

Episode 47: Leveraging Profanity to F\*cking Connect with Brian Buirge

00:00 Speaker 1: Welcome to the Neon Noise podcast. Your home for learning ways to attract more traffic to your website, generate more leads, convert more leads into customers and build stronger relationships with your customers. And now your hosts, Justin Johnson and Ken Franzen.

00:15 Justin Johnson: Hey, hey, hey Neon Noise nation. This is the Neon Noise podcast where we decode marketing and sales topics to help you grow your business. What's going on, everybody? This is Justin Johnson and with me I have my co-host, Mr. Ken Franzen. What's up, Ken? How are you doing today?

00:28 Ken Franzen: Doing well today, Justin. Looking forward to speaking with our guest, Brian. He is gonna bring us some design advice in a unique manner, and so I can't wait to dive into this conversation.

00:41 JJ: Cool. Me too. I have a feeling that we may have to toss up a language disclaimer on the show today. [chuckle]

00:49 Brian Buirge: Not a problem.

00:50 JJ: However, not a big deal. I am looking forward to hearing from our feature guest. He is a designer, educator, entrepreneur and co-founder of GFDA, Good Fucking Design Advice.com. Today we will be speaking with Brian Buirge. I would typically have a bio that I would go through on our guest at this point, but I think I'm gonna just read some of the stuff off the GFDA site instead. "I have fallen in love with repetition and fucking practice. This isn't enough, I need more fucking advice. Carve your fucking path." There seems to be a lot of fucking going on here. You guys have all kinds of cool swag, from swear jars to, Don't Fucking Procrastinate, coffee mugs, to, Fuck It List, notepads. I can't wait to hear your story and what you, guys, are all about. Brian, it's fucking good to have you on the show today. Welcome to Neon Noise.

01:43 BB: Hey, thanks for having me. It's fucking great to be here.

01:45 JJ: Awesome. Do me a little favor and give me a little background on you.

01:50 BB: All right. So, let's see. I am Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania born and raised, I am actually back living here again. I was gone for about 12 years. I went to the... I went super far away to the great state of Ohio to get an education, both undergraduate and graduate there. And then, so I went to Kent State University which, in fact, is where I met Jason Bacher who is my current business partner. We were... Well, I'll get in the business stuff in a moment. After that, I lived in Cincinnati for a little while and now I'm back in Pittsburgh, my wonderful home city, home state of Pennsylvania.

02:36 JJ: So talk to us a little about how you guys got your start, because it's an interesting story. And kind of how you got your start and maybe where that's taken you to today.

02:50 BB: Yeah, sure. Well, clearly it did not very far, 'cause I'm back in Pittsburgh.

[laughter]

02:57 BB: Well, the very least I'm not living in mom and dad's basement yet, but... So, Jason and I both went to Kent State University where we had met. There's a year or two difference between us, he's a smidge bit younger than I am. So we knew of each other in undergrad, but because of the way that Kent State's program works, we didn't really interact a whole lot there. The program at Kent is very lock step in that you take class number one which is only offered in the fall and you have to pass that with a certain GPA to take class number two that is only offered in the spring. So, we've kind of passed each other in the hallway and we sort of knew who each other were, but beyond that we didn't really interact until graduate school.

03:39 BB: So Jason went immediately from undergrad into graduate school and I actually had taken a year off. I tried to desperately to escape the state of Ohio, but that happened to be during the economic downturn in end of 2008, early 2009, so jobs were scarce and... Yeah, I ended up finding my way back to Kent State to, initially, to teach as an adjunct faculty member for a semester. They were letting me teach Photoshop and Illustrator, nothing that you can fuck up students too badly with, without having a whole lot of teaching experience under your belt. And so, anyways, that eventually... After that year rolled into me going to graduate school and so then he and I were at that point basically in the same classes, the same "grade" and interacting a whole bunch.

04:34 BB: So from there, we... We were both teaching classes and the story basically goes, we would go in the mornings and get coffee after Jason's class. He taught a 7:30 in the morning class, so that would usually wrap up around 8:30, 9 o'clock and we would go get coffee and we'd just shoot the shit. We were both some of the only students that had come to the graduate program from undergrad within the Kent community, so everybody else was from somewhere else and at least, at first we were both kind of like, "Oh, fuck all those other people. We're the ones that have come from the undergrad program, so we... " I guess we thought we were special or something.

05:10 BB: But we're walking back from getting coffee and talking about the challenges of teaching and engaging students and trying to impart important lessons to them as we went. And so we weren't really serious, but we were sort of joking about how we could get better... I don't know, better engagement from our students, get them to pay attention and so again, whatever bullshit wisdom we had. And so, we were walking back and we thought like, "How could we get people to pay attention to us more?" And we thought, "Well, maybe we could make some sort of website where students could come and they could get designer device." They could upload their work and there'd be some sort of magical algorithm that would happen and it would say, "Oh, this part is wrong. Maybe you need better contrast and... " In theory, of course, that sounds great I suppose.

06:00 BB: But neither of us are not that smart. We don't have development backgrounds, so coding something complicated like that is clearly out of the question. But as we were going we thought, "Well, maybe we could make one of those websites that just has a random piece of advice or a statement or an exclamation or whatever," and that seems something with our small brains that we would be able to actually do. But again, faced with this problem of like well, our students aren't necessarily paying attention to us in class anyways, why would they come to a website to pay attention to us, and of course the answer to that was clearly, "Well, let's put some profanity in."

