

BY JULIE ANN SIMS



CAREER

MONTHLY IN-SPIRATION

Looking to make all the right career moves in 2012? We offer a year's worth of month-by-month career tips to keep in-house designers on track. You can pick and choose, mix and match, or tackle all of them!

It's only natural to enter the new year with a sense of renewal and hope. And as an in-house designer, you may vow to elevate your skills, update your portfolio and beef up your professional network. You may even set your eye on a lofty career goal that seems entirely feasible as you sip eggnog and make merry with friends and family.

But as you get back into the swing of things at work, looming deadlines and competing priorities may consume your days, leaving you without the energy to turn your career dream into reality. By February, you

might be back to business as usual. Sound familiar? If so, you should take the time to incorporate career-boosting ideas into each month of the year. By taking small steps on a regular basis, you can make progress without becoming overwhelmed.

The following calendar provides ideas that you can mix and match, month by month, as you see fit. You can try to take on every task or pinpoint just a few to help you spring ahead in your career. That way, by the time 2013 rolls around, you'll know you're on your way—no additional professional resolutions necessary!

JANUARY

Depending on the type of business your company does, January may be a hectic time (think annual reports) or a slower period as projects ramp up. No matter what your situation is, it's an opportune month to take a look at the coming year and make sure you're covering a few key bases. Here are some ideas:

- **Start a competition calendar.** Make sure your department is tracking design competitions your team may want to enter. Robin Colangelo, director of brand and design for White & Case, a large international law firm, said her creative department keeps an Excel spreadsheet of the competitions they enter as a team and updates it monthly. This keeps them on track and prevents them from missing key deadlines. At the very least, jot down a list of the important deadlines and tack it to your wall. And don't forget to remind your boss to budget for entry fees. "I've heard people say their companies won't allow them to fund competitions," Colangelo says. "But if you budget for it, the money will be there." If you missed the boat on this for 2012, take the time now to make a note on your calendar or in your budget file to earmark money for 2013.
- **Take inventory.** The start of the year is a good time to look at what projects may come your way and pinpoint where you may need to add to your skills repertoire. Identify one or two areas to improve upon and set aside time in the coming year to take classes, attend seminars or use other methods to build your abilities. If you make a good case, your firm may be willing to cover at least part of the training costs, advises Andy Epstein, noted in-house expert and editor of HOW's In-HOWse Designer blog (inhowse.howdesign.com). "Think about what value you're going to be able to bring to the company from the training and offer to share your knowledge with the rest of the group," he says.

FEBRUARY

It's a short month marked by short days, but that doesn't mean you can't squeeze in some professional development. Consider the following passion plays to warm things up this winter:

- **Fan the flames.** As Valentine's Day approaches, people start thinking about passion, so why not get your team talking about new creative work they're passionate about? Have people bring in objects or design work they find interesting or exciting at your next team meeting and discuss what they like about each one.
- **Send a heartfelt letter.** We all have professional heroes—the brilliant boss you worked for your first year out of design school or the designer you met through AIGA who was kind enough to critique your portfolio. Why not write a detailed thank-you note to those who have helped you or brought honor to the profession through their talent and generosity? "Taking the time to express your appreciation to others is always a smart career move," says Donna Farrugia, executive director of The Creative Group. "Showing your gratitude to someone not only can make their day a little brighter, but it also will make you feel good to remember how someone invested time in you."

MARCH

It goes in like a lion and out like a lamb, but consider letting your inner lion roam free in March with these aggressive career moves:

- **Make a case.** We all know clients love results, but how do you best show them? Epstein recommends creating case studies for projects you've worked on. These profiles should include the goal of the project, any parameters or constraints that you worked under, as well as the outcome of the initiatives. By showing evidence of your success, you not only validate your contributions, but you also show that you're focused on getting results.
- **Practice saying "no."** There are many benefits to saying "yes" in your career—new projects, new promotions, new friends. But never turning down a request can lead to missed deadlines, wasted time or burnout. That's why you need to learn to say no nicely, which can be an art unto itself. "Do it gently," advises Emily Ruth Cohen, co-owner of New Jersey-based Cohen Miller Consulting, a firm that helps corporate and institutional creative teams improve operational effectiveness. "You need to give people a strategy for what they want, rather than just saying 'no.' For example, if someone wants an e-mail blast, perhaps you can offer to create an e-mail template for them instead."

APRIL

April is the time for spring cleaning. Here are a few ideas to help you tidy up your work environment:

- **Clean up your digital act.** The closer you get to the paperless office, the more overwhelming your digital file system can become. "Think of what in your firm is a mess and drives you crazy all year long, and try to fix it," Colangelo says. Last year, for example, Colangelo's team spent several months creating a new structure to organize their digital photos. The result? A better system that reduces frustration throughout the year.
- **Cjet book smart.** If you don't have one already, consider starting an in-house library, where you can store all the design pubs, cool paper samples, useful business books and any other tools you might look to for inspiration. Your library doesn't have to have mahogany walls lined with fancy tomes to be effective; simply decorating an empty cube and stocking it with cool stuff can create a functional and fun creativity zone.

MAY

With May flowers in bloom, here are some ideas to help cultivate your creativity:

- **Fill your professional senses.** Summer through fall is conference season, so make sure to learn about those being held by HOW, AIGA and other design organizations. Most conference websites include compelling arguments you can use to secure buy-in from your boss or firm. Now is the time to start planning for events that can help recharge your creative battery.
- **Take it outside.** Instead of booking a conference room for that next team meeting, how about heading outside to enjoy the sunshine? Better yet, bring some games to play after your next department meeting. Croquet or badminton, anyone?

