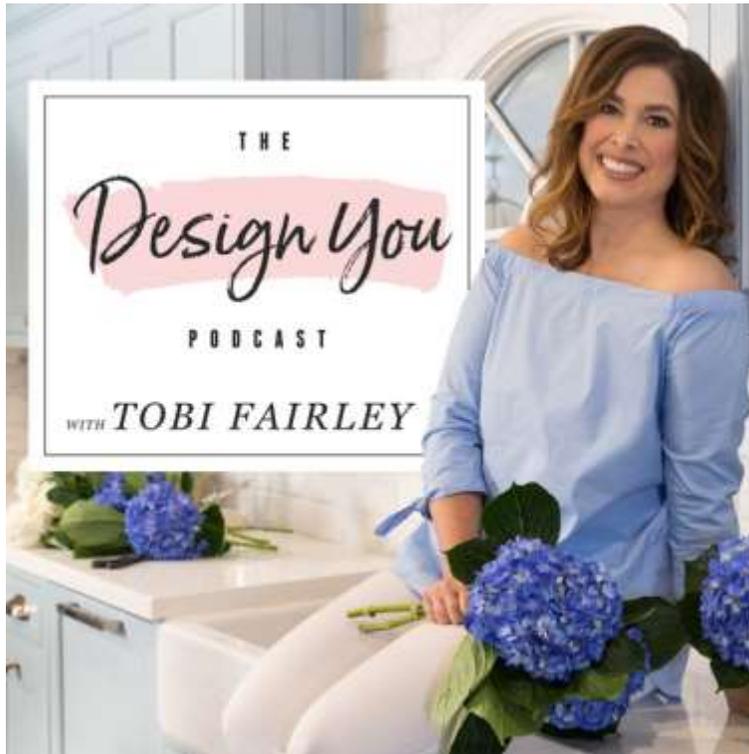


Ep #37: How to Run a Successful Business with LuAnn Nigara



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Tobi Fairley

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You are listening to *The Design You Podcast* with Tobi Fairley, episode number 37.

Welcome to *The Design You Podcast*, a show where interior designers and creatives learn to say no to busy and say yes to more health, wealth, and joy. Here is your host, Tobi Fairley.

Tobi: Hey everybody, I am so excited about today's episode because it's been a little while since I did an interview. But today, I have another amazing savvy businesswoman that happens to also be in the design industry, and we're going to have some fun talking today.

So my guest is LuAnn Nigara and she is a spectacular businesswoman of all sorts. She's been in business for more than three decades as she says, she looks too young for that for sure. And it has been in the window treatment business, the awnings business with her husband, and for the last three years, she's had an amazing, spectacular, super successful podcast.

She was one of the first in our industry to do that and she has a book that we're going to talk a whole lot about today called *A Well-Designed Business*, and I hear she's working on another book. She's a business coach, she's a speaker. I mean, what do you not do, LuAnn?

LuAnn: I don't get to yoga too often anymore Tobi, I can tell you that.

Tobi: I know. Well, I'm so happy to welcome you to the podcast today, so thank you for being here.

LuAnn: Tobi, thank you so much. I have to tell you, you know, I was just working in my showroom one day last week and there I am with my Tobi Fairley fabric books and I'm picking through them, ordering memos, and I'm thinking, "This is crazy. I've been looking at this woman's fabric collections for years and now I am going to be on her podcast."

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Tobi: Woo-hoo. Yay. Buy away. Order samples all you want. I am definitely in favor of that. Well, we've had some fun conversations and just really getting to know each other better because we've both kind of known about each other for years but maybe not really connected until a few months ago. And so when we did, we were both like, "Well, you have to be on my podcast and you have to be on my podcast," we're like, "Okay, done." So here we are. But today I really - I read your book. The first book, and you'll have to tell us in a minute about your second book, but that's really what I want to use to drive our conversation today because there's so many - I mean, way more than nuggets. There's nuggets but then there's just some gold in your book that I really connected with. And so if it's okay with you, tell us a little bit about you real quick on anything I missed, and then let's jump into the goodness of A Well-Designed Business.

LuAnn: I guess the most significant thing to share is maybe the why of everything that has come to take place in the last three years with the podcast, with the books, and with the business coaching is in my experience, in the more than three decades of doing custom window treatments and awnings at Window Works at our location in Livingston, New Jersey, I had the great privilege and honor to work side by side with a lot of interior designers for most of those years. Right from the beginning of starting our business, I was the one who initiated the reach out to interior designers and talking to them about the value of basically subbing out their window treatment work to us. Not completely out of their system but having us as their window treatment person as opposed to them going directly to the different vendors and manufacturers and workrooms and so forth.

And so that was very - it was a great move on our part. It turned out to be terrific for our business, but what I learned along the years is that very few interior designers were successful in relation to their ability as a designer. So I would witness firsthand, designers that were really talented but sort of average, that were legitimately profitable and always busy and constantly calling with clients, to the other spectrum where I might have designers that were very, very talented, objectively talented and busy, but then often there would be this disconnect. There would be designers who were really truly

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talented and you could see that their work was head and shoulders above other people's work, but yet struggled to maintain an active pipeline.

And unfortunately, it's hard to be a creative and be a businessperson if no one has expressed to you the importance of that. So that was what I learned, and it seemed to be this hole, this gap, this missing thing, and that's where the passion from the podcast comes from.

Tobi: Yes, well, I feel, as you know, exactly the same way, and that's why, you know, I'm one of the rare - I call myself a rarity anyway, I think I am in our industry that I'm really more of the person you were talking about originally. Not that I don't think I'm talented in design, but really, I think of design more as my vehicle and I'm truly an entrepreneur and I have my accounting degree and I have an MBA and that design degree, but am I like, the most creative designer on the planet? No, but I'm a dang good sales person and I really get my finances and I have systems and all the stuff you talk about in your book and you're so right.

