

Ep #234: Making a Bigger Impact Through Your Branding with Nicole Yang



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Tobi Fairley

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You are listening to *The Design You Podcast* with Tobi Fairley, episode number 234.

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.

Hi, friends. I am so excited that we are in a season of guests on *The Design You Podcast*, not every week, I'm still bringing you solo shows of all the things that light me up the most. But all of those fabulous, incredible, inspiring women and a few dudes that I've mentioned to you over the summer and over the last few months are starting to appear here on the podcast. And I know they're going to inspire you and they're going to stretch your brain and your thinking a little bit. And that's for sure going to happen with today's guest, my good friend Nicole Yang.

So, Nicole, is our graphic designer and brand strategist at Tobi Fairley Design, Tobi Fairley Inc., all things Tobi Fairley. But she is also a brand strategist and graphic designer for dozens of online women owned businesses. And she really helps turn their ideas, those things bouncing around in their heads into meaningful, impactful design assets which is one of my favorite things about working with her.

But probably even more exciting for me and probably for her too is that she has an incredible belief system and value system that is very much in alignment with mine and our company values. And she believes that through her work as a businessowner and through all of our work as businessowners that we can create the world that we really want to see. Sounds kind of familiar, because that's exactly what I believe too.

So, her expertise in product design, and digital design, and print design, product as in like she helps people create all kinds of things like amazing books and planners and products for their programs and really, really cool stuff. She's helping us with a few of those things right now, even some merch, which I can't wait to share with you because you've probably heard

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me say before. I love to say the word 'merch' as in merchandise. So, we've got some cool merch coming for you in 2023 that you're going to love.

But she's so good at designing and helping to create and envision all of those things. And she does that to help women owned businesses grow confidently and as she says, bravely. So, in today's episode you're going to hear us talk about all kinds of things like responding to capitalism fatigue, whatever that is. And don't worry, we'll tell you. She's going to teach us about the four pillars of branding and how we can really use those in a holistic and values aligned way.

And we just get into a lot of the big ideas, and progressive ideas, and kind of thought leadership that she and I are always working on and bantering about for my company and then just collectively for changing the world. So, I hope that you love Nicole as absolutely as much as I love her and enjoy her and as I am inspired by her because my gosh does she inspire me. So let me be quiet, let me shut my mouth so you can listen to this inspiring, interesting, thought provoking interview and conversation with my friend, Nicole Yang.

Tobi: Hey, Nicole, welcome to *The Design You Podcast*. I am so excited you're here. You're one of my favorite people to talk to, ideate with, brainstorm, all the things. And so, we were just laughing about who knows where this conversation is going but it will be fun, and exciting, and I'm sure it will push some people's buttons but welcome.

Nicole: It's exactly like the introduction I've always dreamed of. Thank you so much, Tobi. I love talking to you so this has been something I've looked forward to for weeks.

Tobi: Yeah, me too. Okay, tell everybody a little bit about you, besides the fact that I've talked about you some, and shared about you because you're our favorite graphic designer and you work so closely with us on so many

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things. But in case people don't know you yet tell them a little bit about who you are.

Nicole: Sure. So, I like Tobi just said, I'm a graphic designer. I started off in the magazine world doing a bunch of editorial design. And then branched out into product design and marketing. So now what I do for businesses on a daily basis is build their brands from a branding standpoint and giving them kind of that visual language that they can consistently use.

But then also working with them on a daily basis sometimes on a design retainer and just helping them literally on everything that could possibly have a visual touch to it to make sure that their message is getting out very clearly. And that it feels really true to who they are and what they want their audience to know about them.

Tobi: Yes. And that's how you work with us and we love it. And part of that – I don't know if I'm special or if other people get this too. But part of our relationship is truly coming together once a month or so and just talking about what's annoying us, what's lighting us up, the forward thinking things. And that's what this podcast I'm sure will feel like. Because again you're one of my favorite people to really explore maybe the next versions of not only our companies but business, the world, what's possible for women, all the things.

And so today we're going to cover some of that. And why don't we start with – we had a little chat before. I know we're going to get into some things like capitalism fatigue, which is really top of mind for both of us a lot of times. But why don't you start with a little bit of groundwork, laying the groundwork of what branding really is. You have a really clear way of approaching branding with four pillars. Can you set the tone for us? Because I think that frames this conversation.

We're going to get into what's working for people, what's not working for people, what we might want to reimagine. So, I'd love to start there if you're willing.

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Nicole: I am absolutely willing because I feel there are so many issues with talking about brands in general. And one of them is that it is a buzzword so it feels really hard to nail down and to make something personal to you. And the second part is that a lot of us know what a brand is if we're entrepreneurs or if we've gone through a branding process before. But sometimes when we think about what it is it doesn't feel actionable.

