describing them as invaluable skills (Kidd according to Millman 2007, 139).

Cass recommends that designers focus on the their business basics, to think about how they communicate with their clients, and how they treat their clients and present themselves, since this will all have an effect upon the work you as the designer produce for the client (Cass 2012, 47).

Designer Michael Patrick Cronan (1999) also reminds designers to be more understanding with their clients because of the difficulty in buying creative services and financial risks that are often involved in making a decision. Cronan writes "I think designers should focus on how difficult it is to be a client and have respect for that. It would have aided me a great deal if I had learnt that earlier." (Cronan according to Heller & Fernandes 1999, 255.)

As can be seen, good communication is vital for a successful business, but it is sometimes an area that is overlooked and the simplest things such as returning phone calls and emails promptly can make a huge difference in a competitive market.

2.7 Pricing

The literature review revealed that the subject of pricing can be very tricky to define in the field of design. Designers often have differing views, which can also change on project by project basis. Some designers advocate working on a hourly fee basis, while many others strongly recommend working for the most part on a project fee basis. And even though pricing is just one of the factors that affect the success of a design business, this tends to be what most designers worry about (Foote 2001, 213).

According to Foote, most design work prices are estimated based on the time it takes to finish the project, and that the standard way for pricing creative work is to charge by the hour (Foote 2001, 213). Conversely, Benun and Top (2008) argue that designers should not price by the hour, even though it might seem easy, clean and orderly. They explain that this is not beneficial, especially in the long run. The main reason for not pricing by the hour is the simple fact that the better and faster you get at doing your work, the less you earn for the same work if you have fixed hourly rates. (Benun & Top 2008, 175.)

Graphic designer Steve Zells (2010) presents a visual illustration to support why he believes design work can't be billed by the hour (figure 1). The illustration shows how design ideas and project solutions are often generated, not just during working at the desk, but to a large portion also when not officially working. Thus it can be very hard to estimate the working hours that led to the final design solution.

● time at desk
● time spent thinking about project while driving, eating and not sleeping
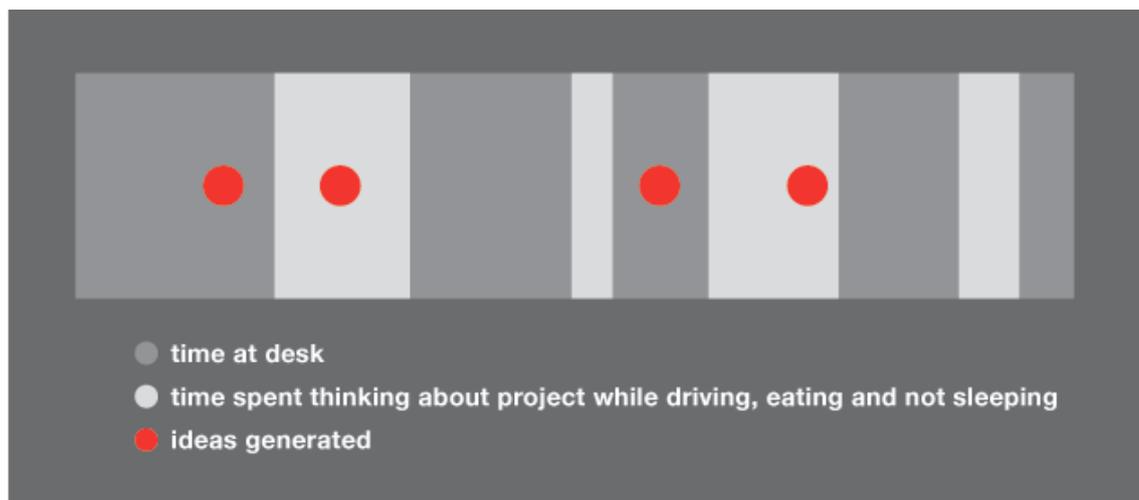● ideas generated

FIGURE 1. Why Graphic Design Can't be Billed by the Hour (Zells 2010)

It seems there is no exact formula that fits all situations (Cass 2012, 47), rather the common advice given by accomplished designers goes something like this quote from Fisher "Set realistic prices that are not so high they discourage work from coming your way, but at the same time are not so low that you are going to be considered a 'bargain basement' designer" (Fisher 2005, 114). Portland based graphic designer Nicholas O'Brian Wilson advises starting designers not to undersell themselves since it undermines their work and is a disservice for the design industry (O'Brian Wilson 2012, 28).

