

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller



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You are listening to *The Design You Podcast* with Tobi Fairley, episode number 273.

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 friends, I am really excited about today's episode, I just finished recording it. It's an interview with my friend, Hadley Keller who has been at House Beautiful, at Architectural Digest, is now at the Design Leadership Network. And we have a very lively discussion that all of you creatives and designers, people who want to get published, people who want to think about content, you're going to love because she is truly an inside source for this information.

And so a lot of the things that we wonder about, that we worry about, that we think about, Hadley is here to tell us all the answers. She's sharing her insights and it's just a really, really exciting conversation. So I'm going to be quiet and get right to the show this week and let you hear Hadley tell us about who she is, what she's done, where she's been, what she's doing now and all of these questions or answers to our burning questions. So enjoy my interview with Hadley Keller.

Tobi: Hey, Hadley, welcome to *The Design You Podcast*. I'm really glad you're here.

Hadley: Hi, Tobi, thank you. I'm so excited. I consider myself the old line, long time listener, first time caller. So I'm excited to be here.

Tobi: Good. Well, I've been a long time fan of yours. And we've gotten to work together in various ways over the years through your different sort of iterations of you and your jobs and careers and things. And we'll talk about that today. But for the people who don't know you already, why don't you

[The Design You Podcast](#) with Tobi Fairley

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

tell them a little bit about who you are, what you do, what you're doing now, where you've been, all the things.

Hadley: Absolutely. So I generally am a design writer and editor. I started my career about 10 years ago, a little over 10 years ago at Architectural Digest. I worked on the print side there as well as digital. I was a marketer. I was kind of every job you could have which was the best training. And then went onto digital and started AD PRO, which is the design center website, they're a kind of peer to peer industry site. And then from there I went to House Beautiful which was kind of the opposite.

I went from this super niche audience to this really mass audience with House Beautiful which was a fun departure and I'm sure we'll get more into that. But kind of writing for a really mass audience. So I was at House Beautiful as a senior editor working on kind of everything there. And then became the digital director which I did for the last three years. And earlier this year I just left the editorial world officially though I'm still kind of in it.

I'm now the director of editorial and community engagement for the Design Leadership Network, which is a professional group of interior designers, architects, landscape professionals that Tobi knows well because she is one of our talented members. So there I'm continuing to do content, editorial but also really kind of finding the places where content and editorial intersect with community and kind of real life experiences which I think is another point we can probably talk about.

I've also had a bit of experience working on design books which I love to do and kind of speaking on different topics in the design world. That felt like an annoyingly long bio.

Tobi: I loved all of it though. No, it's so good and I know that people listening, their ears are perking up right now because especially even some of us who have been in the industry a long time and even have gotten published and even maybe have gotten published nationally. We've been

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

on, I mean well, everything's always changing, and things have been changing for, gosh, pretty rapidly for 10 or 15 years. But in the last handful of years things feel like they've just been kind of on lightning speed as far as change goes.

And I would love to kind of just start there. Can you even just sort of help us, why don't you take that wherever you want to take it. Maybe you want to kind of recap what that means to you of what the changes have been. And then maybe we could start to establish sort of where you believe the editorial business industry is now. And then I know I'm going to have some very specific questions for you that all of our listeners are wanting to know too.

Because we don't quite always know how to navigate this space anymore and what we should use ourselves and what we should pitch to other people and how we can collab. So get us up to speed.

Hadley: Absolutely. So that's a great question and statement. I mean I used to joke to people that I think that 10 years I was in the world of design magazines. They probably changed more than 100 before then. And I don't quite think that's really an exaggeration. I mean to give a funny example, when I first started at Condé Nast actually before I was at AD I was an assistant to one of our executives who was the editorial director for the whole of Condé Nast, all the magazines which was the best experience.

Tom Wallace, he was a super talented editor, had been the editor-in-chief of Condé Nast Traveler for years and then took on this role. And I remember while I was working for him, one of the things he had me work on almost as kind of a pet project because he really was interested and wanted to know the direction was going. Was every month I would go on my computer and I would look at Omniture, which is a data tracking system. And I would write down the website traffic of every website of all the magazines at Condé Nast and I would put them in a little chart that I saved on my desktop of my assistant computer.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

And I would update that in a graph and show it to my boss and that was for anyone listening who has even the faintest understanding of digital media. Now that kind of analytics is basically a whole, hundreds of people team that really are reporting what people have pretty [inaudible] content. So all that is to say, yeah, there's been a lot of change. When I first started, digital was really kind of still new which is pretty crazy. And I think that the most interesting thing to me where I really saw the kind of separation of who was successful and who wasn't there, or really who even persevered.

Because so many magazines closed, as I think a lot of people's first inclination when you're in magazine media was to see digitalized as a threat and think, oh my God, we're going to kind of stay away from it. Because this is this whole new thing that's going to put us out of business. It's like the Blockbuster and Netflix story. That famous saying of they're no one, that's a little passing fad and you turn your head to it. And I think frankly the people who ended up, what we know now obviously is that it's not a threat.

It's a totally different means of storytelling. I'm someone, I worked on both print and digital at AD and at House Beautiful. I love print. I think we're in an industry especially where print is valued. And luckily for people like me, we do, there's still that demand for the glossy pages of a magazine but that's a totally different experience. If I want to really understand how a carpet is made, that's going to be something that's better served in a video. But if I want to see just big spreads of a home, that's great in print.

If I want a really long interview with someone that's probably going to be good on digital. Same if I want a shopping round up, I don't want to look in a magazine at the 15 best new ceramics this season. I'm going to have to call up a phone number to get them like we used to do in our market pages. I want that digitally and then I can click and buy it. So I think the way that media has shifted is it's all about looking at what is the best way to tell this story, I think the best way to think of it.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

And frankly, for designers or people who want to get press, it's also what's the best way for me to tell this story. Maybe I don't even need to be in a print magazine. Maybe I really just want some great Instagram placement. And maybe I can tell my story that way. So I think that was, and that was frankly, a big part of the reason I went over to House Beautiful. We had a totally integrated team between print and digital which was pretty rare. I think we were the only shelter magazine that had that.