It doesn't feel like you can think every single day, okay, here's what I can do to build my brand, and to move it forward, and to contribute to the bottom line, or contribute to my mission. So, the way that we think about it is as four pillars. And the four pillars are visual, so that's normally what we think of as a brand is just what's your logo, what are your colors, what are your fonts? What's that kind of visual language that you're consistently using that people can instantly recognize?

The second is tonal, so that's your messaging, those are the kinds of words that you use, your brand personality, even the kind of audio that you use, the music or the sound affects you might have on your YouTube or your TikTok. That all plays into tonal branding.

The second part or the third part is interpersonal. And that's customer service and that's huge, that's the part that we're often thinking a lot about but we don't think about in terms of branding. But I often say that the product or the service that you provide is not the gift to the customer. The interpersonal relationship you have with them is the gift, making it easy to work with you, to get your questions answered, to make sure that you can get what you need out of the product that you purchase. That's all part of interpersonal branding.

And then the fourth is intellectual. So, I think of that as marketing and what you're consistently doing to reach your new audience. But I think that there's a second kind of layer to this marketing portion. So, it's not just the ads that you're producing or how you're speaking to your audience. But it's the tactics that you're using and what your audience thinks of those tactics. So, our audience is so smart now. We know we're being sold to.

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I was at Verizon the other day upgrading my phone and there was an older couple there who was upgrading as well. And they said to their salesperson, "I know that you're trying to upsell me." And I was like, "This is exactly what everyone in the world are thinking." We know what an upsell is. We know what ads that are disingenuous look like. We know when we're being sold to. So that kind of transparency and the alignment of which tactics you're using versus what your brand values are, all of that is a part of that intellectual branding process.

Tobi: I love that. And do brand values, or company values, or personal values, do they layer over all four of the pillars, and integrate with all four?

Nicole: Yeah. All four of those pillars are what I think of as experiences. And those experiences should all be rooted in what your company values are.

Tobi: So good. And just to kind of reiterate what you said about your product or service is not the gift. You said this recently because you're one of the mentors in our Millionaire Mentorship program. And you said this in a presentation and it kind of blew everybody's mind, which is so good. Because we do forget, we're like, "Oh my gosh, our thing is so amazing." And we start to kind of sometimes – not that a lot of us don't put great work in the world.

But we kind of fall into sometimes maybe accidentally a little bit of, I don't know, maybe arrogance is a strong word. But we forget that that thing is not the gift like you said. The gift is, is it presented in a way that different people with different learning styles can consume it? Do they have to be logging onto it or are they constantly annoyed and irritated because they don't get reminders, or they missed a call, or something wasn't shared correctly, or they weren't clear on what they were buying?

All this stuff, that's the difference maker, that's that gift that you're talking about of how we care for our customers. And so, there's the service. And that's the given, they paid for that.

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Nicole: Yes, that's the given, that's the bare minimum.

Tobi: Yeah, exactly, the bare minimum, yeah, that's the minimum baseline of what you give but it's what happens after that that really creates the brand or destroys the brand depending on what you do and don't do, yeah, which is so important.

Nicole: Yes. And we experience that all the time. If you're going to a restaurant or you hire someone to work on your house, you expect to get the meal or you expect to have your light fixture fixed, or your plumbing fixed. But the ease of moving through that process is what makes or breaks it.

Tobi: Yeah. And don't you think that over the last few years especially since the pandemic we've had a shift? Because I feel like a few years ago, and I was guilty of this too, and this concept will probably move us into that capitalism fatigue or even talking about as we kind of mentioned before we started recording, this content machine that we all get on the treadmill of. But I think a few years ago it felt like the attitude was more do everything possible so you as the entrepreneur don't have to do extra work, automate everything.

Take all the humanness out of everything, couldn't even call. Verizon, we couldn't even call them on the phone and get a real human being. Don't you feel like that has all really shifted because of what you just said about the consumer really being so savvy now that it's really to me, before it was almost buyer beware. And the entrepreneur was taking care of themselves and kind of a little bit screw you attitude of I'm tired and this is fine.

And I feel like we've moved to the client saying, "There's too many options out there and I'm really savvy and smart. And the onus is on you entrepreneur to show me why I want to do business with you." Do you feel that's true?

Nicole: I 100% feel like that's true. And I feel like we're still as a business world need to do a lot more to improve on that. There's still a lot that we

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can do but I absolutely think that it's true. And there is also something crucial that's missing when you start automating things which is the feedback loop. It's great for you to save time and for you to save money. No one's trying to tell any businessowner not to do that. But to remove the feedback loop when you stop interacting with your customers on a one-to-one basis.

That means that you're not innovating, you're not changing your products, you're not meeting a need. You're not realizing when there is any kind of friction with your process. So eventually and pretty quickly you become obsolete because you're not making any changes.

