

Lessons Learned

Top agency creatives share best advice from valued mentors.

SUE ANDERSON, executive creative director, Crispin Porter + Bogusky
“Sandy deWitt at TBWA\Hunt\Lascaris in Johannesburg, South Africa,



taught me to make a decision and stick with it. Every day we’re faced with reasons why we shouldn’t do good work: it’s too scary, too hard to pull off, there’s no time, no money, etc. You have to be brave and commit to your choices in the face of adversity. If you waver, nothing will turn out the way you imagined it.”



RICK CONDOS, co-chief creative officer, ARGONAUT
“When Steve Simpson, my former creative director at Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, first hired me as a writer,

he said, ‘Don’t do anything for two weeks except read this client info. You need to know more about this account than anyone else before you can begin to write an ad.’ That advice formed who I’ve become as a creative—now I want to know everything possible about a client. Information others think is irrelevant can often reveal the biggest insights.”

JAIME ROBINSON, vice president and executive creative director, Pereira & O’Dell
“When I became ECD here, my mentor and chief creative officer, PJ Pereira, encouraged



me to open up to other co-workers and team-mates solving the same problem. As advertising creatives, we are naturally competitive. We fight our entire careers to be the one who solves it. But there’s no room for that as a creative leader. That mindset not only ruins the department’s morale, but (gasp!) you may not always have the best answer.”



PAM FUJIMOTO, executive creative director, WONGDOODY LA
“My first job in advertising was as art director at

WONGDOODY Seattle, where Tracy Wong, chairman and co-founder, became my mentor. One of the most valuable lessons I learned was to always be direct and fair in your feedback as a leader. It’s easy to be the lazy CD that tells creatives everything is crap. It’s much harder to articulate why and motivate your creative team to figure out a solution.”

MIKE CAGUIN, chief creative officer, Colle+McVoy
“My first job as an art director was at a small agency in Baltimore where I partnered with Jeff Grutkowski, a copywriter several years my senior. He taught me that generating and crafting ideas won’t always come



easily and that effort is just as important as talent. But if you stick with it and push through, there’s always a solution. Forging a new path is exponentially more difficult than traveling down an existing one.”

ANNE ELISCO-LEMME, creative director, Duncan/Channon
“Early in my career I worked with associate creative director and writer Cathy



Bowen at a relatively unknown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, creative shop. Cathy taught me that if you don’t get all tingly about an idea, if your stomach doesn’t do a little flutter, the idea probably isn’t good enough. We sometimes gauge our productivity on how many campaign ideas we come up with. But did you land on the one? If not, don’t stop digging.”

KEYS TO A KICK-ASS MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP

I’ve been a freelancer the majority of my creative career, first as a designer, then as a copywriter. I purposefully chose this DIY path for the freedom it entailed (hello, coffee shop-turned-offices and makeup-free workdays). But for all the perks, there’ve been just as many tear-drenched days and head-banging-the-wall nights when I would’ve given anything for creative guidance—someone to help navigate those tough challenges on the page and in the field. Eventually, I found my way... with flailing arms, hard work, my husband’s insightful advice and experience teaching me what not to do.

But here’s the insider secret: whatever route you choose, freelance life or agency life, there’s no need to be the lone creative trekking the wilds of the advertising jungle on your own. In fact, asking for help and guidance is exactly how many of the industry’s top visionaries achieved success. Following in their wise footsteps, we turned to them for counsel on finding and making a kick-ass mentor-mentee relationship.

Play the field

“Stating the obvious, start by seeking out someone you respect,” advises Anne Elisco-Lemme, creative director at Duncan/Channon.

In other words, keep your radar on the industry, read a lot and make note of who’s doing great work. If you’re a student, scope out your instructors. If you’re in an agency, pay attention in meetings, probe the talent around you, and study what they do and how they do it—and not just within your discipline.

“Some of the most interesting mentors come from different backgrounds and bring a unique perspective,” says Carolyn Hadlock, principal and executive creative director of Young & Laramore, who learned volumes about strategy from the agency’s CEO, Paul Knapp. “As a former lawyer, he processed situations so differently than my creative counterparts. I’ve learned a lot about asking good questions from him.”

Mike Caguin, chief creative officer at Colle+McVoy, couldn’t agree more. “Creative minds get into this business to be creative, but often need help developing other skills to succeed.” Whether it’s learning perseverance, how to effectively present ideas or how to manage stressful workloads, Caguin recommends keeping an eye out for good mentors everywhere: in different departments within your agency, at local clubs, in associations, at conferences and even among friends of friends.

And although finding one mentor is great, John Cornette, senior vice president and executive creative director at Erwin Penland, advises mining for mentor gold in more than one river. “In my career, I’ve always looked for traits that creatives excelled at and focused on learning from them in that specific area. Over time, you gain knowledge from a lot of different people to find your own style.”

Be the hungry hunter

But the key to scoring that sought-after adviser? “Don’t wait for them to come to you,” urges John Butler, executive creative director of Butler, Shine, Stern & Partners, who made it a career-long practice of reaching out to writers and art directors he admired for feedback and advice.

Rick Condos, co-chief creative officer at ARGONAUT, adds, “A writer at our agency approached me and said, ‘Once a month, I want to have coffee with you.’ If I forget, she’ll remind me, and I’m so glad she does. There’s no downtime in business, so mentees have to push to make it happen.” Even beyond requesting time, Condos believes the onus is on you as the mentee to bring questions, keep the dialogue going and show you’re motivated. Whether it’s asking for critiques, inquiring about valuable lessons learned,

listening to criticism you might not want to hear or giving feedback, don’t wait for the mentor to take the lead.

