

# How To Get Your First Design Client - Even If You Don't Know How

By Louise Campbell

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I was recently invited for drinks at a private member's country club by a graphic designer friend of mine. It's located on The Goodwood Estate, deep in the heart of the Sussex countryside. In the 1700s, it housed the Duke of Richmond's hunting dogs. Even to this day, man's best friend is welcome.



*Thanks to a grand and stylish renovation, the Kennels Clubhouse is the kind of place you'll never want to leave*



*The Kennels Clubhouse: Airy and opulent*



*The drawing room at The Kennels Clubhouse: inviting and cosy with a real fireplace*

After we ordered our drinks, we chose a sofa next to a roaring fire, to kick back and relax. From there, we could admire the stunning views over the Goodwood Estate and The South Downs.



*View of The South Downs: The perfect place for like minds to discuss life, love and the universe*

Our conversation inevitably turned to work. We discussed when you're learning a new skill why it's important to hire people who are better than you, at what they do best.

**Friend:** "So Louise, what are you working on at the moment?"

**Me:** "I'm working on improving the experience design for the website of a leading scientific publisher. Do you want to take a look?" I opened my laptop and showed her the prototype I was working on.

**Friend:** "That looks great Louise. How did you learn to do that?"

**Me:** "In 2012, a business acquaintance introduced me to a lead user experience consultant who took me under her wing. She helped steer my graphic design career in a brand new direction."

**Friend:** "Is that the secret to your success now?"

**Me:** "Oh definitely. Learning from someone more experience was easier and faster than trying to figure it out on my own."

**Friend:** "It's funny you should say that!"

**Me:** "Why??"

**Friend:** "I had dinner with Richard Branson once, and he said exactly the same thing."

**Me:** "Whaaaat! You're kidding me??!!!"

**Friend:** "Right!? And you know what... I think he wanted me to pitch him"

**Me:** "Aaaaannnd??"

**Friend:** "I didn't... :-)"

**Me:** "..."

When I heard those words my heart sank. This pitch would have turned everything around.

The timing was perfect. Virgin Atlantic had recently launched a new route from London to the Caribbean and my friend had recently won the prestigious 'Observer Travel Award' for best luxury travel brochure design.

She was at the top of her game.

It got me to thinking, why in the world *wouldn't* you want to pitch a multi-billionaire who wanted to hire you?

For instance, what are the *phrases* you tell yourself, that keep you tip-toeing on the edge of glory? I mean, what if you were in my friend's shoes? What if you had the chance to pitch Richard Branson?

Could you think of any reason why you shouldn't sell to him? If so, what would you say to yourself? What might stop you?

### **Phrases that compromise your instinctive nature**

I imagine you've at least one of these thoughts before:

- "I don't want to push it too much."
- "He would never hire me."
- "I need more experience."
- "I'm just a one-woman-band."
- "I'm not confident enough."

### **Why do we say things like this?**

What these phrases reveal is this: it may not only be Richard Branson you're afraid of working with. I know you're thinking it's easy to give these reasons because he's a multi-billionaire, but what if the same phrases are stopping you getting work from clients worth £1,000, £10,000 or £100,000?

The amount the contracts are worth may change, but the way you feed your fear won't. Unless you learn to re-phrase what you tell yourself, you'll never get more valuable clients.

Most people stay in the same job for years. They watch colleagues get the jobs and contracts that *they really want instead*.

What if you knew that securing the work and contracts everyone wants is not about "being confident enough"...

Now, there's good news. To retrain your brain and secure the work and contracts you (and everyone else) wants doesn't have to take months of therapy or preparing yourself to be "more confident".

Instead, it's about...

## **Asking the right questions**

Once you know how to ask the right questions, not being bold enough becomes a secondary concern.

Yes, you might be apprehensive about presenting that pitch, sending that email, making that call or attending that meeting, but even if you're not self-assured you can still come across as professional and get the job.

If you've recently started out in graphic design and you're not feeling positive enough to reach out to potential clients, here are 5 steps to help you become fearless, act professional and get that job, even if your self-belief is waning.

# Step 1: Specialise.

## What most people do: -

They randomly learn one type of design software without understanding if that software is in demand, or decline.

What they don't realise is, they risk jeopardising their whole career by not keeping up to date with design technology skills that clients will pay for. For example, when graphic design moved rapidly from print to digital, a whole generation of print designers found themselves out of a job.