And when I was at AD I worked on both print and digital but they were separate. I mean we overlapped, we worked together but separate teams. And the reason I like that at House Beautiful was although maybe I ate my words a little because it means a lot more work. But really able to look at something and say, "Not only, what's the best way to tell the story but hey, here's a story that's going in print. Is there a video we can spin off of this? Is there an extended interview online?" Make this one story manifest in different ways.

And what's the social treatment? How do we really make it come alive? So that was really fun and I think provided kind of a great foundation. And now obviously fast forward 10 years, we've got, when I first started in the industry it was Instagram was just a nascent thing. Now we're talking about TikTok, now we're talking about AI, which I don't know that we need to get into those. But now Instagram has completely upended the world of design media and what designers do.

I think that's kind of the most interesting part of it from an editor is 10/15 years ago if you were working for AD you were only really competing against the storytelling of décor or world of interiors, salary. Now with Instagram I could be kind of competing so to speak. I mean we could get further into it and I think there's a difference in storytelling. But you can be competing with the designers themselves. You, Tobi, could just share a picture of your latest project, share a before and after. Put it out in the world directly without having it in a magazine.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

And I think there are obviously still benefits to having the context of that press but it's really changed the landscape in terms of kind of what we do and how we serve both as editors, how we serve our larger readership but also our designers, our subjects we cover.

Tobi: Yeah. And on that, gosh, I have a million questions. And I may want to circle back to this idea of knowing what Instagram is and continues to do to the industry. But what I was just thinking about is how has that changed, because I know it has, but how has that changed the focus of the magazine? I know there were, a few years back and I've worked with House Beautiful in different ways, not only being published but also on an advisor board with you all and in different ways.

And I know a few years back the conversation was starting to become something more about, and I think I even remember Jo kind of saying one of the times when maybe we were together that in the past the magazine was really to just send the readers to interior designers in a lot of ways. And then it really became, and this is what Instagram of course helped move along, I'm sure, it really became the magazine serving the consumer itself because they went all ways. They didn't even always have to hire a designer in the same way that they used to.

And I remember Jo at one point saying, "A lot of our readers want to get their hands dirty and they want to make this macramé thing that's hanging on the wall. And they want to put that with a chic thing that they've bought from somewhere that was really expensive or collected." And I know that's just House Beautiful but I know you have some experience with other places. Can you kind of speak to what are the magazines even, what are they thinking these days that are different maybe than what they used to be thinking?

Hadley: Totally. I mean I can speak to House Beautiful obviously most specifically and then I'll kind of try to speak broadly from what I know and what I just kind of perceive. I think what you just said about House Beautiful

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

and a change is that's kind of what happens when you have such a large audience. I mean House Beautiful, you're speaking to at the peak an audience of 10 million readers online and in print monthly. So it's not a niche magazine.

And we could have a whole separate media conversation about that around all these special interest magazines. Then became lifestyle and therefore became mass again. You see it with beauty magazines, fashion. I actually think weirdly enough, design is one that has remained pretty niche as far as things go relatively. But I want to talk a little bit about that kind of bifurcation because I think it's a really interesting point.

And we thought about this a lot when we were at House Beautiful, which was, we know our audience is made up of both professional designers and people who are walking by this in an airport and picking it up or came to us through a Google search. I have never done anything and they're like, I want to buy a chair and I'm starting from zero. So a lot of our impression was, how do we engage those people who are at zero and we want to get them and have them kind of come up through us without alienating, without talking down to a designer audience.

So that became a big part is how do we tell stories, maybe for example, maybe it's a story on performance fabric and it's using all new performance fabrics and talking about advancements in technology that could be interesting to designers. But the body of text throughout is what is this and why should you use it. So that is a kind of literal example. But I will say that thinking tried to drive a lot of what we did. And that does go back to the question of where is this best served?

A macramé DIY, I will say in defense of House Beautiful that we would never run a macramé DIY. But you know what I mean. You can dabble in DIY 100%, especially during the pandemic. We went all in when people were stuck at home. So a DIY is going to probably be online in a video, maybe a social video. But it's not going to be in print, it's not going to be in

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

a beautiful long form video probably. So it's about thinking about how those things are presented.

And then I think the big thing too that really I think, I feel six, eight years ago there was this aha moment a lot of designers had which was a lot of people were kind of thinking, when we started to push towards digital. I'm a professional, I don't want to just give away my sources or give my tips so that they can run them online. That's what people come to me for, which sure, but how many clients do you have a year? Maybe 20, so those 20 people can get your advice firsthand.

And God bless, those 20 people who are hiring a high end interior designer, let me let you in on a little secret, they're not going to not hire you if you tell your favorite white paint color to housebeautiful.com.

Tobi: Yeah. And they're certainly not making their macramé thing, no, none of that.

Hadley: And then you have, so okay, audience of 10 million monthly views, so that's 20 people you have, 9,900,970, whatever who possibly can become familiar with you and help you grow your audience. Whether that's you want a bigger Instagram audience or the product line, or you come out with a book. These are all potential consumers that you wouldn't have touched otherwise if you're only doing your luxury bespoke interior design business. So I think people started to see that too which is, if I can act as a resource.

And frankly, opening up digital opened up millions more opportunities for press coverage, it's not just, it has to be this complete home that's photographed and exclusive and x number of rooms and bathrooms. But you could say, "I just want to give a quote about mixed metals." And that could show up in a story that frankly is going to get 500 times more eyeballs on it than your beautiful print spread sometimes.