I'm in so much agreement with you that many, many, many of the people in our industry and in other creative industries, related or not, really, really struggle with all of these parts of the business and the charging what they're worth and that's exactly the stuff I want to talk about today. And I love that you discovered that and that you became passionate about helping designers and creatives also like me, really figure out how to make their business a business, right?

LuAnn: Exactly right. See for me, I didn't come to window treatments because I had a passion for window treatments. I met my husband, who would become my husband. When I met my husband, he had just six months before that started Window Works, and when I saw started Window Works six months before that, he was also currently the owner of two health clubs, which is how I met him because I worked at one of the health clubs, and he had a full-time job as a probation officer in New Jersey, and he had a tax business on the side where he helped people with their taxes

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because that's his training. He's an accountant. And so then he was like, "And in my free time I'll start Window Works."

So when I met him, he had literally just started this company and then eventually through our courtship and I came to meet him, long story, I mean, came to work at Window Works, long story how that happened, but the reality is that I have said a thousand times that if he had opened up a copier business at that point, we would have had an insane copier business. To me, I'm into the business end of it. I'm into the sales end of it. At that young age, my early 20s, I was driven by sales.

And so sell a drape, sell a blind, sell a copy machine, it didn't matter to me. And then as I matured and grew up in the business with him and running it with him and watching him and him mentoring me, it became the passion for what makes the business successful. And so unfortunately - what's funny is you almost look at that as, "Poor you, LuAnn, you didn't have a dream to do something," right? But like, you know, any one passion, whereas designers, many of them come from moving furniture around as little girls and young men and I can't wait to be a designer.

And so yes, that's so great that somebody gets to grow up and work in something they've been passionate about since they've been a child, but at the same time, if nobody turns that light bulb on and says, "You got to learn how to run the business side of it, you're not going to be able to support yourself doing your passion," then that's the disconnect.

Tobi: Yeah, well, and I think it's so interesting listening to you talk about that because your husband is obviously clearly an entrepreneur, as are you, and there's not that many - I mean, we make call some people in design an entrepreneur because they are really just business owners, but rarely do we see real true entrepreneurs that are driven like you are and like I am for sales and the business side in our industry. Let's be clear, not a lot of people go, "Ooh, I want to make a lot of money. Let me get into the interior design business." That's definitely the place to make money, right? That's definitely not what they say.

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But I think that's so interesting and I love every ounce of what you're saying, and I think that that is the exact thing that so many people in the design industry and other creative industries are missing, that drive for sales, really understanding money and revenues, and that's so much of what you talk about in your book, and let's get into some of that specifically because I think there's so - I mean, my gosh, you've already touched on a million key pieces of it. But you're so right that it's so rare to find people that come to the design industry, and I want one of the little girls moving my furniture around in the middle of the night, but I also had a dad who was saying, you know, "Get an accounting degree. You can always have success with an accounting degree."

And when I got finished with my accounting degree, I knew I didn't want to be an accountant, and I found my way back to design, but it was a path that was really different than most. And to me, I really have always been a salesperson. I mean, my parents said, if I couldn't come in the door I'd come in the window, if I couldn't come in the window, I'd come down the chimney. Like, I would figure out how to get what I want and it sounds like you are the same way. But so many designers just want to be creative. They're like, I just want to be creative, I just want to do pretty.

And in your book, you talk about specifically how that's really not an option. You can hire some things out and you talk about experts they should hire like the web designer and the PR person and the business coach and all the things they should have, which they truly should, but you still go back to the same thing that I believe, which is you've got to have the business piece. You even say you have to have daily financial systems. And if your business is not making you a real living, I don't mean like, a few thousand dollars a year but a real living, then it is a hobby business, and I'm so the same way.

And you said in the book, if you wanted a hobby, you'd go to yoga class, right? Which you don't ever get to. So let's talk about that a little bit, the financial systems and these hobby businesses because I kind of feel like,

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you know, a good more than 50% of the decorators and designers I encounter really have hobby businesses.

LuAnn: See, my thing about it, Tobi is like, for almost everything, almost any question you could ask me, whether you're asking me my opinion where I have to formulate and come back to you with what I think, or if it's someone that I'm coaching or you're asking me the opinion on someone else's life, business, practice, whatever, I'm going to start with, well, why do we need to know this? What do I want to know about this? What do I want to get from this?

And so just before we make that distinction between hobby business and that if you're not doing things a certain way it's a hobby business, I have to say, it's okay if it's a hobby business, but my point on it in making the distinction and bringing it out to light and uncovering it is if you are thinking that you're running a real business, if you're intending to be in business and you are not making money, then don't put your head in the sand and just keep repeat and rinse and repeat and rinse, right? So my thing is because there are some people, I've met them, that are - they have the income from a spouse, whoever it is, and they decorate on the side and they make a few bucks, and if they make three or four grand a year and it pays for a family vacation or it pays for their spa visits, they're fine with it.

See, I don't judge that. I don't mind if you have a hobby business if it's intentionally a hobby business, right? So I just want to establish that because beyond that, what I have a hard time with is the person who expresses not to have a hobby business, that expresses that I am a businessperson and then year after year goes on doing the same things, not making money, and doesn't stop and say, "What am I doing wrong here? Where am I going down the wrong road? Let me look in the mirror and let me figure this out."

Tobi: And I think for me, what - I agree with you completely. And the people who are happy with their hobby businesses, I also do not judge at all. But the people who are happy with their hobby businesses are not the ones

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coming to you and me typically asking for business advice because they are just fine the way they are and they think it's a dreamy business and they have the best time. But what's so interesting to me is that there's so many people that technically would fall into the hobby business category because like you said, they've barely, if ever, made any money year after year after year, and the interesting thing about it is they're so frustrated and they're just banging their head against the wall and they don't understand it. And a lot of times they're working really hard and it's just not happening.

But you know, they're also at the same time not willing to do some of the things, and you specifically talk about this in the book too, like, what are you doing, what are you willing to do, and you say that it may not be easy, it probably won't be and that it probably will be uncomfortable. And I find that a lot of creatives want the business success to a point, but when they start getting into what they need to do, the finances and that kind of stuff and it gets scary and uncomfortable, that's when they quit. Is that what you see too?

