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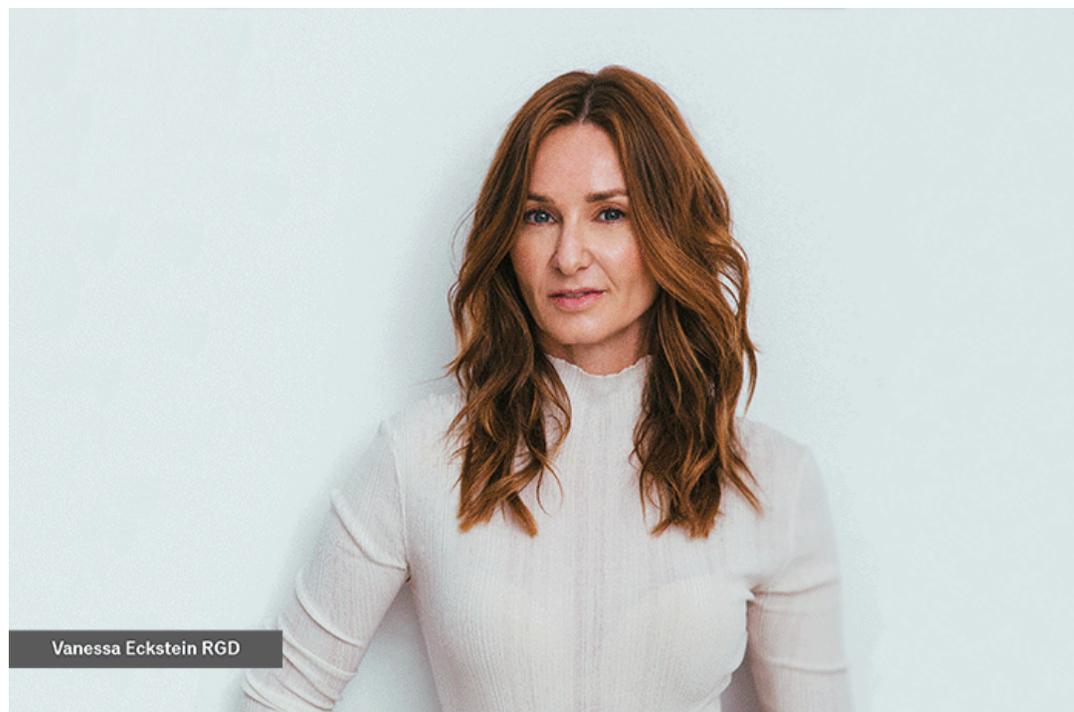
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Meet three female firm owners carving their own paths in the design industry



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The theme of International Women's Day 2021 is “choose to challenge.” In honour of this theme, we asked firm owners Vanessa Eckstein, Kim Pickett and Elana Rudick to share their insights on challenging expectations, building businesses and creating a space for themselves

within the design industry.

Vanessa Eckstein RGD

Founder & Creative Director at **Blok Design** in Toronto

Known for her passion for taking on initiatives that blend cultural awareness, humanity and a love of art to advance society and business alike, Vanessa's experiences living and working in Buenos Aires, LA, New York, Mexico City and Toronto, have given Blok a unique international perspective that has been recognized and awarded around the world.



1. How did you start your firm?

I started blok a long time ago at a very young age, full of hope and with the simple intention of creating a space where we could collaborate with creatives in diverse fields to challenge, shift and expand our understanding of the world through the projects we worked on. This seems very idealistic, but design was siloed and having a political view and standing for social issues was actually challenging the societal narratives of the time. My passion has always been to cross boundaries and expand values by design, while highlighting, at the core, our own humanity.

When I opened blok, there were almost no women running design studios on their own. Yet, I was surrounded by deep thinkers and a full force of inspirational women from the Arts to Humanities to Literature and Social Activism which made me believe that carving my own path was actually possible.

2. Women are still outnumbered by men in senior positions. What does it mean to you to be a woman in a senior leadership role in the design industry?

I see my role more as a free-spirited creative thinker that will always explore, experiment and question all existing preconceptions. As women we inevitably bring many different ways and experiences as to how we encounter the world, but I have never wanted to be defined narrowly as a person or even within the work I do. This openness has helped me reframe and reshape myself and the studio consistently. That is where my passion lies.

3. Can you share any advice for women interested in starting their own firm?

Opening a studio comes with many learnings and many tonalities. The commitment has to be wholehearted and it is up to each one of us to

carve the space we want to live in. Expanding the tangible, the intangible and the magic of our creative souls is a daily intention. In my case, the essence that inspires me. Design is not something we do, but who we are. This is the filter by which we feel and see the world. One that is constant movement and ready for any and all challenges. So for those with the calling to start your own...Leap, and in that leap, go far.

