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## Resourceful Designer Episode 328: Using Pitch Work To Grow Your Design Business

Now, let's get right down to the main topic which is Growing your design business using patchwork. Now, I don't want you to confuse patchwork with specwork. Spec work is when a client asks you to design something, and there's only a slim chance of you getting paid for the work. It can either be as part of a contest where they ask multiple people to design something and only the winner of the contest will actually get paid. Or it may be a client asks you to design something as part of a proposal. You wanna propose something? Well, design something for us to see. And if we like the proposal, we'll pay you for it. If not, you don't get paid. That's spec work.

Designing something for a client without being paid and only with the possibility of getting paid if the client likes and decides to work with you. Now pitch work, on the other hand, is and there are some similarities. Pitch work is also possibly working for free or working for a big discount. But it's not the client asking you for the work. It's you presenting work that the client didn't ask for. Now you may be thinking to yourself, well, that doesn't make sense, Mark. How why would I present work to a client if they didn't ask for it? Well, let me tell you, I've found it personally to be one of the best ways to, 1, gain new clients and to get known in an industry. Now as you may or may not know, I run multiple design businesses.

I have my main design business, Marksman Design, that I've had since 2005. And that, I'm more of a generalist designer. I do web sites and all sorts of graphic designs for all sorts of clients. And then in 2019, I started Podcast Branding, which is another design company that focuses specifically on the podcast niche. Now before I started podcast branding, I actually got into that niche using pitchwork. And I'll tell you how I did it. I've gotten in the habit over the years that whenever I acquire new software, New assets, maybe some fonts or some nifty tools or, nifty resources, whatever. Anytime I get something new and I wanna play around, I wanna test it out.

I wanna see how it works. Maybe try to figure out how I could incorporate it into my regular design routine. I usually fool around with it, but I don't like just fooling around. I like creating something. And if I'm gonna create something, I might as well create something that's useful. And in this particular case, this example I'm gonna tell you about, I downloaded a brand new font from, a bundle I purchased from Design Cuts. You're not sure what Design Cuts is? Visit [resourcefuldesigner.com/designcuts](https://resourcefuldesigner.com/designcuts). It is a wonderful place that has all sorts of resources for designers.

Well, they used to sell or actually, they do sell these bundles from time to time that have all sorts of assets including fonts. Well, this 1 bundle I bought had this really nifty font, and I was trying to figure out how I can use it. It it had variations. Every single letter in the the alphabet had multiple variations. So I wanted to try it out. How would, like, variation 1 look if with this letter, variation 2 with that letter, and so forth? But as I said, I don't like to just play around for the sake of playing around. I like creating things. So in my mind, I thought of a friend of mine.

Actually, Wayne Henderson, the same man who does the intro to my Resourceful Designer podcast. Well, Wayne at the time had a podcast for his voice over business. And the artwork that Wayne was using was something he had designed himself. And, Wayne won't mind me saying this, but the artwork Wasn't very good. So when I got this new font, I said, you know what? I'll design some artwork for Wayne. So I fooled around with it. I came up with something that I thought was really Cool, really cutting edge at the time, very nice design. And I designed the entire podcast artwork, and then I sent it to Wayne.

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And I said, Wayne, I had some time on my hands. I designed this. Feel free to use it. If you don't wanna use it, that's fine. It's okay. But there is no use to me, so you might as well have it. And what happened was Wayne immediately started using that new artwork because it was so much better than what he had, and Wayne started telling people about it. He started passing my name around.

He started sharing with people where his new artwork came from. Now it just so happened that, a couple of months later, I had some more design assets, and I decided to create something new. And it just so happened again that it was a 2nd podcast that Wayne and another friend of mine, Troy, were doing. Both of them are fans of the American football team, the Green Bay Packers, and they have a podcast. In fact, Wayne still has the podcast called Packers Fan Podcast. So once again, I just took it upon myself. I was fooling around with some things. I took it upon myself, and I designed some new artwork for their podcast.

And I sent it off to them. And now Troy got on board, and he started telling people about the artwork that I'd done for them. Not necessarily just saying, hey, Mark gave us this free artwork. It was more like, Wow. Look at this great artwork Mark produced. And my name started getting pushed around. And then people started coming to me asking for artwork. Asking how much I would do it for.

Now Remember, this was before I started podcast branding, so I was just telling people a price off the top of my head. I wasn't sure what to do, or I didn't have a fixed rate like I did with podcast branding. But what happened was word got around, it started to spread, and I started to become known as Mark, the graphic designer who designs for podcasts. Then in 2019, I was going to a conference, and I was gonna be speaking at this podcast conference about branding. And I thought, you know, instead of just being Mark the guy who can design stuff, I might as well just start a business. And I created a website really quick, Launched it before the conference called [podcastbranding.co](https://podcastbranding.co). And when I went to talk, I had a place to direct people to. And it also gave me legitimacy.

