ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS:
A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR INDUSTRIAL DESIGNERS

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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Industrial Design
School of Art and Design
Pratt Institute

February 2003
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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all my friends, coworkers, students, and professors who have supported me in my research this past year. My thesis could not have been completed without them, for it is their personal stories of success and failure, frustrations and aspirations that are being told in the following pages.

Thanks to Lucia De Respinis for asking the difficult question, Fred Blumlein for teaching me confidence, and to Ruth Lande Shuman for sharing her inspiring success story. Special thanks to Judy Nylen, Robert Woertendyke, Rick Goodwin, Harvey Bernstein, Mark Sedlack, Peter Valois, Scott Christensen, Allan Chochinov, Chris Etzel and Russel Lopez for their valuable input. I am grateful to Bruce Hannah for his endless supply of sound bites and encouragement to “do it,” and my fellow students who filled out surveys and put up with my incessant, invasive questioning. Heartfelt thanks to Debera Johnson for accommodating me—not only in the last two weeks before thesis presentations, but throughout the last two years. I would like to make special mention of Alina Preciado and Henry Yoo for their insightful words of wisdom, as well as Nil, Frank, Aliya, and Yelena for giving me great advice.

My deepest thanks to Jose Alcala for his guidance far beyond the call of duty, and to RitaSue Siegel for paving the way in her insightful and thorough research over thirty years ago. Finally, heartfelt thanks to Cindy for her endless support in the most difficult of times.
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It seemed like a simple question: “What does it take to be a successful designer?” It rolls off the tongue effortlessly, imploring a pragmatic answer. In the spring of 2001, as I packed my belongings and headed for New York and a higher education, I hoped I would discover a simple explanation or series of steps needed to achieve this goal.

Was it unreasonable to think that the most likely way to uncover the answer to this mystery was as a design student immersed in a field of experts? Somewhere in the midst of all the knowledge and experience, the answer would surely reveal itself. Is the secret to success lots of talent and flashy rendering skills? Is it about mechanical aptitude, form sensitivity, proficiency in the latest CAD programs, and a “psychic feeling” required to predict the next hip design trend? Is it confidence and the ability to network and sell yourself and your ideas?

That seems like a lot to learn in five semesters. I am sure there are designers out there who can’t do all that and are still considered “successful.” But considered successful by whose definition? Their own? The general public? Their peers? When I asked, “What
does it take to be a successful designer?” the response was almost invariably, “It depends on your definition of success.” Indeed it does. I realized I first had to free myself of any preconceived notions of what “success” is, and to open myself up to a much broader definition of the term. Money, fame, happiness, contentment, and fulfillment are words often associated with success, but they do not define success. I also needed to define what I mean by a “designer.” Design is an expansive field and there are many types of designers, each with their own definitions of success. Sadly, I put away my hopes for an easy to follow roadmap or a paint by numbers way of achieving success.

My thesis topic is deceptively simple: “How to be a successful designer.” But of course, there is much more to it than that. It was never intended to ask solely how one finds success in materialistic terms. Rather, it is an exploration of the many facets of industrial designers; the roles, responsibilities, talents, expertise, ambitions, frustrations and insecurities that have an affect on their view of themselves and their work.

My thesis is full of questions. Many of these questions are posed simply to invite the reader to answer for him or herself. I do not pretend to know all the answers—or if answers even exist. Nevertheless, I have a better understanding of the importance of asking such questions in the first place. As Tennessee Williams wrote, “It’s an unanswered question, but let us still believe in the dignity and importance of the question.”

My own personal search for success started long before I enrolled in the master’s program at Pratt Institute. I began my career as an industrial designer 17 years ago. Like many college graduates anxious to start their career, my goal was simple: work for
a corporation or design firm and design products that would soon be out on the shelves making a difference in people’s lives. I was eager, confident, energetic and unafraid. I didn’t care what I was designing, as long as I was getting paid for it and had the opportunity to see my products on the market. I got the job.

Then reality set in.