LuAnn: Exactly. And I also just see a not willingness to take responsibility for the success or the failure. You see, so often, you'll talk with a business owner that is not experiencing success and when you say, have you this? Well, yes, but no. Have you tried that? Well, that won't work. Do you have a system for this? Well yes, but that's not all the way, how about - I don't need to do that. See, that's the putting the head in the sand. That's the this is the way I do it, it's not working, but I'm going to keep doing it that way, and at the end of every week, month, year, I'll be upset that it's not happening. So there just needs to be a come to Jesus moment, that's all. Just get real. Just get real. Face it.

Tobi: Yes, and I think that you're exactly right, and it is that question of do you really want to do the work that equals success or are you just wishing for the success without the work, and I think that that's what you're talking about. We had a conversation, you and I, a few months ago and we kind of joking but not jokingly, we were totally serious, but it's kind of - can seem

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funny that if most designers and creatives we know just actually charged for all their time, they would already be making six figures, right?

LuAnn: It's the truth, right? When you add that up, it's exactly right. It doesn't take a lot to get to a decent wage if you just simply track and charge the actual hours you work. I mean, just starting right there is monumental. And it's crazy, when any designer puts it out on paper and looks at it, most of the time, their eyeballs will go flying wide open and saying, wait a second, you mean if I just bill consciously 10 hours a week at my \$150 or \$200 an hour times 50 weeks of the year, wow, wow.

Tobi: Exactly. It's called the math, right? Creatives don't really like math, I don't think.

LuAnn: Well, I'm the first one. I can't do it without a calculator, you know what I'm saying? There's no question. I don't actually have a math brain myself, and I think that is one of the reasons why I am so drawn to help designers do this is because without the benefit of the mentorship of my husband, I probably would have been very much like a lot of designers. I think I'm way too interested in the ways and the means and the hows of business works in order to have no figured it out myself eventually. But I absolutely know the benefit of having been raised in a business more or less, that's the way I describe it, by someone who is an astute businessperson.

And so that has to function. Everybody has to find that function. You have to find a mentor somehow. It's either your business partner, your spouse, if you're lucky enough. If not, it's a coach, it's a mastermind group, it's something. But if that's not your superpower, this is like - you know what's so funny is we so often can see that if - say you have a child and you want that kid to play basketball. I mean, we will sign our kids up for basketball lessons, for hockey lessons, for dancing lessons. We don't ever expect any of our children to learn something with mastery without an expert teaching it to them. But so many businesspeople think, "Well, I'll just be in business and I'll just struggle through it for 20 years."

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Tobi: Or they don't even think that but they just do it. Like, they're not even consciously going, "Wow, I'm suffering and this is painful and there has to be an easier way." They just keep getting up and doing the same thing over and over again because of I guess some belief they're supposed to or something. Well definitely...

LuAnn: That's the thing. Never just give your little girl a pair of tap shoes and a hardwood floor and say, here, figure it out for the next 20 years. Every day get up and kick your feet around and maybe at the end of it you'll have a dance. The thing is, there's no shame in needing to be taught how to run a business. That's the reality of it.

Tobi: And I think one of the things that really comes up for most people is this whole scarcity thing around money. Because I think so many people that start businesses in the design industry and other creative fields do not have capital in their business, they literally - there's no barriers to entry so they just sort of hand up a shingle, they get a website, then they're in business, but on a shoestring, and I just don't think that you can really get your business to being a six, seven, definitely anything before that figure business on a shoestring.

LuAnn: No. I mean, you know look, anything's possible. I believe in anything is possible, but it certainly isn't the smart way to do it. One setback, one big order that goes sideways and what? You're going to a credit card to finance your business in the first three months? I mean, that's not smart, right?

Tobi: Well yeah, and then they're not even being experts in their own field but like you say in the book and I've experienced this with so many people I coach, that they're doing their own websites, they're doing their own accounting, they're doing their own PR, they're doing their own marketing, they're doing their own social media, they're doing everything in the world except just focusing on their craft and making the most money they can with it, right?

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LuAnn: Exactly, exactly. And the funny this is too is, I don't know, I'm sure you have run into people, Tobi, as well. Some designers really truly do love the design part and have no desire or have tried to run the business part and failed at it, and then are discouraged because they think they can't design. And not everybody is meant to own their own business, and I always say too, there's no shame in being the most valued senior designer for a principal who knows how to run the business. The principal is at the point where the principal is doing design 20% of the time. They need somebody talented, creative, reliable to do the design the 80% of the time. So that's an awesome person to find.

Tobi: Yes, and the thing is that so many people own their own businesses under the sort of illusion that it is more flexible and they'll have so much more time and it's really the opposite, right? I mean...

LuAnn: I have the luxury of being able to work seven days a week.

Tobi: I was just about to say. You can work any 18 hours of the day that you prefer.

LuAnn: Exactly.

Tobi: Okay, well let's get a little bit more into some of the great stuff you talk about in the book, and one of the things that I find people are so also challenged with besides their finances is when it's time to start really selling themselves and talking about themselves and finding their ideal clients and all that stuff that they just don't really get who they are in a sense. Like, it's hard to pick a strategy, a niche strategy or anything like that because they just don't know who they are and why they're the solution to their client's problems. There's just no clarity. And I'm actually just reading High Performance Habits by Brendon Burchard and he talks about the people that are the highest performers in the world have clarity. Total clarity.

And I think you do and I think I do. We get the vision for where we're going with our company, we get what we're really good at and you even say in the book that if you're not staying on your mission, it's a distraction, and I

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think one of the problems with creatives and designers is how can you stay on the mission or on the plan if you don't ever really know what the plan is, right? Other than I like pretty things and I like fabrics and I like furniture placement or whatever, but beyond that, they really don't understand it. So what do you think about that?