Jokinen also reminds freelance designers to realise that the payment fee for a job is not the same as your pay check, meaning that is very important to count in the business expense factors to the work price (Jokinen 2003, 39).

Cass (2012) offers an important question to ask yourself when deciding on a price, what am I worth or what can I get away with? When pondering how to answer, Cass gives additional questions to help determine the answer, these questions are "How experienced am I? What is the current rate for this in the industry? How much is the project worth, and what is the client's budget? How badly do I want the project and how long will it take?" As a general rule he recommends to charge by the project, and not by the hour. (Cass 2012, 47.)

It seems that the guiding principle advocated by most designers is that the price should mainly be informed by the financial needs of the designer or the studio, so that after all expenses are paid for there is still enough left for a profit that the designer feels comfortable with (Tom according to Fisher 2005, 109). Veteran graphic designer Neil Tortorella offers this simple advice on pricing "A better way to approach the problem is figuring out your bottomline — where you need to be to really make money. Go below this point and you're paying your client for the honor of working for them" (Tortorella 2002).

2.8   Continual Learning and Networking

Because of the constantly changing nature of the design profession, a designer must invest a great deal of time and energy to continue learning about new technologies, possibilities and different design trends (Fisher 2005, 35). Fisher writes "Self-education plays an increasing role in the education of 'creative types' as technology continues to advance faster than those in the design field can learn of the changes" (Fisher 2005, 25).

When working alone from home, there is a danger of feeling isolated because of having no co-workers to learn from and discuss with, Airey writes "It can be easy to think you're isolated in self-employment, especially if, like me, you work from home in a one-person studio" (Airey 2013, 25). Airey (2013) then recommends to visit and build a network with other designers in your area. He gives a simple advice of spending about

15 minutes each day in catching up on design related blogs, which is a very cheap and efficient way to easily learn from seasoned design practitioners. (Airey 2013, 25.)

Airey (2013) also writes about the importance of being a lifelong learner if you wish to be a successful designer. He comments that it is important to realise that design school does not teach you everything. (Airey 2013, 17.) According to Bowen, it can be very harmful, especially for design freelancers if they stop learning, since the dynamic nature of the profession requires that you stay ahead and on top of the latest developments. He goes on with writing "Throwing in the towel on education is virtual suicide. You, your work and your career would stagnate." (Bowen 2009.) According to Illustrator Leandro Castelao, the biggest challenge in working as a freelancer is that you have to be your own art director and try to improve day by day (Castelao 2012, 39).

According to Fisher, design industry conferences are an important aspect for continual learning and networking with other creatives in the field (Fisher 2005, 32). Bryn Mooth agrees and states that the best way to continue learning after entering the design profession is to watch other successful creatives, and to learn from them (Mooth according to Fisher 2005, 34).

2.9   Personal Side Project

An additional aspect that some designers recommend, is to have some personal side project to work on from time to time. Something that you personally are very passionate about, and that gives you creative freedom. London based graphic designer Emily Kane says that she retains "creative satisfaction" by balancing her client work with self-initiated side projects. (Kane according to Airey 2013, 264.)

Web designer and developer Daniel Howells (2013) agrees and states that personal side projects are extremely important for him, as they provide him with a platform to experiment with new techniques without the risk of losing anything even if it fails. He also says it is humbling to see that it is often these personal side projects that bring him new client work. (Howells according to Airey 2013, 263.)

3   MY CASE STUDY

After studying media for many years (three years at Vaasa Vocational Institute, and now four years at Tampere University of Applied Sciences), and doing internships at an advertising agency (Mainostoimisto Grappa Oy), screen-print company (Tai-Tex Ky), and finally working as a full-time graphic designer for a charity organisation (Evangelical Movement of Wales). I decided that I wanted to start my own graphic design business and to learn more about how to do it well and succeed as a professional graphic designer. This is the main reason I chose to combine my thesis research work with starting my design business and by so doing learn as much as possible in the process.