After a few years of designing less-than-prestigious products for public restrooms, I thought I had finally paid my dues and would soon be designing products that are more meaningful. Again, without much thought as to how I might accomplish this, I went to work for a small corporation whose goal was not to be a leader in their industry, but to be a distant second. They wanted someone who could take their competitor’s ideas, change them slightly, do engineering drawings, and furnish a model or rendering to show to their customers. My title was “industrial designer,” but I didn’t feel like one.

My career drifted slowly and subtly off track from my early aspirations and ended up someplace where creativity takes a back seat to practicality and profit sharing. Not that practicality and profit sharing are bad, I just hoped that they would share the front seat with creativity (or at least the drivers would rotate shifts once in awhile). I was paid well, but unfulfilled and frustrated that many of my product ideas had never been produced. Those that were produced were mere rip-offs of others’ designs, although they were quite lucrative for my employers. The incentive to think of my own ideas and push them through to management dwindled each time I was turned down. I was fat, lazy and discontented. I decided I would get my career on track by going back to school, hone my skills and step up to the plate once more. With a better understanding of the field
and years of experience behind me, I could start hitting some home runs and be “successful”—at least, in the way I defined success.

I have noticed a few signs of my success in the field, such as seeing my window boxes on windowsills and porches all over the United States ten years after I designed them. While traveling in Europe this summer, I came across a baby stroller I designed, one in Paris, France and another one in Stockholm, Sweden. It is gratifying to see something you designed being displayed on a store shelf or being used in public. Yet, I still feel unfulfilled—almost ashamed of my professional work. Even my window boxes are copies of terra cotta planters, already in existence for many years. Surely I can do better than this.

Like many industrial designers, I have a tendency to be very critical of the world around me. Nothing is ever designed well enough it seems. Something can always be improved. A shape can always be more beautiful or a product can always work better. Drawing skills can continually be improved. There is always a better idea, but never enough time or money to make it happen perfectly. We are not perfect, and nothing we design is perfect. How then can designers ever view themselves as successful in spite of their imperfections, which will certainly be noticed in a field of critical eyes?

Everyone experiences life differently, as I have found in my interviews with designers. What determines the quality of our lives is not the experience itself, but how we choose to respond to it. There is no perfect job out there, yet there are plenty of designers who are inspired, optimistic, fulfilled, and see their work as meaningful. I spoke with as many of these designers as I could find. I wanted to know about their outlook on life, and to find out how they choose to respond to their experiences—good or bad. This thesis is
not intended for them; they already know where they are and where they are going. This thesis is a guidebook for those who might stumble on the road to success, lose sight of their destination, or need to look up every once in a while to find out where they are.

The research presented here is qualitative rather than quantitative. There is a place for surveying large numbers of designers to compile percentages, but hidden insights require a little more digging, and have the potential to be much more powerful. They tend to stand out against what the majority might be saying. Therefore, my research concerned itself with compiling key insights, revelations and personal stories of designers in their personal pursuit of success.

There is a certain amount of difficulty in obtaining personal stories, however. Not everyone jumps at the chance to tell anecdotes about their frustrations and failures. A long-time reporter once told me that no one is truly themselves in front of a video camera. So even those who were willing to open up to me, introduced some element of self-censorship, however small. Therefore, my research is admittedly biased in many respects. I believe that many interviewees gave filtered responses even though I chose to interview people with whom I had an established rapport and who would therefore be more willing to share their innermost thoughts, hopes and frustrations with me. Truly, the most insightful comments I obtained were the result of casual conversations with fellow students, friends and professors, and not in the context of a formal interview about my thesis topic. I look forward to sharing those comments with you in the following pages.
Part I

What is Success?

“Those people who enjoy life even through the hardships are the real successors.”

SINOJ JACOB MANUEL
Chapter I

Defining the “S” Word

“Be glad you are unknown, for when you are known,
you will wish you weren’t.”