06:44 KF: That'll work.

06:44 BB: And we said, well let's limit it to the F word and we could say things like, "Be fucking bold, make the logo fucking smaller." And literally on the walk back we're like, "Well, what would we call such a website?" And I don't remember who's idea it was specifically for the name, but we just both just sort of shrugged our shoulders and said, "Good fucking design advice." So we ran back to the graduate studio and lo and behold the domain name, www.goodfuckingdesignadvice.com was in fact available. No one else had purchased it previously or parked it or anything, so we bought the domain and got to work. I started doing some basic design ideas and I said to Jason, I said, "I'm gonna make this on like a four or five pound grid," I don't know what it was. I said, "You start putting the code together," and we've just sort of like... We weren't really sure if the other person was entirely serious. We had only known each other formally for a couple of weeks, so we were just sort of like, "Alright, well, I'm in 40%, he's in 40%, the sum total of that is 80%, and that's close enough to 100 to say that we're doing this."

07:56 KF: We're in.

07:56 BB: So, in the very first day from literally 9:00 to 5:00, we [08:01] \_\_\_\_ skirted all of our important graduate student responsibilities of researching and smart people things and writing and whatever else we were supposed to do, and we built this website. Add we had like I think it was 25 pieces of advice to get started. They were all at the time very design centered, very specific to the practice of graphic design, and we launched the site. We had no intentions of turning it into a business of selling products or speaking workshops or any of the many things that we do nowadays, it was just a... This is funny to us like, we're a couple of 12-year-old boys, let's make it and put it out on the Internet and see what happens. And fortunately we were smart enough to do a couple of things. [1] We connected it to Google analytics, so that we could actually see how this was going to perform. Again, we didn't really have any expectations of it, but it was like, "Ah, well, let's see." That was super important, because that really told us that we had something in the end.

09:03 BB: So we posted it like 5 o'clock and we waited until the end of the day, waited until midnight. We both came back to the graduate studio and we checked our analytics and lo and behold, we had had like 500 visitors in six or seven hours. And we were like, "Oh, holy shit, that's amazing." Yeah, 'cause when you think about it, if you're a student or a young professional, and you're trying to get people to your portfolio site, you're thrilled if five people show up on any given month. It's like, "Oh, this is so great, five people," except one of them is you, 'cause you gotta make sure that the lights are on. And then another one's probably Mom, because Mom's... That's what Mom does. And then the other one's probably also Mom, showing the nice ladies at work. So now you're down to like two maybe, and those are very disappointing numbers. So, for us the very first night 500 people was fucking amazing. And we checked the second night and it was 6000 people, and then we checked the third night, and it was 70,000 people. And we were like, "Oh, holy shit, we did something, now what?" So that was kind of the... I have been talking for a long period of time here. So that was sort of the initial start of GFDA and us realizing that we had something that was more than just a joke between the to us, within the first three or four days.

10:27 KF: Impressive. So, 70,000 crap in your pants, got something going here, what was the next thought? Is it, "We need to contribute more content. We need to monetize this. We need to see if this continues"? How did you guys go from there?

10:44 BB: Well, we put an email address up on the website for people to reach out to us, submit their own advice, and just offer whatever sort of commentary they had. So a couple things that we got from that was, first off like, lots of people submitted advice, and most of it wasn't very good. Or at least in the sense of... It wasn't like we had set out and we were like, "Oh, we have brand standards for our company at this point." But we sorta had sense for, we're going to use the F word once in the piece of advice, it is going to be fucking, so it's going to be used as an adjective, [laughter] I think, I don't know, my English isn't very good. I'd probably get kicked out of the country if I had to take an exam. But yeah, so we had sort of unspoken had these rules about how we were gonna use the advice. And so, a lot of the advice that initially came in was like, "Fuck the fucking client." It's like, "Eh, it's not exactly the sentiment that we're going for." I don't know... A handful of pieces of advice that people submitted, we actually ended up adding, but by and large most of it was not very good or people would send these long paragraphs complaining about something in their job, and it's like, "Eh, nope, still not the right feel."

12:00 BB: But then, what we also got was a lot of hate mail. I'd say about half, and then we got a lot of praise and a lot of interested people and people saying, "I want to buy a poster with your advice on it," or, "I want to buy a t-shirt," or, whatever. That was really what this response from our community that we didn't know that we had, was what sort of drove us... Okay well, I guess we could print posters, we could make t-shirts. There's like... Don't exactly know how to do that, but there are resources around us that could make that sort of thing happen. So we responded to some of the hate mail and that eventually, died down. Some of my favorite ones were that we had set the design industry back by 10 years.

[laughter]

12:51 KF: That's awesome. Single-handedly.

12:52 BB: Yeah. I think a lot of people, then and now, that are offended by our website are either offended, [1] simply because of the profanity and they can't see past it, which is... Obviously, I don't have a problem with it, but that's fine, I get it. There's all sorts of different types people and backgrounds, and it works for a lot of people, and it doesn't work for some others. That's totally cool. But some other people misinterpreted our message, also as a, fuck the client mentality, which we never have had that type of advice in our listings. That was just sort of their interpretation and not really what we were trying to get at and say. Anyways, of the two, 50% hate mail, 50% fan mail, you always have the choice as to what voices you're going to listen to, either internally or externally. Clearly, we decided to go with the folks who were cheering us on.