The main factor that motivated me, and gave me the confidence to think that I could actually employ myself and start a professional graphic design business, was the time I spent doing my practical training as a full-time graphic designer for the charity organisation. There I had the opportunity to learn and gain valuable experience in real life projects. Often I was afforded complete control of a particular project in terms design and printing. I also had the opportunity to work on real printed products such as newspapers, brochures, magazine adverts, flyers, etc. This gave me the experience and confidence to work with printing houses and different printing methods.

3.1   My Company Brand

I began where most people would probably start, by coming up with a name for my design company. As was seen in the literature review, when working alone as a designer, the designer himself becomes the brand of his own business (Anderson according to Fisher 2005, 62). The reason I chose to start my design business under a new business name, rather than simply using my birth name, was so that I could keep my design business partly separate from my personal name. I chose to reserve the use of my name for my personal blog, Twitter and Facebook account, since these deal with much more than simply design.

Benun and Top offered the advice not to make a hasty decision about the company name (Benun & Top 2008, 47). In hindsight, this is where I perhaps did make the mistake of actually choosing a name too quickly without fully taking into consideration all of the aspects I really wanted the choice of name to convey. This is the first thing I would choose to do differently if starting again. I would also seek to come up with a business name that was somewhat more personal and easier to remember.

However, I chose the name CreatedSIGN for my business. I wanted to communicate the 'creating' part of design, and also thought it quite clever that the name can be sliced to say 'Create dsign' as in a statement to 'create design'. After deciding on the name, I quickly went on to buy the domain (www.createdsign.com) and register accounts for Facebook and Twitter. The domain availability and search engine friendliness of a business name is a very important factor to consider in this day and age, where the internet is most likely the most important promotional tool.

After deciding on the name I began to design the logo, this proved to be more challenging than I thought it would be, but in the end I opted for a simple and recognisable style that eventually I was quite pleased with. Having got the name, logo, and even Facebook and Twitter pages registered, I was proud and excited as it finally felt like I had actually got the ball rolling and my business officially up and running. Soon after, I also created my website portfolio (www.createdsign.com) and designed my business cards and got them professionally printed on high quality paper (picture 1).

The image I wanted communicate with my brand design, was creativity, simplicity, subtleness, contemporary look with and a professional feel. When it came to presenting my business in text form and writing a short description on my website, I tended to follow the advice given by Airey (2013, 137), to be honest and open about the size of my company and not to try and give a false appearance of a bigger company with multiple workers. This is how I chose to describe my business on the website: "CreatedSIGN is a one man design studio, run by Finnish graphic designer Miska Wilhelmsson." I also decided to follow the advice given in the literature review of refraining from using the word 'freelance' in describing my work, since it seems clear that the word can often be misleading and have negative connotations (Fisher 2005, 53).

PICTURE 1. CreatedSIGN business card with logo (Photo: Miska Wilhelmsson 2012)

I have also sought to remember and focus on the other aspects that define a company brand, not just the aspect of visual design. I learnt from the literature review the importance that the designer himself has, especially when working on your own. That the designer becomes the embodiment of the company brand, and everything he does related to the company, is perceived by the client as part of the company brand. I have sought to communicate reliability, kindness, and professionalism in the way I've interacted with my clients, updated my website blog, Facebook and Twitter.

3.2   My Legal Papers and Accountant

The next step was to get all the legal paper and notifications done. Legal issues and paper work are of course country specific and sometimes differ on certain aspects, thus they need to be researched individually for each situation. I started my business in the UK, while living in Wales, therefore some of the details only apply to this scenario.

Before deciding on the business name and logo, I had already done some basic research, but had not submitted any legal papers yet. The first thing I had to do – as foreigner living in the UK – was to apply for a national insurance number (GOV.UK 2012). This

was fairly easy to do, and a few weeks after submitting the papers I received a reply by post confirming that my application to obtain a national insurance number to be able to work as a sole-traded had been accepted. A further necessary step in the paper work process, was to inform the HM Revenue & Customs of my self-employment plans (HMRC 2012).

