Ep #179: The Problem with External Validation

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Tobi Fairley

Ep #179: The Problem with External Validation

You are listening to the *Design You* podcast with Tobi Fairley, episode number 179.

Welcome to the *Design You* podcast. A show where interior designers and creatives learn to say no to busy and say yes to more health, wealth and joy, here's your host, Tobi Fairley.

Hey, hey friends. It's here. It is here. Okay, maybe not quite. What is it? It's fall. And I say this every year and you're tired of hearing it and I still say it. Because I get so excited this time of year, come September 1, even when it's nine billion degrees still in Arkansas, I count it as fall and I get in a really good mood. But this year I'm in a really good mood not just because my favorite time of year is here but because I'm especially excited about the work we're doing in my company.

I have seriously never loved a team or the work that we're doing as a team any more ever, ever, ever in my 22 ish years of business, maybe longer than I do right now. And that's saying a lot because there's been a lot of fun stuff. But I am in love with my team and the work we're doing. And you're going to be hearing a whole bunch more about it soon. But it's a lot of continued improvement on our programs, and our branding, and our website. And just so much fun stuff and the minute that it's ready I'll start telling you about it because I hate surprises.

I hate surprises and secrets. I hate when people do teasers. I mean I know they're fun and I know they work probably but for me I'm like, just come on already and tell me the stuff. So as soon as I can tell you anything I'll tell you but just know that it's stuff for Design You, and Millionaire Mentorship, and a new website, and a whole bunch of stuff that we're going to have for social media and all kinds of cool things for the new year. And it's super-duper fun.

Okay, so I hope you are just as excited about the next few months in your life and in your business as I am. Because nothing feels more exciting or better than being excited and motivated about your work. I mean there's

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just something about it. And when we're not, when we're kind of off and not that excited in a funk it just feels like something's missing. And so, I wish this for you. I hope you're in that phase right now. And if you're not, don't worry, it'll come back around again because it always does.

Okay, so for today I want to talk to you about a really important topic, something that is likely standing between you and your goals and you probably don't even know it. So, what is it? Well, I call it external validation. Sounds sort of big and fancy and even kind of like something that would be positive, doesn't it? I mean validation, how could validation be bad? Isn't that what we're all looking for in our lives, and our jobs, and our roles, and our relationships and our social media posts all the time is validation?

And the answer is actually yes. And the second part of that is that it's not really all it's cracked up to be. It feels good in the moment. It's sort of like instant gratification, a little bit like that. But there's a lot of problems with external validation. So, seeking validation from outside sources, outside of you, outside of yourself just might be the thing that's keeping you from the life and the business that you dream of, including the money that you really, really want. And I'm not kidding about this. I'm so freaking serious.

And it's confusing because it feels good. External validation feels good. So, on today's episode I'm going to dig into what external validation is and why it's such a problem and what you have to do instead. So, let's start right there with the definition. External validation, it's the approval that you receive from sources outside yourself. So, it's approval from your clients, your peers, your Instagram followers, your siblings, your parents, your spouse, your kids. It's that validation or approval from your boss, from your team, your friends, the world. I mean all of it.

External validation is when someone else is telling you that you're amazing, or that you did a good job, or that you're right. Ooh, how we love to be right. And it's somebody else telling you that you're important, or you're worthy, or you're welcome to be in their group, or their club, or their kind of crew, their squad. It's at some level someone or something outside of you telling

you that you've arrived, or that you're good. It could be getting your work published, that's validation. It could be getting a big new client, getting them to say yes.

It could be when someone is praising your design work. Or it could be somebody telling you that you're beautiful or that you look amazing in your outfit and it's so chic, or that your body looks great now that you've lost all that weight. External validation is what most of us live for. Think about that. External validation is what most of us live for. And it's a big problem. So why? Why, Tobi, why is it a problem for people to make me feel good and to praise me? Isn't that what I'm working for? Isn't that why I work this hard every day, for that kind of feedback?

