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SEO

Title: **How to create killer work for your clients**

Description (<150):   Marisa Howenstine, founder and creative of Hip to Wix, dives into her concept and design process for building one-of-a-kind sites that speak to her clients.

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How to create killer work for your clients

Accompanying text (<258):

Meet Marisa Howenstine, founder and creative visionary behind Hip to Wix. In this charming narrative, she recounts how she conceptualizes, connects with her clients and designs one-of-a-kind websites that truly resonate with their brand and identities.

URL:

How to create killer work for your clients
by Marisa Howenstine | Founder, Hip to Wix

I'm notoriously bad with deadlines. Blame it on my addiction to overpromising. I've assigned the same due date to 3 different clients within minutes of each other. "No big deal," I think. "I'll just pull an all-nighter." Insert caffeine drip, game on.

Seventeen hours later, I'm strung out at my computer, unshowered and in yesterday's clothes. With my headset on, I'm speaking in a hyper-caffeinated tone to clients, friends and the dentist's office alike. Maybe (*just maybe*) I finished one client's project, made it halfway through the second one and barely made a dent in the third.

Clients are ticked, emailing missives laced with lines like: "Look in the mirror, accept that you screwed up and change the obvious—immediately." Safe to say, I'm a wreck.

A few days later, the same client who told me I "screwed up", emails me this:

I would like you to know that the reason I keep coming back to you is that you are a critical thinker with the ability to connect the right dots and see the entire picture! That is of true value. Keep it up! This is your differentiator.

My friends, this is how *not* to create killer work for your clients. So how do you do it then? Well, it's a stressful tightrope act. But read on, I'll give you a safety net.

Discover your client's mojo

At the risk of your eyeballs rolling to the back of your head, have you seen the Simon Sinek TED talk, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action"? Who hasn't seen it, right? If not, check out his juicy 18-minute talk. Sinek's Golden Circle concept alone is brilliant.

As Sinek says, "People don't buy what you do. They buy why you do it." Everyone has a reason for why they exist, from your accountant to your corner car washer. What's your client's why? Why are they inspired to get out of bed in the morning? And why should you care?

I had the pleasure of working with a client, Editorial Emergency, who had a seemingly simple project: design a website for their writing services. But then it hit me, how do I visually convey a service that has no visuals? Aside from the obvious imagery such as a pen, paper, quill or typewriter, how can I approach this differently?

(Insert JPG of Editorial Emergency's website here.)

While getting to know the founder, Julia Rubiner, I gathered she was one cool chick (more on this later). And here comes Sinek: *Why* do you want to work with her? Julia lives to tell stories, and not just any story, *your* story. So, what's her why? She has boundless curiosity and a passion for storytelling that's encoded in her DNA.

Speaking of being a storyteller, you need to be one too. Which brings us to...

Immerse yourself in your client's narrative

Once you discover your client's why, immerse yourself in their story. Who are they? What's their background? What makes them so special?

I worked with a client, Dr. Scott Sweet, who needed a website for his psychiatry practice. He was already quite successful, with the bulk of his practice being referral-based. He needed a site just for a web presence and expected nothing more than an online brochure.

(Insert JPG of Dr. Scott's website here.)

I pitched two design ideas to Scott, neither of which he liked. When I pressed him, he said that the designs weren't "warm" enough. I was stumped. What's so warm about psychiatry?

As I started from scratch for the third time, I kept running through his narrative. We had the obvious roster: successful Beverly Hills psychiatrist, accomplished teacher and seasoned presenter. Okay, that's him professionally on paper. Now what about Scott as a person?

He made reference earlier in our discussions about how he wasn't your "typical psychiatrist who wears a tie". He mentioned his love of Danish design, running (he actually took one of my calls while on a run!) and spending time with his wife and three daughters. Still not inspired, I visited one of my go-to stock photography sites.

As I combed through photos, I found an image of a plush meadow with one lone tree. It immediately elicited a feeling of warmth in me. I felt compassion for the tree standing by itself. I pitched Scott the idea, the tree representing the patient feeling alone. Meanwhile the expansive backdrop of nature suggested renewal and hope, a symbol for him.

He loved the concept. I found several other evocative tree photographs and incorporated them into the website. Did I create a warm design? Thanks to Scott's narrative, I did.

