Tekla Szymanski

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Meet experts like Tekla to talk about how to use these ideas in your career:
I'm Ready to Meet the Community

Introduce yourself to our audience. Tell us who you are and what you are currently focused on.

I am the the founder of Content + Design LLC (www.tekla-szymanski.com), which I launched at the beginning of 2018. I provide content strategy and web development for nonprofits, arts institutions and personal brands. Most web developers and designers don't come from a content-creating background. I do.

As a professional journalist and editor with a long career in newspapers, magazines and online publications, I develop websites that adapt to, and amplify, my clients' message. I'll help clarify, produce and streamline their call-to-action and the story they want to tell to better connect with their site visitors. I design websites with a content-first approach.

My parents were artists, and I practically grew up in galleries, museums and foundries, gaining an eye for form and color and a deep understanding of balance and aesthetics. I believe that in design, less is often more. The same goes for web design that highlights content: You need a minimum of design to achieve a maximum of functionality. Think Bauhaus. I help my clients find that right design balance for their unique content needs.

Currently, I am focused on marketing my services, which does not come easy to me: Journalists tell a story, they aren't the focus of it. I am learning to promote myself, which I still find challenging.

Tell us about your favorite Ellevate Network memory or success story. Why are you a member?

I joined Ellevate at the beginning of 2018 and immediately signed up for an Ellevate Squad. My squad was comprised of business owners and freelancers from various backgrounds, some were seasoned business women and some, like me, were just trying to figure out their next steps. I had just launched my new website and service packages, and I was confused how to best market my company and how to network more effectively. The group gave me invaluable tips and feedback and had my back, while I was able to do the same for the others. I got over my imposter syndrome, and my squad was a big reason that I succeeded in that. My Ellevate membership helps me learn from other women entrepreneurs—and help those, who are just trying to figure out their career path.

How would you define your professional mission?

As a professional journalist and editor, my goal is to promote and advocate a content-first approach in web design and development. I focus on quality content and research for my clients, not on "content creation" for clicks.

My mission is to clarify, optimize and strategize my clients' message online, their call-to-action or the story they want to tell to better connect with their audience—and then develop a website that adapts to its content to convert site visitors into recurring donors, new members or paying clients.

What are some career challenges on your radar?

My main challengers are cheap DIY website building platforms that use cookie-cutter templates with functionalities that overpower the content. I am competing with those services—and with freelancers, who build basic websites for a few hundred dollars.

I will have to find a way to market my services to potential clients as a long-term investment in a well-functioning website that provides value, with top-notch content care and the assurance that I will have my clients' back long after our design is done.

You get what you pay for, but some clients still want to minimize costs, and who can blame them. But this prevalent attitude affects my bottom line as well. It is hard to set yourself apart when everyone thinks s/he is a content creator and designer.

We'd love to hear more about your career path. What led you to where you are today?

I spent my childhood and early career in Florence, Paris, Berlin and Tel Aviv, working on three continents in five languages in communications. I bridge cultures. I have held managing and senior editorial positions in international and domestic newspapers, magazines and the radio. I have designed and maintained websites for nonprofits and professional organizations, and I have participated in political web campaigns on women's reproductive rights.

I launched Content + Design LLC to merge my journalism and editorial background with my love for tech and digital media.

What is it about your job that makes you feel it's the right fit for you?

I hand-coded my first website in 1998 and have loved the tech side of communications ever since. With Content + Design LLC, I've found a way to combine traditional journalism with digital media.

As a journalist, I believe in good content, no matter the platform, and as a web developer, I believe in design that supplements the content, increases its impact and assists in its presentation. I help print meet digital: long-form vs brevity, in-depth vs immediacy, top down vs. crowed-sourced. And I help pair quality content with functional design, since both provide equally important venues to communicate. They need to complement each other, however, and I try to bridge any gaps.

What would you say your personal superpower is?

I am organized and creative and try to find ways to fit the round peg in the square hole. I like to under-promise and over-deliver—and I love to work remotely, on far-flung, global and culturally-diverse teams. The later in the day, the better…

What does success look like to you?

Success to me is following a career path that is flexible, in a profession that I love that easily adapts to changing circumstances. In my business, success would be working with nonprofit clients or arts institutions, whose mission I am passionate about, that continue working with me on their websites long after our design or redesign is done. Success is also being paid competitively in alignment with the value that I provide to my clients.

But success is also staying grounded and mastering my work-life balance without compromising too much of my freedom: A career is great, but family-time, me-time and a social life is as important.

Is work-life balance a problem for you? What is one no-fail tactic you use to create balance?

My office is at home. I can close to the door but it is challenging to keep boundaries, especially since I don't keep normal office hours (I'm a night owl).

A recent New Yorker Magazine cartoon caption said it all: "I don't remember—do I work at home or do I live at work?" That's how I often feel, but my one no-fail tactic to make sure that I know what's what: A strict daily to-do-list (I live by my Google calendar)—and an alarm that reminds me to shut the computer at a set time each day.

What is one piece of advice you'd offer working moms?

My advice to moms working from a home, is to stay professional (dress professionally, have regular office hours, shut the door and don't empty the dishwasher), so that their kids know that mom is an entrepreneur (I dislike the word freelancer). That she is at work in her home office at a certain time of the day—even though she seems just a call away.

When working outside your home, remember this simple safety rule on airplanes: first put on your oxygen mask before you help your child. That same rule applies to working moms as well: You can't be there for your children after you collapse. Whenever needed, decompress, recharge, relegate, set boundaries and say 'no'—and use your commute home for some quiet time.

Pencil in the best hour of your week.
In just one hour, get the confidence you need to face your challenges head on.
We'll help you get started at Ellevate 101.
Start Your Free Membership

Our Mission
We are creating a world where everyone belongs by helping women who challenge the status quo thrive at work.

Certified B Corporation
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