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DESIGN

CONQUER

A MENTORSHIP SCHEME FOR DESIGNERS IS FILLING AN IMPORTANT GAP IN A FIELD WHERE A LACK OF BUSINESS ACUMEN OFTEN LEAVES CREATIVES WITHOUT REAL-WORLD SKILLS TO TAKE THEIR IDEAS TO MARKET



DESIGNER PAUL JUSTIN'S NEW PRODUCT IS CALLED MAKEDO. It is a clever little clip that can be used to connect found objects such as cardboard boxes or old takeaway cups in a creative way. He describes it as "Lego with a conscience". At first sight, it is a project with a social agenda that's a long way from design consultant Ewan McEoin's attitude towards the sector: "If you are in the design business, the free market should determine the success of your idea," he says in a warning to aspiring product designers. "You make money if it is a good idea, and if it is well made and well retailed and you do all the fundamental things right."

The problem is that designers are more likely to miss the fundamental things. The first mistake is designing something for which there is no market: "It's a false assumption that you can populate the world with more lampshades and stools and everyone is going to make a living out of that," McEoin says. Architects may not be the best people at running a business, but professional practice is a significant part of their postgraduate education. Pity designers then, who often leave college clueless about the business context in which they produce ideas.

To tackle this, McEoin and fellow consultant Heidi Dokulil – both former editors of architecture and design magazines – set up Springboard, a mentorship program that, since March 2008, has taken 100 designers, including Justin, through the nuts and bolts of business, to a point where they can make informed decisions about their careers. "It's a boot camp for designers on how to run a business better, how to market, how to do PR and then how to understand more about labelling and assessing sustainable products," McEoin explains.

Unlike in medicine, say, or mainstream business practice, mentorship in design is a rarity. But the lack of basic knowledge still came as a surprise to Dokulil: "Many of the people didn't know how to cost their product and didn't know how a retailer would then mark that up." Or that many well-known imported brands are significantly cheaper than local products because of the economies of scale in their production. Many, too, have not consulted a lawyer over crucial questions such as copyright and had a 'why bother?' attitude to market research. "It was seen as a burden," McEoin says.



EWAN MCEOIN + HEIDI DOKULIL // SPRINGBOARD



It's no surprise, then, that most designers remain micro-businesses, barely paying themselves or anyone else, not even meeting the definition of a small business – one employing between five and 20 people. Australian retailers, in turn, become frustrated by the expectation among local designers that they will pay in advance for stock that may not arrive on schedule. “Once the designer understands the needs of the retailer and the connection has been made, it is amazing how flexible [retailers] can be if they see a good idea and someone trying to build a business,” Dokulil observes. “There is a way of finding a path to it – it is just starting a conversation.”

Springboard was set up using an Australia Council grant to support a tender to AusIndustry, which in turn awarded McEoin's Studio Propeller company and Dokulil's Parcel Group a Building Entrepreneurship in Small Business (BESB) contract to run the mentoring program. Similar schemes in New Zealand and Britain have been successful, as has a Dutch project that links the best new ideas to teams of venture capitalists in a competitive process. Springboard ran workshops in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, where mentors from successful design businesses gave the groups the benefit of their experience.

The course aimed at broadly equipping designers to produce items for retail. The expert mentors included people such as IP lawyer Peter English; co-founder of Dinosaur Designs, Liane Rossler; the director of Design Communication Associates, Bradford Gorman; and retailers Format Furniture and Space Furniture. They helped participants assemble a business plan and work out their direction. “We defined the differences between visual art practice, or craft practice, and a design business,” McEoin says.

The intent was that the 20 participants showing superior entrepreneurship and ideas would go through to stage two – detailed one-on-one and small-group mentoring. “We actually only accepted 17,” Dokulil says. “We were assessing them not just on their idea but on their picture of what they wanted to do, because stage two was to commercialise something. In some cases, it wasn't a product that was the outcome but a really strong business direction.”

For Melbourne-based Justin, the mentorship scheme came at just the right time: “It was like Springboard had been custom-written for me,” he says. “I had been working as a creative director of a product agency and I left to explore my own ideas. I set up a home studio and I was plodding along. I had plenty of design ideas but didn't know what to do next.

“Finance and marketing were languages I just didn't know. [The scheme] was geared to what I didn't even know I wanted to ask,” Justin continues. “The idea of trying to design systems and not just a particular product affected me hugely.” The makedo clip is the result. Justin has teamed up with his old company, Buzz Products, and the clip has just had a soft launch. “We've not designed the end product,” he says, “we've designed the means to an end product.” There is also a website that allows makedo users to share their creations online.

