

Start-up (Way Up): Interview with Young Entrepreneurs Behind Use All Five Inc.

Recent Grads Ditch Hierarchy, Go Straight to the Top Jason Farrell and Levi Brooks explain the particularities of Gen Y and what drove them to start their own design studio.

Use All Five Inc. is a creative and branding agency that focuses on designing unique experiences with the five senses in mind— that’s what the deceptively simple manifesto on their homepage asserts, anyway. Founded by Jason Farrell (pictured right) and Levi Brooks (left) “at the beginning of the millennium,” the agency’s bread and butter is creating stand-out websites: modern, clean, hip, and visually stimulating, much like their own.

In fact, stumble upon www.useallfive.com and you’ll likely believe there’s a small army of designers, programmers, and coffee-brewing assistants behind the sleek and snazzy interface. Use All Five, however, is a two-man show: Farrell and Brooks, 2007 graduates of UCLA’s Design program. Though initial attempts to start their own firm during college “failed miserably,” once off the parental dole and “kicked off into the real world,” Farrell and Brooks resolutely funneled their desire for creative control into establishing themselves as innovative and dedicated professionals. From their office in “sunny and cheerful” Venice, California, the duo has worked for the likes of Apple, Red Bull, Morphosis, UCLA Arts, and luxury real estate firm Urbana. They even re-designed the Los Angeles Homeless Services Coalition’s website pro-bono this holiday season, proving that small businesses can make a big philanthropic impact too.

Certainly, the two budding businessmen are young: they tell me they like to “jam out” while they work and take long lunches as though they secretly think I might tell their boss—or their parents. But they don’t have a boss. And, given their distaste for the hierarchies and hostility at established firms, they like it that way.

Use All Five’s tale is a goldmine for aspiring entrepreneurs, so read on ye of big dreams! Farrell and Brooks also have a thing or two to tell you employers out there: about how and why Gen Y works differently and what kind of benefits could attract us better. But beware Google, they’re on to you: “It just seems like a lot of places come up with tricks to make you work longer. They say that Google is the best place to work because they’re giving you all these fun toys—it’s just a way to keep you there longer!”

This puts Google’s bring-your-dog-to-work policy in a whole new light. Keep reading below for many more such insights from the tech-savvy twosome.

What drew you to start your own design firm?

Levi Brooks: It was definitely freedom. Freedom to survive. At first we knew we’d have to take on some pretty crappy clients. And we did. But we knew that over time, if we kept pushing, we’d get the clients we wanted, and have the freedom, and be in the position to interact with the very top and not be at the very bottom anywhere. At a studio you’re not interacting with the clients at all, you’re just somebody’s little servant. Now we are at the very top—we’re interacting with clients and cultural figures.

Jason Farrell: It’s interesting to see how people we knew in college are working for big design firms, but it’s the design firm taking the credit the minute you get there. We want that! We want those egos!

What do you think made it possible to start your own firm? Do you think that people who graduated with you could also have done it?

LB: I did freelance all through college, so I kind of knew the basics of business. I think a lot of people can do it, they just need to push themselves into the mindset of “this is how a business works, this is how you get clients, this is how you have a project, this is a proposal” and that kind of stuff. Once you get into the swing of things, it’s pretty easy to start your own studio and get going.

I think the hard part is keeping it going, and getting new clients all the time, and making people happy. But the mindset of starting your own studio—you need to have that mindset and go with it. I think a lot of those kids could have done it, they just decided not to. I mean, you don’t make as much money probably at first, and it’s a lot of work and stress. And there are some times that you have to work crazy hours at weird times. But for the most part, they could have done it, too.

How long would you say you work on average?

LB: I’d say eight to ten hours a day. The thing that I tell a lot of people is that I’ll work even at night. If you love what you do, you can’t really put hours on it. You don’t really notice the hours. I’ll get back from work, it’ll be 8 o’clock and I might just hang out on the computer instead of playing video games or watching movies. I might play around with a project

we're working on, try to tinker with it or experiment with some ideas I have. And that's fun to me. I don't really notice the hours.

JF: And then we've also got a little side project going on. And it's fun to work on that at night as well.

LB: Side projects. We're trying to get away from clients in general and just be ourselves. Later down the road, create our own general ideas: facebook or something like that. Your own projects…where you don't have clients barking at you.

What is the most challenging aspect of what you do?

LB: I'd say just making clients happy. It took a while to learn how to massage a relationship with a client. First it was really hard. We'd always try to push, push, push our own way. You learn how to balance that, and take their side and your side and mesh it together and create a hybrid of ideas where they're happy and you're happy. But that's still a very challenging part.

In your industry, what is the hierarchy like?

LB: In a creative field I don't think there are too many job positions. There is a hierarchy that you kind of have to obey…the senior designer or someone above you. But we don't have that in our own office, obviously. We see it when we go to other places and work with other firms.

In a lot of visible hierarchies at creative studios I think it's kind of necessary, in a way, just because in a creative world you need a little bit of organizational hierarchies. But you don't need to label it. People understand it. They see other people's work and understand that they're better…People try to jump that and it causes confusion in their office.

You mentioned that there are mostly males in your industry. Why do you think that is?