Tobi, you're all about feedback instead of failure, isn't this just feedback? Here's the answer of why it's a problem. Because yes, yes we are working hard for this. This is exactly why we work so hard. And at the same time that's exactly why it's a problem. External validation is sort of like a drug that we don't know we're taking. It feels so warm, and so fuzzy, and so fantastic when we receive it. It can put us on cloud nine. It can make our day.

And of course, if you know me and the thought model and how I teach about thinking, the validation itself of course is not what puts us on cloud nine. But it makes it so easy for us to think these amazing thoughts, that make us feel so good inside. Here's the problem though with external validation. Guess what happens when we're not receiving it? The need for it, or might we even say the addiction to it, to this external validation, it creates an insatiable desire for more of it. And as the term insatiable implies, you can't be satisfied. There is never enough of it to satisfy you.

So, think about that for a minute. Once you are living for external validation, no matter how many people validate you in no matter how many different ways it will never ever, ever be enough to truly satisfy you. When you've conditioned yourself to seek external validation and use it as a measure of your worth, or your worthiness, or your success you will spend so much of

your life unfulfilled because you cannot possibly get external validation 24/7. In fact, life is a full experience with 360 degrees of emotions.

So, when we are not getting positive external validation then we are often getting negative external feedback instead. And when that happens we feel feelings of rejection and disappointment, fear, sadness, embarrassment and a whole slew of other unpleasant emotions. And it's not that we won't feel all of the emotions even when we're not really kind of addicted to, and I use that term loosely. I mean I don't know that we're truly addicted. But it's kind of like an addiction. It's that desire for more, give me more, more, more.

And so, it's not that even when we're not seeking external validation that we're happy all the time, it's not that. But it's that by the nature of the validation being outside of us and something we can't control we're always sort of at the mercy of it. So, the desire for external validation sets us up for a lot of extreme highs and lows.

But they're not in our control because we're delegating, if you will, our approval, and our worth, and our worthiness, and ultimately our feelings, we're delegating it to other people. We're like, what do you think about me? What do you think about my work? What do you think about my social posts? And we have no control over what other people think and ultimately what they say. So, I don't know about you but I don't enjoy handing over my happiness, my joy, essentially my thoughts to other people. I don't want to delegate that to somebody else if I can help it.

But when we practice seeking external validation, that's exactly what we're doing. And this habit of seeking that validation, those little hits of dopamine, because that's what they are, they light up our brain like a chemical, which is kind of what's sort of like a drug. This approval it causes us to show up in a few different ways, or the need for it does. So, what does that mean? Well, first you will likely if you're really seeking a lot of external validation, you'll likely fall into a habit or a pattern of people pleasing, which is super problematic.

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Whether you are conscious that it's people pleasing or not you're doing it in hopes that if you give people what they want, even if it's at your own expense, that they will reward you with that validation that you seek. And here's the problem with people pleasing. We people please so we don't disappoint others. But here's the problem, we have a choice, we often can either disappoint other people or we can disappoint ourselves. So, people pleasing has us consistently picking them over ourselves over, and over, and over again.

And when you throw in the external validation piece we for sure sacrifice ourself because in that moment we think it feels so good to get that ego stroking, to get that little chemical hit that we get when we're told that we're enough, or we're amazing, or we're good. So, when you are always seeking external validation you will likely spend a lot of time people pleasing. But you'll also likely spend a lot of your time proving, proving that you're worthy of validation. I did this for years. I still have to fight not proving my worth to other people.

So, what this can look like, if you're in that proving sort of mode in an effort to seek external validation is it can look like a lot of overworking, and overachieving, and high performance. And that all sounds amazing. People have looked at me for years and like, "Oh my gosh, she's amazing. She just makes everything happen, and she's such an overachiever."

But I'm here to tell you from a recovering workaholic, overachiever, overachiever-aholic, it's not all it's cracked up to be because so often you're overworking and overachieving at the expense of yourself, your health, your wellbeing, your family. But you do it because you want that validation. It's crazy. It's almost like an out of body experience. I used to feel like I'd almost been possessed. Why am I doing this? Why am I sacrificing myself for these little bitty moments of someone else telling me that I'm good enough?