Tobi: It's so interesting.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

Hadley: Yeah, that was important. And that was kind of a gospel I was preaching so to speak when I went to digital because that was it a lot of the time. And often people pushing for print. And then you'd say, "Well hey, look, you can have this one print story." That's great and again I won't knock it because I've worked on both, I love both. I think there's a place for both. But I think it took a while for people to see the value in something like a digital roundup.

To give you an example, I mean stories on House Beautiful, blue living rooms that are roundups based on SEO, on what people are searching, so we have that data. Those can see 10 million views over the course of a couple of months. So you think, getting your name out there, it might seem more exciting to have a full home in a magazine and that's great or even a full home tour. But actually having one really great room in [crosstalk].

Tobi: So smart.

Hadley: Right. Over the course of five years that might be 100 million people are seeing that, and [crosstalk] and follow you.

Tobi: That is so fascinating. I love that so much. I'm right there with you. And I do think that people did start to have a little bit of an aha six to eight years ago. But I think I'm still encountering people every single day, people who I coach that are designers and creatives that I'm trying to get them to even understand this for their own Instagram account. And I like to say, "You have fans or potential fans and you have clients or potential clients." And just as you said, the clients or potential clients are a tiny handful of the people that could be your fans.

And I try to remind people because a lot of times and of course we are busy. And it is a big job to create content but I hear people say, "I'm not a DIYer, I don't want to just create all this content for people to just consume for free." And I'm like, "But you might want to rethink that."

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

Hadley: I was just going to say, I also think people tend to go to those two extremes. I don't really mean to put you on the spot but it doesn't mean you have to either do, you know, a custom [inaudible] wall paneling or DIY macramé.

Tobi: Right, paint your own candlesticks.

Hadley: There are so many designers out there who do really beautiful things. Maybe it's a behind the scenes of do you actually see how this wallpaper's being installed or this really clever thing that I did around the switch, or here are my swatches. There are plenty of things.

Tobi: All of that, yes, all of it. And I think people really struggle to think, well, and this is another conversation that ties back to magazines because my experience and every other person I've ever heard with I'm sure an outlier here or there has always said, "When you get published in magazines, especially major big national magazines it's not 100 people hire you in the next six months from that." A lot of people see it, a lot of eyeballs are on it and that's credibility. But it doesn't usually translate into a huge spike in your client base or your people hiring you immediately.

It's just a part of the whole kind of portfolio of what you do. And so I think in the same way, and so people would think, well, if I'm going to put all that effort and put it over there and where are the clients, where is the money? And I think people do the same thing with digital. They're like, "Where is the money?" Even especially if they're making it their own, I put all this time in it and I had x number of views. I had 200 views total and nobody hired me. But they don't get that it's part of the layering of it and doing it over and over and over.

Where people come to find you as a source for that information. And that's when a lot of times you can have a snowball effect where people are coming back time and again, yeah.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

Hadley: Yeah. And I think often with things like that, I mean the whole instant gratification mentality, I was just having this conversation recently with the topic of showhouses too. Someone's not necessarily going to walk in your room and say, "I'm hiring you to do my six family homes." But you build your portfolio, you put it out there. I think the other key point when you talk about building kind of the self-publishing aspect of doing your Instagram or a Pinterest or TikTok or whatever you're doing socially to put yourself out there.

I would encourage people to ask themselves the same question I always ask when I get a lot of designer friends who will ask me for a recommendation for a publicist or do I need one, should I get one? And my question is always, "Well, what do you want to get out of it?" Before you hire someone, stop and think and even put into writing and ideally put that into your intro meeting and your contract. What do I want out of this? Do I just want to grow my audience? Do I want a really beautiful print cover? Do I want a book deal? Do I want a product line?

All those things, you might have a different technique PR wise for all those things. Just as maybe you have a different technique, if you just want to be a video vlogger then you know what, I'm going to say, get yourself a Ring light and really learn to do this stuff [crosstalk]. But if you want a book deal or you want a product line, maybe it's showing those behind the scenes and showing how your ideas come together. I think we might get into this topic later about the book world.

It's definitely one where you've had conversations with publishers now that they're starting to, as of the past few years, definitely very much look at what are people's social followings and engagements when they're thinking about can they sell books. So I think all these things, it makes sense to really sit down. If you want to be strategic about that to sit down and think about, what's my goal, what do I want to get out of it and then kind of go from there instead of just throwing anything at the wall and seeing what sticks.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

Tobi: Yeah, absolutely. So as far as this Instagram conversation goes, where are magazines now? What are they thinking about? I know there's always the question still of course of if I want something published, I shouldn't share it. And I mean that's a tiny little piece of this but are magazines looking at your Instagram to see, is that in the same way you said about the book to give you credibility or are they not, what's that story?

Hadley: Yeah, they're definitely not. I actually think it's kind of the opposite with magazines. I know at House Beautiful, we love to be able to be the one that's discovering someone. That's why when I was at House Beautiful I was lucky to get to oversee our Next Wave franchise. And that's something we're so proud of. And we actually, our favorite thing was when we'd find somebody, they're kind of on the cusp and the most rewarding when kind of maybe they have a couple of thousand followers. And then a year later they're on a TV show and on AD100 or doing whatever.

And you're kind of like, yeah, that was right. So definitely don't consider meeting that requirement. But what I will say is for magazines now, first of all I want to make sure I do address because I get that question a lot, the whole, don't share anything. I would say from my experience that's loosened. When I started at AD it was if there's a corner of a sofa somewhere, that's not going to get in. I think realistically designers have, I mean editors have to be realistic and understanding that Instagram is how designers get their name out there.

