GOING IT ALONE Q&A
Andi Schwartz - Reflector Printing

What is your full name, the name of your company and your department?

My name is Andi DeAnn Schwartz. The company I work for is The Reflector Newspaper. My department is called Reflector Printing.

What types of services do you provide? (creative, production, printing)

Reflector Printing is a small print shop providing full graphic design services for printed materials such as business cards, flyers, envelopes, forms, etc. We print some jobs in-house and broker out the rest.

On average, how many stakeholders do you support on a regular basis?

I only support a few internal stakeholders, mostly the newspaper ad sales staff and the front office. A majority of my work is from the 400+ print department customers I serve.

What are the top three challenges you face in your role as the sole designer supporting your organization?

The top three challenges I face are: project tracking, being a creative in an administrative job and working with people in other departments.

How do you address these challenges?

Project tracking: I use software to make quotes, enter jobs, make job tickets, create invoices for the front office. It does track jobs at what status they are at, but I'm the only one that uses the software. So I keep a clipboard on my desk with a form I created detailing jobs in progress, when proofs were sent, when they were ordered, etc. That way if a front office employee can't find me and needs to tell a customer if their order has been received, they can hopefully find the information on there. It has been useful for myself to see if jobs need to be followed up on, that they don't fall through the cracks. For my pressman, a white board has been installed for me to write jobs he's working on, the due dates, the stock used, etc.

Being a creative in an administrative job: It can get overwhelming when you know you have to spend time on designing a layout, but you also have quotes to work on or orders to process. And then you have a customer call or come into the office and you need to be patient while you discuss options with them. I often have to proof a job to a customer while feeling like I could've done better if I could've focused on it without the administrative tasks. I haven't really found a way to address this, I think it's just the nature of my job. I mostly try to knock out paperwork tasks in the morning and design projects in the afternoon. Of course, this is always open to change as needed. I have to be flexible and change gears often. I'm also looking into ways to further my design knowledge and skills with online training. With my job, I do end up with a lot of prepping customer's files or creating simple business cards that I feel like I get in a rut creatively.

Working with other departments: I work in my own little world in a different part of the building from our newspaper and related staff. Other departments know that I'm where they get fliers or other stationary printed. But they rarely come to me for design help. I think this is because when I'm at deadline for big projects, I feel quite overwhelmed (working on that one!), and they don't want to "overload me". So I get items to print that are designed by others and I feel it could've been done much better (we promote that we do custom design, but our own items don't look like it!). Or it's frustrating to see design choices made on the newspaper that I think could be better. It's hard knowing that with all my job tasks, I can not take on more design tasks around me. My design services are usually tied up with outside clients who are paying for my services. I try to remind myself that I'm in charge of and responsible for the print department, not the newspaper or advertising departments. I do feel isolated quite a bit. I really have to make a strong effort to talk to those in other departments to try and stay somewhat connected.

What are some of the advantages of being the only designer?

I have creative control. I can make design choices that I have understood my customer to want since I am the only person to talk to them about it. I can take credit for jobs that turn out beautifully.

How do you manage the workload and do you have the option of outsourcing certain projects?

I try to be up front with my customers and realistic about turn around times. I have a pretty good understanding of how long it takes to turn around certain projects. I do not have anyone else in the office that can do the tasks that my job requires. So as my workload increases, I just do my best to prioritize my tasks and stay on track. We have not outsourced design services. It's something I've never researched doing.

Do you work with any creative staffing agencies for on-site freelance support?

No we have not. As a designer myself, this is one of my strongest qualities I bring to my job. I personally would not want to hire a freelance designer so I can do more paperwork. Our way of processing jobs is quite unique, to train a person for only occasional work would not be worth it to us. Our workload fluctuates from week to week with no real consistency to it. We adjust as needed.

As the only designer do you find there's a general lack of opportunity for career growth at your organization?

I feel that I'm in a very unique position. I may not be able to "move up" in the company as I'm already at the head of the department. Right now, I feel that there is a lot I can do to move my position of Print Manager to a higher level. I feel the success of our print shop is something that my co-worker and I can work together to grow. It's really just the two of us that make up the whole print department, so we have the freedom to make decisions on the future, what type of services we want to offer or promote, how we want to advertise, etc.

How do you provide coverage when you're out sick or on vacation?

Vacation. That would be nice! I had quite a bit of vacation left over last year. I am the only one who designs for our print shop, the only one that knows how to use the estimating software, the only one who knows how to make job tickets. I can arrange to be off for a day at most. If I'm sick, I'm checking in on things or processing orders from home via remote desktop (Go To My PC). My e-mail is web-based, I can check it on my phone too. My co-worker will be working at learning the software so he can cover that end for me when needed.

Do you find value in networking with designers from other companies?

This is something that until the last week, hasn't even crossed my mind to do! I'm a little intimidated by it as well. When you are a sole designer for over four years, you do start to doubt your creative skills. I think I would GREATLY benefit from networking with other designers, especially other designers who are sole designers in their company.

Do you attend industry conferences like the UCDA Conference, HOW Conference, InHOWse Conference, etc?

No, I have not had the opportunity or privilege of doing so. Some day!

Do industry organizations like AIGA, UCDA and InSource provide any value?

I'm certain they do. I've only just begun looking into the resources and services they provide. I've spent the last four and a half years plugging away at my job every day, just doing the things I needed to keep it going. Now, I'm at a point where I feel like I'm ready to learn how to do my job BETTER! I'm excited that there are resources out there for designers. I'm excited about InSource. I have just signed up for it, and even just reading the titles of the articles, I can tell there is a wealth of information for myself and other creatives in a sole designer position. I'm anxious to see the growth of that service.

What is the strangest request you've ever received from a client?

This actually happened just last week. A local artist called saying he had a painting of a heart with circles like pearls around it. His request was to have me create computer software for him that he could use on his computer that could place any combination of letters in the circles around the heart, like names. I explained to him that I could scan in his artwork, create a file in my design software where I could then place type as needed. He says, "Don't computers work mathematically? Can't you just give it numerical coordinates to tell it where to place the letters?" I told him he would need to find someone that could write software for him to do that and would be quite an extensive undertaking for only that task. "You don't write software?" he asks. "So if I call another graphic designer, they're going to tell me the same thing?" "Yes, sir, most likely." I reply. "Well maybe I'm barking up the wrong tree for what I want to do. Thanks for your help."

Do you use any type project management/job tracking software?

Up until November 2010, we were using custom DOS software written by the guy who worked on our computers! It had been in consistent use since September 1995. When my then boss retired and we had new owners, I pushed for the purchase of Printfire Morning Flight Gold (printfire.com) which allows us to estimate printing jobs and track jobs. It helps that I had a few years learning about print production with the help of my co-worker Mike who runs the in-houses presses and bindery equipment. Although the interface is a little quirky and outdated looking, it has been a wonderful program for what we need.