The literature review also highlighted the need for an accountant (Foote 2006, 41; Malinic 2012, 27). It took me a couple of months after starting my business before I decided to search for an accountant. In retrospect it would have probably been better and easier to have acquired an accountant right from the start; by doing so I would not have needed to do all of the research and paper work myself. At the end of the day I realised I was not an accountant but a designer and took to heart what Fisher (2005, 130) commented on and stated that only a fool would do his own taxes. My wife Alison, has a friend who is a lawyer, he offered to help by recommending a couple of accountants to me with whom he works on a regular basis. I contacted one of them and arranged a meeting with him to explain my business ideas and the extent of the services I might expect to need from an accountant. It was very helpful to be able to talk to someone who knew how all the legal paper work is dealt with in the UK. I also found it very reassuring to learn that what I had already done myself in terms of legal paper work had been in accordance with correct procedure. I thus proceeded to hire him as my accountant. The cost of employing an account can vary enormously, but he estimated that accountancy costs for my business would likely be between £200-300 (GBP) per year.

Another point that I found prevalent in the literature review, was the strongly recommended usage of a working contract (Stuart according to Fisher 2005, 124). I do understand the reasons why many designers strongly advise this, and after working without one myself, I can now see even more clearly some of the benefits. I have not yet started using a working contract with my clients, the reason being that most of my clients to this point have been people whom I know personally and trust, and have not had any real troubles with.

That being said, I have also faced some minor problems, partly due to not using a working contract. An example of this occurred during a website redesign project which was done for a charity organisation (Pastor Training International) that I had not worked

for previously. The project became rather more complicated than I expected, mainly due to misunderstandings and lack of a clear written agreement concerning what as designer, the limit of my involvement was to be. My mistake had been to simply assume the task was simply to redesign their public website, but to my surprise I found out later that they believed I would also be developing their internal 'behind the scenes' database website. Thankfully they were apologetic about the misunderstanding, and were happy for me to continue with redesigning just the public part of the website. However, the experience served as a warning to me that without a written clear understanding of what both parties are committed to, the risk of unpleasant consequences is a real possibility.

The communication (or lack of communication) between various individuals within the organization itself also served to confuse the situation further in that sometimes the directions I would receive concerning editing the website would be contradictory. In this project, I think a well formulated and clear working agreement with the detailed project plan would have been very helpful, since it would have likely served to clarify aspects that were otherwise unclear, and would have defined a single point of contact with the organization having authority to advise and instruct.

Other than that I have not really had any troubles with working without a written agreement. Although I am now considering starting to use a working contract in my future projects. It also seems to me that it is very good advice to call it an 'agreement', as shared by Fisher (2005, 122), instead of a 'contract' if you think this might work better with your clients.

3.3 My Working Environment

The literature review identified that considering the working environment was an important factor when commencing work as a designer.

Firstly I had to decide whether to work at home or set up a studio elsewhere. Holms (2012) advised examining yourself honestly, as although working from home may appear a dream job it does not come without pitfalls, conversely working in a studio environment could provide a distraction in itself as other people are around. Although I evaluated myself to at times be a procrastinator I still decided working from home

would be best for me. Also, I had to consider financial implications and that to begin with this it would be more like a part time job. I was fortunate enough to be living in a house with a spare room that I could turn into my studio to be my main working environment, I therefore decided this was the way to go. I started with emptying the room of all the storage stuff that did not have anything to do with my work or design, as suggested by Place (according to Brook & Shaughnessy 2009, 58), this would help with minimising distractions. My main purpose was to create a working environment that would help me to focus on my design work and encourage me to work in a professional manner. This was also identified in the literature review as Airey (2013, 91) shared his personal story of how the working environment is an important factor to consider since it can affect the way you work, your motivation and professionalism.