Having a professional design website, and I am a professional website designer, so that was easy to do. Design the website, people took me seriously, and orders started coming in. But all of that started because of pitch work. Wayne never asked me for artwork. He never mentioned anything. Neither did Troy, whenever for the 2nd podcast, I just took it upon myself to design something for them and present it to them. I gave it to them for free. Told them they can use it.

They don't have to use it. No big deal. And I'll tell you another story. Again, this falls in the podcast space. I was listening to a podcast of another podcaster I know. Big podcaster, very popular in the podcast space. He actually teaches podcasting. One of his podcasts, He mentioned how he wasn't too fond of his logo.

It's something he had designed a while back, just himself, and It didn't look professional. He knew he needed something. And his business is called School of Podcasting, so he thought, you know, it'd be kind of fun to have something that kind of reminded you of a school. Well, look no further. I took it upon myself to design a logo form. And his name is Dave, and I sent them these logos. I said, Dave, I heard you On a podcast saying how you'd like a logo that was more representative of your brand name. Here, what do you think of these? And Dave loved them.

Now I'll tell you something. I gave him those logos for free. Now Dave, being in the podcast space, has been spreading my

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name around, And I have gotten so many clients from him all because I gave him something for free. It was pitch work. Not only that, But then, Dave hired me to do 2 other logos for him or other parts of his business. So even though that first one was given to him for free, Now I've gotten more work out of them. And as I said, I've gotten so many other businesses and individuals who have come to me for artwork based on the recommendation that Dave gives them. And all of that was through Pitchwork.

Now I've been talking about giving stuff away for free. But say you're trying to build your portfolio, and Either you're new to the industry or this is great if you're pivoting. Say you're starting a niche. For example, you wanna work with, I don't know. You wanna you wanna work more in the financial industry, and your current portfolio has everything from gardening to automotive, to musicians, and all sorts of other things, but you really wanna focus on the financial niche. Well, if you wanna build your portfolio to go towards the financial niche, you're solely gonna have to eliminate everything that's not in the financial niche and include only the things you want because you should only include in your portfolio the type of work you wanna do. So if you don't wanna do anything with musicians, you shouldn't have anything that has musician related in your portfolio. But if you don't have enough clients in the financial niche to actually build a good portfolio, you can go look for people, either existing clients that you can do stuff for or even clients that are not your current clients.

You can go out and offer people. And instead of doing a design like I Mentioned earlier, where you design something and then you offer to them, you can approach them and say, hey. I'm trying to build stuff for my portfolio. Normally, I would charge x amount of dollars for this sort of work. But I'm willing to do something for you because I wanna build a portfolio piece. I'm gonna do it at a huge discount. Now I'm talking, say, for example, if you're gonna build a website and you would say, you know, the website that you would need would be a \$5,000 website. Well, I'm willing to build the website for you for \$1,000.

Or even less, \$500. Now, I know people are saying \$500 for a website? That's crazy if it's a \$5,000 website. Why would you only charge 500? Because the client never asked for a website. This is you going to the client and saying, I need to add stuff to my portfolio, And I am willing to do it at this price. Now the good thing about pitch work is because you're offering such a big discount, You can tell the client that you wanna be in control of how things work. So You can design the website that you would be proud to have in your portfolio. So it's kind of like cuts the client out almost a little bit, where you say, I'm gonna design this website for you. You're gonna give me the content, but I decide what the website's gonna look like.

Because that way, I can show off my work. I can show off my capabilities. And I could do so with a live website. This is not a fake website I'm building. This is a real website that people can actually go visit, and it's for a real business. Now there's a member of the resourceful designer community who was doing just this. She wanted to build her portfolio. She's starting out, and she doesn't have any websites in her portfolio now, but she wants to do more web work.

So she approached somebody, a local landscaper, and offered to do a website for him for, I think she said it was, like, \$200 or \$300. She offered to build an entire website for him for that price. But the condition was that she would have total control of what the website looked like. And it was kind of a win win for both. She was able to build this portfolio, still get paid a little bit for her time. And this guy got a I was gonna say free. He got a very inexpensive website for his business. And that's the power of pitch work.

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It's not something the client is asking for. It's something you think the client either needs or can use. Now another example of pitch work is say you design something innovative. A client and you come up with an idea, and I'm not talking about something that's gonna be patented or trademarked or anything like that. But just you come up with something nifty, and you decide you're gonna share it with your other clients. And you share it in a way that says, hey, I did this for this client. I can now do this for you if you're interested.

Now in this case, you're not offering a discount, but you're pitching the work to the client. You're saying, I have something that you may not be aware of. Here, I'm offering to do something for you. Are you interested? And a lot of times, the client will go, hey, I didn't even know that thing existed, or I didn't even think about that. Yeah. Why don't we do that? I know I've shared in the past how I designed a fold over card for a client. This is years ago.