Wondering where to begin? Here are 2 things I remind myself when getting into a client's mindset:

Keep it real
When I first read Scott's writing for the website, one line stuck out: "I didn't plan on being a psychiatrist." It was authentic and refreshing to read. Scott didn't have his life perfectly mapped

out, which is something many can relate to. I took his admission and made it the first sentence on his homepage. Perfect! Or so I thought.

Scott mulled it over and said that he didn't want the site to start on a "negative" note. As a substitution, he gave me this: "I became a psychiatrist for many reasons." His new line was something that any psychiatrist could've said. There wasn't much to latch onto. However, since I loved the site design, which was radical enough already (many of his colleagues had sites that looked like book reports done in Microsoft Word), I let it go. But the experience reinforced how important it is to be real and relatable.

Get comfortable with concepting
What makes my work different? I conceive and execute *concepts* for my clients. These concepts don't always mirror what their businesses do. In fact, I embrace unique juxtapositions because they encourage you to see a business differently.

[PMMCo](#) is an engineering firm based in Australia. When they came to me, they had a website that was technically sound but creatively empty. Owner Marc Jolivet wanted something unique visually, but his current site displayed matter-of-fact photographs that left little to the imagination.

(Insert JPG of PMMCo's website here.)

One of the services PMMCo offers is digital design using CAD and 3D printing. After I saw some of their playful samples (a striped frog, a translucent skull), I thought how fun it was, seeing your ideas materialize in 3D form. My researching phase led me to a line in their marketing materials that intrigued me: "We have a child-like curiosity, skill and access to a modern workshop." This got me thinking about the concept of play.

I scoured stock photo sites looking for playful imagery and discovered a rainbow dust cloud, exploding into the air. I was taken by the visual and how I could incorporate it into PMMCo's site. What does exploding colored powder have to do with engineering? Not much. But the bright, dynamic image was akin to PMMCo's creativity and spirit. So I used the photo for their homepage. For design continuity, I chose a bold color palette of pink, purple, blue and yellow. I finished with an inviting headline on the homepage: "Welcome to Our Playground."

Marc was thrilled with the new site design, even his young daughter thought it was cool. Concepting is challenging, but it's what separates you from the designers who charge $500 for a website and churn it out from a template in 10 minutes, or from the clueless client who says their 12-year-old niece's best friend could design their site for free.

Get creative with your research

So the client filled out your onboarding questionnaire. The research doesn't end there. You want your work to stand apart? As a creative, get creative.

Remember Editorial Emergency, the client who needed a site for their writing services? Julia and I were emailing one day about homepage concepts and I asked her to send me a list of likes. She loves black: black nail polish, black leather jackets, black skinny-brim hats. She cherishes her black Doc Martins and collects 1" black and white punk-rock pins. A theme was emerging!

I came up with the idea of shooting a photo collage of her likes. For the homepage image, I designed and produced a collection of black and white pins with her logo (which I also designed), her tagline and some digital graphics. I taped them to Julia's black motorcycle jacket and shot it up close. I also photographed a fun portrait of Julia biting down on a pencil, which suggested writing and "I don't take myself too seriously." What did all this say about her? That she understands the importance of being relevant and engaging.

So get creative with your research. Clients will love that you're thinking specially for them and your work will show it too.

Go with your gut

In our business, it's not just about the facts—it's about feelings as well. If you can't capture your client's *je ne sais quoi,* they're no different from their competition. What draws you to one product over another similar product? Your gut.

I live in Los Angeles where voiceover actors can make $30,000 for a 30-second commercial spot. I met one of them in particular, Joanna Rubiner, who needed a web presence. Unlike the average on-camera performer, she didn't have a folder of headshots for me to work from.

(Insert JPG of Joanna Rubiner's website here.)

As we kicked around ideas for website visuals, Joanna brought up the idea of having a scrapbook-inspired site. Designing a site with glitter, googly-eyes, stickers and photo strips? Hard pass. She also mentioned her love of vintage by showing me aged, solemn, sepia-toned photographs. I failed to see the connection between these drab-looking portraits and the fun, spirited voiceover actress that she is.