## What we'll do: -

We'll thoroughly investigate the type of design software skills that are profitable today. Then we'll create a strategy that will allow you to build client relationships, sell your design skills and get paid market rate or more for your work.

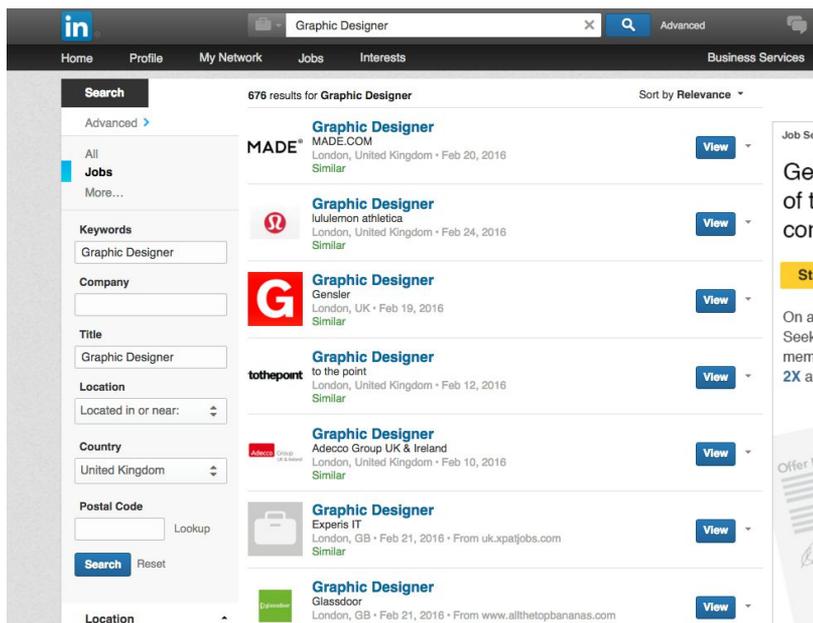
What you'll discover is that by focusing on design skills that are favoured by employers, you'll instantly increase your hire-ability and earning potential.

## Action step: (approx 1 hour)

Go to LinkedIn. In the main search field located at the top of the page type in "graphic designer." Your goal is to find out what type of graphic design skills are in demand today.

Below is a screen grab of search results for the term "graphic designer" in the London area.

In the left-hand menu, you can filter the results by location, postcode and country.



Once that's done, click on each job one by one, and cut and paste the job description into the spreadsheet. For this example, I've identified two main categories that graphic design jobs fall under, website and print design.

Here's an example. Click to view.

1	<b>WEB DESIGN</b>
2	Software: Adobe InDesign, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Publishing Suite, MS PowerPoint, Adobe Acrobat . Motion graphics experience using After Effects would be an advantage, but not essential
3	Graphic Design: able to design graphically compelling materials that reflect our messages and identity
4	Templating: ability to storyboard presentations and animations and to compose page layout
5	Client/customer service: understanding of marketing as a service to the office
6	Teamwork: works well as a member of a team, pitches in to help out others
7	Communications: ability to speak and write clearly
8	Efficiency: ability to work quickly and under pressure
9	
10	<b>WEB DESIGN</b>
11	Critical eye for detail and attention
12	Passion and deep understanding of the web design principles
13	An outstanding, versatile portfolio that demonstrates the ability to create clean design
14	Essential: mastery of Adobe CS suite.
15	Desired : understanding of HTML and CSS and responsive design
16	Confident presenting and explaining ideas
17	
18	<b>PRINT DESIGN</b>
19	Fluency in current graphic design practices and production software, such as Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, and possible experience using adobe lightroom, aperture, bridge or similar.
20	Strong conceptual skills, the ability to iterate quickly and easily
21	Superior interpersonal skills and the ability to collaborate actively and proactively with others in a cross-functional team

Now you can clearly see the type of design skills favoured for each category of design. In other words, what type of software design skills potential clients will actually pay you for.

Next up, we'll take a look at *the* most powerful skill, beyond a great design portfolio to secure clients...

## Step 2: Building relationships.

**What most people do: -**

Most designers pray that potential clients will land in their lap without them having to do any relationship building at all. Then, when a potential client gets in touch out of the blue, they risk jeopardising the relationship before it's even got off the ground, by asking the wrong types of questions.

