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How I Run A \$18K/Month Interaction Design Consultancy



Nick Disabato



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SAVE



Nick Disabato

Founder, **Draft**

\$18K

REVENUE/MO



1

FOUNDERS

1

EMPLOYEES

Hello! Who are you and what business did you start?

Howdy! I'm Nick Disabato, although everybody calls me **nickd**. I run **Draft**, a small interaction design consultancy. The business exists as a loose framework for supporting deep practice, slow work, and a broader consideration of what it means to design right now.

We are probably most known in the industry for writing evergreen, influential books on design & technology, especially **Cadence & Slang** and **Value-Based Design**. But in practice, these things are fueled by occasional client work of a consultative nature. We work exclusively with executives to co-create strategy and practice a form of design that we believe is more purely connected with the fundamental needs of their businesses.

Right now, **we work with Shopify Plus stores** to research customers, plan fixes, and craft & execute experiments that generate outside profit. We also get paid to **blather about everything**

that's busted with your store in a 20-minute screencast & follow-up call. **We are very good at our jobs.**



What's your backstory and how did you come up with the idea?

I started in the industry in 2006 and found it hard to get a job doing UX design, which is what I've always really wanted to do. In 2008, I started writing an outline & zine for a book about how to get started in UX design, synthesizing everything I knew at the time. Then in April 2009, an old friend from my college radio station emailed his entire address book to let them know about a website he was starting called Kickstarter. **We became one of Kickstarter's earliest projects**, successfully raised over \$10,000 to print the book, and I set down to write, typeset, and edit the rest.

At this point, I still had a W-2, but the book took off and caught the attention of a few independent consultants. I used the book's profits to pay off my student loans, got my UX job, bounced around a couple of gigs, and finally went fully independent in January 2012.

In 2013, I took a month off of client work to focus exclusively on what I wanted Draft to look like. The result was our flagship consulting offering, which went somewhat viral upon launch, sold out instantly, and shortly gave me enough money to buy a house here in Chicago.

After moving in, I turned one of the rooms into a full printing & shipping center, making zines for business & fun. We now have an industrial full-duplex printer, stack cutter, multiple binders, and corner rounder to put together new zines to test the waters & eventually scale up into larger books that we print offset with local manufacturers.

“ Whatever you've been conditioned to think about business is probably

☹️ Whatever you've been conditioned to think about business is probably wrong. The only path to success is the one that nourishes you.

To this day, every book you buy from Draft is packed & shipped by me, from my house. It's a lo-fi, punk operation, and even after 10 years, it remains so much fun. I have the best job in the world, and I operate entirely on my terms.

Take us through the process of designing, prototyping, and manufacturing your first product.

We make zines because they are easy, fast, and cheap ways of testing unfinished ideas and working in public. They also act as finished products that are hopefully of some utility & interest.

So when I started putting together the foundation of what would become Cadence & Slang, I made 50 copies of a zine on a \$100 laser printer, bought some stamps from the post office and bulk envelopes from Office Depot, and mailed them for free to a few dozen people that I knew online, with an exhortation to provide me with unflinching, brutal feedback.

With that feedback, I put together an outline for the book, as well as a literature review of other resources that came to inform the text. Lots of days were spent on the reference floors of the library downtown, taking notes and xeroxing.

The book itself was extensively prototyped for type size, font selection, line height, margins, and justification rules, for both its first & second editions.

Ever since our first book, we've continued making zines as a way of having fun, doing weird stuff, and working out ideas that might come to be evergreen.

Describe the process of launching the business.

Our first Kickstarter project happened back when I was still on social media, and I found myself using Twitter a lot to address objections and connect directly with backers. Because Kickstarter was also new, I found myself explaining the process of crowdfunding writ large, trying to make the whole process more understandable and reduce others' perception of risk before taking their money. After funding, we used backer updates & social media to gin up interest, and we eventually leveraged that into a handful of plum speaking slots, which allowed us to increase our profile to the degree that it felt safe going independent.

These days, we use a mailing list to communicate with everyone, and we run a **small private community** for those who want to go deep with their design practice.