LuAnn: Well, I think you definitely have to sit down and figure out what your mission is. What are you doing? One of the things I can tell you is that it's okay if it changes as you mature and your business matures. However, there are certain constants that should be important to you. So for instance, Window Works, the mission is very clear. We want to be recognized as the very best in our area for custom window treatments and awnings, and we will provide shade and privacy at the window. It's very clear-cut.

And so what happens is - I tell this one store in the book about one point, three, five years into the business, I became aware of the gift show in New York City and that was like, oh, I'm going to go and I saw these throw rugs and you know, blankets and tchotchkes and everything and I said to my husband, "You know, I think we should put these in the show room," and he's like, "We sell drapes and blinds and awnings." I'm like, "Right, but when people come in they can just buy this stuff," and he's like, "They're not going to come here looking for that. We don't advertise..." I'm like, "You know what, Vin, you don't know."

Tobi: You just don't get it.

LuAnn: Well, I spent a grand on the crap and of course, we didn't sell one thing because it isn't our mission. We don't express that to the world. We didn't tell that to the world. And so the thing is - and this is why I say it is so valuable, A, as a creative to have that mentor or the partner or somebody because I experienced it. I know what it's like to be that person that wants to be out of the system, that wants to do a different thing, and there's that shiny object and let me run and go do this. Now, when you listen and hear me and see me, I am literally almost 40 years doing this, and so the first 10

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you would have thought I was just as crazy as half the people we coach. I mean, honestly.

Tobi: Well, we really are as crazy as them, we just are kind of reformed.

LuAnn: Yeah. I mean, the thing is you learn. You learn and so that's why I'm so passionate about it because I get it. I understand what it's like.

Tobi: Well yes, but I think designers think, yeah but, you know how you were talking about they, "Yeah, but that doesn't apply to me," because you're in a business where you just do window treatments only and some people in the design industry get that they just do kitchens or they just do closets. But beyond that, most of all of the industry are trying to be all things to all people, and I think that this is one of the hardest, scariest things for creatives to be able to pick a thing to do and help themselves really stand out with it.

And this is something I work with people on all the time, and it's just - it feels like they're cutting off their arm or their leg if they stop doing parts of the business, even though when we dig deep, a lot of times, the parts that we're asking them to give up, they actually hate and they're the parts that are miserable. And even just deciding whether to procure product for people, or deciding which parts you love and don't love, and I think if we can, as an industry, start to specialize in certain parts of the business and maybe even collaborate with our peers that are doing other parts, we could have so much more success than being the "residential interior designer," or, "high end residential interior designer," because that encompasses hundreds, if not thousands of things. And that's way too many things to really get a foothold financially or in marketing or in anything else, I think.

LuAnn: Well, and I think - I agree, and the thing where I think you're going and where I was headed too was that when I said that sometimes it can evolve and change, ours is static. Ours is clear. But one of the things I run into, and it sounds like you're expressing the same, is if you're at the beginning or you have been in five years and you're not profitable or you're 10 years and not profitable, and you are willing to look in the mirror and

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have your come to Jesus moment and say, okay, let me just sit down, let me just revamp this whole thing, let me just figure out where I'm going wrong and try to set out on the right path, so that's what you're talking about. You're talking about getting clear, getting focused, and what is it that you should do.

So the thing about that is if you look and you say, like you said, I don't like the procurement part, I don't like this part, well, one of the things that I run into is that a lot of times, I'll find that designers truly love that consultation process. So of course again, Tobi, we are not talking about the designers that have made it, they're full scale luxury, like you said, they're not listening to shows on how to be in business, right? So the hobbies aren't and the full-scale service that are profitable and that, right?

But if you are struggling and if you were to say to yourself, "What do you mean get focused?" Well, I hear it and one of the things I say too is say something that you love doing. Well, I really love the consultation. What do you love about it? Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and what do you dislike about it? Well, I hate all the work afterwards and I have to this and I have to make a list and blah, blah, blah. So my first thing is okay, so why don't we just do consultations for the next six months? That's it. Close the doors on everything else. Just do consultations.

And by the way, if you did five consultations one a day for two and a half hours with travel, maybe three-and-a-half-hour workday and charged \$300, I don't know, even I can times that, that's \$1500 a week. No product attached to it, the only thing coming out of that is your gas and wear and tear on your car and your insurance out of that. That is truly almost profitable. And so the point of that is is that if you are at that moment where you're banging your head against the wall and you happen to say, "Well, what I really do love is," it's okay to pull the plug, regroup, and do that for say, three months or six.

And then what happens is you might say, "You know what, I'm going to keep going. This is just fine with me," or little by little, you find your way

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back, you find your mojo, you find your juice, some of those people ask you to do a full room, and then you layer in the things that you like to do, make it clear how you charge for them, make it clear how you'd run the system to do it, and just approach it in an organized way and anything that reaches that, "I'm not really into that part," just don't do it. Say, "No, I'm sorry, I don't do that part."

Tobi: Yeah, and even people would start their businesses like that so they would be profitable early on because so many people think, well, the first few years I'm not going to make anything and I'm going to have to put all my money into hiring other people. And I mean, maybe to a point, sometimes that's okay, but honestly, most of the time I think that's just a bad habit that never turns into the making money. In your book you say - you talk specifically also about people undercharging, which goes hand in hand with this conversation, and you say when you undercharge and stack your pipeline with too many projects because so many want to take advantage of your ridiculously low price, everyone suffers.

And I think that's what you're talking about too because when you do all things for all people and you're not willing to charge enough, you're insecure about that and you just get more and more clients and then your work suffers and then everybody's mad at you, then you're officially on the treadmill of misery, right?

LuAnn: Well, and what's the point of having - if you have 20 customers, clients, and 18 of them are upset with you because you're not running your business properly, my argument is I'd rather have five that are thrilled with me and each of those five will tell at least one person that they've got to use me. That is way more profitable in the end. That's going to turn you over money way better in the end than having 20 people that you're not serving any of them to the best of your ability.