You'll sacrifice yourself, your family, your health for all the stuff, that big job, or that magazine shoot, or that showhouse, or that important client with

their unrealistic expectations. All because of the warm and fuzzies that you might get, that you hope you'll get, they're not even guaranteed, they're not even promised, but they're possible. So, you believe you have to do it. You don't have a choice even though you're usually ignoring all of the other side of the coin when you're saying yes to things.

You're ignoring a lot of the other negative experiences, and pain, and suffering that come from signing up for things that you really should be saying no to in the moment. They're part of the package. But we put on those rose colored glasses, we dream about the external gratification, we can already see the validation. We can see ourselves on the cover of the magazine, or getting the product line, or the clients walking through on installation day and telling us how absolutely amazing we are.

And we forget all the negatives and the red flags and we say yes anyway. It's crazy. It's crazy what we will do for that ego stroking. And I know you know exactly what I'm talking about. I know it so well because I've done it so many times. And there's more, it's not just that. Here's some more of what happens when you're seeking external validation. You barely ever even celebrate the successes you do have when you have them because the satisfaction that comes from external validation is so fleeting.

You feel it for just a moment but then you're already onto the next thing before you can even count to 10 because you've got to get right back on the horse and go after the next hit of dopamine, the next bit of validation. So, you get right back up and you start hustling again, in an effort to get that next batch of ego stroking that comes with needing the world, or some people, or a specific person's approval. And we do it over and over again.

Now, what else? Well, surely that's all the story. That's about enough. Sadly, it's not the whole picture though because external validation will have you practicing a whole lot of FOMO fear of missing out. Because every time you say no to attending an event you don't really have time or money for or taking on a client that you don't really have time for or being part of anything or everything.

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Wearing all the hats that you really shouldn't be wearing because you're afraid not to. Because you're afraid you might miss out on not only that event, being there but you may also miss out on that validation. That praise and ego stroking that you could be getting if you were there feeling important, feeling like you belonged, feeling like you were one of the important people, feeling like you did a really good job. And again, this is not that we don't get to do a good job in our life. It's just where are we seeking the validation, the information that we did a good job?

And if it's outside of us instead of inside of us, that's where the problem is. So, at the end of the day none of that external stuff is really fulfilling, truly fulfilling. It's what leaves us doing all of that, just like I did. And we're tired, and exhausted, and we're kind of like, I thought it would feel better than this. I thought it would last longer. I thought I'd be happier. And I sure as heck thought I'd be richer. I thought there would at least be some money in this and there's so often not. But it doesn't ever bring lasting joy, external validation does not bring lasting joy and it doesn't bring a lot of money.

But it does bring epidemic levels of self-doubt, and insecurity, and confusion around why we keep getting back on the hustle bus even with that tremendous toll it takes on us. And in all of the moments when we don't get the validation that we'd hoped for, it leaves us in self-doubt, and insecurity, and confusion and second guessing on how we must not be as good as they said we were. We must not really be worthy. And so, it creates a lot of self-loathing which feels really horrible.

External validation teaches us to trust everybody else more than ourselves. It teaches us that their opinions are more important than my values, that their approval is more important than my peace of mine, or sanity, or wellbeing. That their judgments of me are true, good and bad. And I should adjust and adapt myself accordingly. And this way of being, this reactionary way of being always at the mercy of what others think of you, it's exhausting. It's what creates burnout. If you've hit burnout and I've been there multiple times, it is almost never the physical labor.

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It's definitely the mental gymnastics but it's usually the mental gymnastics that you're doing trying to get the validation of other people. External validation is the proverbial dangling carrot. It's on a stick and a string over there dangling. And it gets us back on the freaking hustle treadmill time again and again because we want a bite of it, just one more bite. But just like a drug, the effects of each bite or each hit of external validation are more fleeting and less satisfying than the time before. And you think they would be more.

You think that the bigger your successes, the more impressive they are, the more visible they are, the more national they are, fill in the blank, the more whatever they are. You think when I get that one, when I get that magazine, that product line, that client, then it'll be lasting. But it's not. Living for external validation simultaneously creates a sense of desperation, I've got to have it, I've got to have it. While also desensitizing us from what it even really feels like to experience true joy and fulfilment. So, it's really confusing. It's really kind of numbing and it's completely a lie.