Tobi: Right. And there's a lot of frustration happening with the customer and you're not in touch with it at all. I mean talk about impacting your brand. I mean honestly in a lot of ways whether it's business or humans this is kind of to me the genesis of cancel culture because people just got sick of not being able to get anybody's attention. And they had to go online and start shouting through a megaphone, "This person is shady." Or, "These people don't listen." Isn't it interesting?

It was a level of accountability because we had removed the feedback loop which is the accountability piece.

Nicole: That is such a good point. That's actually something I've thought about recently. I was trying to prepare myself for a confrontational situation with a service that I was provided recently. And I was like, "What is the last ditch effort that I can make?" And it would be to go online and say, "Everyone, buyer beware." So, I think that you're so right. And it's because there's not a place for you to say directly to the person, "Let's work this out and come to some sort of solution."

Tobi: Well, yeah, and gosh that, I mean again, I don't want to get off track here because we have so many things to talk about. But my brain just starts going crazy because I even start thinking about all the ways that businessowners started putting clauses in their contract, non-disparagement clauses and all these things that I've since learned are not

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equitable. I never had one, but are not equitable and are not customer centric.

And are really just kind of trying to prop up businesses in this position of I can do whatever I want sort of thing without accountability. So that entire, it's like an ecosystem I think with the cancel culture and everything that has evolved. And that's what we're seeing a lot of pushback against online businesses and other things. And I think it's the culmination of all of that stuff together probably.

Which in theory originally started with a good purpose of a bunch of entrepreneurs are fatigued and want out because of the content machine and because of this capitalism fatigue which I want to get into. We can explain what that is to people. I think in theory it was for a good reason but it's like everything, and especially in America. I feel like we take everything so far. A little bit is good and we literally take it to the enth degree. And capitalism is probably the reason for a lot of that actually.

Nicole: Yes, I definitely agree with that.

Tobi: And I love this. And I knew this would be just conversational. And I love that we're showing people kind of the behind the scenes because this is how we really talk on a regular basis. Every month we're processing these ideas together so let's talk about that idea of kind of both the content machine, capitalism fatigue. Which was the chicken, which was the egg? And let's help people understand what we mean by both content machine and capitalism fatigue because they are BFFs really.

Nicole: 100%. When I think of capitalism fatigue I think of the fact that it's kind of like what I said earlier, we know when we're being sold to. Literally everything is an ad now. I mean I walk into my kitchen and I look at my Alexa and there's a new ad that pops up on the screen, which is not a feature I thought it had when we bought it. That would have changed everything. And those go hand in hand is every single time you see an ad which is literally everywhere. If they could put it on the back of cereal boxes they would.

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Hopefully no one hears this and gets any ideas. But all of that requires new copy, new designs, a new approach, new ideas. And because there are so many ads now, that's not quite as effective so now I have to go into this organic content approach. And we're seeing literally every business, not just small business owners are having to do that. Now if you boost a post on Instagram or Facebook you're not boosting it to an audience that is prime to buy or that might be a warm audience.

You're boosting it just to the world and you might be getting a ton of bots of a ton of haters who are now looking at a product that was never intended to be seen by them. So, it's all kind of intertwined as we're just creating more, and more, and more in order to overcome a problem that was based content to begin with.

Tobi: Well, yeah, and when you think about the fatigue that we were trying to fix a few years ago with this automation and the things that the entrepreneurs started doing for their own self-care which kind of then ended up harming the consumer at some level. Now we've added all the digital, the digital marketing, the digital stuff. We're not taking that away but we're coming back and also then saying, "But now you also have to go back to analog because people want to see real people and they want you to really show up."

And now we need to do reels because Instagram's not about pictures that are still, it's about reels and you showing up. And so, we actually, we're trying to solve fatigue and we've compounded it. We just keep adding to the to-do list more, and more, and more to the to-do list.

Nicole: Yes. And I think it's also important to note that when we talk about the to-do list it's not just like you're doubling your workload for content. It also means that entire businesses are restructuring their teams to meet new demands. There are so many teams that I've been on over the past couple of years where every three months quite literally, every workflow, every SOP that we've developed we have to redevelop. And we have to

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retrain the entire team because we're adjusting to this new expectation of content.

And it's so unsustainable and we spend so much money and so much time that could be put in better places.

Tobi: Yeah. So how do we opt out of that, what do we do? What do you think? I know there's a million ideas and none of them are proven yet, but what are the things that you're toying with, playing with, kind of chewing on of how to opt out of this content machine and how to opt out of this really, what a lot of times now is being called unethical marketing and all the things? It was bro marketing, now it's not even just the bros anymore, it's everybody's unethical and selling it all. Is kind of shady for a lot of people right now which were businesses were for profit, people have to sell.