It's A fold over card with 2 slits that you put business cards in. And this was a it was like a little mini greeting card, just a little bit bigger than a business card. And on the top of the, the greeting card had their logo. When you opened it up, you had the business card inserted in a slit. But if you took the business cards out, Behind it, where the business card sat on printed on the back, it said, please contact me for more cards. And what these people were doing is instead of handing out 1 card to a client, They would find out this folder that had 2, 3, 4 cards in it. And at the top of the when you've Unfolded this card, it was a a top fold. So when you fold the top up, on the inside it said, please hand out these cards to anybody who you think could use my services.

And when they took all the cards out, it would say, you it looks like you're out of cards. Please contact me, and I will supply you new ones. Well, I did this for 1 client, and the client loved it. So then what I did is I let other clients know about this. And I just said, do you want me to design something like this? I pitched it to them. Is this something you'd be interested in? And I had several clients took me up on the offer. They thought it was a great idea, and I ended up designing these for other clients. Now the great thing is I already had the layout and everything designed.

It was just a matter of Swapping out some logos, changing some text, the colors, and get it done. So the design work was a few minutes at best, But I was still able to charge them a decent price for it even though it took me next to no time to do. Plus, I made money on the print brokering. So there was no discounts involved in that case. But again, it was pitch work. The clients didn't know that they needed or didn't even know these things existed until I brought it to their attention. The idea is if you need to build your portfolio or you're trying to build yourself, get yourself known in a niche. You obviously need to get work in that niche or get work to put into your portfolio.

And one of the best ways to do that is to go out looking for the work you wanna do. And you can do that in the ways that I've mentioned. You can Find somebody who needs something, design it for them, and then offer to them either for free or at a very low price. And say, hey, Here, I did this for you. If you can use it, great. You don't have to. But if you do, let me know.

And if you do, please let other people know where you got it. So now you can get referrals from that person, they'll be grateful, but also you get a great piece that you designed to put into your portfolio. Or you can offer them at a very low discount. Whether that's, I'll design it for free, you just cover the cost of the printing. Or Here, I'll design something that would normally cost this amount, but I'll do it at this very, very discounted rate. Or as the final example I shared with you, No discount at all. It's just you share something that the client may not have thought of or didn't know existed, and you

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offer it to them. When I designed a appointment page for one of my clients, their their website, they needed a Very specific.

This was for a medical clinic, and they needed a very specific appointment form. And I built it using Gravity Forms on their website. But once I had the form built out and everything working out the way they wanted it, I then used it as an example to approach other clients that could use appointment forms. And I would tell them, look. I just did this for this client. Could you use something similar for your business? If so, I could implement it for x amount of dollars on your website. And I had several clients take me up on that offer. They thought, wow.

That is great. That would save me so much time With my my client intake, if they were able to fill out all this information on a a form on the website and submit it. So after doing it once for 1 client, I then reached out to other clients and said, hey. Take a look at what I just did. Now this kind of goes hand in hand with previous episodes that I've done about clients not knowing what you're what you do or what you're capable of. But in this case, it's a pitch. And the worst thing that can happen is the client says no. Now I am a strong believer in this practice.

As I mentioned, it's how I grew podcast branding. Yes. I had designed podcast artwork before, but that it was just mostly for myself and for another friend, but I took it upon myself. I started designing things for people and offering it for free. Here you go. And then word started spreading that, hey, Mark does great podcast artwork. And the more people that started to hear about that, the more people started to talk about it. And then when other people needed artwork for podcasts, my name was given.

And out of that grew my business that now is my main business. It takes up the bulk of my time compared to my original business that I started in 2005. So all of that to say that if you are trying to grow your portfolio, whether you need to change out what's in there now, it's just outdated and it's time to update it, Or you're new to the industry and you don't have a portfolio and you need to find pieces, and it's great to design fake stuff, but clients that come to you Tend to they can tell if something is fake, especially if it's a a website where you design this website for such and such a company, and they go Check out to see if this is real, and then they find that company. If you did it for an existing company and they say, well, that's not the website the company uses. So it doesn't look as good. It may show off your capabilities, your skills, but there's just something about it when a client goes to you and it's like, no, this work is all fake. None of it is real. Well, a great way to get real work for your portfolio, even when you're just starting out, is through pitch work.

Reach out to people. Offer to do work for free. And, once again, I'm not for free work for designers, especially if it's spec work where they come to you and they they ask you to do something for free. But I think it's okay if you're the one doing the asking. Now, that may be controversial. There may be other designers out there that say, Mark, absolutely no circumstance should a designer ever do anything for free. And I'll just politely disagree with them. That's how my business started, so I can't say that I'm against it.

So you have to do you. You have to decide if it's worth your time, if it's worth the effort, if it's worth the returns that you may get. And that's what I want to talk about today.