Now, at this juncture I could've done one of two things: 1) disregarded her input and done my own thing, or 2) submitted a scrapbook-looking site with glitter-framed photos of her dressed in Victorian garb. I followed my gut and did both.

I've always been a fan of Target advertising with their bright, punchy primary colors. For the homepage intro image, I shot a retro portrait of Joanna with a red and green color palette. The look and feel conveyed her lively vibe and what a delight she is to work with. I played off her scrapbooking idea by shooting over 100 portraits of her in various exaggerated acting modes that I later designed into a photo booth strip. The *piéce de résistance* was a portrait of Joanna

wearing her grandmother's fabulous Roaring '20s fur coat—so *that's* what she meant by vintage.

(Insert JPG of Joanna Rubiner's photo booth and fur coat portraits here.)

You might be concerned about going with your gut. Fear not. Trusting your instinct could beget success. An in-demand talent agent saw Joanna's website and immediately asked to meet with her. She was thrilled, especially since unsolicited meetings with agents are a rarity in Hollywood.

Become a 1-stop shop

I'm fortunate to have a slew of skills to draw on. I'm a designer, photographer and writer with dual degrees in English and Photography (I've won many awards for the latter). My skillset ensures that any creative vision I have will be executed successfully, as shown with my voiceover client.

Joanna and I did the Target-inspired setup at a neighborhood park on an overcast day. Because of my photography experience, I embraced the clouds, whereas an untrained eye might have rescheduled the shoot for a sunny day. The billowy sky is a photographer's lighting dream come true. The clouds serve as one big soft box that subdues the harsh sun. This results in flattering light for your subject that is essential for any good portrait.

Later that night, I went through hundreds of Joanna's photos and selected the master shot. It was nearly perfect except for her facial expression, which needed to be more candid. While it's always better to achieve a shot in camera rather than fix it in Photoshop later, there are always exceptions. I performed digital surgery on Joanna and composited her face from another image into the master shot.

Not only did I nail Joanna's portraits, I spared her the stress of having to find her own photographer and retoucher. The majority of my clients come to me without any creative contacts and are incredibly appreciative when you've got that covered. If your skillset isn't diversified, then find talented subcontractors to add to your roster. You don't want to be stuck with lousy, low-res cellphone photos when designing a client's website. A wise photography instructor once told me that when assembling a portfolio of work, you're only as good as your worst photograph. The same applies to visuals for a client's website.

Befriend colleagues who are smarter than you

You're not always a genius, especially when you're in the beginning stages of concepting a project. This is where your tribe of colleagues comes in handy.

My mentor and former art school teacher, Steve LaVoie, is always someone I can rely on. We love kicking around creative ideas and waxing poetry about the creative process. Steve's got an MFA and a wealth of information. His art book collection alone is Hennsey & Ingalls' dream come true. Because Steve's a teacher, he's mastered the art of constructive criticism. I'm always in awe over his knowledge. It's humbling to know that I still have a lot to know.

Alas, not all of my colleagues are diplomatic in their feedback. I often get emotionally-charged comments from one colleague in particular. Here's a gem he recently texted me: "White outlined text in a background of white smoke? Are you crazy?!?!? This is your most illegible design yet and that's saying something."

Yikes. But I checked my ego at the door and accepted the input. He's a smart creative himself and has saved me from past mistakes. I put his caustic comments in perspective. I'd rather get a cry of disgust from a respected colleague than a pin drop of silence from a client later. And frankly, I want my work to elicit strong reactions. Ambivalence gets me concerned.

It's damn difficult analyzing creative work, especially when it's your own. So hold your trusted colleagues in the highest esteem. They're the gnarly, nitpicky teacher you had in art school, whom you hated until years later when you're racking up awards for your creative genius.

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Ready for a warm, fuzzy client update? Julia, from Editorial Emergency, just hired me to design another website for a new business venture of hers. I was thrilled to have the repeat business and told her it'd be finished in six weeks, not six hours. See, I'm growing! As for giving up the caffeine drip….

Marisa Howenstine is a proud Wix web designer, award-winning photographer and writer. She started Hip to Wix in 2018 and asks that you not judge her website. It was one of her first designs and she's been too busy to revamp it. Follow her on Instagram @hiptowix.