So, what the heck, or as I would normally say, what the hell or what the eff do we do about this because we've tried everything? And now I think a lot of people are just stuck, what now?

Nicole: Yes. And I've been there too. I mean for the first two years of the pandemic, sat down at my computer every day. And was like, "I do not know what the heck I'm doing here? What's the point of all of this?" And I think it comes down to just choosing. Choosing what you can do and agreeing not to do literally everything. And you and I have had the conversation a lot where we're saying, "Can we just go back to when it was fun?" I think that people are so tired of being sold to.

People are so tired of hearing about the businesses that they frequent, literally in headlines every single day. There's something unethical. They did something wrong. They're in a new lawsuit. We don't want to be involved in that. But what other choices do we have? So, I think that part of overcoming this and again this is all an experiment but part of overcoming it I think is being really transparent about what your process is, where your money goes, what your team looks like, how are you spending your resources.

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And admitting that it's not always going to be perfect. But at least you can show people that you're making an effort so that they can build more trust in you. And so that they can cheer you on and tell you if it's aligning with their values as well. And then the other part is can we just make this fun again? It used to be so fun to just go shopping and to go window shopping, or to get online and just type something into Google and see what came up. And it's not that way anymore.

And I think that we can make it more fun by enjoying our businesses and remembering what our values are and what we want out of it as well.

Tobi: Yeah. That's all so, so good. And one of the things that's coming up is you had such a brilliant way of saying this a few months ago because we were talking about this very thing. And I said, "What do people want?" And you said, "I think people want you to show, don't tell. Show them things. Show them how you're living. Show them the fun you're having. Not manufactured, real life, show them the things you value. Don't just try to write a really good Instagram post three times a week, that's something that they're supposed to read.

That you hope they connect with but they basically just keep scrolling by." Because that is feeding that content machine. So, let's get into that. What does that mean? How do you show and not tell without, as we said a minute ago, doing the American way of show, don't tell and bastardizing it too. And just being more of the highlight reel, or more of trying to show, it's not about showing perfectionism anymore. It's actually moving away from the manufactured version of showing.

And this doesn't necessarily mean to be messy and chaotic all the time. But yeah, what does that mean when we get into show, don't tell?

Nicole: I think the most basic way to think about it is just more behind the scenes. If you are truly living out your values and if you're truly using your process, or your product, or whatever it is, it should be easy for you on a daily or weekly basis to just be like, "Hey, guys, here is what I'm doing this morning." And it might involve some part of your process or your product. I

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think incorporating more of that behind the scenes makes it easier for people to understand what your values are.

Because you're not telling it to them, you're not telling it to them, you're not just spitting in their face constant dogma. They're able to infer it in a way that feels more true to who you are as a person and less like they're being sold to. So, if you have a team that is diverse and that's something that you think your audience would really value then you should be showing more of your team on your Instagram or Facebook. And maybe they need to hop on and just say, "Hi", really quick or share some of their expertise.

Or I think you've done this really well the other day with kind of the pets of your team, the pets of Instagram. And everyone got on to share their dogs and cats, which I loved. But it's little things like that where we don't have to tell people, "Hey, we're invested in diversity and we're invested in x, y, z." We can just show them what our team looks like or what we do on a daily basis, or how we approach our work.

Tobi: Yeah, we just last week we sent out an email because we try to email at least once a week really to just stay connected with our people. And it does have benefits of SEO and other things too. But it's more of just showing up and not only emailing people because we want them to buy something but actually building relationships with people. And so, April, our COO who you know and you work closely with too. She's been handling those emails.

And so, some weeks she's like, "Hey, we're going to write the email from you, tell me what you want it to be about this week. Give me some downloads, tell me some things." But a lot of it, she's just writing herself and so last week she wrote an email from herself about how she's failing her way to success and something she was trying that was really scary. And we got so much response. And she started sending me all these emails that people were responding because it was so real life and you could tell it wasn't manufactured.

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And she was like, “I’m kind of terrified and I’m kind of excited. And when I think about this, these are the things I worry about, Tobi not liking or getting upset about. But then I have to know to do my job. I have to just kind of say eff it and she gets over it.” And that kind of stuff and it was just so candid and real. And so, I didn’t know it was coming. The team didn’t really know it was coming other than Nicole, the other Nicole who’s on our team. And so, we all read it randomly. And she goes, “Well, first of all this was a test to see if our own team reads our own emails”, which we all passed.

And secondly we were like, “Oh my God, I love this email, more of this please.” Because we were into it because it came across and the subject line was Did You Know or something. And I was like, “Wait, what are we telling people? Do we have a secret?” I didn’t even know what it was, and I opened it and it was from April. And I was like, “Oh my God, I love this.” But that’s the kind of thing you’re talking about of just actually showing up in real life and not perfecting it and not editing it to death. And not making it just perfect and all the things, right?