13:48 BB: So, yeah, that is what led us to start the process of actually making a business and selling products. Although, even at the time, once we started into that system, into that mindset... We were in graduate school we were like, "Uh, maybe, we'll get a little bit of extra side cash." But, for a good portion of the first two, three years of our "business"... And I am using air quotes, I know nobody can see me, but I'm using air quotes. We didn't really... It was just like, "Oh, well this is just a side thing. This is never gonna turn into a legit job, "career."

14:27 KF: The advice that you were giving though, was it the same advice you were lecturing on, but just with a twist, a little shock and awe, throwing some profanity in there, that garnered, that was at that one notch that made the difference? Or was it different advice altogether?

14:44 BB: It was both. We started with a list of 25 pieces of advice. Very quickly, as we continued to get more and more traction than we were... Early on, it was not hard to add advice. A lot of the advice, it very quickly went up to 50 and then 75, then like a 100, 125. We tried to add them in 25 quantity chunks. Why? I don't know, it just feels good. It's like the 10 commandments, it's a good solid number. So we started with very graphic design, specific advice, and as time went on, we were... It might have been advice that we were giving in terms of a critique, in a studio class, or a lot of times, we would ourselves be students, in a class, in the graduate classes, and one of the faculty members would say something and... In a lot of instances, Jason and I were in the same class. We would sort of like... One of us would perk up and either nudge or look across the room at the other one, and be like, "Oh, that's a good one. We could put the F word into that." A lot of the advice, over time, has also come from our personal experiences, whether it was the experience itself or somebody saying something in a classroom, or a mentor, or whatever, and it's like, "Oh, that would be a good one, to put into the site."

16:02 BB: And as time went on, we realized that we weren't speaking just to graphic designers. And fairly, quickly, I think we realized that. We realized that there were, at first, other creative writers, architects, artists, illustrators, all of those were engaged in our site, but then we also, were finding that there's, CrossFit people and military people, and fitness folks, and all of these other demographics that were enjoying our advice. So that actually started to change a little bit of the direction of what we were doing, fairly early on. Because again, our initial thought was graphic design specific advice. And so, all the advice is numbered. If you look at some of those earlier ones, which we've never wanted to remove anything, but there are some that for people in other industries might not be immediately apparent, as to what that means.

16:55 KF: Okay, cool. On your website, you're listed as the good cop, and Jason is listed as the bad cop. Why is that?

17:04 BB: I'm the nice guy, and he's not.

[laughter]

17:08 KF: Alright, there we have it.

17:11 BB: Yeah, it's a bit of the working relationship is definitely a good yin-yang kind of thing. It's been really beneficial for us because, again, jumping back to graduate school, somewhere along the way, we had all these crazy, initial experiences with the website and the first round of products that we came out with, the posters and the t-shirts were huge catastrophes, just everything that could go wrong, went wrong. We didn't know what the fuck we were doing. Thankfully, we had a lot of friends to help pull ourselves together, on both of those notes. But somewhere in the first, I don't know, nine to 12 months, we said, "If we ever get anything out of this, it would be great to be able to go and speak about this crazy experience that we've had." And so not having any specific speaking gigs lined up or even knowing how to approach that we thought, "Well, one of the ways in which we could do a speaking gig, obviously, it'll be the both of us so we should prime ourselves for that experience, if it ever... If the opportunity ever shows up."

18:15 BB: So since we were teaching studio classes and we, at that point, we were also starting to do some freelance work together and go to meetings together, we decided that in the classes, I would hop into Jason's class and we would tag-team, running critiques and he did the same in my classes and it was a good opportunity for a concentrated period of time, our studio classes were like two to three hours long, where we learned how to play off of each other and read each other, and know like, "Oh, I can pick up the momentum here," or, "I'm totally bombing on this." I'll just make eye contact like, "Please, take this over. I don't know what the fuck I'm talking about."

18:55 BB: So yeah, and I think just in terms of how... We learned very early on how we were interacting with students and with clients, and ultimately then with speaking sort of what we felt most comfortable in terms of roles. And so we just sort of have played off of that. So anytime that somebody really needs to bring down the hammer, either in the classroom or in a client meeting or whatever, then Jason is that role, and anytime somebody needs to come by and clean up the tears, then that tends to be more of my role.

19:29 KF: Alright. So you have a little bit of a theme going on here. It sounds like you guys are willing to take risk and willing to fail or, at least, in the story that I'm gathering or what you just told, that's kinda what I'm gathering from that, and on your website you talk about it a lot as well. So let's jump in real quick about risk-taking. Over the years Neon Goldfish, we've done some quirky things I think that some of our clients were like, "Yeah, I wish we were a marketing agency with a goofy name like 'Neon Goldfish'." [chuckle] We could do silly shit too, but we're not... We have to be conservative because we are in a boring industry." And you're talking about risk-taking in the creative world or taking chances and also learning from failure. In today's age though, I think a lot of business entrepreneurs are scared shitless of risk because of [1] failing, but [2] the backlash they might receive because it seems like anyone farts crooked in the world today, that there's an anti... There's a rally against you and you have to answer to people. And it's fearful, that's fearful alone, just to have to spend time away from making money doing the money-making things we do, to just address that to almost the point where no chance-taking is being made at all. So talk to us about your approach risk and how you tackle failure.