Tobi: Well yeah, and when you're charging nothing basically, first of all, I love in the book where you say there's no prize for being the least expensive person on the block, but tons of prizes for being the leader in

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your industry and a company who brings their A game to every project, which is so, so smart, but the process of if you're not charging enough money, how can you take care of your clients anyway? There's no margin to do anything for anybody, right?

LuAnn: You have to make money because the other part that goes hand in hand with building a business that is going to withstand recessions and the year and everything else is you must have money in the bank because in the other part of being a good businessperson is delivering on the customer service end. And sometimes that's going to cost you money to deliver on the customer service end, and if you haven't been making money, then you can't be the designer that says, "You know what, my vendor let you down on that, or I made a mistake on that, I'm going to cover that for you." You have to do that. You cannot turn your back on that and expect.

I have that often. I'm sure you do as well, Tobi. One of the conversations that often comes up throughout the year in coaching is a designer will say, this x, y, z happened and my client expects me to make good on it and you know, I didn't make enough money on this project in order to make good on it so tell me how to word it to tell that client that I can't do that. I'm like, you came to the wrong person because I'm not going to give you a carte blanche on that, I'm not going to give you an okay on that.

If you really - if we analyze this and the responsibility lies with you, it's not relevant to me and it shouldn't be relevant to you in this moment that you don't have enough money in this project to make good. The big picture we got to work on is making sure that you make money on every job so when a job costs you money, you can afford it. But this little micro picture is I'm sorry, big girl panties. You've got to make...

Tobi: Yeah, and I think that's where a lot of times you hear designers and creatives saying, "My clients are a nightmare or this person is a nightmare," and it's really not the person being a nightmare. They're just expecting good customer service, right? They're expecting someone to make good on something that should be done right. And I think that we tend to want to

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blame as an industry sometimes and that's back to that, like you said, not taking responsibility, that whole piece.

And so we kind of find ourselves often as an industry, I think, and the general thinking that I find in the industry between a rock and a hard place. Because we need money, but we're not really willing to charge enough money because we're afraid of that, but then clients need good customer service but we didn't charge enough money so we can't give it. And then also I think we all just as an industry, are pretty pitiful about just follow-through. Follow-through and good business, getting things done. I think so many creatives tend to use the excuse of, "Well, I don't feel like doing that today. I know I was supposed to finish that client's work and I told them we'd have it finished a month ago, but you know, I don't really feel like doing that today."

LuAnn: See, that's where if you don't have systems, that's where you get stuck because when you have a system and every Monday you do this and every Tuesday you do that and every Wednesday you do this, then you just get up and do it. That's it. It's Tuesday, this happens on Tuesday. So Tuesday is the day I send invoices or Wednesday is the day I check in with vendors and Thursday is the day I review invoices sent to me. You've got to systemize your business so there is no debate.

It's the debate of, "Oh, I don't feel like doing this," enters when you don't have a plan for your day. When you haven't planned for your day, then you can let it all kind of filter through your head and go in one ear and out the other and end the day in saying, "Well, that was a pretty good day," well because you know what? You didn't have a to-do list, and so you're not looking at the things you said you would do that you did not do.

Tobi: Or you have a to-do list of 99 things and they're all of equal priority. So you're so used to them not getting done they just rollover, right? Week after week, day after day. Well, and I think one of the biggest, most important systems for me, and probably for you too is my schedule, of actually putting - I know that's true for you because us just trying to get on

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each other's schedule to do a podcast, we both know exactly when we're booked and it's like, for six months at a time. We know exactly where we're going to be every day and what we're going to be doing, and you better believe at the end of our day, the stuff we were planning on doing gets done, right? Because we keep our word to our self and to other people.

LuAnn: And I'm going to tell you, I'll be truthful there. I can't say that every day I get everything done, but I'm not - the things that aren't done, they're not lost on me. Do you know what I'm saying?

Tobi: Well yeah, if you don't get it done it goes back onto the calendar in another block or you move things around, but at least you're aware of what they are and they're not just sort of in your head, right? Or they're not just somewhere on 15 different pieces of paper and Post-It notes that are disorganized and I think I remember one point in the book I even highlighted where you said - talking about systems, you said, "You need to spend time creating revenue, not chasing an endless circle of unorganized invoices, phone calls and to-do lists," and that's kind of what it looks like if you don't have a calendar and you don't have systems and you don't have accountability, right?

LuAnn: Right. And the thing, the way we function at Window Works and at the podcast as well is the big ideas, the big things that drive the business are assigned days and they - so every week, certain things at Window Works happen on Monday, certain things happen on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, the same with the podcast. And then what happens is those are non-negotiables. If it's - say for instance, if it's Tuesday, every single invoice, every single sold project at Window Works is going to get eyeballs on it. And if there are five pairs of drapes and 16 Roman shades and four mini blinds on that order, then every single one of those vendors is getting called on Tuesday, and that happens for every order. And so on Wednesday, every single person that owes us money is getting a phone call. Every single Thursday, every invoice that has been sent to us by a vendor is getting checked for accuracy. Every single Friday, every invoice that we owe is getting paid.

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And so those are the big things, the big themes of each of our weekdays, Mondays is our meeting days, our whole staff meeting day and our sales meeting day. And those are the big things. And then what happens is the to-do list for each of us individually is enunciated as well but what my point of it is yeah, okay, so I might have a to-do list of 15 things on it and I'm supposed to be at my desk all day and the next thing I know, three sales reps walk in and want me to see every blasted fabric that's new for the season this year, right?

Next thing I know, I don't have four hours at my desk. I have an hour. Well, the non-negotiable things, because it was Monday or it was Tuesday or Wednesday, that's getting done. Some other stuff is going to have a little creative like, okay, I got to stay late and do that, that I can move to tomorrow, that I can move to Thursday. So that's what I mean. It's like, when you break your business down into blocks and you understand the things that are crucial to running a successful design project and you block them in and they become non-negotiable, yes, you can have things that ruin a day. Maybe the plumber is on the job and all of a sudden he calls you, you weren't supposed to be on site and you've got to go put three hours. But what was that thing's non-negotiable thing? That day doesn't end with that not getting done.