Nicole: Yeah. And I think you used a really important word there which was ‘candid’. I have seen people manufacture behind the scenes and things that are supposed to look on the fly and super authentic but it’s not. And I think that eventually people kind of catch on to that. But being candid and having the flexibility in your business to allow yourself to be candid. I think some people get really rigid with their schedules where they’re like, “I think I’ll just hop on Instagram Stories or Facebook Live and just talk for five minutes.”

And I have that issue as an introvert, and that’s a completely different thing but building that kind of flexibility into your brain space and into your business where you can feel like that’s something that’s possible.

Tobi: Yeah. And that’s actually what her email was about because we have just adopted this, eff it is the new hustle approach mantra in our company because we were getting rigid. And it was feeling like that same content machine. Launches were like, oh, we just finished one, now let’s gear up

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for the next one, what are we going to say, do we have enough runway? We haven't started the emails yet. We're going to run out of time and all this stuff. And we were just like, "Oh, this is miserable." We hated it. It wasn't fun anymore.

And we just decided to go, "You know what? We may have emails, we may not have emails." We may come up with an email. We may have three emails and we may the day I go, "Oh, I just thought of another idea. Let's send that out tomorrow too." And let's hop on Instagram. And it was really blowing up the sort of rigidity and the schedule which freaks people out because we do love systems. And we have a lot of systems that keep us going.

But in the places where we were feeling really fatigued, we're like, "What if we just blow the whole thing up and don't replace it with another system yet." What if we intentionally throw mud on the wall and see what sticks instead of acting like that's a bad thing because we've been told it is. And what if we just are open to testing, and trying, and connecting with people in a different way? It has been so refreshing, right?

Nicole: I think that's so interesting because systems are normally built to keep people safe and to provide some level of expectation. But then you're right, you get to a point where it's not keeping you safe, it's actually hurting you. It makes you dread your days. And that's when you know it's time for a change. And I think that part of this too is it's scary because when we think of a system we think it's directly tied to our income and what we can bring in. And we want to be able to rely on that. But I think it's important to know that you can be flexible. You can toss out the system.

And if something needs to change, if you aren't meeting some of your sales goals and you absolutely need that because that's what is paying your bills. You can make a change and you can make that change on the fly and just as quickly as you did before. And it's not like being flexible is the end all, be all, you can make adjustments.

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Tobi: Right. Well, and I think what we were seeing is we had these systems that we thought we had dialed in and all of a sudden they stopped working probably because of the capitalism fatigue because they were based on the old paradigm of send this many emails, and then have this bonus, and then do this thing. And people had figured it out and it never even really felt good to a lot of us anyway, we felt like we were using somebody else's playbook. I've always felt like I had on a costume or was playing dress up. And it was against my own core values in a lot of ways.

But we're like, "Well, that's what they say to do, let's do it. The gurus said so, the gurus said it worked." And then when it stopped working, part of me was secretly thrilled because I was like, I'm giving myself permission now to say, "Even they don't really know what to do right now because the consumers' changing, the world is changing. There's a major shift in so many ways." And we have permission to just completely be ourselves. And it was the best news ever I think.

Nicole: Yes, I love that for you. And I think this is our time to shine because so many women that I have worked with over the past few years and I felt this myself when I started my business is I came in excited, feeling like I had something to offer, feeling like I could change things in a way that could be really positive. And then immediately was shut down, every single person that I was getting mentored by or was asking for advice from would say, "No, don't do it the way you have it in your brain. This other way is the proven way."

And no one's going to get onboard unless you do it this proven formulaic way. And so, I changed a lot about my business to meet all those formulas. It never felt good and I just kept thinking to myself, why do I even have a brain? Why am I thinking, trying to have independent thought when really it's not valued in this world but now it is. And now is the time for it to shine.

Tobi: That's so good. Okay, so it's amazing and liberating and also terrifying, and can also be an excuse to do nothing, and to procrastinate, and to overthink, and to sit on the sidelines because you're not sure

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because you feel uncomfortable to try your own thing. So, what have you seen that's helped you especially as an introvert you mentioned, that's helped you be willing to show up in uncertainty?

Which is funny because if nothing else the last two years has shown us, anything that we thought was certain was a complete façade, and a lie, and an illusion. Nothing is certain and anything can blow up at any moment.

Nicole: Yeah, isn't that fun?

Tobi: Yeah, exactly. So now that we've stripped, completely vulnerable and we're standing there feeling like we're naked basically. And we're supposed to just trust ourselves, what has helped you start to show up in that way?

Nicole: Well, I have to admit that I still don't think I'm doing it anywhere close to perfectly. But I think that surrounding yourself with people who are going to support your different thoughts and who might not agree with you but support where you're going is huge. I was just a couple of years ago in the middle of the pandemic I had this dream that I had when I first started my business which was to create a grant program for women of color.