They can't expect them to hold everything especially with the timeline of print media and now there's so many things that are not monthly anymore. So I would just say, try to avoid the kind of sweeping view of the entire room. Maybe you can get a detail shot. And again kind of to the same idea of thinking strategically. Maybe it's okay, I just shot these four projects this year, there's one that I really want. I think that's going to give me cover material.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

And then maybe try to hold back from that one and the other ones, you can kind of think strategically about which ones might make sense for which audience the same way we do as editors and kind of go accordingly. As far as where magazines are now what they're looking for, I think frankly it's kind of just the ante has been upped in terms of, I think my experience at least is very much that just a beautiful room doesn't cut it. I mean we have for better or for worse, access to in the palm of our hand every day we can scroll and see hundreds of thousands of beautiful images.

So it's all the more important to have some sort of story, whether it's something that was interesting in the project, a hurdle that the designer overcame, a story that's interesting about the family. I think also if you look at each of your favorite magazines, and I could give you my own analysis. But I think it's kind of a nice exercise, look at that and see what you think each magazine kind of looks at for that story. There are definitely certain outlets that focus more on the homeowner and what was the story behind buying the house or moving in.

There are certain ones that are going to want to dig more into how did the renovation go or what was that like, what are the learnings? There are certain that are going to want to pick up on things you could replicate at home. So I think you can kind of use those patterns to formulate how you're pitching or how you're thinking of pitching.

Tobi: Yeah. So to that note because I agree the ante has been upped and there's fewer spots than there used to be. So it kind of can be discouraging I think to a lot of people working in this business. Because it's like, well, the absolute most elite projects ever are going to get shared and mine are not. So how should we turn that on its head? Because is it those little digital pieces? How do we think about being a good partner for magazines if we don't have the best work in the world? I mean it's good solid work, yeah.

Hadley: Totally and I think that's true. And I think the other thing that I want to be careful of how to say this but I think something that's really interesting

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

too is with digital and especially social media came a certain democratization which is great. Anyone's work can be out there, anyone can be doing. And as a result we're seeing, we as editors have so much more to choose from, it's insane. So again, you're right, the competition's even more there.

But also everyone's work is out there and there are plenty of people who maybe they do a really good practice but it's nothing revolutionary or particularly editorial. And that might not make sense on the cover of a magazine. But that might be something that, I mean I'm thinking probably a little less for your audience or maybe for some of them, a lot of the most successful kind of design bloggers or kind of design influencers. And their work isn't necessarily going to be on the cover of AD but it's what a lot of people want.

And so that can be spun into a product line, I've seen it, that can be spun into a book that's going to be probably a better seller than some people on AD100 who are more niche. So I think it's also thinking not just of that one outcome as meaning success or failure. But then I will say that, yeah, being more creative in what you pitch and how you do it, one of the stories that was the highest performing three when I was at House Beautiful. It was a designer friend of mine and I was scrolling on Instagram and saw a post that she did about, it's Tina Turner.

I don't know if anyone listening knows her but she had done this showhouse room and she was showing how she had these ugly closet doors and had upholstered them. And I think this might have been during the pandemic where I was like, "That's a great idea, let's do it." So I hopped on the phone with her, I did a quick interview and we turned it into this piece kind of about. And this was kind of the sweet spot because it was you can DIY this but she did it in a much more kind of upscale bespoke upholstered look.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

But hey, by the way, if you're in an ugly rental and you have builder grade doors you could do this at home. And that just went bonkers. I remember telling her that and she's like, "What? It never even occurred to me that that was a story." And I think the thing that is beautiful with digital is again, like I said, it doesn't need to be the full spread of the 15 room palatial home that. There can be just an interesting anecdote or learning or hey, there was this issue where we had this soffit and we came up with this really clever idea to hide it.

And maybe that's useful for someone, so you can get, and frankly a lot of times those are going to really resonate with people perhaps more than just the beautiful home.

Tobi: Yeah. That makes me want to ask you about the consumer today because I think you probably know a lot about the consumer from these conversations. I mean you know a lot about the designer too but I think as designers we feel a lot of times like the consumer is a mystery and there's so much always changing. What do you think, because obviously your ultimate audience is the people that are going to buy whatever magazine. And yeah, some of those were much higher end audiences.

But when you go to 10 million people, like you said, you're putting everybody, you're putting them asses in there. What do you think is different today about what the consumer is looking for? Are they hiring designers, are they not? Is it a combination? When they hire you do they just want parts and pieces and not the whole thing? Because we see all of this confusing evidence out there I think that we don't know what to do with sometimes.

Hadley: What I will say and I'm sorry in advance if this is maybe not the most satisfying answer.

Tobi: Truth is important actually, yes.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

Hadley: I do believe it's the most true is where we are with the internet right now we have this, and I will say it's a fallacy but the very least this idea of the infinite audience. So everyone's always feeling they can be reaching more people, they could be getting more press. When you're thinking about it like that, there is no 'the consumer.' There is no way of generalizing that. That can be everyone from someone who's living on a football field length yacht to someone who is buying this from their dorm room.

And when we're talking about that and we're looking at Instagram and TikTok where you can theoretically reach anyone, I think that just makes it more the important that you as a designer need to really kind of establish your brand, what you want, who you want to go after. And again that's that whole is it taking a long hard look and being like, "I have one look that I really like and I don't really iterate much, I'm not really interested in doing that. But if that one look is really good and I can spin that into something that might." There's room for that to be a success.

Or if it's, I don't actually really have an established look, I tend to do all different sorts of things depending on the client, then what you're really going for is you're going for high end clients who are creative and who have vision. And that might mean that it doesn't really matter to you to get hundreds of thousands of views on something as long as you have those core people. So those are two kind of hastily drawn examples. But I think basically the only kind of strategy you can have in the face of anyone could be finding me is who do I want to be found by?

And how do I want to be presenting myself as a kind of content creator and therefore, with the assumption that content creation for your audience is mostly kind of a means to an end of getting a client or getting success in design.

Tobi: I love that and I want to talk about that, it's a perfect segue into this idea of content creation. I think the bane of a lot of small business's existence is kind of like you were also saying, this infinite audience. It's the

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

same kind of story of shoulds, I should be doing all these things. I should be showing, I mean I hear it every day, I should be showing up more, I should be going live more often, I should be more consistent, I should be posting. But I think that content creation can feel very daunting to people, it's confusing, it feels hard. Magazines do it every day.