Another brand to emerge from the Springboard process, again in Melbourne, is Native – a range of furniture produced in a collaboration between experienced manufacturer Rob Young and recently graduated designer Dhiren Bhagwandas. “All designer-makers have a ‘build it and they will come’ mentality,” admits Rob Young, who has more than 15 years of experience and makes furniture for the likes of Coco Republic.

Although a successful businessman, he joined Springboard to get design back into the heart of his work. It helped him “integrate entrepreneurship and design” and to develop a targeted approach to setting up the new brand with Bhagwandas. The first collection has been launched and he



ELLIAT RICH // URBAN BILLY



ROHAN NICOL // LUCELUX LIGHTING



PAUL JUSTIN // MAKEDO



DHIREN BHAGWANDAS // NATIVE TABLE + STOOLS



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hopes to export, assisted by a brand identity created by Christey Johansson and Marcus Piper of studio one8one7, one that extends to hosting lunches with organic caterer Fresh Fork.

Young now has an afternoon shift at his 13-strong Melbourne factory dedicated to manufacturing the Native collection: “Springboard has basically taken me somewhere I was ready to go but wouldn’t have got there by myself.” He is very much the director working with the designers and is happy to have clarified for himself the breakdown of responsibilities. It is these insights into how to organise a business, more than simply launching a new product, that have had a significant impact on the participating designers.

Alice Springs-based Elliot Rich is one of a number who, post-Springboard, have split their practice into two in order to have a clearer sense of what they are trying to achieve in each. Rich now has both her company, Telegraph, where she works for clients on design projects that can range from web pages to public art, and Elliot Rich Design, which develops more conceptual products, such as her Urban Billy teaset.

Another product she’s working on is called Lichen – a coat that unfolds to a tent – which has pricked the interest of the Australian Army. “Prior to Springboard, I was happy to have the Urban Billy as [just] an image in a magazine,” she reveals. Although still very much at the craft end of the spectrum, the clear division of her labour has allowed her to contemplate getting the teaset made in small batches. The price point “is still in the wings” but she’s thinking about it.

In Wagga Wagga, meanwhile, Rohan Nicol has similarly split his business between mass commercial work and his studio craftwork. Nicol has been working with local company Precision Signs, which makes lighting units for gaming lounges among other things, to develop his own lighting range. He has been adjusting his vacuum-formed plastic lights to match the skills and machinery available at the Precision Signs plant, and the two parties are now working together; Precision provides the manufacturing, storage and distribution while Nicol handles the design and matters such as marketing.

“My own motivation was to develop a sustainable practice in the financial sense – it is about making a buck,” he says of his mentoring experience. “I recognised that if I was going to get any volume I needed to collaborate with industry.” A traditional handmaker, he trained himself in CAD modelling

AN UNEXPECTED BENEFIT HAS BEEN THE DISCOVERY OF A WEALTH OF UNTAPPED MANUFACTURING TALENT

so he could work with the factory. “I have set myself up so [that five years’ out] I can do the [lights] in [lots of] 1,000. I have a much more nuanced understanding of the market.”

Nicol, who is also an academic at Charles Sturt University, is now of the view that all designers would benefit from business training, although squeezing that into already tight course timetables is the problem. One option Charles Sturt

has established is a double degree – a BA in Jewellery and a BA in Business, available in 2010. There are also state-based mentorship schemes, such as those operated in Queensland. For example, the CAST program teams up three jewellers with a business mentor. However these tend to be aimed more at craft-based practitioners.

For McEoin and Dokulil, these less tangible outcomes are a vital part of the success of Springboard, as is an open-access website the pair have funded themselves, which carries all the findings and resources developed in the first round of Springboard – a creative commons – and which acts as a virtual design community.

Another unexpected benefit has been the discovery of a wealth of manufacturing talent across Australia waiting to be tapped: “You have people who invest millions of dollars in machinery and don’t want it sitting there idle,” McEoin says. But there are also manufacturing skills there that will soon die unless put to new use. “There is an element of Springboard that is brokerage, go-betweening and facilitation. We are encouraging people to find a really great idea that fits a gap in the market. Don’t just end up being a service provider or giving your idea away for someone else to make for you.”

Whether Springboard will go ahead with a new batch of designers is uncertain. The federal government has abandoned the BESB grants, in favour of support for specific industry sectors. McEoin and Dokulil are preparing a case to take back to government. The benefits, they say, are not in new models of chairs and lamps but in using design thinking to tackle bigger societal issues, such as an ageing population, waste reduction or taking advantage of new materials.

People like Paul Justin are now evangelists for the mentorship route: “Springboard gave me a very holistic viewpoint,” he says. “I got to design the business. I went in a product designer and have left an inventive, blogging marketer communicating a socio-ecological message via a global web business.” ■

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