20:58 BB: Yeah, sure. So for us one thing I will say is that it's not that we aren't regularly scared shitless, 'cause we definitely are, but I think for us it's the courage to move forward anyways, and just to accept... To become comfortable with being uncomfortable or used to being uncomfortable is a frequent spot we find ourselves in. And I think that that wasn't necessarily... I know that it wasn't necessarily how we set out initially, with a delivered mindset, but it is what has happened. So I sorta touched on our first couple products were complete failures in terms of our production portion. So I'll give you that story and that sort of lays the groundwork for why we think about our process and approach the way we do.

21:49 BB: So the first two products we had were posters and t-shirts. And we didn't... When we started the company, "started", we didn't have any money, right? We were graduate students. $20 bill goes a really long way to buying beer, so it wasn't like we had this... We didn't have venture capital or... I mean, even money in our own bank accounts to make the products. So the first thing that we did was through a recommendation of a friend of ours, we decided to run a pre-sale for our t-shirt and posters, almost simultaneously launching those, and that was just because we didn't have the money to buy that in advance. We had no idea how that process really, really worked. I mean we knew generally, but not enough that we could... Not that we really felt comfortable knowing, "Oh, this is how this will turn out." So initially we had hired... I'll give you the abridged version of the story, we had hired somebody to do both the t-shirts printing and the poster printing, who was like... This is like a lateral move, another college student. So despite the fact that we are in a college town and there are more t-shirt shops than there are Starbucks, for some reason we thought it would be a great idea to hire a college student to do this.

[chuckle]

23:10 BB: I don't know we were trying to save money. We had, in our pre-sale, we had gotten about $10,000, which was more money than he or I had ever seen in a bank account, mutually-owned or separate, so we were pretty excited about that and we're hoping to keep as much of it as possible. But as we found out, hiring a college student is not necessarily the best way to go. So we had done this pre-sale and we had basically said, "We will ship all the products on Black Friday." And it ended up coming down to the weekend before Thanksgiving and we had nothing from the guy that we had hired. And he basically had just like decided that he was gonna jump ship. He had attempted a couple t-shirts and they were terrible, and then just completely gave up on the posters. And so here we were like less than 10 days away from what our customers were expecting and we had zero products.

24:12 BB: And a couple things. [1] Jason and I are not people to miss deadlines, which we take very seriously, then and now. And also it's a great way to completely ruin your career before you even begin, to create a website called 'Good Fucking Design Advice', put your name on everything, the products and the website and then take people's money and not deliver the products. That's just, you're totally screwed if that happens. So we got to work. We got some friends of ours. One friend who knew how to do a little bit of screen printing and had the equipment. And the posters we printed in a three-day, no sleep, nonstop printing marathon. We had sold somewhere around like 300 posters I think, and in the screen printing process lots of things can go wrong. You need to print like 400 to make sure that you can make your 300 clean, perfect, held [25:13] \_\_\_\_, typeset prints. And so we managed to pull that off.

25:19 BB: Unfortunately, two days later we had the posters cut down, they're like on a 19x25 sheet and the finished size is 18x24, and we took them to a company to cut that half inch off on all borders, and half of the posters, the gentleman who was running the chopper, chopped the left side twice rather than the left side and then the right side. So we had to go back and print another 200 posters again. So, it was like this really stressful, very work intensive period of like six days trying to make sure that all of this came together and that we could send everything out on time like we had promised people that we would.

26:01 BB: Moving on from there, the first round of coffee mugs that we had made. We thought, "Oh we've got it. We can... This product we don't have to print ourselves or with our friends. We can order product from a company and it will be sent to us and then it's done. And then we just put in a box and send it in the mail." But we're dumbasses and we took the coffee mugs and we're like, "Oh, well, the coffee mug is this size and we found these like 4x4x4 inch cardboard boxes, and it was like a glove fit, like the mug fit perfectly with the handle pressed up against the back corner of the box and then we put a piece tape on it and send in the mail. And lo and behold if you ship a piece of ceramic ware in the mail, not in bubble wrap, it breaks. [laughter] So we sent out like... We bought the minimum order of mugs, which I think it was 72 at the time and 60 of them broke. So all the profits that we could have had from that, we had to like reorder the mugs and then ship them out, and it was like, "Uh, can we not do anything right?"

27:06 BB: So... But these early experiences for us were really... There's such dumb mistakes, but you also have to keep in mind, we're graduate students, we're doing client work, with a million other things going on. This was not our primary focus, but something we were just figuring out as we went. So this sort of commit first, figure it out later approach is really what defined our early process. And then as we continued to move on, I think... There's somebody that has this great quote about, "The purpose of life is to continually fail at greater and greater things." I would say the very least we've not made the same mistake again and again and again; we just make new mistakes on bigger and larger and more complicated problems, and then we learn from it. And one of our main, when we give lectures and workshops, one of our main takeaway piece of advice is, "Experience is a thing that you get the moment after you need it." So, until you go out there and you start fucking things up, making mistakes, you're just not gonna have that experience, that's the only way to get it. That lays the foundation for us for the risk-taking approach. And it's really been in the last, probably two to three years that we've been able to clearly identify and articulate that as who we are and our offering and the workshops that we do. Yeah, so that's sort of how we ended up here.