JF: In our major, it was really mixed. We had a professor who was high up at Oglivey [a major advertising agency].

LB: And she argues a lot for more female designers. I don't know if it's just a personal preference, or if it's just a stigma that's been in the industry for a while. I can see it changing though.

JF: The thing is that there are a lot of guys because guys are "nerdier," I guess.

LB: More attune to sitting on the computer for a long time. Especially, because now you need to know a little bit of programming here and there. But I see it starting to change. Slowly. There are some pretty big-time female designers who are really throwing their weight around.

How do you think that our generation—your generation—is different than previous generations in terms of work?

LB: We definitely don't like it. I've seen that.

JF: We want things fast. We want to be rich really fast. Right out of college you want a lot of money.

LB: Be able to travel the world and have fun. Everyone wants that. Some guys get to do that. But it's a harsh reality once they get out of college. For our generation, it's really harsh to get put back into society. They're really not happy with their jobs starting out. They want to be a lot higher up, and that's understandable. That's kind of one of the reasons we started our own studio - so we wouldn't be so far down at a regular design studio. Why not start our own studio and jump all the way to the top? There's a big risk in that, but we're already pretty happy with where we're at in terms of our clients.

Why do you think our generation is so different from previous generations?

LB: Parents were really there a lot more. I mean, it was a good experience to have the parents always there to support, push you to be successful. If you look back on that whole experience of getting into a great college…it was scary. I think our parents pushed us a lot more than any other generation.

JF: I think it made us feel like we deserve to get a job right out of college. Because it's kind of weird how you do all this work right before college at your high school, and everything is right there: you get into college, you do everything you're supposed to do, you get in, you meet all the requirements. Then right after college it's like—what do you do now?

LB: I feel like it's kind of a weird job market right now for our generation getting out. The baby boomers still have a lot of power and hold us down, from what I've seen. And they really don't like us. I've met a lot of baby boomers who don't like Generation Y at all. They want to talk down to us, treat us like crap. I think they went through a lot of hardships to get to

where they're at. They want us to do the same thing and go through all the hardships. And I think that a lot of people I've met in college could be smart enough to get to the top right away.

What do you think is the employers role in terms of helping workers balance their personal and working lives?

LB: I think mentoring and pushing them to be as creative as possible. I've seen our generation be the most creative out of any other generations, coming up with some great ideas. A lot of them being shot down by the older generations. I think they should be more welcoming to those ideas. Be open to our input. The other big thing is that we've had the internet our whole lives. And they're still getting accustomed to that medium. We already know it and know how to use it. Mentoring and being there, but also understanding that we want to have a life outside of work and that life outside of work actually enriches and creates better opportunities inside the work world. Bringing ideas from the outside world into the work world—I've seen that really work out.

What could employers offer to make themselves more attractive to you?

LB: I would say more freedom. Just in general, more freedom.

JF: A lot of money per hour, and definitely less hours.

LB: Not even health care, I care more about freedom I guess. Especially our generation, we don't really care about health care!

Now for some personal questions. Are you planning on getting married? Why or why not?

LB: Probably, eventually. I'm not really thinking about it. How this studio succeeds or doesn't succeed will kind of dictate the rest of my life almost. Kind of scary to think about it. But I want to succeed first and then have a life a little bit later down the road. Probably in my 30s or so. We're only 23, so we have some time to really experiment with this and have time to screw up.

JF: Maybe I'll be different when I'm around 36! We also plan on having more employees. And we'll be able to just do more creative work and managing, so we'll probably have lot more free time in our 30s.

Do you plan on having kids?

JF: Maybe in my 30s.

LB: Probably, I think we're too young to even think about that. Probably. I don't really know why or why not, but I think having kids I can see really enriches your life. I don't want to say you get to life vicariously through them, but you get to see them grow up. Have fun with them, really see them flourish. It would be a great experience.

JF: The same thing, really. But not until like 35. As a company we don't have money to support kids.

Do you think that a work-life balance - having a successful career and having a successful family life - is realistic?

J: Yeah, in your 30s, not right now.

LB: I can definitely see that happening. It's all about give and take and working accordingly…Get a project done when you say you're going to get it done, but have the freedom to leave and go as you may and control your life. Some people work better at night after the whole family goes to sleep, or sometimes they work a lot better in the morning before everyone is awake. A lot more freedom is just the key to a successful work-life relationship.

JF: Just making enough time for both. Something we can't do yet!

So they're driven, hard-working, talented—and self-entitled as all hell! Farrell and Brooks admittedly embody the best and the worst, at least from a traditional employers perspective, of Gen Y: they're good at what they do and they're not going to wait around for the perks. They want to be snowboarding in Tahoe in their 30s, after all.

The thing is, mutual resentment between Gen Y and older generations— the latter doesn't appreciate Gen Y's immodest demands, the former objects to exclusive hierarchies for their own sake— is bad for business. As feisty and bright as we youngins may be, there is plenty we can learn from experienced professionals. That said, businesses that want to attract and retain talented young people need to seriously rethink their outdated employment models. Farrell and Brooks implicit advice? Granting us a little more freedom will go a long way.