Hadley: And the rules are always changing.

Tobi: Right, the rules are changing, magazines do it every day, it's what you do, even though you had to shift to digital. But the consumer, not all designers are used to this. I feel like I've been doing it forever because I was an early adopter to a lot of things and I was a blogger and all the stuff. But what about content creation today?

Hadley: No, but you're right, and I mean I think it's crazy. That's a good reminder to your audience, remember, magazines are doing this and we're kind of busting our asses to do this to be honest and we usually have teams of people and that's our full-time job. So don't feel guilty. What I would say is frankly, to that point, if it's something you really want to do and invest in, hire someone to do it or at least get someone on your team trained to do it and delegate.

We've passed the point now where social media is a thing I can do in my spare time and especially if you really want to get stuff out of it then it's well worth the investment. The other thing I'll say though and I hope this doesn't come across as too smarmy. But I think it's worthwhile and even the context I was talking about, who is your valuable audience.

I saw this once and now I think it's probably gone viral on TikTok or something. But someone said something, "I'm struggling getting likes or views or something in my small business. And my latest post only is a small store, my latest post only got 50 likes." And I'm thinking about this and then I think, but wait, I have this tiny boutique shop, if 50 people walked into my

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

store I would be like, “Oh my God, best day ever, this is huge.” But I think sometimes that can be really good for contextualizing it too.

We don't all, first of all, remember, if you're a professional designer you're not making your living doing content creation. So great, it doesn't really matter if you have 5 million followers, that's not what you're getting paid for. You're getting paid to create work, and of course social media and digital media exist as these tools to spotlight you and to maybe help you get more work. But at the end of the day getting 500,000 views on a reel isn't really putting bread on your table, so to speak.

So I think remembering that as long as you're reaching an audience that's appreciating what you do, I think, and not only I think, but I think realistically we've seen a shift in the kind of influence or marketing category to this, which is the so-called micro influencers. Where you're like it's actually the people like the Kim Kardashians of the world have power when you're that big.

But often someone who has 20,000 super loyal fans who love them and are going to buy everything they put up is more appealing than someone with 7 million who most people are just scrolling by because they follow for a celebrity and they don't really feel that connection. So I think that's always important, who are you creating this for? What's the purpose?

And if you're meeting those goals then kind of the other numbers are arbitrary because again, we're living in this fake idea of there's no cap to the amount of views you can see on TikTok. I think TikTok has only perpetuated that because the algorithm is random so sometimes something will just blow up.

It can be something you don't expect and then all of a sudden it has half a billion views. And then something you put hours and hours into isn't going to hit. So I think you kind of have to let it roll off your back and just

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

remember that this is all a tool that's being added on to your business and to kind of take it as that.

Tobi: Yeah, that's really good advice. So in 2023 and moving forward, how important is it for designers to be published nationally or locally? How important is it for them to have a book? I mean I know it depends on their goals, but if their dreams are to have that top-level business where they are going to potentially have product lines or be known.

I hear people say all the time that I'm coaching also say I want to be the go-to person for X. Or the go-to person in Austin. Or the go-to person in whatever. And that sounds great, but it's also very vague. And I'm a little bit unsure of this answer because in 2009 when I had my first cover, which was House Beautiful, it was a major game changer. But we weren't looking at having all of the tools and Instagram and things at our disposal that we have now.

So how important is that stuff now? Is it more of just a personal goal and people enjoy having it? Is it critical to your business? What do you think about that?

Hadley: No. I mean I don't want to mince words, I still think having a cover of a major magazine, and from everyone I've heard who's subsequently had covers of House Beautiful it has been huge and amazing. Obviously everything is kind of diluted a little bit now because we consume so much media. But I still think that's huge and that's great and I think that's kind of a career crowning achievement to be on the cover of a major publication. So I totally understand people wanting to work towards that.

I think it's a matter more of just kind of seeing what else goes along with that and how else you can use your talents. I mean we could do a follow-up on book publishing, and I'm not the expert there but I know a little bit, and there are a lot of people who are. That's a tough game. I think a lot of people want to do that and get their name out there. That, to kind of

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

contradict what I was saying earlier, not contradict but I was saying, “Oh, magazines don’t care how many followers you have.” In the book world, that is kind of how you’re going to sell books.

Tobi: And the same with product lines too.

Hadley: Yeah. 99% of people are not going to make money with a book deal, but sometimes people want them basically to have a glorified really beautiful hardbound portfolio, essentially. Good for you if you want to do that. 90% of the time if you’re doing a book you’re going to have to fund part if not all of that up front. So that’s a whole other kind of game.

I definitely think regional is really, really interesting because I’ve heard so much from designers where it’s, okay, national media, that’s amazing. That earns you respect and kind of maybe opens doors and things. Really, if you want to get business, it’s regional. And I’ve heard that for years and I still hear it.

And I was just at dinner with a group of designers in Chicago who were talking about even taking out ad space in certain local magazines and how it totally paid dividends, it was a great idea. What I find really interesting about that now in the post Covid world is, I’ve made this argument a few times recently. I feel like right now in 2023 there’s almost no such thing as a local designer anymore.

I used to always say to people, “Oh, do you primarily work in Arkansas, or do you do projects all over?” And now I feel like even people who were squarely in the local camp, their clients might have a house in Florida and an apartment in Paris or whatever.

Tobi: Exactly.

Hadley: So even if you are based locally, you’re doing projects everywhere. So I actually think, although that complicates it, I do wonder if that opens up more opportunities too with, okay, local publications in those other regions.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

I was talking to a woman who was based in Chicago but then was expanding her practice to Arizona. And she's talking about, okay, then I think I need to become known in Arizona. So instead of focusing here, I'd like to have more press on my work in Arizona.