Even though the studio room has been and will be my main work environment, I have also found it is good and important on occasions to leave the studio and head out, for example to the local library to work on a certain project. I found this very helpful at times, especially if I was struggling to focus on work and were distracted by other things. In the library surroundings I could more easily settle-down and focus on what I was meant to be doing, the home based distractions being minimised. This again comes back to the point made by Holms (2012) about examining your own personality and being honest with yourself about how things are working.

PICTURE 2. Me in my studio working environment (Photo: Miska Wilhelmsson 2012)

The positive side about having my studio space in my house is that I do not need to travel to work, and the negative side of having my studio in the house is that I do not need to travel to work. Yes, you did read that sentence correctly. I mean it is great to be able to work from home and not having to travel to work, this saves both time and money. But it also has its down sides, the main one being that there is not such a clear difference between home and work. I will expand upon this aspect in the next section concerning working habits.

I would state that the most essential parts of any studio is a large desk, a good chair, and of course the working computer. Airey (2013, 97) identified the need for a good chair, thankfully I already owned and used a quality computer desk chair. It has adjustable height and back controls, and I have certainly found it a valuable tool to aid the days sitting at a computer. Benun and Top (2008, 258) also identified the need to separate personal and work space. This can be difficult when working from home, however I have tried to separate the work studio by putting a sign with my company logo on the door and trying to only use the studio for work. Often if using the laptop for personal browsing I will take the laptop and sit in the lounge instead, hence separating work and leisure activities.

When starting a business, the acquisition of the working equipment (such as computer, software, printer, etc.) can be a big expense. For the scope of my thesis I have intentionally decided not to focus much on these aspects, but I will offer just a few words for reason of wanting to clarify my own situation and hopefully providing a useful tip to prospective students looking into starting up their own business.

When starting my design business, I already owned a one year old MacBook Pro, a five years old iMac, Canon 7D D-SLR camera, Adobe Creative Suite 5.5 Master Collection, and other accessories. How did I afford all this? Well, actually I did not. My grandfather and grandmother have been very generous and have helped me with acquiring most of this equipment, and I have also helped them with a lot of computer, design, and translation related tasks.

The main tip I would give for students about acquiring working equipment, is to consider buying the Adobe software package while still being a student, since this is the way I was able to purchase the software with an 80% discount for students, and the

license still allows me to continue using the software for commercial design even after finishing my studies. When acquiring working equipment (such as computer, software, printer, etc.) it is often possible to get different tax refunds when you are buying them for your company, so it is also a good idea to research and ask your accountant (if you have one, which you probably should) about the different ways to be compensated for your equipment costs.

3.4   My Discipline and Working Habits

When I had officially started my business and got a few clients and multiple projects to work on, I quickly found out that the main challenges in being a self-employed graphic designer working from home, are the aspects of discipline and time-management. It can be very easy to get distracted from working when working alone from home, especially without helpful working habits. This reflects the literature which suggested that good working habits and discipline are key factors in success (Foote 2006, 76-81).

I can definitely relate to the statement made by Airey (2013, 10) about getting up early from a warm bed when your wife is still sleeping beside you and you do not have a boss waiting for you at the office. I am often in a very similar situation, since my wife works a nurse and has a four days off every week, it certainly does take 'discipline' to wake up early and get out of the bed alone. The days when my wife is working and I am home alone working also present their own problems, since it is so very easy to get distracted when working alone and no one is watching or telling you what to do.

The main problems I have learnt I need to fight against is my own laziness and being distracted by other things that do not concern the work I should be doing. I do feel I have become better at being more disciplined and organised with my work, but I still have much to learn.

As was suggested in the literature review by Holms (2012), it is important to know yourself and your tendencies towards procrastination when working alone, before deciding to start your own design business and work alone from home. I do see the wisdom in this advice but also think this is an area in which all people struggle to a certain degree. Therefore it will be a continual struggle that committed self-employed

designers need to learn to live with and seek to overcome if they wish to be successful in their work.

By having my studio working environment in my own home, the mental preparation for leaving for work is often absent, which can sometimes lead to a lack of motivation for working. I have tried following the advice given by Henson (2012, 25) to go for a walk in the morning to help myself get in work mode, and then to return back home as I would do if arriving at a working office - after all that is what it is for me. This did help me in waking up in the morning and getting quicker into work mode. I also have found that having a break in the middle of the day is beneficial, if just to be able to get some fresh air and a change of scenery.