STEPHEN ANDERSON

Industrial designers have an opportunity to affect the lives of millions of people on a daily basis. If we had our name on every product we designed, (a la Calvin Klein) we would be well known too—even famous. Yet, we do our work behind the scenes, without anyone’s knowledge that we even exist. Indeed, some designers are famous, but not every profession allows for this kind of success. Think for a moment and name a famous dentist, or a famous accountant. A famous librarian, perhaps? I’ll give you two points if you thought of Mr. Dewey—four more if you knew his first name was Melvil.

I am under the impression that fame is not a measure of success for someone in these professions, although respect and recognition from one’s peers most assuredly is. Anyone considering these professions most likely never had a burning desire to be famous or to compare their own success with that of a well-known personality. But in the field of industrial design, we tend to have slightly bigger egos.
We want to see our creations in use, affecting millions of lives. We have competitions and hand out awards. We are so talented, but at times so full of ourselves. We think, “We can change the world!”

Before one sets out to discover what makes a successful designer, one must ask, “What is success?” In the beginning of my research, I assumed everyone had the same definition of success as I did. Don’t we all want to be rich and famous, see our products on the market and be respected by our peers? Apparently not, as I learned in my interviews with designers this past year. Just as there are many types of designers, there are many definitions of success. Mark Sedlack, a designer from the Midwest, had this to say:

“Success for me is being in a position where I can make my own decisions as to what I want to do with my time. Decisions such as what I want to design, who I want to design for and when I want to do something else entirely.”

Since the freedom he speaks of is mostly determined by financial considerations, his immediate goal is to be independently wealthy, leaving as much time as possible to pursue other interests that might or might not be lucrative. How can he accomplish this? After working for a company designing child restraint systems for automobiles, Mark realized that he could make a lot more money doing this work on his own, collecting royalties. He started his own company and works out of his home, doing everything from idea generation and sketching, to working models, CAD work, overseeing tooling and
production of molds, crash tests, graphics—even instruction sheets. He does all this when he is not tearing apart and rebuilding cars in his garage or building computers from scratch. He happens to be one of the smartest people I know, and I have no doubt he will succeed.

I also spoke with a staff designer named Walter, in his mid thirties. When asked about his definition of success as it relates to his career, he said,

“Coming up with a good solution to a problem. Also, I like more complex, challenging problems where I learn about other things in life, such as designing a space museum and learning about space travel.”

Walter’s comments were typical of many designers I interviewed. As I spoke with more designers, my preconceived notions of success slowly began to broaden. There seems to be more to it than just making money. From the responses I received, I came up with nine basic categories of success, or career goals. They are:

1. **Fame:** As in Philippe Starck, Karim Rashid, Charles and Ray Eames
2. **Fortune:** Making large sums of money. The larger, the better.
3. **Recognition From One’s Peers:** And the award goes to…
4. **Affecting People’s Lives:** Contributing to the benefit of society, designing products that help people, and teaching others what you know.
5. **Enjoying What You Do:** You like your work for any number of reasons and like the people with whom you work.
6. **Freedom:** You might be interested in other things besides design and work and more work-like leisure, travel, family or fishing.

7. **Working on interesting projects:** You like what you do and learn from your work.

8. **Turning ideas into reality:** Seeing results by getting products out on the market.

9. **Working for yourself:** Be your own boss, and everyone else’s too.

There are many factors involved in interpreting success for any individual free to choose his or her own lifestyle and career. This freedom of choice cannot be overlooked, nor taken for granted, especially in today’s unsettled world. We are fortunate in our society to have the freedom to choose whatever goals and aspirations we wish regardless of age, sex, religion or color. This is not to say that our goals are easily realized simply because we desire them. It takes a great deal of hard work and a solid plan to achieve anything worthwhile and rewarding. Yet, even with hard work and desire there are no guarantees for success in all we set out to accomplish.