So maybe that's a way to think about it, kind of segmenting or adding those things to the mix as opposed to thinking, oh, now I'm in multiple cities, I need to go national or national only.

Tobi: Yeah, and how do we measure the success these days of being magazines? Is it still the same, like it's hard to measure? Digital is so much easier to measure.

Hadley: Oh yeah. I mean the great thing is, obviously, with print that's how it's always been, you can get circulation. But the good thing now is if you're on a cover, that story is going to go online too.

Tobi: Right.

Hadley: So I can tell you how many views it got. So that's really great and rewarding to know. But in terms of value for the designer, I think that's back on you. What does that mean? If you got 1 million views on that story but you didn't get a call from a new client, is that still a success to you?

I think that's kind of for the designer to determine. Because I think, really, when you look at so many, take for example, and I know we're talking about a different ballpark but I think you can apply the same thinking. You look at the huge celebrity covers of AD, I don't know that the Kardashian cover immediately resulted in Martin Lawrence Bullard having calls from all those readers who wanted to work with him, I think it's more about wanting to see it.

So, again, there are different measures of success. That's still by any means a success and a big kind of splash moment, which is great. But you think of just how are the different ways that things manifest, and I think

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

sometimes we get really frustrated, right? We're in a world where it's so easy to measure everything, you know, we can see how far away our delivery food is by the street.

Tobi: Exactly.

Hadley: So we have so much data that sometimes it's frustrating when you do something like this, like in a magazine or you're in a show house and there's no direct correlation of I put in this many hours and it paid off this. Sometimes you just have to say, okay, this is what return on investment means to me and it's not always going to be.

Frankly, we talk about this at the DLN a lot because we talk about the membership and what you get. And it's kind of like but it's hard to qualify because different people join for different reasons and you get certain things out of it. Like making a human connection or learning something or finding a new resource, or even kind of just developing conversations with people, that's not something you can really put a price tag on and that becomes hard with press too in the same way.

Tobi: Yeah. So let's talk about how your personal kind of, I don't know, focus I guess, has changed moving over to DLN. There's some things that you bring over from the magazine, there's editorial in the DLN, but talk to us about what's the difference of what you're doing now?

Hadley: Yeah, absolutely. So I will say, I talked earlier in this conversation so maybe this is a nice kind of full circle loop to come back to, but about my transition from AD Pro to house Beautiful and how that was really going from a niche audience to huge. And now I've kind of come back the opposite way to like hyper, hyper niche. And that at a time which I kind of referenced, when most lifestyle magazines are veering much more into lifestyle.

I think my kind of peanut gallery, media world commentary is that I think what happened, to give a kind of brief history of magazines, about 150, 125

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

years ago basically you had all of these newspapers that were usually segmented by regions. And then you had publishers who were thinking, oh, well we have this general thing that we send to people weekly or daily, but what if you really like golf? What if you really like beauty? Or back in the day, what if you're a woman?

So then you start to spin out the Golf Digest, Women's Day, all these special interest things. And that existed for about 100 years. And then with the rise of the internet came, again, the concept of the infinite audience. So all of the sudden you have something like if you were to go on Facebook or Twitter or any RSS feed you'd see a story like Kim Kardashian wore these jeans. You'd see it from Lucky magazine, from Elle, from Harper's Bizarre. Every single person is covering the same story and they're all kind of cannibalizing content. And everyone thinks that they can cover any topic.

So now I think we're actually moving a little bit away from that. And I see it a little bit in kind of the rise of things like Substack, like these smaller specialty newsletters where you're really like, I don't want to speak to – And as we were talking earlier, when your audience is huge it's hard to speak to your audience because one person might want something totally different than the other.

And so to bring that totally back around to what I'm doing at the DLN, I think that's been really rewarding is to have kind of come from this larger design world, always with the connection of the professional design community, but now saying, you know what? I've got this audience of like 500 people, and that's pretty small, but you can kind of serve them exactly what they want and it can be a little more personal.

I'm kind of relaunching our quarterly magazine, which will be coming out later this summer. And this whole idea that this doesn't have to be like a magazine, it shouldn't actually feel like a design magazine. But it's almost kind of like a newsletter meets magazine concept. So you're really tapping into the kind of community aspect here. And that's why my title is kind of

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

joint editorial and community engagement, because I think that is so much of what content is now, especially with social media.

Nothing's coming from this detached voice that's the omniscient narrator. You're really seeing stuff from people, you're developing a community. And that's what Substack newsletters kind of encourage, that's what social media sharing encourages. So I think just thinking about how we –

And I think there's also a part of it for me, frankly, that's like I don't want to be back in that game where I'm creating the same story as 15 other competitors. What can we create that's unique because it's about one of our members or it's a specific first person story, instead of just my one of the 500 takes that are cannibalizing the same story.

So it's a little bit of a different kind of attitude towards content and content existing in a larger realm, whether it's we do an event and we write something about that. Or we're having our summit in Mexico City later this year, so we'll be doing a lot of content around that to kind of hype it up, but with that special connection, that you know, this isn't just a random story about Mexico City. This is because we're going here and we're going to interact with this person and this place.

So it's kind of like giving the editorial a little bit more human connectivity is what I would say.

Tobi: Yeah, I like it. It's interesting. So, obviously, you can't, nor would I ever ask for you to share secrets, but in general what do you feel the sort of, I want to call it like temperature of the design industry these days? And what is it that designers are worried about, thinking about, excited about? What are you hearing all the time?

Because I know so many people listening, it can feel so isolated at times or like you're the only one. And I think it's always so great to hear like this group of some of the top designers, architects and landscapers in the world are all getting together, and they have so many things still in common.

[The Design You Podcast](#) with Tobi Fairley

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

They're all worried and thinking about the same thing. So what are those things these days?