28:36 KF: Perfect. To be creative, to try to... And from a marketing standpoint and I think of that from a creative [28:40] \_\_\_\_ design... From a marketing standpoint, how do we break through the noise and be a risk taker to be bold, to... Without... Or maybe do [28:51] \_\_\_\_ finally be able to say, "Screw it, I don't give a shit." What your take on that?

28:58 BB: That's a great question and sort of it's both easy and complex to give you a bullshit starting of an answer. [chuckle]

29:06 KF: Perfect. [chuckle]

29:08 BB: I think that... So in terms of risk taking and creativity, I'll give the disclaimer first. I don't feel that risk taking, it's not like taking stupid risks, it's not like, "Oh, I'm gonna jump out of the airplane without a parachute," that kind of thing or however, you wanna make the equivalency in the creative industry. I think the first part is defining what's at risk, and so it's like, "Okay well, do you wanna do something that's... " You don't wanna do something that's gonna put your relationship with the client at risk or whatever, but what you... What is often the problem is there's some sort of ego thing like, I'm afraid of putting this out there, whether that's happening on behalf of you as an individual or the client. It's like, "Uh, I don't know", there's like this uneasy area. But for me and for us, I think, when we talk about risk taking it has to do with... So, for us, risk is the lifeblood of the creative process. If you are... Inherently, if you are doing something that's creative, innovative, or disruptive, you are taking a risk in some form, whether small or large.

30:19 BB: If you're not taking a risk then whatever you're doing can't possibly be creative, innovative, disruptive, whatever industry business jargon you wanna use, because if there's no risk involved, that means that you have a strong idea of what the outcome is going to be. And if you have an idea of what the outcome is going to be, then that means that somebody else has already done it because then you can look and you can point, you can say, "Oh, so and so has already done this," in which case, then you're not being creative. You're just sort of a lemming following in the tracks of somebody else's idea or approach. If you're going to be innovative, if you're going to be creative, then there is some amount of risk, either small or large, that has to be a part of your process. Does that answer your question?

31:06 KF: No, it does, it does. It's thinking, being conscious of the risk you're taking and understanding what the... Not to just jump blindly at something but to take risks, just to make them calculated ones.

31:20 BB: Right. Right. And I think we're working on a couple things right now in terms of moving GFDA forward. One of which is we're working on a book and so I've been doing some writing for that. And one of the things that has come out of the writing is that you have to take a chance but it's not leaving your creative process up to chance. It's not like... They're two... How do I say this? They're not mutually exclusive. So, in your process, you have to take chances, but you also have to make use of your creative process. You have to put in the work and the time in order to bring those ideas to fruition. And our challenge, admonition, whatever you wanna call it, is to make sure that that risk-taking, that chance-taking portion that happens early in the process exists, and that you're not just looking out, seeing what everybody else is doing, and then copying, emulating, whatever.

32:23 KF: Does that book, is that gonna follow a lot of the items from the workshop, The Art of Risk Taking?

32:31 BB: The book is... Yeah, it will have a section about risk-taking in it. It's basically we're in the book proposal phases and I think we've got a couple publishers that are interested. We're trying to take the advice that we have and expand upon it. I think we'll probably do 100 pieces or 150. We're not that far in to say the specifics about it yet but to take the advice, and to write a couple paragraphs about it, and just to take a little bit of a deeper dive into it, and both as a general sense for creatives, but then also to talk a little bit in the book about our experiences and how that informs this section of advice. So, in theory, let's say there's a section on risk-taking and we've got 10 pieces of advice that in there, and then a story or two about where we've found that in our practice.

33:29 KF: Alright. Let's talk about the pledge on your website. Do you have a...

33:34 BB: Sure. What do you wanna know about the pledge?

33:35 KF: I wanna hear one, the reason you have it, and two... And I'm gonna go ahead and read it off real quick and then I'll let you expand upon it. It's "I, blank, hereby swear to abandon all fear, to question everything, to trust in myself, to honor those before me as I excel, and to support those who follow as they ascend. I swear that I will never accept another standard for success as I will set my own measure higher. When I am finished, no one will ever fucking look at blank the same way again." So I love this. This is kinda cool and you got pictures of people who've taken the pledge, filled it out, and it's on the site. Tell me about this, and give me some insights on what it means to you and what it means to others.

34:24 BB: Sure. That was... By the way, that was a brilliant reading. I don't think we need to stop the podcast and start over again 'cause you nailed that.

[laughter]

34:31 KF: Perfect.

34:33 BB: So, the pledge was actually one of the very early social things that we had put together. Initially, we talked about posters, coffee mugs, t-shirts, all of that came out. And then we hit a point where we were realizing that people were taking photos. This was seven years ago when Instagram, Twitter, all those were much more fresh. So people were taking photos and interacting with our social content, and we were looking for a way to have a little bit more of a back and forth dialogue and to get other people putting themselves out there and swearing. So, Jason and I, we came up with... We were loosely talking about this idea of "How can we get some social engagement that is free and interactive in some way?" And we didn't exactly know what the solution to that was. It just so happened that I went away for a weekend and Jason sat down with one of our other roommates who also happens to be named Jason, and they came up with this pledge. And I came back, and it was written out, and minor tweak here and there, but that was what made it happen. And again, it was sort of this, with Jason and I, it's always this 50/50 thing.