And I see so many people chasing validation from others. I've been that person. I have to be careful not to be that person again. I work really hard at not being that person because of the toll it takes on me. And this is not a judgment, if you are that person it's just an opportunity for awareness to see no wonder that feels empty, no wonder it's not lasting, no wonder it's not what I thought it was. But it's the very thing that has us saying yes to everything all the time.

It has us saying yes to the next client or three of them when we're already over capacity and couldn't take another client if we had to. It's the thing that has us saying yes to the next opportunity, whether it's a showhouse, or a speaking engagement, or a marketing opportunity, or a social media feature, or a product line, or brand partnership, or whatever that strokes our ego.

But if we're truly honest with ourselves we can't and shouldn't be taking it on right now because we either don't have the skills, or the bandwidth, or

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the time, or the money to make it happen, much less do a really good job at it but we say yes anyway. You can be sure that external validation is always baked into your thinking without you knowing it if you're looking at opportunities and telling yourself, this is a once in a life time. I've got to take this even though, fill in the blank, I don't have time or money to do it, whatever else, my family.

I have to miss this thing or be away from them. But if you're saying but, but this is a once in a lifetime thing, you can guarantee that there's external validation that is leading the charge for you to say yes. But here's what I've learned and I want you to know. There's very few once in a lifetime things. Maybe even none because if something's really right for you and if it's about more than just your ego then it's going to be there again. Or you can recreate the opportunity for that to be there or something better will come in its place. But it won't in that moment seem so life or death.

It's that ego piece of the puzzle that has us building up the drama and the life or death scenario of how important. It's inflating the importance of the thing, that's your ego talking. So, seeking external validation is a problem because it's so freaking expensive. It truly convinces you to sacrifice the very things you say you value most in the world like your children, your health, your business.

We sacrifice what our business really should be doing and it profits and its growth because we're constantly saying yes to things we shouldn't be saying yes to because they feel exciting and once in a lifetime. And our ego's like yes, yes, yes. They, those external validation opportunities they keep us from building real wealth. They even keep us from money, just fees in our business in the short run, seriously. External validation cost us cold hard cash even in the short term, not just long term.

And you want to know how, how, Tobi, how does it cost me money right now? Well, let's think about this for a minute. It's because accepting external validation in the way of praise, or accolades, or awards, or acknowledgements from our clients or our peers or the industry, including

things like getting published in magazines. That's what we're accepting instead of money. It's what I call accepting non-cash currency. You're operating in the currency of praise, in the currency of ego. And you're getting paid in magazine features, or a beautiful portfolio.

And it's not that those things aren't important but when we sacrifice actually getting paid money because we're taking those instead, because they're so alluring and they feel so good when they stroke our ego, it's a problem in our business. We're getting paid in praise instead of dollars, seriously. Praise is non-cash currency. So, think about this, let's break it down, let's think of real scenarios where this has happened.

How many times have you taken a job for less money than you wanted to, or needed to, or hoped to because you thought to yourself, well, I'll go ahead and take this because it will get me published or I'll have pictures for my portfolio? Or how many times have you thought, or at least hoped, well, I'll take this job for less money because it's going to lead to other future jobs that will pay me even more? But somehow, somehow those things in the future rarely pan out. They rarely actually show up. They rarely actually even pay us more.

And the interesting thing is how can future money, possible future money, not even guaranteed future money really help us keep our business afloat or growing right now in the short run? So even if it was going to come later which it regularly does, we're sacrificing our business today in the hopes of what could come in the future.

And then how about this. How many times have you lowered the cost of products? And I know you have. [26:12] because I know you have given something at your cost or a deep discount because you wanted the project to look finished and beautiful and the client says, "I'm not spending any more money. I'm not spending any more money." Or they don't have money so you're like, well, I'll go ahead and discount this, this time. Or I'll go ahead and let you have this at my cost because your ego is screaming that it doesn't look finished enough yet and doesn't look good enough yet.

