

Justin Rucker



Education: BFA. illustration, BYU 1999

Job Position in 2006: Working in New York City for Shannon Associates

Family: Married, three children

Questions and Comments:

What is your current role and position?

Currently, I represent commercial illustrators. I negotiate contracts ranging from a small editorial piece in a magazine to big advertising jobs. I work with children's picture books in particular, so we are constantly in search of talented artists that we could pitch to our existing clients. I work on client relations, which includes keeping our existing clients happy. I also market, manage projects, and do online business.

Websites: http://www.shannonassociates.com/industry/industry_interview1.cfm

<http://www.shannonassociates.com/index.cfm>

<http://www.kidshannon.com/home.cfm>

When you came to BYU, what did you study?

In 1991, I started my freshman semester at BYU. Then I left for two years to go on a mission to Budapest, Hungary. After my mission, I started to move toward a major in education to become a teacher but realized it wasn't quite right for me. I started looking for other options and ran into some people in the design program of the Visual Arts Department. When I realized what they were studying, I knew that design was exactly what I wanted to do. I applied to be a part of the design program focusing on illustration and, luckily, got in. When I did my internship, I decided I really enjoyed the business side of illustration versus doing my own illustrations. Business was a great match for me because I enjoy working with people, and in business you have to be good at working with people, especially clients.

How did you get into this situation?

When I was studying at BYU, I knew it couldn't be as easy as, "you can draw well, let's throw you money," so I knew I needed to do an internship. There was only one business class I could take in school, but to be a full-time freelance artist you have to consider yourself as a small business owner and make decisions accordingly. People who treat it as a business are successful, while people who just draw a pretty picture and think people will simply flock to them soon realize it doesn't work that way. What I realized is that I had to support a family, and I wanted to make sure that what I chose to do was successful for my family. The year before I graduated, a fellow student had done an internship with an artists' agent in New York. I knew if I did an internship with an agent I would learn skills to help me as an illustrator, so my goal was to find an

agency that was successful. The agent happened to come again the following year to interview personally for another intern. I wanted the position and prepared myself for the interview. I was lucky enough to be chosen and fulfilled the six-week internship. I really tried to listen and make the most of a wonderful six weeks in New York. I ended up coming back to New York after graduation and have been working for the same company ever since.

Was this another BYU student that had an internship the year before?

Yes, she paved the way for my current boss to have any relationship with BYU. They found her hard working and honest. It's a small market we work in, so there is a lot of personal business information about the artists that must be kept confidential. My boss valued that this girl was trustworthy. Then the next three years after that we had interns from BYU.

What advice would you give young visual artists?

Consider your work as a business; you have to put just as much effort into the business side as you are placing on what you're creating. You need to find someone you trust that has a business sense to help you. When you start working, realize you are competing with the best in the business right away. There is a steep learning curve, and you have to realize that you aren't privileged to the same types of contracts, jobs, pay, and fee that those that have been doing this for years are privileged to receive. You kind of have to make your mark in the industry you've selected before you can expect those perks. Work hard and be patient and it will come. Keep quality as a goal, and when you say you are going to do something, follow through as best you can.

How would you advise young illustrators that deal with content issues?

Every person has their own level of what they can and cannot do. We turn away a great deal of work based on content. The Lord will bless you if you take a stand for whatever it is that you believe, and he'll direct you to something else. If you find you're hitting undesirable content more often than not, you either need to find a different part of the market that will accommodate what you are doing or find something else to do. I think that sounds pretty harsh, but it is reality if you want to feel good about what you're doing.

What would you say most young artists don't understand artistically or technically?

Artistically, I can tell a student portfolio right when I see it. I see hundreds of portfolios, but I can always tell a student portfolio right away because of its lack of training. Time and understanding of the market teaches you a lot of things. When you are creating portfolio pieces because someone is paying you, you step up to the plate. It takes time to build enough portfolio pieces to look like you are an established artist.

It is important to have the confidence that you portray in your portfolio because directors will only buy what they are confident about. I constantly try to encourage artists to put themselves in the art director's point of view: they are putting their job on the line to hire you for this project; if you fail to follow through, they are going to be in serious trouble. They are going to research you; they are going to find everything they can about you. They are going to look through and find your worst piece and be concerned that they get that piece versus your best piece. For example, in the children's market, they want to see multiple pieces where you can handle a character and take it through a picture book story. They like to see if you can show that you've done some similar type work to the project they will be working on. With every job, the directors are on the line even more. It's very tough. You have to have a passion for it.