35:54 BB: So he sat down and worked with this other Jason... Jason Richburg, and had the pledge written, and then I came back and he's like, "Got this pledge thing done. You gotta put it up on the website and figure out how all the social content's gonna work." And that was, of course, the shittier end of the bargain on that one. That was an early lesson for me that I need to hit it a little bit earlier before him so that I don't end up on the shit end of the stick all the time.

[laughter]

36:23 BB: Again, we were, very early one, I think it was less than the first year when we had put that out. And for us it was a bit of a risk because it was like, "Okay, well let's put this out there and see if anyone's gonna bite on it." And we put it up there, and then Jason and I took our own photos and put those out. And then, for a week or two, nothing. And we're like, "Oh, maybe we're fucking idiots. Maybe we look really dumb." And then we thought, "Okay, well let's... " So we printed a couple of the pledges off and we went around the graduate studio and to some of our students, and we're like, "Here, hold this piece of paper. No, no, no, no. Don't read it. Don't look at it. [laughter] Just hold that piece of paper. I'm gonna take a picture. This is definitely not gonna end up on the internet somewhere."

37:10 KF: "Trust me."

37:14 BB: So then we had about six collective friends, so then there were eight photos up there. Then, very slowly, hostings started to trickle in. At this point we've got hundreds, probably even thousands, of submissions. Unfortunately, on the website we've changed the API for how that loads. So at one point early on, it was with Flickr, and then we moved to Instagram, and then Instagram, I think it was a year ago, changed their APIs. So now there's just like, I don't know, I think there's 20 or so sitting on there. But for us, it's like nobody's really gonna sit and scroll through that page necessarily. We're more interested in what the pledge itself means to people. So early on we launched the pledge. It's running, we're starting to pick up traction, and we actually got one of our very first speaking engagements out of it.

38:08 BB: It was funny because we had noticed that there was this large group of people that had taken the pledge and somebody had printed it out for them on yellow paper and of course, again being early on, we're like, "Oh sweet. Look, there's 40 people took the pledge in that one photo. That's great. I really wish they would have taken them individually. That would've made us look cooler. [chuckle] But okay, cool, whatever. At least we got that photo on there." And then shortly thereafter, the people who run that conference, the next time around, so somebody had brought that to their conference. The next time around, they invited us to come be speakers and workshop leaders, and that was the first... We had spoken maybe two or three times before that, but that was our first conference. It wasn't like going to a university or anything. And we were surrounded by a ton of other speakers who were way more talented and way more creative than we were. So it was definitely a humbling experience and also very motivating to see where some of these people have been and what they had done, and think about how we could apply some of their lessons to our practice.

39:12 KF: So those speaking engagements, workshops, tell us a little bit about those. Where might we find you or do you have anything coming up, the calendar for the rest of this year, upcoming next year? And what are your workshops about, or your speaking engagements? What are you gonna focus on, or are they a random variety?

39:32 BB: Sure. So, our lectures started I think in 2011 or 2012. And again, as I was saying earlier, the purpose was to initially tell people about just this ridiculous story that we had and have continued to keep having. So the lecture is a good bit of what we started the podcast with, just our story and how we got going. And of course, there's a lot of pretty pictures to go with us and two very attractive men that stand up on stage and deliver the information. So we were doing the speaking engagements. And sort of slowly out of that we started realizing like, "Oh, well a lot of the people who were inviting us to come out are universities because obviously we connect very well with a college crowd and young designers." So then we started thinking, "Well, we could do workshops where we come out and we do a lecture and then we do a weekend workshop." We've seen other professional creatives do that kind of thing.

40:33 BB: And for us it was a possible opportunity to just expand our reach, get more money out of the opportunity, etcetera. So we started doing very graphic design based workshops, teaching a series of exercises and projects over a weekend. And we did that a couple dozen times at different places. And eventually we sort of started feeling like our day-to-day work isn't a typical graphic design studio. I mean we do a little bit of client and consulting work, but it's not like some close friends of mine who graduated and they're in it doing design work, eight to 10 hours a day, day in and day out, and that's their job. For us, it really is just me and Jason and all of the responsibilities from head janitorial work to chief of security are us, finances, shipping logistics, all of that is handled in some capacity by one of us.

41:30 BB: Then we started thinking about two years ago, "Okay, well if this doesn't quite feel like who we are then what is it?" And I think that was the point where we really started to take notice of our approach to problem solving and the risk taking aspect, and then started thinking about how we could offer that as our primary workshop offering. We loosely came up with an idea for what the curriculum for this workshop could be. We put three sentences about it on our website just to see if anyone would bite, and lo and behold by three days later, Nike contacted us, one of their divisions, and was like "Hey, we see that you do this workshop, we'd like you to come out in like six weeks and do it here at this week long summit that we're having", and without exactly lying about it we were like "Oh yeah, we do workshops all the time." [chuckle] And of course not saying that we'd never done this workshop before.