I have also sought to follow the advice given by Latigo (2011), concerning not sitting too long, and as Airey (2013, 97) added the importance of also stretching every now and then. I also found Airey's (2013, 98) recommendation concerning drinking plenty of water very helpful in keeping up with my concentration and energy. I have noticed my concentration and energy levels being much better during a day when I have been drinking plenty of water, as opposed to when I have not. I have been trying to always have a glass of water at my desk and drink water regularly.

3.5   My Professionalism

This was the first part in my initially proposed hypothesis, and when doing the literature review it proved to be a very important point to keep in mind, since after all it is called the design profession for a reason. It was also seen in the literature review that professionalism crosses many boundaries with other key areas.

As previously mentioned, I sought to communicate an image of professionalism through my company brand visuals, business cards, website, and the way and content I posted on Facebook and Twitter or responded to client emails. I took on board the point that was raised concerning professionalism needing to be portrayed through the whole company and its actions, not just by the visuals (Airey 2013, 79).

I decided to follow the recommendations be several designers (Foote 2006, 39; Fisher 2005, 53) to refrain from using the word 'freelance' when describing my work or company. This was because I wanted to avoid the negative connotations associated with the term and help create an impression of professionalism.

As discussed under the heading of my working environment, I also sought to build my working environment in a way that would encourage me to work in a professional manner, and to be reminded that this is my working environment, not just another room in my home.

I think that the most important aspect about the subject of professionalism, is that the designer himself needs to be clear about this in his own mind, namely that he is now seeking to be a professional designer, no longer not just a media student who does some random work for people every now and then, possibly even for no pay. The designer needs to adopt a mindset of professionalism towards his work and business.

3.6   My Communication

When dealing with clients, one thing that was emphasised in the literature was the importance of communication, especially relating to your clients in a professional manner (Fisher 2005, 82-86). Now after more experience in working with real clients, I can certainly relate to that objective even more.

As mentioned in the discussion concerning using a working agreement, I have also experienced some difficulties with client communication. I think this has been valuable lessons for me, and I do feel I have learnt something about how to try and avoid similar problems occurring in the future.

I have sought to follow the advice of always answering emails quickly (Fisher 2005), however there have still been a few times when I have delayed replying because I was trying to focus what I was working on at the time. What I have done to try to overcome this is try and spend the first half an hour of the day replying to any messages, I have also considered automatic email replies if I know I will be away for a few days. However, my personal experience would definitely advocate trying to always reply

promptly, especially to important emails. This I learnt to my own cost when I once neglected for a couple of days to respond to an email from a client. My main reason for not replying was that the email did not really contain any questions for me to answer. Next week I received a phone call from that client, asking if I had received the email and why I had not replied. My answer, as above, did not find favour with my client – he an older gentleman, with some experience in the organisational world – kindly gave me the advice to always seek to reply to business emails, even if this would mean just writing back that you have received the message. I have since tried to keep this advice in mind, and I do accept the wisdom of his words, since I know myself how frustrating it sometimes feels when people do not reply anything to your emails, even with a recognition that they have received them. This also relates to the point made Cronan (according to Heller and Fernandes 1999, 255), about understanding from the client's perspective and how they themselves are taking a financial risk on you as the designer and that it helps to make them feel involved in the process.

3.7   My Pricing

Pricing, as seen in the literature review, is often a very tricky subject in the world of design. I can now better understand why people often give a very vague answer to what to charge for graphic design, since there are so many different factors that affect the price. I decided to follow the advice to charge by project instead of charging by the hour. The reason for this was the main arguments offered in the literature review by Benun and Top (2008, 175), for example that the better and faster you get at doing your work the less you will get paid of working by fixed hourly rates. I also thought it simply makes much more sense and is more helpful for a client who often needs to work to a set budget.