**Bad relationship building questions:**

- "If I worked for you, how long would it take for me to get paid?"
- "Can I work 3 days from home for you?"
- "What are the benefits of working for you?"
- "I'm just a one-woman company, does that bother you?"

Asking about money, working from home or your company status shows you care more about *your* needs than the clients. Starting off with your best foot forward, shows you are keen to put your clients needs first.

**Good relationship building questions:**

- "What are you looking for in a graphic designer?"
- "Do you have any design jobs coming up in the near future?"
- "Can I give you my details in case you have any design work coming up soon?"

Good questions are OK, but the client could answer them with a “No”, “Not sure right now” or “I don’t know” and your intention is to remove all doubt from their minds whether to hire you or not.

I’m going to show you the exact questions to ask, to get to magic relationship building status.

### **What we’ll do:-**

We’ll go a local networking event, or we’ll ask a colleague to introduce us to a potential client. Even if the potential client doesn’t have a design job for you immediately, I’ll show you the exact questions to ask that get you noticed. What happens during the kind relationship building that gets you noticed is, you unearth your *engaging powers*, making you come across as impressive and memorable.

### **Action step:**

Book your place at a local business networking event or go to LinkedIn.com and ask a colleague to introduce you to a potential client. Then, you’ll have the opportunity to practise magic relationship building questions. Magic relationship building questions allow potential clients to comfortably *share their vision of their future, with you. Easily.*

### **Magic relationship building questions:**

- “Where’s your focus right now?”
- “Besides an increase in perceived value, what would you like the outcome of your design or re-design to accomplish?”
- “I hope you don’t mind me asking, what does success look like for you as far as the design for you on this project goes?”
- “Oh OK, what’s the thought process around the current design?”
- “I was wondering if you achieved ‘X’ or ‘Y,’ have you thought about how that might look like?”

Magic questions allow you to immediately identify whether the client needs your services or not.

If you’ve had a positive encounter and the client is keen to hear from you again, the next step is to schedule a catch-up call via phone or Skype to get the design brief.

## **Step 3. Arrange a call to get the design brief and the budget**

Your aim is to get the client to share a detailed design brief and budget with you in the same conversation, either before your chat, via email, or to discuss during your call. The design brief outlines the project status, it defines business and customer needs. It gives you an overview of what the client wants your design work to accomplish.

Knowing the client’s budget allows you to assess if the outcome they want is possible against your market rate and their timeframe. So what happens when the client says “but if I share the budget with you, you’ll just tell me that’s what it costs.” To a certain extent, that’s correct.

That's when you need to know:

- The exact market rate for your role
- How long it will take you to do the job
- How much you need to allow for contingency (things like how many rounds of revisions will be included.)

For that, pointers included in a design brief should be:

- Background - project status so far
- Brief - the *to-do* list
- Objectives - outcomes (not always, sometimes you have to dig deeper for these).
- Budget

Below is an example of a real life design brief. The exact details are covered for privacy reasons, but as you can see, it's very detailed. The client has already identified most of the problem areas, that he wants *you* to solve.

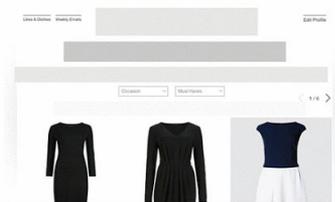
*Redesign Brief*

**Background**

Tool is provided by a third party company who have developed an algorithm to determine the dimensions users provides about their dimensions.

The objective for providing the tool to increase their confidence (thus, as this increases, so does their average spend), providing advice and from without the need to with a real-life

To access the tool, users must and create an account by They are then able to access the as shown below:



**The Brief**

We require an experienced Designer to work with us and customers to fully exploit all the functionality within improving the ensure users a) understand how to use it when they and

feed the and to increase ATR (Add To Bag) rates within or

Is an initial brainstorm with the following issues with the current:

- 1 | Navigation, Structure and Responsiveness**  
From the very top of the page, we believe this is confusing, and key features such as are being missed by the majority of users. The so it needs to be made work with MCP (mobile web).
- 2 | Lack of**  
The user is always presented with these return visits are usually driven from the weekly send to the, which contains These as users are not being prompted to which actually allows the algorithm to return to contain. We felt it would be beneficial if the return to contain, in the email, for to drive conversion if a user has clicked on a
- 3 | On-boarding**  
This is no of the tool, no about what the vague ticks and crosses under each item does (it's left to the user to assume this), or encouragement to keep providing this feedback. We believe we could do a much better job in this area to make the first time experience a truly warm and enticing one.
- 4 | Prompts**  
Along the same theme as customers are not, at any we believe timely
- 5 | What the Functions actually do**  
At present, any interaction with these so this further validates the We believe customers may expect will make the item and that: will save the item in a area, but this needs to be investigated and tested.
- 6 | Looping loyalty with Registered members**  
which from within the theme, if any of these items are clicked within the other than the