Our website has not changed materially for many years, because I have found that typographic principles are evergreen. What matters is the text that you use to communicate with people. If you loaded Draft in 2013 and A/B'd it with Draft in 2022, you wouldn't see much of a difference. Different nav, new logo, that's it.

When we quit going independent, I incorporated the business, reached out to a few possible clients, and got enough work to last me through the summer. We did mostly one-off UX

clients, and get enough work to last me through the summer. We did mostly one-on-one projects, creating new software for small businesses and coordinating with other designers & developers to make it happen. Our early clients kept us afloat while we worked on a rework of Cadence & Slang and began envisioning the next chapter of the business.

Since launch, what has worked to attract and retain customers?

We have not advertised for our entire 10 years in business. Everything is done by word of mouth & through sharing with others' audiences (hi!).

“ You don't have to scale & take over markets. You don't have to resort to weird marketing techniques that make people feel gross. You don't have to advertise on platforms that harm the world or take deals that compromise your values as a person.

In practice, I tend to work until I have something to share or, less frequently, would like to make more money. Then we reach out to people, start posting a bit, and I make announcements on my mailing list. Perhaps a podcast appearance or guest blog post happens every so often. That's about it.

Future income hinges on the quality of our work and the reputation that we have created in the industry. This works well for us because it allows us to course correct pretty rapidly. We don't shovel money, time, or resources into platforms that are variable in our return, which allows for maximal focus on the only thing that matters: deep practice.

Generally speaking, one must turn out high-quality work and then toot their own horn, in whatever way they feel comfortable doing so. For us, most of our traffic comes from placements in niche outlets that speak to our audience. We deliberately work in small, punk ways.

How are you doing today and what does the future look like?

Our income has been variable since 2013, but it's always been enough to meet the basic needs of me & the business. We typically make \$18,000 a month in an average year, split roughly 80/20 between consulting & educational work. Our long-term goal is to increase the percentage of this that goes into writing.

2020 and 2021 were our first & second best years in business. Doubling down on eCommerce work for 5 years was a good idea! We took on a few new clients, mostly in the food & cannabis businesses, and continued promoting our latest book, [Value-Based Design](#).

2022 has been harder, with significant pressures on DTC businesses, layoffs, and a broader economic downturn. I firmly believe that a recession is here, it's just upstream and it hasn't become evenly distributed as of press time. I must admit that while we are still profitable, the underlying financials do not augur well for durability. We are working hard to restructure our income streams so that they are diversified as much as possible away from consultative work for the next few years so that we can keep passive income coming in and scrap our way through whatever is coming next for the world.

rough whatever is coming next for the world.

Through starting the business, have you learned anything particularly helpful or advantageous?

The most important thing I can suggest as a business owner is to know yourself on a deep, archetypal level. Some people are better at starting new stuff and terrible at finishing it. Others are great collaborators but poor leaders. Be clear & conscious about your work style, the daily routine you want to have, and the people you want to surround yourself with.

And everyone has their limits. I have fought burnout myself a couple of times, including quite recently. As one age and discovers more about themselves, they are sure to bump up against these limits, which are always messy. Go to therapy, work on your mental health, and keep your body nourished & well-maintained. There is always room for growth & transformation.

What platform/tools do you use for your business?

I use very few tools for my business, and what I do use I mostly built myself.

- Draft's website is entirely built on a 10-line PHP templating engine that I wrote for my first blog in 1997. It is hosted by [Nearly Free Speech](#).
- We use [Stripe](#) to process payments.
- I write almost everything in [iA Writer](#), and then port it to Apple Pages for typesetting.
- We ship packages with [Pirate Ship](#), integrated with [Shopify](#)'s buy button.
- We use [Gusto](#) for payroll.
- [Buttondown](#) for email. Almost all ESPs are bloated & rotten, completely unnecessary for a business of our size. Buttondown does one thing well.
- [Secrets](#) for password management.