Hadley: First of all, I'm so glad you asked that question because that's, honestly, the biggest reason I joined the DLN. That has been my continued experience, whether at AD or House Beautiful. Design can be really solitary, a lot of times people are running their own firms, they're kind of siloed. And you want to kind of be able to talk about these things.

We just have had a couple of events the past few weeks and I will say there are definitely a lot of things that everyone's talking about. Number one among those is employee retention and employee recruitment. I think hiring and retaining talent is the biggest thing on anyone's mind. And we're planning, I know for our programming, we're going to do some talks on things like staff sharing or different models for retaining employees. How you motivate people if you can't just be giving them huge raises. So I think that's a big, big question.

Another one, I think, is the future of just the workplace. Are we ever going to be back in person? Is remote work something we should be adopting for the future? We had someone speaking last week at our business forum who said, and I love it, she was really just kind of blunt about this. She said, "I really don't like remote work. I don't like it at all. I want my team in the office. But realistically, I had to bite the bullet and deal with it because if I wanted to get the best talent, I had to offer them remote work." So sometimes that is about compromise. I think, unfortunately, logistics, shipping, receiving and all that and the supply chain.

Tobi: Supply chain nightmares.

Hadley: They're still happening. But I think, knock on wood, one of the things that I think is nice is I know there's a little bit of trepidation around potential economic softening.

Tobi: Right.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

Hadley: But I think it really feels like the clients that are hiring high-end designers, they are probably –

Tobi: A little more insulated from that.

Hadley: They're going to be okay. And this is a long process, so all those things that boom, we saw during COVID, that's still kind of playing out. So I think, for the most part, it seems like people have work and they feel good about that.

The last thing I'll bring up because I feel like we can't even dive into it, we'd need like six more hours. People are talking about AI and how that impacts the design world and what that means. Whether it's just kind of using chat GPT to write proposals or something. Or it's, oh my God, is there a world in which people will be able to have a full-fledged kind of design proposal created by artificial intelligence?

We had a talk at our business forum last week with Fred Nicolaus from Business of Home. If anyone hasn't read it, I encourage you to read his piece on AI in the design world.

Tobi: I just read it, so good.

Hadley: Yeah. Basically, rest assured, the robots are not coming for your jobs, at least for a couple of years. They still can't really figure out measurements and stuff. But I think one of the things that was interesting that came out of that was, okay, and it kind of goes back to what I mentioned earlier in the conversation about the rise of digital for magazines.

Tobi: I was going to say it feels very much like that same thing.

Hadley: Right, but I think our conclusion was kind of, okay. Instead of feeling, oh my God, it's scary, I'm going to shut it out. Maybe try to learn

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

more about it. Embrace it, see what parts of it can – Because I think we tend to think in extremes like, oh, my God, a robot is going to do my plans.

But realistically, that's not really what it is now, but could it maybe help you source the exact carpet you need? Is there a way that you could harness chat GPT or artificial intelligence to be doing certain simple email replies or drafting certain things you need? So I think I just encourage people to kind of do a little digging into it and get to know it better. And then you'll maybe be less scared of it.

Tobi: Yeah, one of the things that's been on my mind, which is kind of aligned with me getting back into retail, which is mostly ecommerce and a tiny bit of boutique that I swore I would never do after closing my retail store 14 years ago. But it's so different now. I mean, even just the technology with Shopify and the internet.

Hadley: Oh my God, yeah.

Tobi: And you can easily integrate it into Instagram where they can buy right from there. Like one of the things that's been coming to my mind about AI is that even if a lot of people are able to create designs, they're pleased with the mid-level market, not the highest end, but like at the mid-level market, they still have to buy products. They still have to buy it somewhere.

So product design, product ecommerce and all of that is really a fascinating thing to think about like, what opportunities does this create for me? Which I think is fascinating to think about.

Hadley: Yeah, and I think even to add another layer onto that, it goes back to, I mean, I made a joke that I was kind of like, I don't think any talented designers should really be threatened. If anything, it's like bad, shoddy developers who are just trying to throw up a million rooms that maybe they could get an AI script to do. But realistically your talent as a designer and your vision and what you specifically bring.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

And to do another kind of harkening back moment, it does remind me a little bit when ecom was rising and some designers were kind of like, well, now my clients can just get everything online, so they don't need me. And I remember I said this straight up to a few designer friends, like, honestly, if you think that all you bring to your clients is an ability to put a sofa in the cart, then you need to rethink your strategy. Because then you're just a glorified personal shopper. And if that's all you're doing, frankly, maybe you shouldn't have those clients.

So I think it's also a time to, again, reevaluate like what I bring is this unique perspective. And client service, first of all, that's a huge one. I mean, that can't really be outsourced to the robots just yet. So I think, really, really kind of taking ownership of what you bring to the table that's beyond the kind of simple logistics and then maybe those simple logistics can be outsourced.

Tobi: And don't you think this also circles back to the idea of showing up in the online space and creating content? Because so many designers have, and I understand why, but have hidden behind their work in a lot of ways and try to let the photos speak for themselves or the work speak for itself. And I think it's going to be so much more about you and your personality and your point of view and you on video.

And I see people not wanting to be on video, not feeling comfortable with that. They don't understand that it gets easier the more reps you do. But I think, to your point, if you're competing with AI and it's like a digital room that looks like it's real and installed next to yours, that could look like apples to apples.

But when you show up and you're talking and you're talking about the process, and you're showing the process, and you're connecting with the humans on the other side, that is, I mean, at least for up a period. Yes, there will be an AI-like person that looks like a real person at some point in the future, I'm sure. But in the short run for so many of us, I think it's about

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

connecting with our clients and our audience and being willing to be seen and showing up, I personally think.

Hadley: Oh, absolutely. No, I couldn't agree more. I think that's so true. And just kind of, you know, that goes back to everything we were saying about Instagram and showing behind the scenes. Even if, okay, if you can't show the beautiful image that you want to hold for the cover, what can you be showing? And what can kind of round out your version?