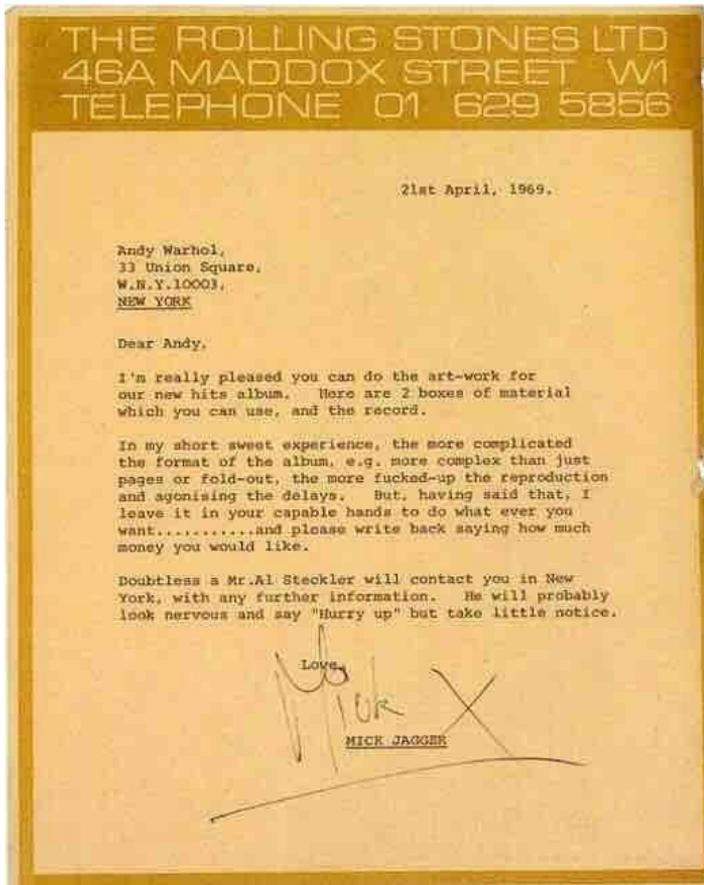
seamless experience to mirror potentially with some more Again - this needs to be investigated and tested.

- 7 | Evidence of / needs to be**  
From user testing on one of our other tools, it has become clear that our customers We hypothesise that adding more of these credentials (in whatever form is most appropriate / appealing) may perceived value / validity of
- 8 | Lack of context with**  
Currently users can by clicking on a small drop-down box, that only contains the When sorted to a ("no") there is no produce much of the content to use in the o we thought incorporating some of this may help
- 9 | Clutter**  
Within the outfits section, the left and right how this works could be improved here in general - the images for example are the same size There is also a question about whether a way users shop?

Longer term we also considered:

- Feeding
- Including items already purchased into or this will soon be provided

Below is a fascinating example of a simple design brief written by Mick Jagger to Andy Warhol in 1969.



*Sent from Mick Jagger to Andy Warhol in 1969!*

Once you've discussed the design brief thoroughly with your potential client, you can start to prepare your A4 pitch snapshot. The A4 pitch is what you'll prepare once you've received the design brief.

### What most people do: -

Most designers ask questions during the design brief stage that put the onus on the client to make the design decisions. Then, when the designer goes to a pitch the client, they don't have the exact requirements needed to deliver the job. The client then thinks they're unfocused and unsuitable for the role.

But, you may be thinking, "What about clients who don't know what they want? What do I do then?" If that's the case, it's up to you to spring into action and produce three potential *design solutions*, that allow the client to decide what direction *they* want *you* to proceed in.

Here's an example of questions most designers ask during the design brief meeting:

### Bad questions to ask

- "How much experience do I need to do this?"
- "Do you like this typeface?"
- "What's your favorite color palette?"
- "Do you want me to do A or B?"