On the design side of things, our tools are pretty simple & obvious:

- Most of my clients are on [Hotjar](#) for heat & scroll mapping.
- [Conversion Crimes](#) for usability testing.
- [Audio Hijack](#) & Zoom for customer interviews.
- [GoTranscript](#) for transcribing usability tests & interviews.
- I do lots of interface sketching on my iPad, with an Apple Pencil in Procreate.

While I understand that sometimes people don't know what's out there, and it's hard finding really useful tools, I must admit I tend to bristle at these questions, because your tools don't matter. What matters is what you make of them. Seriously go and do whatever you want.

What have been your most influential books, podcasts, or other resources?

- [Donella Meadows, Thinking in Systems](#). An essential read on the unpredictable nature of systems, and how to go about understanding & controlling them.
- [Edward Tufte, The Visual Display of Quantitative Information](#). The classic text on information display, this book was one of the most influential on my early design practice when I read it back in 2004.

- [Robert Bringhurst, The Elements of Typographic Style](#). You only need one book on typography, and it is this one. I ripped off its layout for [my first book](#), which turned out to be a good idea because that book has sold over 3,000 copies.
- [Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass](#). I think a lot about sustainability & durability when it comes to running businesses. Kimmerer's meditations on nature & abundance landed hard for me when I thought about how businesses have a deeper interconnectedness to the world & its resources. Related: [her piece on serviceberries](#), which I happened to first read in the shade of [the serviceberry tree that I planted in my backyard](#).

I don't listen to podcasts.

Advice for other entrepreneurs who want to get started or are just starting out?

Whatever you've been conditioned to think about business is probably wrong. The only path to success is the one that nourishes you.

You don't have to scale & take over markets. You don't have to resort to weird marketing techniques that make people feel gross. You don't have to advertise on platforms that harm the world or take deals that compromise your values as a person. You don't have to have an office or even a fixed address. You don't have to do what everyone is telling you to do. You don't have to grow at all if you don't want to.

The goal is to figure out what kind of life you want, what you can sustain, and most importantly what can serve others & help the world, and then double down on all of that as a continuous practice. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Are you looking to hire for certain positions right now?

We've only added 1 role in 10 years, and we're not hiring right now.

That being said, we're always looking for small Shopify development agencies to partner with on consulting projects! Reach out if you have availability to work on a flex retainer.

Where can we go to learn more?

- [Draft's website](#)
- [Tutorials & guides](#), all free
- [Books & courses](#)
- [Become a member](#)
- A new thing that people seem to be excited about: [text](#)
- And [get in touch](#) if you would like to talk about working together!



Pat Walls, Founder of Starter Story

Want to find more ideas that make money?

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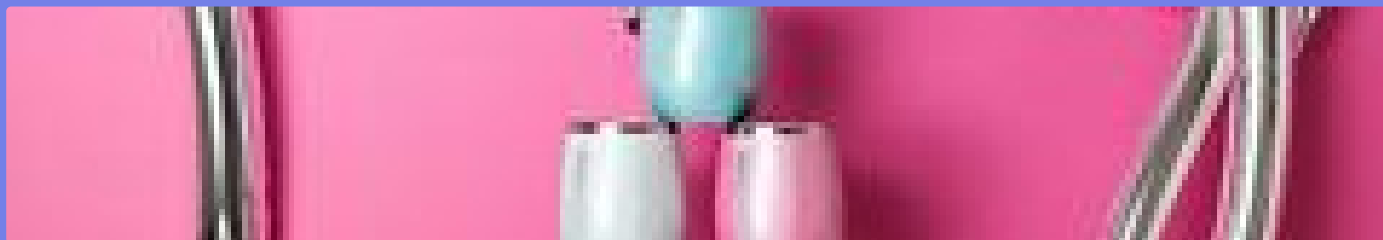
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\$1.08M /YEAR



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Abhishek

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It's about taking action every day.



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Sam Parr

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I love this website.



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Moz / SparkToro

Love Starter Story's transparency.



Johne Vang

Be The Match

You can't find this information anywhere else.



Trent Baren

Instagram

So much valuable information.



Bilal Budhani

Entrepreneur

I was hooked on Starter Story as soon as I discovered it. Resonated with me right off the bat.



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