Tobi: I'm so glad you're talking about this.

Nicole: Okay, good. Hopefully it doesn't feel like too much of a tangent.

Tobi: No, I love it.

Nicole: Good. But it felt like something when I first had the thought that I thought I'm never going to be able to do this. No one's going to get onboard, probably not going to be able to do it until 15 years from now when I have \$5 million and I can do whatever I want because I'm making money and people respect me now. But I was really feeling like it was needed and especially in the middle of the pandemic and in the middle of kind of the crest of the new racial injustice movement.

I was like, "This is the time when this really needs to happen." It's a business model that no one was really getting behind. I was using my own

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money to fund the business development for these women in the grant program. And I just tossed it kind of as a loose idea to a couple of my friends who I thought were going to be maybe supportive but also give me some feedback if they thought that it was really truly not going to work. And they got onboard immediately and it happened so fast after that, I mean just took off.

Everyone was so excited about it. It's one of the hardest things that we do in our business but it's also the reason why I keep going. It is the number one thing that I love about my job. And I feel like when you get back to your values and the things that really get you going and you surround yourself with people who are willing to hold you accountable if something is truly not going to work, but can support you. That I think is everything.

Tobi: Amazing. And so, tell us a little bit how this works. So, you actually give money to small businesses owned by women of color to help them start up their business, or run their business? Or how does the grant, what's the grant for? How does it work?

Nicole: Yeah. So, it's anyone who has – any woman of color owned business who has been in business for a couple of years and has at least kind of proven the product or the service a little bit can apply. And if they win, we provide them with business development. So, we'll redo their brand. We'll make them a website. We'll create their content marketing. We'll give them kind of the first few things that they need to get started and to market. So, it kind of depends on the grant recipient and what they need.

There have been people we've created Instagram templates and marketing templates for them. And other women have required more kind of operations and behind the scenes things like trackers for their data. So, we do that and then we give them the money to fund all of their online expenses for the next year. And some extra stuff too. We'll pay for a photoshoot so they have new headshots and new photos for their website.

Tobi: Amazing.

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Nicole: Yeah, it's really fun. And it feels very holistic and very full. And especially for women who don't always have the mentorship that we might have benefited from. To be able to have a group of women who can say, "Okay, I'm not just handing you money and then you're guessing at where to spend it. We can have a conversation about what we think might be more effective for you." And then kind of come to that decision together.

Tobi: That's so good. I agree with you in every way. Talk about making business more fun, more meaningful, all the things. And one of the things that you were talking about and I don't know if you used this word exactly but I wrote it down when you were talking. I think collaboration and community is what I'm seeing the difference maker being in this how we're showing up. And you said, "Surround yourself with people that don't always agree with you but that support you."

And that's been the biggest shift I've seen because the old paradigm for me was the whole white male, rugged individualism, bootstrap it, it's all just about your own mindset only. Don't even acknowledge that there's any other systems at work here and everybody's equal. And we all live in this beautiful American dream meritocracy. And if you just work hard enough you can all succeed. And that was all about being this lone ranger who was in charge of your own destiny. And that was the model that created burnout for me, this fatigue for me, disconnection for me.

Do I even want to do this anymore? And when I learned for the first time in the last couple of years literally, and the team I've built now and the people who I've surrounded myself with now. A lot of which was kind of created from working with people that had aligned values with diversity, and inclusion, and equity, and all the things, and ant-hustle. Just really being transparent about my values. And it attracted me to the right people to collaborate with and to connect with. Everything changed.

I've never had so much fun in my business. There are things that I used to just dread because I had to make those decisions on my own. And now just having a group of people that I can be like, "What do you all think about

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this?” Or, “Why don’t you make this decision instead of me?” Or, “What would you have us do?” It is the most fun, I mean I kind of get chills when I talk about fun. It’s lifegiving. It’s so different than all the pressure that I put on myself for years to be responsible for myself and everyone else to try to build fame and fortune and all the things.

Nicole: Yes. Why does it all have to be on you? And on top of that I think there is also there’s just work burnout. And then there’s creative burnout and it’s not occurred to me until this year that I could share the creative load with someone. I could have someone that I could turn to and say, “I’m having this kind of baseline idea but it’s not growing anywhere. I just am out of ideas, what do you think?” And just having that conversation. It’s so, so helpful.

Tobi: Yeah. We’ve been really taught to isolate ourselves for years. I mean we could get into all the reasons why and I definitely think it’s textbook patriarchy, textbook white supremacy, all the other systems at play and we could get into that whole conversation which for a lot of people feels political.