Tobi: Yeah. And I try to start with those things in my day. The top two or three things that have to get done because you know the minute you open your inbox or you start taking phone calls, that stuff is all tentative, depending on what you're saying. But I also loved in the book where you said, "If the best sales person, which should be you, is spending all their time doing paperwork, there's a problem," and I think a lot of what I was hearing of what you were just saying is you're not necessarily the one doing all of those non-negotiables, right?

LuAnn: No. I have my own list of non-negotiables, but they are all about driving the sales number. Whether it's the podcast number or the Window Works number. My top five things every single day are around revenue building. I'm a rainmaker.

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Tobi: Yeah, and that's all, and that's what so many creatives get stuck in the minutiae I think in doing all of the tasking, and they're not the rainmaker, and it's so easy to procrastinate and hide in the task and in the to-do list instead of putting yourself out there where it's uncomfortable and making money.

LuAnn: Yes. There's very few things that I do now that are not related to making money. Bringing in new sales or making existing ones larger. There are some things. For instance, if I sell a drapery to somebody, I have to do that drapery work order. That's too detailed to pass off to even Kimberley, who is proficient at doing drapery work orders. I don't want in my business, for me to do her drapery work orders or vice versa because there's always - you know, you...

Tobi: Mistakes.

LuAnn: Yup, and you take terrific notes but there's always that one thing when you're in the middle of doing the work order and you go, "That's right, we said that we would do this with the lead edge, my note says a quarter inch but we changed to a half inch," but other than the drapery work orders, there's not a lot of things that you'll find me doing in a week that are not related to building revenue.

Tobi: Yeah, and I think that that's one of the key things that - 80% of your time, in my opinion, should be in that zone of genius, that making money for your company, the rainmaking, and I think it's probably for so many creatives and designers like, 10% or 20% if they're lucky. And then they wonder, like again, they're banging their head against the wall, "Why am I not cash flowing? Why is this not making money?" and we're like, well, you're not taking charge of that, right?

LuAnn: Sometimes - and I feel like - and again, I go back to this because I do have compassion. You, Tobi, come from an accounting background that your brain goes that way first, but I'm no joke. My brain goes the other way first. It's this well-earned, hard-earned, trained. So it's like, I have had 40 years of tap-dancing lessons is basically what I'm expressing to you and

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now I can do a pretty good tap dance. But I've been taking the lessons, and the thing about it is what I mean to say about that is that it is so important that if this is not your innate skill to be able to evaluate what is moving the needle is that you have some accountability. So for me, I don't need it any longer but in the beginning years, I can often hear my husband saying to me, "Why are you doing that? Where is that going?" I don't know, I thought I should do it. No.

Tobi: What's the end game? What is the - have you mapped it out? What do the numbers look like? Have you done the math? Is this a distraction? Which I think there's - yeah, that's a habit that many creatives have of the bright shiny thing. As we say, squirrel, and then we're off on another thing because it seems boring to do the same thing every day for three decades, right? It seems boring. It seems boring but it's really not boring when you're making a whole lot of money as opposed to being entertained but struggling constantly.

LuAnn: Yeah, well my thing about it is if you're going to be self-employed and you're going to be in business and you hope to go three, four, five decades, to your point, right, there might be a lot of things that might be boring or might be this or that, but you know what, I would rather have my moments of boredom, my moments of absolutely despair, my moments of absolute joy, all the moments in between with money and the checkbook at the end of the day. Because you know what, you're going to have all that stuff anyway, and if all that goes on and you don't have money, it's sort of like, what am I doing?

Tobi: Yeah, and as they say, if you got a problem that money can solve, you don't have a problem, right? So the more money you have, if your problem is you don't have enough time in the day, if you got money, you can hire people to do part of that job for you. But if you're operating literally on a shoestring or in the hole, that's not a possibility, right?

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LuAnn: Do you find - I find so often with designers is that they underestimate what they do has such great value to the person that doesn't know how to do it. I have said that on my podcast so many times.

Tobi: Well yeah, and why they don't charge what they're worth, and you know, I was just about to say, let's talk about for a minute this whole idea of your worth and your value is tied right in there with it. Why are you the solution to their problems? And you say in the book not to charge based on your needs. Like, you need to make payroll or you need to pay the rent, but charge on the value to the customer, and I think you're so right. We just don't see it that it's that valuable and we take - I'm sure it's not just our industry. I think it's people in general, but we discount the things we do a lot of times unless we've trained ourselves to really see them and talk about them confidently. Like, oh, anybody can do that, oh, anybody can put together a party, anybody can put together a room, anybody can see paint colors. Well, definitely not. They cannot.

LuAnn: No, absolutely not. And I think that when I talk about that chapter, there are two ways that we don't charge our worth as entrepreneurs. The two traps that I feel like people can fall into. One is charging from your need, and that is a mistake. So there are entrepreneurs who are in business, there are designers who are in business and absolutely have a car payment due or have a payment to a vendor due, or have something due. And so maybe they are giving somebody - the phone rings, there's an opportunity for a proposal to go out or an opportunity for a consultation, and they undersell it because they actually need the money that that is going to bring in in order to meet a deadline on a bill. You see, and that's wrong.

Tobi: Well, it's that scarcity mindset, and I've just had this conversation not too long ago with a designer that said the same thing. She's like, "Well, I pay myself so I can pay the mortgage and our family, for our home, and at the minimum, I need to make \$5000 a month out of my business," instead of thinking of like a regular salary or paycheck or goal or something else. Of course, are you going to go really charge something that should be \$30,000 when you're afraid they're going to say no and you're focused on

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needing the \$5000? No. You're going to go at \$10,000 and go, they're getting a lot for their money and at least I'll cover the mortgage. Terrible idea.

