

The business of design

Kimberley Seldon shares solutions for designers, decorators and stylists

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If you think that the interior design business is all about shopping around town with someone else's money -- and earning a ton of your own while you're doing it -- designer Kimberley Seldon has a few home truths for you.

"If we made half as much money as our clients think we do, we'd be retired," she says on the phone from her Toronto design studio, explaining that the vast majority of design professionals are actually earning under the poverty line.

Many design professionals are great at being creative, she notes, but no one ever taught them how to run a business.

So she's filling the gap, heading across Canada this fall to present intensive one-day workshops on the Business of Design. Covering a range of entrepreneurial skills, the courses are designed to help beginner and intermediate design professionals improve their bottom lines and their workdays.

"The course was born out of my frustration learning how to run a design business," says Seldon, who's also Style at Home magazine's decorating editor and the host of HGTV's Design for Living. "I'd already gotten to a certain level on my own . . . but four years ago, I hired a business coach. She just took my business apart from the ground up."

It wasn't an easy process for Seldon, who says that as a small entrepreneur, she was proud of her company's ability to be light on its feet.

"I resisted anything that looked corporate -- systems for organization, systems for tracking," she says.

Setting firm deadlines was an issue; after all, what happens if the fabric order doesn't arrive on time, or that jewel of an armchair gets lost on its way from the warehouse?

"I hear a lot of small businesses say the same thing -- we're creative, we can't give a deadline to our client. Well, what my business coach said is 'Yes, you can.'"

"You need to stop thinking you can't give them guarantees . . . you can't promise what you can't deliver, but at the same time you can't expect clients to pay big money for things and not know when it's going to pull together."

Today, Seldon says her company is dramatically different -- in a good way.

"I went into all of this in my own business kicking and screaming," she says. "But now, when my business coach says I need to change something, I know she's right."

During a 100-person test run of the seminar, client billing emerged as a major issue. "You bear tremendous responsibility, and yet you bill yourself out less than your IT guy or your plumber," she says, adding that the audience helped to coach those who were setting their rates too low.

"We get into the nitty gritty -- how to charge for your services, how to get clients, but more importantly how to keep your clients, how to manage trades and suppliers, how to make more money and, at the same time, save your clients money -- there's actually formulas for that."

Seldon says once participants realize she's going to be completely forthcoming about her own experiences, they open up, too.

"It's like a giant mentoring group," she says. "As soon as you state what your problem is, you see 30 nods -- you think you're the only one having trouble getting money from your clients, but you're not."

Along with the process of managing clients and their expectations, isolation also looms large for many designers, who often work as sole proprietors.

"And you're still isolated if you're the employer," she adds. "Your employees want to know that you're in charge and that things are right with the world -- it's not fair to be stressing in front of them."

The Event

- The Business of Design I, A Style at Home event, runs Oct. 21 in Calgary at The French Connection Fine Antiques (it's on a day earlier in Edmonton, at Sage Furnishings & Design Centre). Cost is \$395 plus GST

- For information or to book, call Kimberley Seldon Designs at 1-416-780-9187 ext. 221, or check the website: kimberleyseldon.com.