But whether we look at the why or not, the fact that we have been really – I mean even those teachers that told you to change everything you were thinking about were teaching you, and teaching me, and teaching all of us that same process that was whole lot of, not only formulaic. But it was very disconnecting from other people because if you’re just following the steps you’re not collaborating. You’re not questioning. You’re not thinking quickly. You’re not innovating. You’re not doing any of those things.

You’re literally just going through the motions talking about a machine, we’re really looking at ourselves as machines and not humans. And I think that was really not working.

Nicole: Oh my gosh and in so many ways. I think that’s something that we internalize in ways that we probably don’t even realize. When we view our work as a machine we start viewing the workers as machines. We start stripping away their humanity and their rights. It goes deep.

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Tobi: Really, really deep. I know, there were some things we were talking about before this and you were like, “I don’t even know if we can go here yet. I’m not even sure I’ve fleshed some of this stuff out.” But it really does go deep. And for the people who have been turned off by me, they think I make things political. Let’s just be honest, business is political. Humans are political. Humanity is political. We’re talking about literally people’s rights, and their wellbeing, and they’re meeting their basic needs.

And when we turn our businesses into machines we really strip away, we dehumanize ourselves and everybody else in the process, yeah.

Nicole: Absolutely. I think that’s so right. And I have a friend, her name is Aliyah Walker, she used to do these diversity roundtables. But she would always say, “My whole life is political.” She’s a Black woman, she’s like, “Literally everything about my life is affected by the system. My life is political.” So basically, if your life isn’t, if you don’t see business as political, if you don’t see politics as being part of everything that you interact with, it’s because the system was built to benefit you.

And that’s not because you did anything wrong, but that’s something that you should be aware of and see, but not everyone gets to benefit that way.

Tobi: Yeah, exactly. And it’s about humans. It’s about the planet, the climate, all the stakeholders, all the things, it’s so good.

Nicole: Oh gosh, all of it.

Tobi: So, anything else for people to think about? Because it’s like, okay, in one way it’s refreshing that we can throw out the branding and marketing rules and show up as ourselves. And in another way when we start talking about these deep issues. I don’t want to always imply to people that everything about their business or life has to be altruistic, or world changing. I mean you can turn this into another job thinking, now I have all this other responsibility. It’s just different responsibility.

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And some of us want to do that and some of us are moved to do that in small ways, and big ways, including your grant and things that we do in our business. But is there anything that can help people just relax a little bit about this? We can have serious businesses but we can also have fun. We can change the world in our own unique ways without taking responsibility for everything. How do we find that more, I mean I hesitate to use the word 'balance' because it's also been kind of bastardized.

But how do we find that rhythm maybe is a better word that works for us, that feels so much better than stepping on a treadmill that someone else set the pace for?

Nicole: Oh gosh, yes. I think I mean I am starting to feel like the word 'values' has become bastardized as well. But I do think it comes back to your values. And when I say values it does not have to be this giant altruistic thing. I have seen brand values be playful, have fun. It can be something simple. It could be something fun. It could be something light. If you've built a business that is filling a need that you haven't seen and that need is that it needs to be light because everything else in the world is heavy, that's a beautiful thing.

And that's something that you determine that people need, so let's embrace that. And we don't always have to think about the big heavy stuff, if that's a part of your values. That's something that your audience really places a lot of – sorry to keep using the word 'value'.

Tobi: Yeah, emphasis or prioritizes.

Nicole: Yes, a lot of stake in, then obviously that makes sense for you. But there are other parts of your business that are defined by many more things that your audience needs from you than what you do altruistically or what you do politically.

Tobi: Yeah, so good. Amazing. Okay, so I will for sure have you back because we are building things. We're talking about things together. We always have seeds of ideas that we're chewing on and kind of birthing. But

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is there anything else? I'm curious if you want to talk a little bit about maybe a collaboration that you're starting to work on. Because it kind of builds on this idea and shows some people some examples of how you could expand the work you're doing and have more fun with it. Am I teasing people?

Or do you at least want to share a little bit about kind of one of the things you're doing in your world?

Nicole: Yes, I'd love to. And thank you for letting me, that's really kind. This is actually a really nice culmination of everything that we've talked about today. So, I am starting a new agency model with some of my friends who I've been doing a lot of client work with recently. And it really builds off of this idea of approaching branding as four pillars. And it also, I feel is a response to capitalism fatigue and to a lot of the ways that we have seen businesses be built in ways that aren't effective.

And so, our business and our collaboration is an agency that's designed to build brands using these four pillars in every single way that feels holistic. So, you're essentially getting a brand, and content marketing, and a client experience, and offered design, and values coaching. But the really nice thing is that it's all customized because something that we were seeing so much with agency work is that a lot of businesses opt in to agencies because they need that full teamwork, that kind of holistic approach.