In fact, frankly, I think it's more of an opportunity. You have to get a little more creative and you can kind of show other sides of you and what you can do. And who knows, maybe that leads to something else. Maybe there's something. If you were only showing your beautifully composed room shots, that wouldn't have caught someone's eye. But you end up showing a scheme for something and it catches the eye of a product designer who wants to collaborate and they initially didn't see you in that light.

Tobi: Exactly. A TV show, a product designer, a magazine that's going to do a video component of something. Yeah, there's so many things that you're just at least creating the opportunity for it to manifest into something if you're willing to show up and be seen. Yeah, I agree.

Hadley: Absolutely.

Tobi: This was so fun. I loved it. I mean, gosh, like you said, we just scratched the whole surface.

Hadley: I know, I feel like we could do this for hours.

Tobi: We could take any one of these and we could go down every individual rabbit hole. So you'll have to come back.

Hadley: For sure.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

Tobi: I did one episode on AI, but definitely there's many AI episodes in the future because we have no idea where it's headed.

Hadley: I know.

Tobi: And we can only guess.

Hadley: Also it's always changing, right?

Tobi: Yes.

Hadley: So you can do an episode this week, and then in three weeks there's totally new technology. So you want an update.

Tobi: Yeah. Like who do you turn to to get the latest on industry trends or AI or technology? What sources are you looking to for that information?

Hadley: I mean, I kind of look at everything. I do love Business Of Home, and we saw that piece there. But I honestly think so much of, especially when you're talking about AI, and frankly especially the past few years as design has, I think design has become more of a focus and the home has become more of a focus that it's almost like not even always the design.

I mean, I read The New York Times, I read The Washington Post. I kind of am always on Twitter, following certain people that I like. I see stuff on Instagram, obviously. I think it's kind of casting a wider net now more than ever before.

Tobi: Yeah, agree.

Hadley: And you can see things. I was just emailing back and forth with Peter Salak this morning about two different stories in the times that were kind of design related. But it's not a design magazine, they were larger kinds of general interest news pieces, but you can find that information kind of anywhere.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

And I think as a designer, it's also good and it behooves you, for your client relationships and for your own inspiration, to kind of be looking to the wider world and seeing how we fit into that.

Tobi: Yeah, and that's what's so great about an organization like DLN, because you also have other people to talk to about it. And you're also all looking at different sources and sharing information and bringing it together. Because it's impossible to have your finger on everything. It's impossible to read everything and we don't have time, there's information overload.

So that is one of the things I love most about it. And I've been in the DLN for a long time. I mean, I've probably been in since right after I had my House Beautiful cover, so like 09 or something.

Hadley: Wow.

Tobi: Yeah, it's been a long time. But being a little bit not in New York City or whatever, I'm not always like right at all the other events that you have. But I'm finally, as you may know, just went through the training to be in a group.

Hadley: A forum, oh, awesome. That's great.

Tobi: And so I'm really looking forward to that and it's really fun to see several of the people in my forum are people that I know from all over the country. But I think it's just anytime that we can put ourselves back in the room with other people doing top level things we're going to up our game, we're going to get ourselves thinking differently.

Hadley: Exactly.

Tobi: And so I appreciate y'all for doing all the work you're doing. I know you're playing a role in a lot of that, deciding what conversations are happening.

Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

Hadley: Exactly. I mean, you've been doing that for a while in this way, so I'm happy to be here and kind of continue that with you, too.

Tobi: So fun. Well, if people want to talk to you, like what is that you want them to know? More about the DLN? Just talk to you in general, catch you on Instagram? What are the things?

Hadley: Catch me on Instagram if you want to just kind of like see where I am at any given moment or what I'm up to. It's just Hadley Keller. But if you want to talk, I always joke that I'm a very easy person to find. My email is Hadley@DesignLeadershipNetwork.org. If you Google me, you can find it. I don't make it difficult.

But please reach out. I'd love to hear from you. And yeah, if you have questions about the DLN, about press in general, about pitching, I'm always happy to help.

Tobi: So good, thank you. Well, I love this. I knew I would. Thank you for your time. I will have you back.

Hadley: Thank you.

Tobi: I look forward to seeing you in person, hopefully, sometime soon.

Hadley: Yes.

Tobi: And yeah, thanks so much. It was awesome.

Hadley: Thank you, take care. Bye.

Okay, friends, I hope you loved that. I know you did. I know you were probably writing stuff down. I know you're going to be pinging Hadley to say "What about this? What do you think about this?" And she absolutely just invited you to do that, so find her on Instagram, @HadleyKeller.

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Ep #273: Reaching New Audiences Through Design Content with Hadley Keller

Or if you're interested to know more about the Design Leadership Network, you can email her. I know she will be thrilled to tell you all about the work she is doing there, what the network does, who it serves, why it's so amazing. So please reach out to her. We are so excited to be able to share her wisdom and to share the benefits of the DLN with you on the show. So check her out.

And I will be back next week. And I hate to promise, because sometimes my plans change, but I do believe that next week is going to be the week that I finally go deeper in talking to you about my ecommerce shop and what an undertaking that's been and what it's been like and what I learned and all the things.

So that's the plan for now. And you'll find out when you get back here a week from today if that's still the plan. But I absolutely think it's going to be, so I'll see you the same time next week with another great episode of *The Design You Podcast*. Bye for now.

Thanks for listening to *The Design You Podcast*, and if you're an interior designer or creative looking to uplevel your business, I have something for you. It's my Build a Better Business guide, because burnout, rampant undercharging and the feast and famine cycle are epidemic in the design industry. And there's a better way to run your business.

So head to tobifairley.com/betterbusiness and get my manifesto and guide that will have you on your way to a business with more ease, more joy and more money. That's tobifairley.com/betterbusiness.