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It's not going to get you that external validation. You wouldn't be able to be really proud of it and get a lot of accolades once you photograph it and publish it if it's not all finished. So, you sacrifice your profits once again for the same reasons, to build your portfolio or get published but it's costing you money. And we act like that that's the only way to get published or build our portfolio is if we sacrifice the cash for the ego stroking. But the truth is, if we just made the cash we could just pay to finish the job or style it and get it photographed.

But we sacrifice money all the time and the reason we do that is because we're more attached to the finished result, the look of the job in that moment because of the promise of external validation than we are attached to making the money. It's crazy. But the promise of external validation has us turning our back on profits again, and again, and again. And then we wonder why the biggest problem in our business is lack of cash flow.

So many businesses go out of business in the first year, the first five years and the first 10 years because they have a lack of cash flow, yet we are accepting non-cash currency as if it's a good idea over and over again. And we do it because we believe that if we get lucky and get published or have pretty enough pics in our portfolio that eventually it'll pay off and we'll start getting the bigger and better jobs.

Yet somehow even when we do, even when all of that falls into place and we do get the bigger and better jobs, guess what we do? We keep undercharging and lowering our prices and passing things on at our cost for the very same reason because we still value the client's praise or the promise of getting published or the pretty pictures that our Instagram followers are going to love more than being profitable. So, we keep doing it over and over again far into our business, way longer than we should. In fact, we never should have but we do it for a long time.

And we're still so confused on why we never have any cash. Once again we wonder why our business continues to not be profitable, or successful as much as we wish it would. And the other weird thing is we're also at

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those moments because we are having the pictures, and getting published, and putting things out in the world. We're continuing to get external validation because it looks to the world like we're killing it, like we're so freaking successful. You're everywhere, you're amazing, I've seen you in all these places.

But we're not making any money and our business is on the verge of collapsing a lot of times, or at least it's in famine mode, which is really, really stressful. And this cycle perpetuates this cycle for other designers because all the other people in our industry buy into the lie too. Because they see us getting all that validation and they just assume, well, surely they're making money, surely they wouldn't be doing all of that without making any money because that's what we thought when we saw other people doing it before us. And so, they start the same exact cycle in their business.

It's truly an epidemic. So external validation creates major distractions from the one or two important things that we really should be focusing on in our business. The one or two things that if we focused on those, like making a profit, that we could actually create the life we're dreaming of. We're like, "Oh, if I trade my profits for external validation, there will be a point in time in the future when finally, I've been in business long enough, and surely the money will come. And then in that moment surely I'll have financial and time freedom", which is the big lie.

But we could actually create financial and time freedom if we're focusing on profits and our schedule and our business instead of always seeking external validation. So being addicted to the praise and the validation of anyone or anything outside of you is truly the opposite of freedom of any kind. In fact, a lot of times it feels more like you're sacrificing yourself for those tiny little moments of happiness, and not even really joy. They're not true joy but they're tiny little moments of happiness.

And we're convincing ourselves that those little moments are enough. And so that's why we keep putting up with all the soul sucking parts of the

business that's not working for us, when we have no cash just to get those tiny little moments. We're truly just propping ourselves up on those and hope that they'll last a little longer next time. But the truth is that they're more fleeting the next time than ever. So, no wonder you're constantly feeling burned out or strung out if you're in the habit of seeking external validation.

And saying no to external validation is not easy. It only happens when you realize that true and authentic validation, the kind that comes from you, yourself, that helps you honor yourself and your own values. It's only when you realize that kind of validation can only come from the inside. It's completely an inside job. You've heard the phrase, happiness is an inside job.

This is what they're talking about. If you delegate your happiness to other people by banking on external validation you'll never truly be happy. But if you turn inside and you decide to create a habit of self-validation of telling yourself no matter what anyone thinks of me, I'm good enough, I'm worthy, my work is worthy, I don't have to take non-cash currency. I can absolutely get paid for the amazing work I do and I'll accept nothing less.