## What we'll do:-

You'll get a detailed design brief from the client. The design brief will provide the details you need to be able to do the job and exceed expectation. When you do this right, you'll have all the information required for how you're going to solve the client's design problem. When you do this right, the client will think you've read their mind and the likelihood of you being offered the job is high.

## Good questions to ask:

- "Who is your target audience?"

How they answer this will clearly let you know if they've defined it or not, plus you'll learn more details about the type of audience, if they have one.

- "What are the dimensions for the posters or flyers?"
- "What's your budget and timeline for this project?"

If they avoid questions about the budget, you can always email them about it instead. If after emailing them, if they still can't share a definite budget with you, it's going to be hard to work together.

Getting an answer to the budget question (or not as the case may be) allows you to weed out those that can't pay you market rate. Generally, big companies don't have a problem paying you market rate or more.

Also, get into a good habit of charging market rate.

That's because companies have done their homework and know what market rate is. By *not* charging, at least, the market rate you *undermine yourself* and that can define how you're treated by the client in all future dealings with them.

The last thing you want is to find out that a younger graphic design colleague is getting paid a higher rate than you are for doing the same job ... just because they asked.

## Action step: -

Arrange a call or Skype chat with your potential client, to discuss the design brief. If the client can't supply a design brief before or during the call, you'll need to decide if you want to take this project any further. Supplying a detailed brief means, the client has an idea what he wants *your* design solution to achieve, it's up to you as a design professional to fill in the blanks for him or her.

Questions to ask whilst discussing the design brief will give you the details required to write a comprehensive A4 pitch snapshot. A snapshot that shows the client you listened to their requirements and know exactly what they want to be delivered and when.

## Magic questions to ask:

- "Legacy data aside, do you have any recent data to backup the current design?"

Asking potential clients if they have data to validate the current design will allow you to assess where the current design weaknesses are.

- "Current design aside, what are your design outcomes for this project?"
- "I've recently completed a project exactly like yours that resulted in an X revenue increase. Would you like to learn more?"
- "I've gathered some design reference for you on X. Did you know that if we did Y, you could achieve Z?"
- "Short term, what are the deliverables on this project?"
- "What would you like the outcome of this project to be?"

Once you have details required to take a holistic view of the design brief, you can move onto the next step.

## Step 4. Prep your proposal.

**What most people do: -**

Most people do a bit of research on the company. Then, they make up a design brief based on how *they* think the client should proceed. They spend hours creating a proposal that doesn't match the client's actual needs. The result is a proposal that totally misses the point.

**Bad proposal prep:**

- Creating a complete redesign of the client's website and logo that wasn't asked for or identified from the project brief.
- Preparing a pitch in English when the language that is spoken in the client's office is German.
- Including your daily rate in the proposal if it wasn't agreed upon or if the budget wasn't shared during the project brief.

**Good proposal prep:**

- Preparing an overview of the current design and how it could be improved (if that's what was included in the brief: "improved or re-design").
- Preparing an outline of how you would work together.
- Including any time, you may not be available to work on the project.

On an A4 sheet of paper we'll break out the design project into 3 phases:

1. Discovery phase - the *research* phase
2. Design phase - the *sketch* phase
3. Development/Production phase- the *execution* and *delivery* phase

These 3 phases will provide the structure for your A4 pitch proposal. Next to each phase include a timeline, deliverable and cost based on the client's budget.

**What we'll do: -**

We'll cut and paste the design brief to an A4 sheet of paper in Word or Google docs. In the introduction, we'll summarise the design brief findings. Then we'll add the 3 phases into the A4pitch snapshot. Then, we'll add the tasks

associated with achieving each phase, and the timeline for completing each phase. We'll do it this way so that the client will have an A4 project snapshot to refer to during your pitch meeting with the client.

### **Action Step:-**

You'll create the A4 pitch based on the instructions above. You'll create 3 examples or case studies of design work that how you've solved a similar problem for a previous client. As for most of you, this will be your first client, I suggest doing 3 pieces of pro-bono to show you mean business, based on your specialised design skills defined in Step 1.

Below are some examples of what you can do to create a winning proposal.

### **Magic proposal prep:**

- Create 2 or 3 examples of case studies of design work you did in a previous role that relates to the clients design brief, that exceeded expectation.
- Host your case studies online or in Dropbox so you can share a link to the case studies folder with the client.
- Stating your strengths and 3 reasons why you would be a good fit for the clients design team (if they have one).

