

Stefan Bucher: sailing through Cape Town

 By [Herman Manson](#)

25 Feb 2010

[Stefan Bucher](#), author, graphic designer and the man behind the hugely popular online animation series [Daily Monster](#), is a speaker at the Design Indaba conference this year. Here he talks with Bizcommunity.com about the advantages of staying independent, working with big agencies, and the many possible monsters lurking behind design awards. [[view twitterfall](#)]

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Some of Bucher's monsters were featured in the 100 Days of Monsters. His other published work includes *The Graphic Eye - Photographs By Graphic Designers From Around The Globe* and *All Access - The Making of Thirty Extraordinary Graphic Designers*. He also runs his own studio, [344 Design](#), with past clients including Atlantic Records, the *New York Times* and *STEP inside* design magazine.

Bizcommunity: In South Africa we have lots of small, very creative shops, trying to compete with the big guns of the agency world. There is a lot of passion and skill but surely these designers must sometimes wonder why they keep on fighting for their 'independence' when really they can join an agency and still do pretty good stuff for a nice cheque every month. Are there any advantages for a graphic designer in doing their own thing? And for client?

Stefan Bucher: Working by yourself, or as a small team, definitely has its challenges, one of them being sharply reduced income when compared to a big agency job. But those are two separate things. You can run a giant shipyard and make tons of money, or you can take your own ship out to see and look for new lands. You might find one and strike it rich, but even if you don't - you get to go sailing.

Both of those options are perfectly excellent ways of spending your life. One isn't better than the other, but it may better suit your personality. In my case, I love setting my own course, finding interesting things to do that can be very different from day to day or year to year. I get to choose who my clients are, I get to generate my own projects, and I get to visit you in Cape Town to talk about it.

Beyond that, I don't think there is a strict dividing line. Big clients need the operational security of a larger design firm or ad agency. Everything can't depend on one person all the time. There has to be a backup. But I do a lot of design and illustration work for ad agencies on behalf of their big clients, and I love it. Ad agencies are pros, both at dealing with creatives and at getting work approved and produced at that scale. And they love working with me, because I bring an outsider's perspective, combined with the speed, care, and intricacy of a dedicated obsessive-compulsive Prussian. They make me look great, I make them look great, and together we make the client look great.

It's all fluid now anyway. It doesn't really matter where you work. Analyse how you work best. How much flexibility do you

enjoy? How much security do you need? As long as you've set up a process for yourself that allows you to get the maximum amount of work done, and you're enjoying your days, you're doing it right.

Biz: What do you tell graphic designers about community?

Bucher: Community = good! That's the gist of it. But when I start talking about it, there's a half hour... gone! You gotta talk to your peers. You gotta talk to your elders. And if you lucked into a bit of usable knowledge, pass it on! It's good for the soul.

Biz: You have won loads of awards. I know they give one profile and it's always great to receive acknowledgement from your peers. But I'm wondering about the bullshit factor. Is there a monster in there somewhere?

Bucher: Oh, I'm sure there are many Monsters in there. I've won lots of awards, but I also scratched out on many, many more. You'd just never know it unless I tell you. More importantly, though, I've judged lots of shows, which taught me about what wins and what doesn't.

One thing I can tell you is that I've yet to see a jury with an agenda, particularly one geared to exclude. All the juries I've been part of approached the judging with a sincere desire to shine a light on truly outstanding work.

Sometimes you get a jury where everybody gets along; we all have a similar sense of what's smart, funny, and beautiful, and we put together an amazing show. Other times you just don't see things the same way, and you end up invalidating each other's votes.

This happened to me last year. Anything I loved, another judge just hated, and vice versa. It was ridiculous. This was a three-person jury, and we judged in one pass. The stuff with the most votes got in; the rest was out. No chance to discuss or have a runoff election. It was terrible, because the only work that went into the show was the stuff where everybody said "Hmm. Neat. OK, sure. It's got my vote." And all that stuff was undeniably nice, always beautifully produced, and absolutely deserved to be in the show. But the more avant-garde work never had a chance, because as much as we all felt a real responsibility to put together an excellent show, we just couldn't agree on what that would be.

In summation, here's my rule of thumb:

If your work didn't get in a show, it was obviously way too gutsy and forward-thinking to make it in. The stupid judges just didn't get your greatness, and award shows are meaningless anyway.

If you did get in, award shows are a great barometer of where design is going, and the judges were right to elevate your work as an excellent example of what's next!

Biz: How does interactivity - and I'm not only talking online - challenge you as a designer?