Make it work

Of course, it takes two to make sparks fly. If someone is interested in mentoring, they’ll pick up the reins, make themselves available and involve you in the learning process. “The best mentors ask, ‘What would you do?’” says Craig Mangan, executive vice president and executive creative director at BBDO. When they were both working at Goodby Silverstein & Partners, creative director Jamie Barrett would invite Mangan to pull up a chair next to his monitor. “I’d watch Jamie craft things over and over. It showed me his mindset and allowed me to absorb the tricks he used to get somewhere great. Then when I was working alone, I didn’t second-guess myself nearly as much.”

It also helps if you share the same values, have similar creative tastes and have a mutual respect for one another. But the best relationships offer a true give-and-take, with the mentor artfully blending brutal honesty with encouragement and the mentee ready to put words into action. “Find someone who makes you feel really insecure because of how great they are, but who also inspires you to become half as great as they are,” advises Mangan.

JEANIE CAGGIANO, executive vice president and executive creative director, Leo Burnett “Kent Middleton, an ECD at Leo Burnett and one of my most influential mentors, advised me, ‘Sometimes you’ve gotta let the train hit the wall.’ In other words, you can’t control everything: clients will have hissy fits, creatives will go AWOL, your boss will pick the wrong idea, etc. So fight it as long as you can, but at a certain point, let it happen. Then swoop in and fix the situation. Out of crisis comes opportunity.”



CHRIS ROBB, partner and chief creative officer, Push “I was lucky to work closely with David Lubars at BBDO West and Fallon, and observe how someone that successful could be so down-to-earth and genuine. It was refreshing and gave me faith that you can be focused on big time work and not be a schmuck. Less-talented people try to baffle you with bullshit, especially with all of today’s new technology. But David had a way of inspiring you to really push things by just keeping it clear and simple.”



JOHN BUTLER, executive creative director, Butler, Shine, Stern & Partners “In the eighties, I was fortunate to be one of the young art directors that Jerry Roach, creative director at JWT New York, took under his wing. He taught me how to use typography more visually, to push against design norms and not to rely on preconceived notions of what something should look like. I learned that nuance is everything and to agonize over the details. I have Jerry to thank for driving plenty of people crazy over the years!”



“It’s weird to say my professional mentor was a relative, but it’s true. One of the best pieces of advice my father and former Fallon president and creative director, Bill Westbrook, gave me was, ‘Never take a job for the money. Find one that gives you the opportunity to learn and grow.’ The second-best advice he gave was, ‘If you don’t do bad work, bad work won’t get done.’ Push yourself, don’t settle and be relentless in finding a better way. When I was able to combine those two pieces of advice, I found confidence in my work.”

—**TRIPP WESTBROOK**, executive creative director and partner, Firehouse

KAT GORDON, founder and creative director, Maternal Instinct; founder, 3% Conference “The first creative director to hire me, Fred Schwartz at Anderson & Lembke in San Francisco—now at Left Field—became a great mentor. Looking over my portfolio, he once commented that my writing was stronger than the accompanying art and that I needed to demand more from my art director. This gave me the confidence to stand up for my ideas and the realization that I had to care about the entire creative execution, not just the words.”



STEVE GRIMES, creative director and copywriter, The Richards Group “Shon Rathbone, my mentor and executive creative director at Publicis Dallas, showed me that being a good leader is a lot like shifting your mindset from renting to owning. For renters, every problem is someone else’s. But owners own their problems. When I moved into a leadership role, I approached it like I had equity in the company and was responsible for its success or failure. When you approach it like you own it, you have a whole new perspective and work ethic.”



CAROLYN HADLOCK, principal and executive creative director, Young & Laramore “Years ago, when I was an art director at Young & Laramore, I was going through a tough time juggling multiple projects. David Young, the agency’s co-founder, asked me how I was holding up. I said I was good—even though I was incredibly stressed out. He said he admired that I wouldn’t allow myself to become a victim and be defined by my circumstances. Though there are days when my whiny self kicks in, I hear David’s words and they right me.”



MENTOR PROGRAMS

ADVERTISING

The Advertising Club of New York’s ADvantage Mentor Program
WHERE: Online
CAREER LEVEL: Any
COST: Free
URL: theadvertisingclub.org
 This six-month mentorship includes one monthly phone call and at least two office hours by phone, email or in person.

The 3% Conference Speed Mentoring
WHERE: San Francisco, Atlanta
CAREER LEVEL: Any
COST: \$122–\$975 (conference fees)
URL: 3percentconf.com
 Like speed dating, 20 creative directors offer fast-paced one-on-one conversations, as part of the main or mini-conferences, with the opportunity for longer-term mentorships.

ADC Portfolio Night
WHERE: More than 20 cities worldwide
CAREER LEVEL: Any
COST: \$10–\$25
URL: portfolionight.com
 Aspiring copywriters, art directors and designers brush shoulders with creative directors for advice, networking and recruitment.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Adobe Design Achievement Awards Student Mentorships
WHERE: Online
CAREER LEVEL: Students and recent grads
COST: Free
URL: adobeawards.com
 Fifty accomplished professionals select mentees from the winners of the Adobe Design Achievement Awards and give feedback on their portfolios.

AIGA Chicago Mentor Program
WHERE: Chicago
CAREER LEVEL: Any
COST: Free
URL: chicago.aiga.org
 From an initial group of up to 80 designers, small groups form around common interests and mentor one another. Past groups have visited local agencies and even designed and written a cookbook.

Institute for Human Centered Design’s Access to Design Professions
WHERE: Online
CAREER LEVEL: Students or entry-level designers
COST: Free
URL: humancentereddesign.org
 Funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, this program enables professionals to mentor designers with disabilities.

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