

# CAFFEINE

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## Building a community, brunch by brunch

Website builder Rocketspark has been building a community of graphic designers, including vision-impaired creative designer Laura Feavearyear who says getting to know people in the FMCG industry chain has helped her get more work.



EDITOR

Fiona Rotherham



Creative Jam founder Laura Feavearyear

When Laura Feavearyear was 15 she and a bunch of her school friends applied for a job at the Albany Pak'NSave supermarket. During the interview process she says they all got asked the same questions except for her: she got asked an extra question on how her disability would affect her working.

Feavearyear, now the owner and creative director at Creative Jam, was born with bilateral coloboma, a condition that affects both her eyes.

Anticipating the question from her prospective employer she had practised her response at home with her parents: "I'm visually impaired, I can't drive but I'm willing to work and I'm a keen learner."

She didn't get the job and was told there was nothing she could do in the store. "I was gutted," she says.

But 25 years later she is working with supermarkets – with Pak'NSave, New World, Countdown, Coles, Woolworths, Aldi, Redmart, you name it. She's specialised in FMCG (Fast moving consumer goods) retail packaging design and branding and has been involved in lots of products on shop shelves including the likes of beauty brand [Dose & Co](#) and [Dr Feelgood](#) frozen pops.

After studying design, she again struggled with finding employment due to her visual impairment so instead started her own business. Her first big client was [Oob Organic](#) and then Dr Feelgood and those brands gave her the profile she needed to get a job. After the birth of her son, she decided to go out on her own full-time and focus on the retail packaging niche.

"Eventually I got a portfolio that would speak for itself, that no-one would see me with an eye condition, they would just see the beautiful work I was creating."

She set about becoming a master in her niche, visiting so many supermarkets that her husband now only wants to do online shopping, she says.

"I got to know suppliers, I got to know food techs, I got to know the industry. I started going to events that had nothing to do with design but a lot to do with FMCG because I knew if I was going to become a master at something I had to do more than just doing design," Feavearyear says.

Now when people ask what she does, she no longer says 'I'm a designer'. Rather she says "I'm a creative specialist for the FMCG industry."

Feavearyear's inspiring business journey was part of a Brunch by the Bay event held this week in Auckland, aimed at building a community for graphic designers.

It's the third such event organised this year by Cambridge-based website builder [Rocketspark](#) which is purposefully trying to build a community for its clients and others that will help them in their businesses.

It not only helps them – Rocketspark has also benefited from new people attending that have ended up signing up as subscribers to its website building platform although that wasn't the original aim, says Rocketspark CEO Grant Johnson.



Rocketspark co-founder and CEO Grant Johnson

## **The gap**

Rocketspark started out in a student flat in Hamilton in 2009.

Its four founders - brothers Jeremy and Grant Johnson and their mates and fellow University of Waikato graduates Richard King and Lee Reichardt – saw a gap to create a platform that enabled websites to be built more easily and cost-effectively for small-to-medium-sized businesses (SMEs).

“The opportunity was to make something that was super easy to use and when people needed help to make it easy for them to get in touch,” says the CEO.

Its focus has shifted from building websites itself to providing a subscription as a service (SaaS) model for graphic designers to use the platform to do so. The company now employs 25 people, has clients in 25 countries, and has revenue in the millions of dollars from thousands of users (as a private bootstrapped company it doesn't reveal financial figures).

The vast majority of designers using the platform are women with young children who can be quite isolated in their business journey. Often they have the design chops, but lack knowledge about the

business side – how to deal with tricky clients, how to do quotes and proposals, how to make a profit, Johnson says.

These were all things the Rocketspark founders had also grappled with when they set up their own business until they managed to get their processes right which “put us more in control”, he says.

It runs a business academy course for designers to learn how to solve some of those issues but Johnson says post the Covid lockdowns, there was an increasing appetite from the designers to get out of their homes, make connections and hear from people just a bit further down the road of running similar businesses.

“Businesswise they are competitors but there’s enough work to around for all of them and they have an ability to help each other and share stories,” Johnson says.

### **Making it happen**

Rocketspark’s first couple of events, titled Process, didn’t really fire as it had hoped because many of their designers with children struggled to be able to attend at night.

It morphed the idea this year into the daytime Brunch by the Bay events, first trialled in Johnson’s home town of Papamoa in the Bay of Plenty in April. A further one was held in Christchurch in September and then one in Auckland this week, that were tweaked along the way with what worked and what didn’t.

Attendees pay \$40 to \$50 per ticket to the events which also have sponsors to help defray expenses and Rocketspark picks up the rest of the tab. It hopes to expand the concept into Australia next year.

“If you’re going to intentionally build community – for us it was organic and then we became intentional, get help from people who have done it before,” Johnson says.

He gained some useful insights from fellow Bay of Plenty resident Sam Kidd, co-founder of [LawVu](#) which has been building a community around in-house legal teams that use its software platform.

Rocketspark also did some work with [Sian Simpson](#), former director of community and Kiwi Landing Pad and founder of Public Rally which helps businesses build their communities.

“Just having someone who has seen it before has helped us to have the confidence to do what we do and get our process right around building community,” Johnson says.

It has also created a website, [Creative Launchpad](#) to share content and helpful advice and telling success stories of graphic designers.

Simpson suggested finding designers who would be “community champions” and provide content for the site.

“That was actually a precursor to the events, the people that have come to the events had seen the content or one of our social media posts and started to connect with the community in that way, so that’s a really key part of the formula,” Johnson says.

“Once we make the connections at the events, it’s like putting our business development side of things on steroids. Even though that wasn’t the original thinking that would happen, it did happen.”



Brunch by the Bay Auckland

### The panellists

Along with Feavearyear’s presentation, the Auckland Brunch by the Bay event featured three panellists offering insights on the design business: Sarah Marshall who set up Ahoy Studio early five years ago, Harry Burt who spent years as a nomad freelancer travelling the world until joining innovation studio Previously Unavailable this year, and Ruth Lever of Rule Design who is based in Tokyo with New Zealand clients.

**Marshall’s tip:** Know where you’re spending your time and adding value to clients and then communicate that to the clients so they understand the cost of what they’re asking for.

“If they don’t know it can lead to niggly situations and I like to avoid confrontation. Spend time working on your own business and services, just mapping it out.”

**Burt’s tip:** You don’t have to find an industry niche as he’s done everything from music videos to building websites but be aware of what your skills are. “I’m like a Swiss army knife, my niche is problem solving. I like to use my skills to solve problems for clients and consider different ways of looking at things.” He says designers need self-awareness and energy to “end up where they want to be”.

**Lever's tip:** Find a business mentor if like her you're still relatively new to running your own business. "It's great to have someone with experience in tackling the more sticky points you may be having or issues with clients. Friends and family can't provide the best advice because they don't really know what you're talking about. Find someone you trust to give advice and also validate what you're feeling." She also advises taking the time to look back and acknowledge your achievements in the past year.



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Fiona Rotherham is the editor of Caffeine. She previously worked at numerous business publications as editor, co-editor and senior journalist. Her passion for startups was sparked while working at former entrepreneur magazine Unlimited of which she was also editor for some years.