What advice would you have for someone trying to break into the artistic side of illustration?

It takes a lot of hard work. Keep drawing and try very hard to find a way in. It's tough to get appointments with people anymore. We're very lucky that we've tried very hard to maintain our client relationships. It is a huge job to keep yourself in front of clients. Try to find someone who will give you honest feedback. Take that honest feedback and try to apply it to what you are doing. I don't think we stress market research enough. Research what your target audience or age group is doing because it's just as specific as any type of advertising piece. You have to market. You have to think, if this is a picture book what would be the age group for the picture book. Are you trying to do toddler imagery, or imagery for teens or young adults, or is

this for an eighteen and older market? Each one of these levels is a whole industry unto itself, and if you can't understand the industry, you can't be expected to be successful, just like anything else.

How would a senior artist in college, with no publications, get an appointment with you?

Our Website describes what to do; you can send four images, and we'll take a look at them. We get hundreds of emails a week. If you would like a portfolio review, we offer one of our agents to review your portfolio. It's for a fee, but if you want to get an honest review, it's a good source.

What emails catch your attention?

Something that's different, you can tell there is skill involved and that they care about what they are doing. You have to have a Website, and it needs to be easy to navigate.

How important is it to have a personal Website?

It's huge! We live in such a digital age. Being in a visual field, you must be able to show your work visually. An updated Website is the perfect way to show that. It is very important to express your personality through your portfolio, but also remember to look professional. Nobody wants to hire someone who looks like they are fourteen years old. Clients don't want to hire anyone that doesn't look like they know what they're doing.

What are the pros and cons of your BYU education?

I had a fantastic experience at BYU. The most important part of my education was the spiritual aspect along with the knowledge that I was entering to learn and go forth to do something bigger. It's not necessarily working to just make money but that each of us needs to have a higher understanding of what we are here on the earth to do. Being able to study in a place where the prophet would come, along with others, and bear testimony at the devotionals was a wonderful experience. I think my professors did an excellent job. They arranged trips to New York and California to see different aspects of illustration. Looking back now, I wish they would have been even more critical and a bit harsher during critiques. I do wish there were more business classes because I think that a few of them were pretty right, but we didn't believe them at the time. As a student you think that the world is yours and that you're going to conquer it, so it didn't matter what they said. In reality, a very small percent will actually do something with illustration because it's such a tough profession at which to be successful. You really have to love illustration in order to make it. It needs to be something that you can't NOT do, something that if you stopped doing it, you would break.

Do you represent painters also?

The company I work for is more on the commercial end of illustration. We do have computer artists, painters, and photographers. We branch out quite a bit, but we don't really deal with "fine art" on a regular basis.

What would you suggest as far as trying to help others progress in this business or any type of business?

As far as industry standards are concerned, do research on your market. For example, if you are involved in picture books and you don't know who the last ten Caldecott winners were, get on the ball and do your research. You can go to the graphic artist guild; it has plenty of resources you can look at. Subscribe to the magazines that tell you what is cutting edge in your industry, and continue to keep your eyes and ears open. Involve yourself in a group that will get together and honestly critique each other's work. If you aren't getting honest feedback, and everyone's just praising you, watch your back—there's something wrong. I cannot tell you how many artists come to me and say, "My parents, neighbors, and friends all like it." I'm here to tell you a majority of the time that's great, but it doesn't measure up. Read your scriptures and stay close to the Spirit, and you will be guided to what you are meant to do.

How has being an active member of the Church affected your work?

My Church membership absolutely affects my work. For the better, I hope. There is always a need for people who will deal honestly in the world. I feel at church I am encouraged to be the best employee I can. It

has always been something that my parents told me, that if you put the Lord first, he will take care of you. When you are successful at doing that first, everything else falls into place; it always does. Currently, I'm working in a bishopric, and it is a pretty constant job, but that usually is the case with any type of service for the Lord. I think everyone that serves in the Church deals with some issues; you've got to be in the world but not of the world.