**MASLOW’S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS**

Dr. Abraham Maslow, renowned psychologist and authority on human behavior, claimed that there are five levels of needs: physiological, safety, social, esteem and self-actualization. One’s definition of success may vary depending on which needs have already been fulfilled. For example, once the lower level needs such as money and security are met, a designer may become more concerned with esteem needs, such as recognition for his or her work or contribution to the field of design. In this regard, one’s definition of success changes as his or her surroundings change, as they get older, and as they achieve other goals in life.
MY OWN PERSONAL SUCCESSES

The Bordon Cremora® jar is one of my successes, sort of. It can be seen in grocery stores all over North America, wherever fine processed chemicals that resemble the taste of milk are sold. But just so you don’t get the wrong impression, let me clarify what I actually designed. Not the jar or the label. Not even the cap. I designed the ribs on the side of the cap. The company I worked for paid me a significant amount of money each year to do things like this. Notice how the ribs match up with the ribs on the side of the jar? A simple-minded engineer would never think of that. You might ask, “Why would anyone pay an industrial designer that much to put ribs on the side of a cap?” Perhaps a better question might be to ask, “Why would any designer quit a job that pays that much to put ribs on the side of a cap?” Perhaps it is because the designer would rather spend his time designing something that actually makes a difference in people’s lives (and get paid a lot of money). Some designers may not care what they design as long as they are making money, but in five years only two of my products reached the consumer: this cap, and a little plastic box that holds three pills. Working there, I could not see how I was making a difference in anyone’s life but my own, and I was miserable.

AFFECTING PEOPLE’S LIVES

There is nothing like seeing one of your products in use by an actual person on the street. At first there is a feeling as though you just saw an old friend (or in some cases, enemy) and want to run up and introduce yourself. This is immediately followed by a
feeling of fear and trepidation as you wonder what the user (victim) actually thinks of your product. They may be quite satisfied or they may be ready to throw it away.

My advice is this: **Do not come any closer until you have assessed the situation for at least ten minutes.** If you hear any swearing, leave the vicinity immediately. You may have already achieved your goal of affecting people’s lives.

I designed baby strollers for Century Products Company, so I always have my eye out for them. I noticed a family using this stroller in Stockholm, Sweden. It looked like one I designed so I stared at it intently. I don’t speak Swedish, so I couldn’t tell if they were swearing, but I must have been standing too close—they caught me looking. I can only imagine what they were thinking when they saw this stranger staring at their baby as if it had three eyes. I assured them that I was not a child molester eager to get my hands on their 2-year-old, but was merely looking to see if their stroller was the one I had designed—and it was, to my surprise.

“What do you mean you designed it?” I get this reaction frequently from people who catch me staring. A designer hopes one’s reaction would be something more like, “Oh, that’s wonderful! I’ve always wanted to meet the designer and thank him for making my life so much easier!” On one occasion, I did get such a response but people usually look at you as if you are from another planet. I once designed a “strainer” for urinals in public restrooms very early in my illustrious career. I have learned that it is best not to approach anyone using that product under any circumstance.
Success means something different to everyone, but there is one universal truth for any definition of success; it is the realization of one’s goals, whatever they may be. Once I recognized this, I knew I was getting close to a universal definition of the “S” word. After struggling with the wording for an hour or so, I came up with the following definition as it applies to my thesis question:

**Success: The realization of one’s goals, whatever they may be.**

You may feel that I was a little hard on designers at the beginning of this chapter, but I am not the only one to have this view. In his book entitled, “What is a Designer: Education and Practice,” Norman Potter shared a similar view:

“*We do well to remember that designers are ordinary human beings, as prone as others (given half a chance) to every human weakness, including an exaggerated idea of their own consequence.*”

Or as one unknown designer put it:

“A designer can’t change society much, if at all. He CAN do a good job on his little chair or car- that’s all.”

I think designers can do great things for people, and I think this is one of the reasons we are compelled to create. Nevertheless, certain controlling factors must be in place for success to occur. To some, success happens frequently and to others hardly at all. To some, it happens early in their career and to others, much later. Many find fulfillment from internal sources and many look for it from external sources. But I believe fulfillment and success can be found eventually in all of us.
Chapter 2

First Things First

“Most people aim at nothing in life and hit it with amazing accuracy.”