In trying to figure out a price for my projects, I found the simple advice given by Tom (according to Fisher 2005, 109) to be very helpful, that to go with a price that you feel comfortable making a profit from. I have not had any problems with clients thinking that my prices were too high and I have also won a project where I know the client was seeking competitive quotes. Although sometimes afterwards, I have felt like I should have probably charged more for a project, but I guess this is just natural and part of the

learning curve when starting your own design business. After all, it is always possible to change your prices in the future if you realise they are either too high or too low.

3.8   My Continual Learning and Networking

Networking was a very important part in starting my business and getting clients. As I mentioned previously, as soon as I had decided on my business name I registered a Facebook page for my company. I then invited most of my Facebook friends to 'like' my business page on Facebook, this proved to be extremely useful, since almost right away I got a message from an American friend who was looking for a graphic designer for a small project and he was happy to entrust the work to me. Also, soon after making my business known on Facebook, I was asked to come for a meeting at the charity organization (Evangelical Movement of Wales) that I had recently done my practical training with. They had seen that I had now officially started my own design business, and wanted to ask me if I would be willing to continue working on major projects for them. This time I would of course get paid according to what I would quote for a project, just like a professional, not simply a trainee. I felt this was a successful start.

In these first six months of running my graphic design business, researching the subject, and writing this thesis I have definitely learnt many valuable lessons about the design profession and how to successfully work as a self-employed designer. It has been a great learning experience, and it has also taught me to always continue in my learning. I can certainly relate to the point made by Bowen (2009), concerning the need for continual learning and that it does not stop when you finish formal training. Some practical ways that I have followed the advice given in the literature review concerning continual learning, has been that I have followed Airey's (2013, 25) advice in looking at design related blogs and websites for daily inspiration, updates and helpful ideas. Prompted by Fisher (2005, 34) I have also started subscribing to UK's leading graphic design magazine Computer Arts.

3.9   My Personal Side Project

Following the example I found in the literature review (Howells according to Airey 2013, 263) about having a personal side project to work on from time to time, I started a side project that I have wanted to do for a long time. It is called 'Reformed Gospel Tracts' (www.reformedgospeltracts.com) and the idea is to produce well designed quality tracts/flyers (picture 3) that explain the gospel message of the Bible, in a concise and clear manner. It has already proven to be a very successful endeavour, although not necessarily in great direct monetary gain, but beneficial in other aspects.

PICTURE 3. Printed Reformed Gospel Tracts (Photo: Miska Wilhelmsson 2013)

This side project has been very helpful for me by way of motivation, encouragement, and also by providing me a platform to utilize my creativity for a cause I have a strong passion for. It also provides me a way of focused marketing, to a niche target client audience which I have desire to work for, namely churches and other Christian organizations. With every order of tracts, I usually also include a copy of my business card so that they can contact me for design work if they have the need. This project also gives more credibility for my design company, since my side project is already so much bigger and more well known than my design business itself.

4 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to seek to answer the question 'What are the key elements to focus upon and keep in mind when starting a one-person graphic design business?' The chosen method of research was a literature review combined with a case study implemented by myself as a graphic designer seeking to successfully start my own design business.

I started with the four point hypothesis, consisting of the following headings: *professionalism*, *time management*, *the company brand*, and the importance of the *working environment* (i.e. the studio). A literature review was then conducted, based on the needs of a one-person graphic design business start-up.

The literature review identified nine main headings, to answer the thesis question. The headings were as follows: *company brand, legal papers and accountant, working environment, discipline and working habits, professionalism, communication, pricing, continual learning and networking,* and *personal side project.*

The literature review confirmed my hypothesis in identifying certain key elements, however, it also built upon it by identifying several additional key elements and expounding the ones that were part of the original hypothesis.

In my case study, I sought to implement these aspects that I was learning in the literature review. Most of the literature review was found to be applicable and true in the case study. One a few occasions, authors in the literature review contradicted each other, one view was then chosen to be implemented.

The conclusion is therefore that these nine headings – although others could be identified – serve as a helpful and important guide to focus upon when starting and running a successful one-person graphic design business.

Other aspects that could be researched more in future thesis work would be: the importance of a business plan when working as a graphic designer, and how to gain clients as a start-up graphic design business.

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