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JUNE

As the days grow longer, you might take advantage of those extra hours of daylight to boost your productivity using these suggestions:

- **Share your shortcuts.** Have a sanity-saving InDesign move to share? Or a trick for prepping a file on the fly? Colangelo brings her team together every once in a while for a "tips and tricks" meeting, where people can share what they've learned recently. "I can't have one person being the all-star," Colangelo says. "Everyone is hands-on and needs to have hands-on skills."
- **Play musical chairs.** Routine is the antithesis of innovation, so why not change up your seating arrangements at work? "Moving desks around so people aren't sitting in the same spots every year encourages cross-collaboration," Cohen says. Make sure, of course, that you run the idea by your boss before engaging in any heavy lifting. If moving to a new workspace isn't realistic, try updating a different aspect of your work environment—even new artwork, posters or plants can freshen things up.

JULY

Now that you're really in the dog days of summer, it's time to strike a balance between work and play. Here are some strategies:

- **Disconnect.** Thirty percent of creative professionals surveyed by The Creative Group said they check in with work several times a day while on vacation. Don't be one of them. The idea is to recharge your creative battery, not the one fueling your laptop. If you must keep tabs on things, set specific times that you'll be available and stick to that schedule. "It's all about setting people's expectations," Farrugia says. "Most professionals will respect your parameters if you communicate them."
- **(Jo out to lunch.** A strong internal network is an in-house designer's No. 1 career weapon. Make it a point to ask someone, or several people, from outside your department to lunch, and use the time to find out what their key challenges are. Make breaking bread with co-workers a habit rather than a one-time deal. "Every month, I think you should have a goal of planning lunches, especially if you're a manager," Cohen says. "These are big-picture, getting-to-know-you-better meetings that help ensure buy-in for your team."

AUGUST

For many, August is a time of fun and sun, but even if the French Riviera isn't in your future, you can visit new places with these tactics:

- **Take a field trip.** Put yourself in your customers' and clients' shoes by acting as if you were one of them. "You should go to a store that sells your products or interfaces with clients or candidates in some way," Cohen suggests. She says this type of research can yield valuable design insights, yet it's something many people fail to do.
- **Pitch in.** What's a great way to meet people, develop new skills and make a difference in the world? Volunteering, of course. If you're in a corporate job where the work doesn't vary significantly, a pro-bono gig can help you diversify your portfolio. Consider donating your services to a creatively-focused organization, like your local AIGA or Art Directors Club, where you'll get to hobnob with fellow designers while giving back. "August is a good time to start volunteering because that's when organizations start planning and look for volunteers," Epstein says.

SEPTEMBER

With school starting, kids aren't the only ones headed back to the classroom. You can make learning part of your fall curriculum using these tips:

- **Consider "old-school" learning.** With colleges, art schools and universities starting up, why not enroll in a class? In-person coursework holds the benefit of helping you mingle and make new connections. Consider taking a class outside of design: Business writing, copy editing and e-marketing are all relevant skill sets that can help round out your abilities.
- **(Jo to the head of the class.** Make it a point to experiment with social and mobile media to increase your value to the firm. This will enable you to offer insights and ideas that can inform your company's strategy. "If I were able to hire someone tomorrow, I would want them to come in with that knowledge, on top of working on many websites and having print expertise," Colangelo says. If you don't have one already, start your own Twitter feed and use it to follow industry luminaries, publications and organizations, as well as to share your own expertise.

OCTOBER

Jingle bells in October? Yep. The leaves may not have fallen, but many people are contemplating the holidays and other year-end events like performance reviews, raises and bonuses. So, give yourself the gift of preparation by doing the following:

- **Review the review.** Don't limit yourself to what's included on an annual review form when prepping for your meeting with your manager. "A lot of reviews that designers have in corporate environments aren't necessarily relevant to what they do," Epstein says. If your review format is lacking, create an addendum that covers some of your professional accomplishments and goals. As you gear up for your review, think about what you want to get out of the meeting: Is it a raise, a promotion, a roadmap for professional growth? Once you know your agenda, you can prepare more effectively.

• **Benchmark your Benjamins.** This is a good time to see how your paycheck stacks up for several reasons. First, many organizations, including The Creative Group, release salary information this time of year. Combine that with the fact that year-end raises or bonuses may be in the works, and you have every reason to get your hands on some research. The data can help you build a case for a pay bump. Or, on the other hand, you may rest easy knowing that your compensation is where it should be. Either way, it pays to be in the know.

NOVEMBER

It's easy to get lost in holiday hubbub, but instead of becoming distracted, how about using it to your advantage? Try these ideas:

• **Spread holiday cheer.** Is your company having a holiday party? Offer to be the creative mastermind behind the event and you'll create goodwill while flexing your creative muscle. You also may be able to make new contacts in different departments.

• **Wrap it up.** Handmade gifts can be a great way to showcase your creativity. Consider making your own wrapping paper, creating interesting gift tags or bestowing other goodies that can help your co-workers and *business contacts get through the season gracefully.*

DECEMBER

Making merry is high on the agenda this month, but be sure to also make these important career moves:

• **Build your book.** With cold weather settling in and some vacation days at your disposal, why not take the time to sit by the fire and update your portfolio? You'd be surprised how quickly you might forget the details of a project or misplace the files. Be sure to gather samples of all of your work, noting the results as well – the more tangible the information, the better.

• **Polish up your profiles.** Is that abandoned Google+ profile becoming a career minus? Use downtime over the holidays to update any online profiles you use professionally and add to your connections. Reach out to professional acquaintances and plan to get together in the coming year. "There's no substitute for face-to-face interaction," Farrugia says. "Online connections are great, but we're more likely to help those we interact with in person."

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