42:28 BB: But at the same time... Sort of, bending the truth a little bit, but at that point Jason and I had both had been teaching at the university; for me I think I had been teaching for like six or seven years at that point and he had taught for five before he moved out to New York City, so it wasn't like we were unseasoned in front of a group of people as educators in various forms and of course our other workshops. But yeah, so that was sort of like the call to action, like, "Oh, okay, we really need to flesh out this workshop and figure out how we're going to put our money where our mouth is, and create something that's truly a good experience for people." So we did that first workshop for Nike and it could have been a huge catastrophe, a huge failure, but in fact it was a great success and they liked what we did and they had us come back and do one for a different division, and those have led to workshops with other people, corporations, conferences, etcetera since then, so we've really been pushing that workshop and that experience as a primary offering that we have nowadays.

43:34 KF: So, I always like to ask, and this is probably more... Definitely right up the design alley. What do you see coming down the line, and this is your designer cap coming on, from the design world? 'Cause I talk with Justin all the time, and I feel like the design especially when it comes to websites is stuck in this weird funk right now where everything looks so damn similar. And I always ask people that are in the design world what they see coming down the lines, trends, anything else that they like, has them excited or has them disappointed. Anything you want to share with us there?

44:12 BB: Disappointed is definitely, that's a good word. I think that we've seen in recent years a very strong democratization of design, whereas 15 years ago there were not a million Word Press templates or Shopify, or Square or any of those services that are offering good-looking pre-designed templates for people. And so consequently most of the web has started to look very ubiquitous, very much the same regardless of where you go, because it's like to code a website from scratch and to have somebody put in the effort, that's a high ticket item. And for a lot of like very small businesses that are just getting started, the finances just aren't there for the major design companies to come in and provide their services. And I think I'm uniquely positioned as a business owner to understand both ends of the equation; I'm a designer, I've done client work and have my educational background and whatever, but then I also have this business owner mentality where I see the value in seeing where every penny goes and always feeling like there's never enough money, and how can I get something done for a reasonable price? And where do I drop the money and where do I have to pull back and not put so much money and effort into things?

45:40 BB: So I understand why that's happening, but I think that in terms of the web these experiences are becoming more and more streamlined and consequently more and more boring and less engaging. So I think that the... I don't know... I think the future of design has a lot to do with the content and the experiences, and it's almost a given that things are going to... From a visual design standpoint that things are going to look good. I think you'll have some key outliers that really are able to do something unique. I think that's gonna cost more money, and I think for those people that have the money it will be worth their investment, but for the smaller and medium-sized folks I think it's really gonna have to be less about thinking exclusively about the visual or the graphic design and more about the totality of the experience from customer service to the way that the content is written; it's really gonna have to be about... The branding is really... I think it's already there, but more and more for even the smaller entities it's going to have to be about the experience of the place when the place isn't there. So whether you're getting an email from a customer service person, visiting a website, looking at their Instagram, there has to be a continuity among all those things so that it feels consistent regardless of what medium you're looking at or interacting with.

47:13 KF: All right, cool. I like the kind of direction you're kinda taking there, going there, because the content component I think is something that these still see a lot of opportunity for improvement whereas design, you're right, everything looks good, or you expect everything to look good these days. So very cool.

47:33 BB: So frequently it's like you just go to these websites and you can tell it takes like 30 seconds, and not even, it takes 10 seconds, you're like "Oh, this is a Word Press template", and then it's like "Oh, these are stock images", and it just starts to feel very impersonal. I suppose it's better than some middle aged woman who made a card company and is using Comic Sans, it's like a step above that, but yeah it's still not the whole deal.

48:04 JJ: See Justin, I tell you Comic Sans has been out for a while and we continue to want to use it in our designs so, this is just validation to start using Comic Sans.

[laughter]

48:12 BB: I'm telling you yeah.

[laughter]

48:14 JJ: Justin we gotta talk...

48:15 KF: Please talk him, please talk him up the Comic Sans ledge, he's that and Papyrus are two of his favorites so it scares us.

[laughter]

48:24 S?: What?

48:25 JJ: Love it.

48:25 BB: Well there's whatever this new script face is that everybody's using that looks like, somebody did water color. Like we just did the national stationary show a couple months ago in New York and I don't know that we were necessarily exactly the right fit for the show but it was an interesting experience. And getting to walk around I can't tell you... There are some people that have some brilliant fucking ideas and great cards and products and so forth, but there are also a number of people that are middle-aged women that decided... With zero background in design, cards, illustration whatever that are like, "Oh, I found the scripty watercolor type face and I'm gonna put that on a card and I'm gonna run a card company." And so much so that we had a girl who interned with us last year was helping out one of the days of the show. So at the end of the show we had a bottle of whiskey and we just... It was a drinking game, we just walked the show and every time we saw that typeface you had to take a shot. So fortunately it was New York and I got to take the subway home.

49:27 KF: Right.

49:28 BB: Because... And I also fortunately I didn't die, didn't get hospital drunk.

49:35 KF: Fun drinking game. I never thought about doing that, that's a good idea for sure. Brian, what has you excited whether it's in your own business or industry-wise, right now, what are you working on that's fresh, new? I know you just talked about the book, but anything new that you guys got coming down the line that you wanted to share?