Here's one way you could do that:

Once you have prepped your A4 pitch proposal and double checked it against the brief, you could email it to the client. The client would usually expect to receive it within 24 hours of your catch-up call. Or if you would like more impact, you can present it during the actual pitch meeting. It's up to you, both ways are acceptable.

## **Step 5. The pitch.**

Once I showed up to a design pitch with my 1YO old daughter because my babysitter was ill. Luckily my client at the time (my graphic designer friend above) was super sympathetic, but if you want to make a good impression, I don't recommend it.

Other examples of hiccups to avoid when pitching are: arriving with a Dominos cheese crust pizza or coffee from Starbucks :S Yes, I've seen this happen. Arriving with food makes it look like you've showed up for an unplanned lunch meeting, it shows a lack of respect for your client's needs.

Arriving with weekend luggage, unkempt hair, hungover, smelling of heavy perfume or aftershave, dirty nails, suffering from a heavy cold or completely hyper from drinking too much coffee is also not very client friendly.

Learning by failing at the pitch stage became a powerful motivator for me to learn how to get it right next time. Sometimes you can't afford to fail.

I want to help you avoid some of the pitfalls that are so obvious now, but at the time so consumed I was with my needs, I hardly noticed the clients needs at all.

Now, it's not that you can't turn pitch disasters around - you can and I'll show you how, but you don't want to waste a client's time. Be there to align your skills with their needs, to make your pitch meeting as valuable as possible.

### **What most people do: -**

Most people arrive unprepared for the pitch meeting. When they do this, the client thinks you're disorganised, unprepared at worst, wasting their time. What you don't realise is that it could jeopardise your future career. The technology design industry in London is quite small, especially amongst the best companies, you can't risk being unprepared if you want to maintain a great reputation.

### **Examples of bad pitching**

- Shaking the client's hand and saying "Nice to meet you, James." When the client's name is Chris.
- Interrupting the client's introductory talk about the company with questions.
- Presenting a pitch based on your own bias, not the client's need.
- Not presenting an A4 pitch snapshot of how you'll work together.

### **Examples of good pitching**

- Arriving on time.
- Having your A4 pitch and case studies ready to present.
- Looking your best

### **What we'll do: -**

We'll make sure you have a printed A4 copy of the pitch ready in your laptop case. We'll do this because after you've run through your 3 case studies and how they relate to the job in hand, you'll present the A4 pitch to them. When you do this, the conversation will be about what you can do for the client and when you can start.

### **Action step:-**

You'll print out: an A4 copy of your pitch, a one page CV (optional) and the client's original design brief. You'll have 3 case studies ready to show the client in either powerpoint or hosted on WordPress, accessible and open in the order you want to show them, from your laptop computer.

### **Examples of magic pitching:**

- Arriving 10 minutes early.

You'll arrive early, but you'll only let the client know you're there 10 minutes before the appointment. Arriving early but, not too early shows you are punctual, reliable and most importantly that you respect the client's time.

If this is your first pitch, get 3 pro bono case studies together to show initiative.

- Securing your WiFi and password from reception when you arrive and log in.
- Remembering the client's name.
- Having your pitch open on your laptop, ready to run through.

You'll have 2 or 3 examples of work ready to show them that's relevant to the project brief. You'll also show them how your work improved X, Y and Z metrics.

- Having your project questions ready.
- Having your market rate ready to share with the client, based on actual research.

### Conclusion:

Once you know how to ask for what you want, your entire life can change:

- You can stop living hand to mouth.
- You can afford to buy *that* new car.
- You can afford to take the kids on holiday whenever you want to.

Knowing how to ask for it is the magic ingredient to accelerate your successful career in design.

Here's a quick summary of what I'd like you to do next:

- Step 1: Specialise in a specific area of design, whether it's print, web or UX - choose one and dive in.
- Step 2: Build relationships, reach out to potential clients practice asking magic questions.
- Step 3. Practice asking for a design brief, if the client doesn't know what that is - decide if that's the client for you, or not.
- Step 4. Prep your proposal.
- Step 5. Create your Pitch. Even better you can use mine as an outline, the exact A4 pitch that got me, my first \$9,800 client. Sign-up to get your personal copy.
- In the meantime, imagine for a moment you're having dinner with Richard Branson in a weeks time. What questions would you ask him, to secure a meeting with the Virgin design team?

Congratulations! You made it, all the way until the end of this article. As a reward, I'm so excited to help you get started.

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