ANONYMOUS

Success is influenced by internal factors, which are under your control, and external factors, which are not under your control. The more factors you are in control of, the better your chances are of achieving success. Setting goals for yourself is the best way to be in control of your life and your career. Resist the temptation to do what “everyone else” wants you to do, and instead do what you think is right for you. Unless it is your decision, you will never be able to give it your total attention and commitment.

GOAL SETTING

No matter what your definition of success is, the only way you can realize a goal is if you have one in the first place. It sounds obvious, but many people do not have goals and wonder why they never get anywhere. Others get somewhere but wonder why they are nowhere near where they wanted to be. Rick Brinkman, author of “Life by Design” explains:

“Setting goals is not so much about moving forward in the future, but rather pointing yourself in the right direction, so that when you are in the future you are close to where you want to be.”
There are plenty of books written on setting and achieving goals. I will not spend time discussing information that is covered more fully and is readily available elsewhere, but I want to stress their importance in achieving success.

In my research, I came across different goal setting philosophies. One entails setting goals that are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and within a certain Time frame. These are known as S.M.A.R.T. goals. By setting goals with these characteristics, one has a much better chance of achieving them. Achieving smaller goals builds confidence, which enables you to set and achieve goals that are more ambitious. Another philosophy as told to me by Bruce Hannah, is to aim as high as you can. He says, “Pick an unrealistic goal and miss it, but go farther than you thought you could.”

Regardless as to which philosophy you choose, you must first define your values, then set goals that coincide with those values. For example, if you find that you value nature, it wouldn’t make much sense for you to set a goal that involves designing jet skis that may cause harm to the environment even if you think jet skis look cool. If your goals agree with what you value in life, you will have a much better chance of finding yourself in a position where you are fulfilled. Be clear as to what you want from your career and where you want to be in the future. Although one should keep an eye out for signs of success wherever they are, do not rely entirely on “I’ll know it when I see it” type thinking when setting your goals. It is important to identify what you want and visualize yourself doing it.
STUDENTS’ GOALS

I was particularly interested in learning about students’ goals as they looked toward their design careers. Had they put much thought into their goals? As an undergraduate student many years ago, I don’t remember thinking much about my goals, although I’m sure I did at some point on my way to class one day. A good deal of my own dissatisfaction in the field can be attributed to my lack of awareness of what I wanted when I got out. Perhaps I was too concerned with getting my projects done on time, but I do not think the importance of self determination was mentioned in my undergraduate program. How to design your life, set career goals and know how to achieve them requires a great deal of thought and foresight.

Those students I surveyed had varied responses, however the categories with the most responses were “Working on interesting projects” and “Affecting people’s lives.” Also high on the list were “Great job environment” and “Working for yourself.”

I could not tell from the responses whether or not the students had previously put much thought into their goals. I should have pressed the issue, but they seemed tired and overworked to me, as if they needed more sleep. The responses did tell me what I suspected all along about designers:

Designers like to help people.
Designers want to be challenged.
Designers are concerned about their work environment.
What is important is not that students have a career goal by the time they graduate, but that they **know the importance of setting goals**, which can determine their future success and level of fulfillment in their career.

**EXTERNAL FACTORS**

External factors can also have a tremendous impact on one’s success. Sometimes you can do everything right and still come up short on the success scale. One designer spoke to me about the importance of having a client that sees your vision and supports you:

> “I think the most important thing is a good client. You can have all the great ideas in the world, but if your client does not see the value or doesn’t have the interest or confidence in your ideas, you can’t be a success.”

Finally, sometimes you just have to be in the right place at the right time. Luck and success sometimes go hand in hand. We do not have any control over when it happens, but we do have control over how we perceive our luck, and how we take advantage of happenstance. Sometimes the wrong answer to a problem is the right answer to another problem. Seeing where one can apply a solution to an unrelated problem can be the key to a great idea.