50:00 BB: Yeah, I think sort of the two major things would be the book, which is just super exciting, because I've wanted to write a book and sort of encapsulate the GFDA experience in that for quite some time. And I think about four years ago we had a couple missed opportunities with proposals. We'd have publishers reach out for us and say, "Hey, we want you to write a book." And we'd say, "Okay, what kind of book do you want us to write?" And they would say, "Aaahhh, just put a proposal together and we'll make it work." It's like, "All right." So we write a proposal and they'd come back and they sort of do the, "Yeah, we were thinking something more like this." And you're like, "Okay, that's cool, that works for us too. You could have just told us about that up front." [laughter] "We didn't need this whole game back and forth."

50:45 BB: And so... The same thing happened three or four times with different publishers, where it was that exact experience, "Write us a proposal. Nah, we were thinking more like this." Okay, so we modify the proposal, send it back and they take it to whoever their higher ups were and they'd be like, "Oh, absolutely not. We are not gonna have a company called 'Good Fucking Design Advice' write a book." But now we have been around, they haven't been able to kill us yet, we still exist and with a bit more of a reputation and validity behind who we are, our message, who we talk to, who we work with. Now it's prime opportunity for us to be able to do this. I'm very excited about that moving forward.

51:26 BB: And then the risk-taking workshops again are a really exciting thing for me. We got to do some this year, we did a tour of Europe for the first time, both me and Jason are first time visiting Europe, and fortunately we got to do it on somebody else's dime. And we did our workshop in Barcelona with a conference called 'OFFF', OFFF as in... I'll sort of plug them, they're 17 years running. At least this year was the 17th one. They will be doing 18 again next year, and I don't know if you guys or anybody in your audience ever pay attention to conferences, but for a conference, particularly a creative one, to run that long, they are definitely doing some really great things. So we had a great opportunity to speak there and do our workshop. It was also the largest conference I've ever spoken at. It was like... I think the attendance was 3000 people. Prior to that the max we had spoken to was like 500 people, I think.

52:27 BB: But it was sort of an interesting experience because we got there and I was like, "Oh, this is way bigger than I thought." [laughter] And you get up on stage and they mic you with a little mic that comes around that's flesh coloured and you can't really see, and up on stage there's the couch and the coffee table that nobody uses but they put it up there for whatever visual effect. [laughter] So it was real like, "Oh man this is the big leagues." Yeah.

52:54 JJ: "This is it."

52:54 BB: There's 2000 chairs in front of you and then a Megatron screen outside the design museum for all the people that wanna eat hotdogs while they listen to you talk. [laughter] So that was definitely an experience. So we got to run the workshop there, and then we did it again New York earlier this year in, I think it was June, for the 99U Conference. And that part is picking up steam and I feel like every time we give it, it gets better and better, and the exercises that we're doing get more and more creative, more and more risky. So, it's a lot of fun.

53:28 BB: I think for me and Jason we both work remotely, I'm in Pittsburgh, he's in New York and we're primarily by ourselves most of the day. We have meetings here and there, and of course he and I talk almost daily, sometimes twice a day. But you're sort of in this secluded environment, so for me personally I love going out and doing the workshops and doing the lectures, because it's like, "Oh, there's real human beings out here", and it's also very fulfilling for people to tell you how much the content that you create means to them and how it's impacted them in different ways. So, if you're sitting by yourself for like six months and then you go out there and you get to give a lecture or something, and someone's like you know I finally quit the job that I've waited for a year because of an email you sent out and I'm so much happier with whatever I'm doing now. That makes it all worth it.

54:20 JJ: Sweet. Very, very cool. What's the best way for listeners to get in touch with you?

54:25 BB: They can email me personally at Brian, B-R-I-A-N @gfda.co. There is no M at the end. Or, of course, you can visit the website goodfuckingdesignadvice.com, or gfda.co if you don't wanna type all of those letters. Yeah, any of those. Or if you've got a set of tin cans, you wanna try to make that work, I'm flexible.

[chuckle]

54:52 JJ: Whatever works, right? Good stuff. Hey Brian, before we say goodbye, if you had one piece of parting advice for our listening audience what would that be?

55:01 BB: Oh man, everybody always asks this and I gave you my good one earlier so I'll just repeat it again because I like it so much, and because sometimes I'm boring and unoriginal.

[chuckle]

55:12 BB: So I would say, the main thing is experience is the thing you get the moment after you need it. So until you go out and start just making a fucking mess of everything, you're not gonna get what you need to move your creative practice forward, whatever that creative practice is... Whether you're a designer, an entrepreneur, a writer, I don't care. You've just gotta start doing the work and be okay with it being shit for a while. And even once you're doing the work and it starts turning out good, you have days were it's shit again and it's like that's totally okay, it happens to everybody.

55:46 JJ: Good stuff. Alright, Neon Noise nation, we hope you enjoyed our conversation today with Brian. Be sure to go over and check out his website at goodfuckingdesignadvice.com. Brian thanks again for being on the show today. It's one [55:57] \_\_\_\_ of awesome value Neon nation. The show notes from today will be available at neongoldfish.com/podcast. Until next time. This is Justin, Ken and Brian signing off. Neon Noise nation, we will see you again next week.

[music]

56:14 S1: Thank you for listening to this episode of the Neon Noise Podcast. Did you enjoy the podcast? If so please subscribe, share with a friend or write a review. We wanna cover the topics you wanna hear. If you have an idea for a topic you'd like Justin and Ken to cover, connect with us on Twitter @neongoldfish or through our website at neongoldfish.com.