

THE POWER TO THRIVE

BY B.G. YOVOVICH

In these difficult times, it's more important than ever for interior designers — whether they're seeking employment or not — to network, build up their skill sets and market themselves.



In normal times, interior designers generally prefer to focus on their work without the weight of external distractions.

Unfortunately, things are far from normal these days.

To make it in today's tough economy – and be ready to thrive when things pick up again – design professionals are finding they must now devote much more time and attention to survival-related details: effectively building and managing a network of industry contacts, re-positioning their skill sets, putting together a strong résumé and successfully marketing themselves.

MARKETING YOURSELF ON PAPER

Whether you're currently looking for work, or you simply want to prepare yourself for when you might be, the résumé is the most basic and critical employment tool. But surprisingly, many professionals, both inside and outside the design industry, struggle to communicate their skills on paper.

"One of the really big mistakes that people make is that they primarily focus their résumés on the responsibilities that they have had," says Greg Wittlinger, Senior Vice President of Marketing for carpet manufacturer The Mohawk Group in Marietta, Ga. Wittlinger oversees Re:Work, a series of career workshops for displaced design professionals, sponsored by The Mohawk Group, along with IIDA and *Interior Design* magazine.

"Your résumé needs to not only include a list of your accomplishments, but also to be focused on how you achieved them," he says. "Companies today are not looking for people who do things; they want people who make things happen, and they want to know how you made things happen."

Wittlinger says one way to communicate this type of information is by incorporating a "STAR" approach when creating your résumé. Using this method, you would describe:

- **S:** the situation you faced
- **T:** the task you accomplished
- **A:** the action you took
- **R:** the results you achieved

When creating a résumé, Stephen Viscusi, author of *Bulletproof Your Job* and a New York-based career expert well known in the design industry, suggests leaving the creativity at home and keeping it as to-the-point as possible. "Some people want to make a graphics statement on their résumé, but that is not what your résumé is for. It is just to be read," he says. "Let your résumé speak for itself, in simple terms."

It is also important that résumés be tailored to specific job opportunities. "Your résumé should be changed for every single job," says Viscusi, who worked in sales and product development at Haworth for more than four years before shifting to his current specialization as a career expert. "If you are applying for a job that is healthcare-related, you want to point out your healthcare experience. Even if it was three jobs ago, you need to point out the experience that is specific to the job for which you are applying."

Similar considerations also apply to portfolios. "You need to be sure that your portfolio is in order and up-to-date, and that it is reflective of who you are," Viscusi says. "You need to be able to talk about it, and you should practice giving a presentation about your portfolio."

And just like the résumé, a portfolio needs to be tailored for specific opportunities. "When you take a portfolio, it should only include work that is relevant to that specific interview," Viscusi says.

THE NETWORKING GAME

For interior designers who are employed, networking opportunities tend to naturally arise. "While you are working, you get invitations to industry events – parties, seminars, lunches," says Stephanie Chiuminatto, who co-founded the LMNOP professional networking society (short for Leadership, Mentoring, Networking, Opportunity for A+D Professionals) after she was laid off in December. "A lot of times, we're too busy and we push them off to the side. Not that they are not important, but they are not a priority at that moment."

However, when you're out of work, those networking opportunities become crucially important, although more difficult to access. "You get a job because you know someone, or you met someone through someone who told you about an opportunity," says Jennifer Graham, a veteran design professional who lost her job in December and is now Project Director at interior design firm M Moser in New York. In fact, one of the key reasons Chiuminatto and Graham teamed up to launch LMNOP was to help unemployed designers stay connected to the working community and encourage them to stay in the profession – many left the profession during the economic crisis following Sept. 11, 2001.

"One of the great things that has come from forming our LMNOP group is that a lot of the vendors and manufacturers who hold industry events have been very purposeful in making sure that we get invitations to them," Chiuminatto says. "They also have been very generous in providing complimentary tickets for some people in our group, if it is a paid event."

One very valuable source for networking may be easily overlooked by designers: leasing agents at major design

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centers, such as the New York Design Center, the Merchandise Mart in Chicago and the Pacific Design Center in California. When a design organization is looking to lease space at a major center, it very likely is looking to expand and hire people as well, Viscusi says.

"The leasing agents from the various design centers make very good employment resources," he says. "The leasing agents know which design firms are hiring, and they also know which manufacturers are hiring designers."

Another networking source can be found in manufacturers' sales reps. "The reps from Knoll, Carnegie, Herman Miller, Steelcase and other manufacturers might call on 20 design firms a day and are like traveling headhunters," Viscusi says. "They are calling on design firms every day, and they know about all the jobs. So it's good to build a relationship with the sales reps who call on you."

Networking with manufacturers can serve another purpose, as well. LMNOP, for instance, has arranged for manufacturers to provide hoteling space for out-of-work designers in their showrooms. "This gives people office workspace where they can go for a few hours or maybe for a day," Chiuminatto says. "We have about 10 [manufacturers] completely confirmed, and another 20 have offered their showrooms as venues for our meetings." For designers not involved with LMNOP, consider the same

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the silver lining

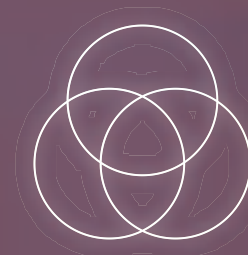
Interior designers have the power to thrive by taking time to invest in themselves and in the profession during these difficult times. "Spend time now to do things that will improve your employment opportunities so that, when the economy does turn, you will be better positioned," says Greg Wittlinger of The Mohawk Group, sponsor of Re:Work career workshops for displaced design professionals.

Looking for specific ways to market and improve yourself?

- **Consider becoming LEED-accredited**, Wittlinger says. In fact, the recently founded LMNOP professional networking society (short for Leadership, Mentoring, Networking, Opportunity for A+D Professionals) offers several study groups for the LEED exam, according to Co-founders Jennifer Graham and Stephanie Chiuminatto.
- **Get involved**, Chiuminatto recommends. "Several of us [with LMNOP] are doing volunteer work, and another group member and I are entering a design competition together," she says.
- **Expand your knowledge base**. Look for programs along the lines of the Re:Work workshops that can provide career coaching and help you improve your résumé writing abilities, interview skills and even financial planning.

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approach: Ask the reps with whom you've developed relationships if they can provide similar space.

WHERE THE JOBS ARE

It's also a good idea to keep an eye on the hot business sectors.

"You have to find work where it exists," Graham says. "Right now, the financial and law firm sectors are weak. You have to find sectors that are strong, like education and healthcare."

And Viscusi advises, "Follow the Obama dollars. That is where the design jobs are going to be all over the country: a lot of rebuilding of schools and environmental projects. There also is the rebuilding of infrastructure – maybe not things like building a bridge, but things like toll booths, with which designers will be involved."

The bottom line is, it's up to individual interior designers to ensure they come out of this downturn better, stronger and more marketable. "You are going to get your next job because of what you can bring to the table," Graham says. "We must be in control of our career paths, and in a tough environment and in difficult times, we must also be resourceful and pull ourselves up by our bootstraps." ■

FOR OTHER CAREER-BUILDING IDEAS AND ADVICE, CHECK OUT THESE SITES:

RE:WORK

themohawkgroup.com/rework

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