But what they're being given is just a formula. The agency is saying, "Okay, you need these five ads and you need these five brochures." And that's it and that's part of your package. And that doesn't do anything for your business. It doesn't do anything to your customer base. It really contributes to this capitalism fatigue because we're seeing the same stuff over, and over, and over again.

And what we really want to do instead is say, "Okay, what are your strengths? What's that thing, what's your super power that you can really come into business with and help change the world with? And we'll do everything that we can to build that up and to make that something that you feel really confident just running with."

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Tobi: Yeah. I love it so much. And what I love about it is you each independently have your own businesses separate from the agency. Which I think also from a finance standpoint seems to me looking from the outside in like it makes it feasible for you to take this more custom approach to working with people because it's not your only way to make money. It's not everybody's livelihood all by itself.

And I think that's again back to our original point what squeezes kind of the personalization out of a lot of those agencies is they started wanting to do things custom but they couldn't make enough money. And they couldn't run enough people through the model. And so many of the business models are broken. And so, it's not feasible to sustain everybody that works at that company or even for the owner to make what they want to make. And so, I love that you're exploring this collaboration it looks like in a different way.

Nicole: I hope so.

Tobi: Yeah, it's so fun. And I mean I don't even know enough about it yet. I just know one of your partners also is small world connected with me and my company and April and I because we're going through a certification with her, the equity certification with her with Trudi Lebron. So, we were connected with her because you came back and you were like, "I didn't know you knew Megan." But that's part of getting into the world of connecting with that, people, surrounding yourself with the people like you talked about that have things in common with you.

And so, I do find the world really is small a lot of times. Well, that's so exciting, I can't wait to see how that comes to life. You know that we're already considering using you for a project I'm working on. So, I'm excited to learn about that. But yeah, I think just having courageous women willing to question things, willing to go against the status quo, willing to throw the formulas in the trash, willing to reclaim our own brains I guess, like you said earlier, that we had kind of parked or disconnected from, all of those things.

It's not easy, it takes courage, it's scary, it's uncertain. We don't know if it's going to work but I applaud you and I'm so excited and inspired by seeing

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the things that you're trying. I'm trying to do the same thing in my world to see what's possible, to rewrite new models that aren't just formulaic but that have room for a lot of nuance and a lot of individualism and personalization while we still collectively stay connected. It's all new, yeah.

Nicole: Yes. Thank you for saying that. And I think what you brought up was also a good point is that it doesn't all have to happen at once. We all have our individual businesses. This is one extra thing that we're doing. So, I know you talk a lot about diversifying. And it doesn't always have to be diversifying and offer what people tell you need to diversify. It can be trying to append the system one thing at a time. And to me that's also diversifying a business and a way that's really important.

Tobi: Yeah, I love it, I agree. And if some of us aren't willing to try these things as a side hustle, or a one-off project, or in some way that lets us test the waters and dip our toe in and see what we learn from it, then nothing's ever really going to change.

Nicole: Exactly, yes.

Tobi: Amazing. Well, thank you so much for being here, this was so fun. I know, yeah, we're for sure going to have you back.

Nicole: We have a lot to talk about.

Tobi: We do, we have so much to talk about. I mean, well, in a lot of ways you are part of my team. We consider you part of our team and so yeah, we're not going anywhere. I don't think you're going anywhere I hope. So, you'll be back. But in the meantime, if people want to learn about you and follow along as you test new ideas and things, and be inspired by the grant work you're doing and all of those things, how do they find you? Where is the best place to follow you? All that stuff.

Nicole: Yes. The best place to follow me is on Instagram and that's @nicoleayang. And then you'll also get updates on our Waves of Change grant from there. Or you could follow us @wavesofchange grant on

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Instagram. And you'll also, if follow, may get updates on Rendezvous Creative which is that new agency model we were talking about. So hopefully I will see you on Instagram.

Tobi: Amazing. Yeah, so everyone listening, let us know what you think. Let us know how we inspired you. Definitely go follow Nicole, she's got a lot of beautiful eye candy over on our site, also lots of wisdom too. And I thank you so much for being here. It was awesome, everything I dreamed it would be and more, so thank you.

Nicole: Same, this was my pleasure, thank you so much, Tobi.

Okay friends, I hope you love this. I hope we have your wheels spinning, I hope you're thinking about what's possible for you and your company and how the way you present it to the world can have even greater impact than maybe you're already having. So go check out Nicole and all the places she told us we could find her. You're going to see lots of beautiful things coming really soon that she helped us create because we have our new website finally launching soon. She didn't design the website. One of her good friends, Tiffany designed it.

But she co-created a lot of the assets that work with our website and she is our go to girl for a whole lot of things that we're creating in the coming weeks and months and all of next year. So, stay tuned for all of that and also stay tuned for another great episode and guest next week here on *The Design You Podcast*. Bye for now.

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.