

The hardest part of starting a business is getting started. Yet beginning a second career as an illustrator didn't feel that hard. The biggest reason, no doubt, was that my previous five years had laid the groundwork. I had done the homework and I wasn't afraid it wouldn't work. I just didn't know what life would be like as an illustrator, or if I would even like it. I had essentially eliminated the "first-day jitters" by putting a toe in the illustration business, while at the same time running my design business. I had already had a "soft opening."

And so I released my employees, packed up my boxes, sold my furniture, found a new office, hung up my ties and slacks, and turned out the lights on the design firm. That day, an enormous weight was lifted from my shoulders—and a new, lighter weight took its place. My feet were barely touching the ground.

The second hardest thing about starting a business is learning how to get business. Having to hustle to grow the design firm gave me a head start. After running a seven-person design firm, becoming a freelance illustrator is a move down the food chain. Myriad responsibilities and engagements simply vanished. Those who were once competitors were now potential clients. I knew a lot of the best designers across the country, and they knew me, and I wasn't afraid to ask them for work. Not only did I start getting good projects, I was buoyed by well-wishes and

words of support for what appeared to others to be a brazen career move. What initially was doubt turned to reasonable assuredness.

Fewer cooks in the kitchen

A fundamental difference in design and illustration is the clientele. In general, designers work directly for companies, whereas illustrators work for designers and art directors—one step removed from the actual client. Design projects tend to be complex and involve lots of people, rounds of approvals, meetings, alterations, and protracted timetables. Illustrations tend to involve fewer people, few or no meetings, and short deadlines—fewer moving parts. At this point in my life, I was ready for the latter.

One of the great benefits of working directly with designers was that we speak with a common vocabulary. My new clientele were generally more attuned to the styles of illustrators, making it more likely that I'd be called into projects that were the right philosophical fit. My inner designer understood the context in which my illustration had to function, so I knew the right questions to ask.

I expected that all of these factors would make for a new efficiency in my job. I found myself working for people who had not only shared my goal of producing notable work—they expected it from me.



Advertising
Carter Cosgrove, 1997



Promotional brochure
Craig Frazier Studio, 1995

Style guide

I knew for certain that illustrators live and die by their style. But I also knew that style is far more than what the work looks like. It has its roots in the methods and patterns of thinking we consistently apply to our work. It is what we do that others do not—our personal point of view.

I realized that in defining style this way, I was translating my design principles directly into my illustration. I was building a belief system around how my illustrations were supposed to work and allowing that to inform what they would look like. It's working from the outside in—very much form following function. I was dedicated to creating work that was simple in appearance and complex in meaning. Illustrations that employed wit and metaphor—riddles that asked something of the viewer. I wanted



Cover, *Most Promising Leaders*
Time Magazine, 1994

to work in symbols and codes that add up to new and smart ways of thinking about things. I wanted to employ understatement, leaving breadcrumbs so the reader could arrive at their own conclusions—a sort of programmed ambiguity. I wanted to contribute to my clients' designed pages and, more than anything, make work that was memorable. I wanted it to be beautiful. I wanted it to matter.

This approach would eventually gain me the reputation for illustrating complicated and even mundane subjects in ways that made them simple, accessible, and memorable.

The beauty of illustration as a career is that you get to practice every day. Every project is another step toward greater skill. The reality is that you cannot suddenly have a style—it arrives when it's ready.



Corporate collateral
USI Consulting Group, 1998