LuAnn: That's the first way that it's a no, and then the second way is like what we were just discussing is to not recognize that what you do is - it's so funny because there are so many designers that have been to four-year degree for design and so many that have come to it through other avenues. It doesn't matter. However you get there, if you are doing it and you're doing it well, you cannot underestimate that the person who's calling you and interested in hiring you, you have to start with the premise and the faith and the trust in the fact that they're calling you is because they cannot do it. They need you.

Now, do they ultimately need you personally? Maybe, maybe not. Depending if it's the right fit, depending if the project is right. But the point is they need someone because someone doesn't say, "I have to pick paint colors and I have to get a rug and I have to get a sofa and I have to get two lamps and a table. Let's see, I could walk into a store and buy that or I can call a designer. You know what, it doesn't matter to me, let me call a designer." No. The person that calls a designer cannot walk into a store and buy it. That's the point. They don't have the confidence in themselves to be able to do it. And because you can do it with your eyes closed, they cannot.

Tobi: Well, and I think that a kind of a third part to that that I find is that I mean, part of it is the joy or the enjoyment, but a lot of it is like, maybe the ego or getting credit or that kind of fulfillment that I see so many designers that are willing to forgo money because they're attached to the end result, they're attached to the project being finished, and I'm often saying, why do you believe it's your responsibility to take money out of your family's mouth to help somebody else buy something that they either can't afford or choose not to afford? But you're going to help them get it basically for free or at cost out of the goodness of your own heart, like the martyr syndrome because you're so attached to somehow the finished result.

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And yeah, it's really fun when you go an installation and you get the highs of all of that and everybody's happy and warm and fuzzy and they're so thrilled, but it's not real fun like a week or two later when you're sitting back in front of your computer looking at the bills you can't afford to pay. That is just - a fascinating, kind of a phenomenon or enigma to me, that disconnect between charging almost even at all in a sense and making a profit at all, as opposed to being so attached to the end result.

LuAnn: Well, and I wonder if it really is simply being attached to the end result or a way to rationalize not having the courage to stand and say, "Look, if you want that sofa, it's \$5000. Otherwise, if you want to spend three, we can get this one." And so...

Tobi: It's exactly that.

LuAnn: Right. So instead of just saying, "I really didn't have the courage to present and stand in my space on that price," so what we say and what we rationalize is, "But then the room came out so much better and it was photography worthy," and yada, yada, yada. And so it's just this little twisted little game that we play in order to save ourselves from the come to Jesus moment, looking in the mirror.

Tobi: In the book you say on page 87, I like, triple highlighted this because I loved it so much. "When you do hard things, everything gets easier, and when you do easy things, everything gets harder." And I think that we consistently as an industry take the easy way out, especially when it comes to charging and marketing and promoting and deciding. Deciding who we are and what our passion is and what our niche is. We just take the easy way out and no wonder I think we end up in this place that is so hard long-term, because we didn't do the hard stuff on the frontend.

LuAnn: That quote is from Lee Cockerell. He was the senior vice president of worldwide Disney operations and I interviewed him and I mean look, Disney is the epitome is customer service, bar no one higher in doing it better, and that is - was interesting because I have always, I promise you, I

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even from a young child have always lived my life being willing to make the hard decision or have the hard conversation.

There are a lot of things that I have said to you in this podcast already that I came kicking and screaming that I was taught by my husband or I was taught by this one or that one, but that I will stand in my space and say that's in me and I have always been willing to do it. But when he said it in that words, that was so clear for me. When you will not make the hard decisions, everything gets harder. When you only do the easy decisions, everything gets harder. Vice versa.

I mean, it's just so clear. You have to - the hard decision is okay, I'm in business, the hard decision of that is systemize it. The hard decision is stand there and say, "This is my price. No, I'm sorry, you don't get to lower my price for me. You can go somewhere else." The other thing that I - you know what, Tobi, is I find and I love to use this example. I did a presentation I did in DC one time. So often I will see in the Facebook groups or in the coaching or in the masterminds a designer will say to me, "Well, in my area, there's too many designers so I can't charge that much money," or, "In my area, the going rate is x, y, z." And so...

Tobi: In my area, people are cheap. I mean, that's always - in your area, Tobi - I'm like, no, I'm in Arkansas. It couldn't be any more tiny and rural. If I can charge six figures, so can you, right?

LuAnn: Well, and this is the thing. And so what I like to do and I've done this a couple times now. When I'm at a design center for an event, so I did it at DC, I did it in Chicago, I'm sitting there in a room with about 100 interior designers and I say to them, "How many of you would believe this to be a true statement that you're looking shoulder to shoulder at 100 other interior designers? Do you believe that in this room, we have colleagues that are charging as low as \$75 an hour for their services and as high as \$300 or \$400 per hour for their services? How many believe this is probably a true statement?" And in variably, all the hands go up.

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And then I say, "How about this statement? Do you believe that you're probably all doing business within a 30-mile radius of each other?" And they all just go, wow. I'm like, right. So this whole, "In my area," no. Doesn't exist. Every single area has its tiers of clientele. You decide your lane and go to it.

Tobi: Yeah, as Alan Weiss says - sorry to interrupt - Alan Weiss says in the Value-Based Fees book, he says that the consultants pricing is not determined by the client or customer, but commiserate with the designer's own low self-esteem.

LuAnn: Right. My point is if you have the chops that you can't be a minute out of school and charge \$500 an hour because you don't have the chops, you can't pull it off, and you might have the chops design wise, possibly if you're innately gifted, but you probably - it's not just the chops for design. It's the stand in your space and the confidence to instill in your clients that you're the one to take the project along. But my point is if you are in business, say minimum of three years and you are charging under \$120 an hour and you're blaming it on the area that you're living in, you're kidding yourself. You're kidding yourself.

Tobi: No one should ever start for less than \$100 period. Out of school, is still in school, never been to school, none of it, doesn't matter. Well, that's so fascinating.

