

Deface Graphics Exeter

Graphic artist Phil Rees creates stunning designs for major and independent record labels that have won him an enviable reputation in the music industry – but ask him to draw up something as simple as an invoice and that’s another matter altogether.

Or at least it used to be until Phil, the founder of Exeter-based Deface Graphics, discovered Plymouth College of Art’s Business for Creative Industries course.

“I’d been running my own business for 10 years, working mostly with the music industry and specialising in album covers,” says Phil. “I’m a creative and I love my job, but the business part of it had always been a bit of a downside.

“I don’t know anyone in the creative industries who has really had any business training, because it just didn’t exist – and universities didn’t even offer it when I was there. But I wanted to grow what I’m doing, gain some professional business etiquette and knowledge, and arm myself to move forward.”

Phil spotted an ad from the college on the Designed in Devon web forum and found himself travelling down to Plymouth every Thursday for six weeks for the Business for Creative Industries course.

“The course looked at all different aspects of running a business and was a real eye-opener”

“It fitted in perfectly and was exactly what I was looking for,” he recalls. “I was on the course with 23 other people and we were all very different. But when it came down to common business things

like managing yourself, timekeeping and invoicing, everyone had similar issues and we were all unsure where to start.

“The course looked at all different aspects of running a business and was a real eye-opener. I suddenly became aware of mistakes I’d been making in the previous 10 years – things to do with pricing, time management and client customer service. It’s easy to undersell yourself and not charge enough, so the people running the course helped us understand our value and price our work properly.”

Phil had been relying on word-of-mouth to bring in work, and he’d never needed to advertise – a mark of success in an industry that runs on reputation – and his overheads were consequently low.

But Phil says the course helped him appreciate that his business had a lot of unrealised potential.

“I wanted my business to grow and as a result turn over more money, and the course was very good at showing me what I could do and how I could do it. Now, when I’m taking on new work with larger clients, I can talk to them in a more clued-up professional fashion. I always stay in contact with clients a lot more now and things run very smoothly.

“Before the course I’d take on every and any piece of work, but now I’ve gained the confidence to reject certain work that wouldn’t benefit me or my business. I’ve become more organised and structured in the hours I work, found time to be more creative, and as a result the quality of my artwork has risen.”

Phil says one of the most useful parts of the course was a lecturer’s suggestion that he should set aside one day a week as a “natural development day”.

“When you’re working solidly, going from one job to the next, you can lose a certain amount of creativity because you don’t have enough thinking time, and if you’re not careful that can feed back into your work,” he says. “It would be so good to have that time to go over things, look at where you are, where you want to be, and what you want to change. So now, when Thursday comes, all my clients know I’m away

from my studio. I use the day constructively for my personal development, whether that’s research for my business, working on my website and portfolio or even a piece of personal artwork. That’s helped me focus.”

“So impressed by one of the lecturers that he’s asked her to act as his business mentor”

But that’s not the only benefit Phil has discovered.

“I’m pretty certain I’m going to see my turnover increase because of it,” he says. “The music industry is going through tougher times because of illegal digital downloads and the recession, so the course made me think I should look at other revenue streams. I’ve only ever wanted to do creative graphic design, but now I’m going to start looking at other things and source interesting work outside my usual sphere.”

And Phil was so impressed by one of the lecturers that he’s asked her to act as his business mentor since finishing the course.

“Having someone who understands the industry I’m in and how it works can just nudge me in the right direction,” he adds. “I knew that would be really beneficial for me.”

And he’s very happy to recommend the course to others in the creative industries.

“Without the course, I’d still be treading water wondering how to reach my business goals, but now I feel well equipped to plan and tackle what lies ahead.”