And even if I'm not getting published yet, or right now, or ever, I'm still worthy, I'm still really good at what I do. I validate myself and I truly believe it. That's totally different. But it takes some serious weaning from the dopamine hit that comes from the external version. Because somehow that internal version doesn't feel quite as strong in the moment. It's not that instant gratification but it's the long term path to what you really want.

And so many, many times we're trying to convince ourselves that we don't need external validation. We say things like, "I don't really care what others think of me." And maybe we know sort of that we do but we're wishing we didn't. But as long as we're living off the nourishment, the food of external validation then it's absolutely not true that we don't care what other people think of us. And I'm not even saying we shouldn't care what anybody thinks

of us. There's some people in our lives that we probably want to care. For me that's my child, my family, my immediate family, not all of them.

Brené Brown says you can fit on a post-it note, or you could even say on one hand, on your fingers, the number of people that you probably should truly care what they think of you. But at the end of the day if you don't have yourself in position number one then you're truly still living for other people. And we do care. We do care and we live for it and we want and need to hear all the reasons why they validate us.

So, what will it be? Will you live out your life and your career propped up by those juicy little chemical hits that keep us forever hustling and praying we don't burn out, or give up, or give out, or worse? Or are you ready to do the, what we might even call hard work? I call it worthy work, of untethering yourself from that addictive cycle of being validated by other people and other things, things like getting published, things like – I don't know, you name it, gifts that you get sent for partnering with a company on Instagram. It's not cash. It doesn't pay the bills. Feels good, makes you feel important.

But are you ready to untether yourself from that addictive cycle and start practicing what it feels like to only need your own approval? Because you know you're living by your real values. To put those external validation blinders on while you get really clear on what you do value, what those three, or four, or five things are that you truly value the most.

So, your values can be your guidepost of when to say yes and when to say no. And even in those moments when you feel FOMO. Even when you have the urge to people please, even when it feels easier just to sacrifice yourself and your profits for those little hits in the moment. If you're practicing internal validation and letting your values really guide you then you'll be able to make the decision that's truly right for you.

Because in the long run, self-validation or internal validation, which really I think you might want to hear it this way. It's really trusting yourself above all else and everyone else. And putting what you know inside in your gut, in

your heart, your intuition, whatever you want to call it. But putting what you know first, that's the only way to the joy, and fulfilment, and freedom that you truly deserve, the lasting kind. That's it.

So, what will it be, external validation that's fleeting and comes with a lot of suffering or internal validation that may feel harder in the moment but leads to lasting joy and freedom? I know which one I'm picking, friends. I know. I figured it out. And that's what I have for you today, kind of deep stuff. Let me ask you a favor real quick too as we wrap up. If you're loving the podcast now that I'm back to doing more solo episodes, because I hear from so many, you are, so many of you loved the episode recently on accountability.

And I'm sure I'm going to hear a lot back on this one and I have more coming for you. But if you're loving the fact that I'm back doing a lot more solo shows and pouring my heart into writing this content again and bringing you big ideas again more often then I would absolutely love it if you would head over and leave me a review on Apple Podcasts. You can leave a rating up to five stars. Yeah, just go for five. As Glennon Doyle says on her podcast, if you don't love it then just don't leave one. I'm teasing, leave a review and a rating, the one that's most authentic to you.

But I hope that you're loving this and I hope that you'll go over and let me know what you're loving the most so I can keep bringing you more and more great, important, powerful episodes week after week. And when you leave those ratings and reviews it helps other people know what to think about the podcast, whether they should listen to it and all the value that it brings. Okay, so if you have a moment I would love that, I would be forever grateful.

And I will be back next week with another, I always say great episode, how about another incredible episode that I'm also going to pour my heart into just for you, of the *Design You* podcast. Okay, so I'll see you a week from today. Bye for now.

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Thank you so much for listening to the *Design You* podcast, and if you are ready to dig deep and do the important work we talk about here on the podcast of transforming your mindset and creating a scalable online business model, there has never been a more important time than right now. So join me and the incredible creative entrepreneurs in my *Design You* coaching program today. You can get all the details at TobiFairley.com.