LuAnn: Because clients shop in groups too. I often say this on the podcast too. People shop in groups. So designers will say to me, "Well, I've been charging \$85 to \$100 and I'm trying to get to the \$125," and I go, "You're \$125 now. You're there." And so but then, "Well, some people are going to say," I'm like, "Right. Your current clients and their friends are going to say no now because they are going to swim in that \$85 lane forever. You can't go to \$125 and \$175 and \$200 and think you're going to take your same client base along. You're leaving them behind. That's the point."

You're going to a different pool. You're jumping into a different pool and there's new clients there because I promise you, the client who is shopping

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for an interior designer that's expecting it to be \$175 to \$225, he or she, if she comes across a designer that's \$85 an hour is not calling them. They're not going to say, "Oh, I thought it was going to be \$275 an hour but there's one for \$85, let me call her." They're going to say, "That's not my designer. They must not be educated enough, they must not be experienced enough." So as you do better, just do better and own it and go higher. It'll be fine. There's people there waiting for you when you get there.

Tobi: Well, and the interesting thing is that that's always so funny to me is the thing that keeps you from charging what you're worth is fear - the fear of I might go out of business or I might have to work for nothing and make no money, and it's so interesting to me that what you're afraid of is always your current reality. Like, you're making no money, you're barely making ends meet, but by golly, let's be afraid to charge what we're worth and actually maybe someone will say yes because the alternate option is that we continue to suffer and we're already there. So there's nothing to lose, right? But it's so fascinating. The mind is a fascinating thing.

LuAnn: But the thing about it too is that if you are a skilled designer, both talent and business wise, so in other words, if you have the talent to put together a beautiful, well-appointed room with the proportion and the scale and everything, not just I can eye it up and it comes out half okay. If you really have the chops, right? But then you actually have taken the time to systemize your business so that you can run a project efficiently, you want to go right up to that higher level, that bigger swimming pool of the \$250, \$275, \$300 because you know what, that level of clientele is infinitely more recession proof.

That level of clientele is always going to have the discretionary money, whether they choose to spend it on interior design or not, will always be up to them. But they will have it. So when times get tough and the economy turns around because - and I talk about this because I've been through four recessions in business so I know darn well what it's like, right? But when it comes around, if you're bottom feeding, then who's the first people that aren't going to spend for a "luxury service?" The people who are hit the

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hardest. But the people at that top, forget the 1%. The top 15% of our country, they're always going to spend money on design. That's how they do it.

Tobi: It's not even just the bottom feeders. It's really kind of the middle. The middle-class has gone away and if you're trying to make ends meet in that kind of middle zone of the messy middle of interior design, that is the hardest place I think to be. The middle and down, for sure.

LuAnn: You know, I misspoke. I should not use the word bottom feeders. I meant the bottom-rung. In other words, like, look, I was raised in the bottom-rung. I am a regular person. When I say, I just mean the kind of regular average person that is not going to spend money on interior design when the economy shrinks and their livelihood is at stake and their family is at stake, right?

Tobi: Well, and even when the economy's good, it's a life or death situation to even buy a sofa because they know they're not going to spend money to buy another one in the next 15 years probably. So like, it's so much harder. Yes, it's so much harder.

LuAnn: So if you have the chops, go to the higher lanes. They're always going to spend.

Tobi: I agree with you. And if you don't, if you don't have the wherewithal I guess, or the confidence to go there, you don't have a client problem. I think you have a mindset problem. You definitely - a mindset, which confidence is only mindset. It's your thinking.

LuAnn: It's important to surround yourself with people who know more than you do, whether you have to, like I said, get involved in a coach or a group of designers, surround yourself with people who know more than you do in business and that could help you and be a sounding board for you and that objective look at you and say, you know, you're kidding yourself on that, or no, this is hard, but keep plowing through. You just need somebody that just checks you. And also, that same person that just says, alright, you're

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doing good, keep going, you're in the right direction. Sometimes we just have to know we're in the right direction.

Tobi: Exactly. Well, and I think that's a great place to end. I could talk with you for three more hours so we'll definitely have to do this again, and I'm going to come to you on your podcast so we'll continue the conversation. But I think towards the end of your book, you say another quote, and I'm not sure if it's yours or someone else's and you say, "All I need is within me right now. I will persist until I succeed." That's really about a mantra, and I think that that's kind of what you're talking about is you need those people that help you see that you've got this. You've got everything you need right now. You can do it this afternoon if you feel like it. You can literally go from \$75 an hour to \$150 this afternoon.

LuAnn: You can, and you should.

Tobi: Exactly. And if you're afraid it won't fly then go create a service and bring the customer piece, the value piece to match your price, right?

LuAnn: Exactly. That's the thing. Never lower your price. You take away a service, you take away a product, you don't lower your price. The other person has every right not to spend \$5000 on any conglomeration or any one piece. But it's not up to you to have that \$5000 worth of product or hours or service be only \$3000. They're grown up people.

Tobi: Exactly. Well, that is just the best place to end and thank you so much. This has been so much fun. I mean, honestly, I feel like we've been talking for five minutes and it's been an hour, just about. So amazing and we could go on and on and we definitely will. We'll definitely come back together but thank you so much for your candor, your conversation, your book, it was just really a pleasure and it's so fun for me to find other people that are like-minded and that really champion - we're championing these women and men, but especially I work with a lot of women in our industry. I want - my goal is to make every designer a millionaire, honestly, it really is, and I feel like you feel the same way about the people you work with.

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LuAnn: Yes, and I love your podcast, Tobi. You're doing a great job. Your advice is spot on and I just listen while I'm driving in the car, I'm like, yes, yes, she's right.

Tobi: Thank you.

LuAnn: Thank you.

Tobi: Well, I will see you again really soon and thank you everyone else for joining us today and we look forward to letting you know when LuAnn or I are back on each other's podcasts and we will continue this conversation really soon. So thank you again LuAnn and thank you everybody and I'll see you again on *The Design You Podcast* next week.

Thank you so much for joining me for this episode of *The Design You Podcast*. And if you'd like even more support for designing a business and a life that you love, then check out my exclusive monthly coaching program Design You at tobifairley.com.