Kim Pickett

Principal and Creative Director at KIMBO Design Inc. in Vancouver

She's a big city girl who helps her clients share their visual stories. Meet risk-taker, snowboarder and Creative Director Kim of KIMBO Design Inc., an award-winning creative agency. She's a conceptual and strategic thinker who produces compelling, innovative campaigns executed with a clean and elegant signature style.



1. How did you start your firm?

I started KIMBO Design as a freelance operation back in 2001. Knowing the nature of my industry, I knew that being an entrepreneur was the best way to ensure I would work on projects that I'd be passionate about. With only a couple thousand dollars and being new to BC at the time, it was tough at first. But over time I managed to grow my client base and reputation enough to turn KIMBO into a full-service creative agency.

2. What does it mean to you to be a woman in a senior leadership role in the design industry?

It's not easy but I think the culture (at least in the design industry in Canada) has slowly been changing for the better over the past couple of decades. The most important advice I can offer is that you position yourself as a professional and try to overcome prejudices by showing your knowledge, skills and talent. Prove that you are not only as good as your male counterparts, but that you're able to offer a fresh perspective they can't provide.

3. Can you share any advice for women interested in starting a firm?

Starting your own firm may be tough and scary at first, but the reward of building a business around your own vision is definitely worth it. Focus on what you are passionate about and what you're good at and expand on that. Remember, opportunities present themselves all the time, but you must work hard to seize them. More importantly, by becoming a

woman in a leadership position yourself, you make a positive impact on changing the culture over time and bringing gender equality to senior leadership positions in the professional world.

Elana Rudick RGD

Founder and Creative Director at Design Is Yummy in Montreal

Elana is Founder and Creative Director of an award-winning studio that specializes in crafting thoughtful and engaging designs. She is passionate about providing her clients design solutions that will cohesively communicate their brand. With a firm belief that the “why” is more important than the “what”, Elana has tackled diverse projects for clients in the retail, cultural, pharmaceutical, educational, not-for-profit and corporate spaces.



1. How did you start your firm?

I founded my studio in 2009 from my apartment in Montreal. When my grandfather passed away, he left each of his grandchildren a little money with instructions to “do something he’d be proud of” with it. My grandfather was an entrepreneur, so I figured he’d be proud if I used the money to start my own business. With his gift, I was able to buy my first iMac.

For the first year, I made connections, designed whatever came my way and ate a lot of ramen noodles. I met clients in a local coffee shop that I referred to as “my boardroom”. I was confronted with doubt from those around me wondering what I was doing “drawing all day” and why I would turn down the security of a good pay check. In truth, as much uncertainty as I felt at times, the unknown was much more exciting than any of the previous design jobs I’d held where I didn’t feel 100% passionate about the work.

I learned bookkeeping skills, the art of collecting on invoices and how to manage cashflow. I also learned how to sell my services and communicate my value as a designer to non-designers. Shortly after surviving my first year of business, I started dating my now husband (who’s also an entrepreneur). He looked at me over dinner one night and said, “You’re going to have your own studio.” It was one thing to think about my dreams, but it was another entirely to have someone else believe in me and understand what I was working towards. That outside encouragement gave me the push I needed to take my business to the next level.

Design Is Yummy has since grown into an award-winning studio comprised of diverse, talented creative professionals and I couldn’t be

prouder. Don't get me wrong, it's not all cupcakes and gummy bears. There's been a huge learning curve as I shifted my role from a one-woman-show to studio owner over the last 8 years. Being an entrepreneur is a humbling process. You're constantly having to adapt, learn new skills and check your ego.

2. What does it mean to you to be a woman in a senior leadership role in the design industry?

Honestly, I had a hard time answering this question. In my day-to-day I don't feel outnumbered. Being in a leadership position as a woman has never been something I've focused on. Starting my own studio as a woman in my 20s, I definitely came across my fair share of "boys clubs" and gender bias. That said, I've never been shy to walk out of a meeting or turn down work if I felt myself or my staff was being mistreated in any way. We've worked hard to build a reputation over time that now affords us the luxury of turning down work that doesn't align with our core values.

The creative leaders I've come across over the years have been inherently open-minded. As a female studio owner, I've experienced much more pushback from outside the creative community than within it.

3. Can you share any advice for women interested in starting their own firm?

Starting anything from the ground up is hard work. Regardless of gender, my advice is:

- Make a plan and don't be afraid to ask for help. Talk to people around you who have started a business (any business). Learn from them.
- Surround yourself with positive people who have your back. Find strong communities (like RGD) with people who have been where you are/want to go.
- Learn from your mistakes, because you will inevitably make lots of them. Grow from them and move on.

A sidebar for people with tiny humans:

Growing a business is a challenge and balancing that along with the mom-guilt factor is tough. Being a mom has also helped me tremendously as a woman in the workplace. As a parent of two toddlers, I've learned just how precious a commodity time is. I've learned to slow down, listen more and stay calm in the face of adversity (or when carrots are being thrown at your head during a work call).

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