ArtsHub

The winners and losers marketplace

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An increasing number of designers are working without pay, pinning their hopes on prize money to bankroll their work.
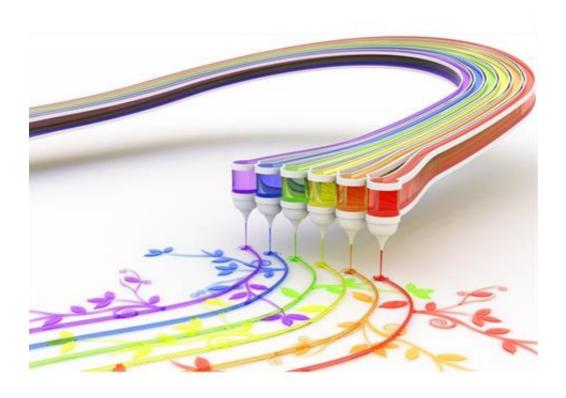

Image via Fig Creative (https://www.figcreative.com.au/websites-and-mobile/website-business-package/)

The booming online competition model is creating a buyers' market, expanding demand but also destroying client relationships and decreasing returns.

Platforms like DesignCrowd (http://www.designcrowd.com.au/) and 99 Designs (http://99designs.com.au/) make it easier way for clients to acquire designs and provide pathways for designers to secure commissions.

But they are criticised for pushing the wrong idea - that creativity is cheap, creative process optional and designers expendable,

The competition model uses the online space to help clients crowdsource potential designs. Clients post a brief for a logo, website, t-shirt or whatever and designers submit entries. The clients choose their favourite and the winner gets prize money as pay.

Although the sites offer packages for high-end clients willing to pay $2,000 or $3,000 for a design package, most of the business is at the low end, often less than $300 for a design.

Alec Lynch, founder and CEO of DesignCrowd, says that what compelled him and his business partner Adam Arbolino to start the company were the challenges in the industry faced by both designers and businesses buying design.

'In Australia there are about 25,000 designers employed full time at design studios but at least 60,000 have graduated without employment. DesignCrowd is giving designers an opportunity to work in the design industry and earn a living doing what they enjoy, designing.'

Lynch said the platform brings more work for designers because clients who have traditionally buying design has traditionally as expensive, slow and risky process are able to access professional design at an affordable price.

'While some clients would previously have used agencies or single freelance designers, there are also a bunch of clients using DesignCrowd who may have in the past not paid for graphic design by using templates, DIY tools or their printing company,' says Alec Lynch.

Author Bryan Collins turned to design crowdsourcing for his book cover, curious to see how it compared with working with a commissioned designer in a one-on-one relationship.

He found that the major differences between working with the online competition model was not just the prices and variety of options, but also in the lack of communication. Giving feedback only by email was time-consuming and difficult. 'Furthermore, many designers didn't speak English, so it was more difficult to communicate what I was looking for.'

While Collins was very happy with the result, he has some reservations about the fact that the losing designers didn't receive any monetary compensation for their hard work. 'But that's how the site works. By going onto the site everybody knows there is only one winner, so you don't have to feel guilty about that.'

As an ethical issue, spec work has always been widely criticized in the design field. The supporters of this model simply see it as a way for designers to win clients over by designing - what designers are best at - versus selling - which they are often not so good at.

It's particularly valuable for those who are just starting out in the profession or those with limited mobility including work-from-home parents and regionally-based designers.

The platforms are also opening up the global marketplace, allowing designers in emerging economies and untrained designers to compete with professionals based in business hubs.

This was the case for Manila-based designer Grace Oris, who launched her career in design through crowdsourcing platforms: 'At that time, I was a stay-at-home mom looking for something to occupy myself with. I clicked through a banner ad and thought it would be fun. It also seemed an easy way to earn some cash.'

Before joining design crowdsourcing platforms, Grace had little experience and no training. 'I've been doing design work here and there. But design crowdsourcing platforms has been what got me into seriously studying design and considering it as career for myself.'

After more than a year and a few hundred contests, she decided to move on, concerned that the crowdsourcing model was undervaluing her work and spreading the expectation that she would work for free.

'Designers aren't viewed as serious professionals so they are simply told what to do by clients who are more than likely clueless about design.'

There is indeed added value in working with a traditional designer: 'A professional designer would ensure that the designs he/she proposes are based on research and a solid understanding of the client's business,' explained Oris. 'This requires a good client-designer relationship, which you just can't have when there are dozens of designers clamouring for one client's attention.'

 Perth-based designer Quinton Soe-win thinks that crowdsourcing platforms may prompt a polarisation of the design business, with clients looking for high quality design packages using the traditional designer-client relationship model but online platforms providing quick affordable designs for smaller clients.

He thinks the comparison may actually make clients realise the value they get from a design relationship. 'A lot of good work has come out of local designers educating clients and giving them a level of outcome that they didn't even know they needed, nor should have paid for.

'I'm hoping that the added competition of crowdsourcing just drives up the standard of design expectations in general and that people recognise the increased value. '

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator who specialized in Italian contemporary art and art from the Asia-Pacific area.