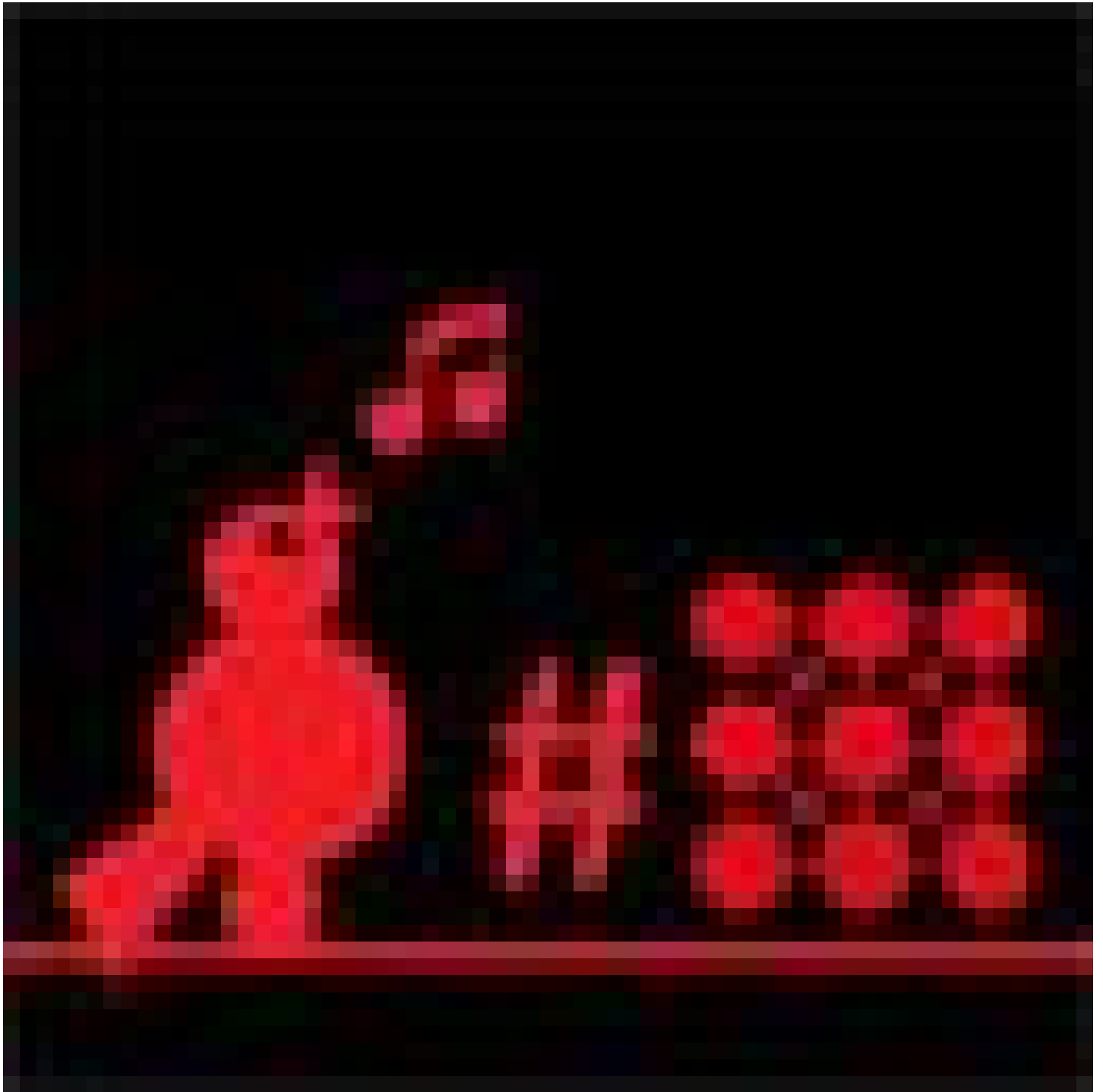
Bucher: Well... on a very basic level I just try to make what I do comprehensible to others. That's a lot easier in formats that have well-established conventions to play with, and are physically static, like a book. I wish I had greater facility producing things for the online realm, but there, too, it's about making things comprehensible and functional for an audience. How do you get people to a desired destination in a way that's fun and interesting? I think it's that simple, but I may be completely wrong.

Biz: What do you think you will take home from your trip to South Africa? And what would you like to make to your South African audience to take from you when they head back to home and work after the Indaba?

Bucher: What will I take home from my trip? I'm happy to say that I have no idea yet, but I'm sure my horizon will be bigger because of it. What will people in the audience take with them from my talk? I hope first and foremost that they'll have fun and get to laugh. If I can give them a little look at things through my eyes on top of that - that would make me

happy.

•[Stefan Bucher](#) is speaking at the Design Indaba conference at 2.10pm this afternoon, Thursday, 25 February 2010. Follow him on Twitter at [@monster344](#).



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ABOUT HERMAN MANSON

Herman Manson is a freelance business journalist and media commentator who helped Bizcommunity.com cover Design Indaba 2010. He blogs at <http://www.marklives.com> and his writing has appeared in newspapers and magazines locally and abroad in titles as diverse as *AdVantage*, *Business 2.0*, the *Mail & Guardian*, *Men's Health*, *Computer World* and *African Communications*. He co-founded *Brand* magazine. Follow him on Twitter at [@marklives](#).

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