

Kathryn: Welcome to episode 31 of Compass, I'm your host Kathryn Hunter. Do you have a skill set that you want to develop but haven't yet? Today, Julie Waterkotte and I talk about that and more when we discuss becoming a remote stationer. I wanted to let you guys know, currently, I am offering free one on one brainstorming sessions, to help you find your location independent path. To book, visit compasspod.com/brainstorming and let's get started. You're listening to Compass, where we talk with location independent womxn about their work and the paths that got them there. We get into their stories of struggle and success, finding clients, figuring out what to charge, and of course, we talk money. Join us and take the next step in finding your direction. Julie, welcome to the show.

Julie: Hi. Thank you for having me.

Kathryn: I like to start with your early life and see where that influences you later on. What did you want to be when you were five?

Julie: I either wanted to be an artist, which I ended up being, or I really love animals, so I was thinking a vet tech.

Kathryn: And how had that changed by the time you were in high school?

Julie: Oh Gosh. My mother was a single mom and she always encouraged me to do what I love to do and what I was good at. So, I was always drawing around the house and she was always buying me pads to draw on and entering me in classes and stuff like that. That was the art based. So she really nourished that and I just kind of entered grade school and high school, just doing art and had friends that you know were amazed with my art and I'd draw for them and just pictures and stuff and it just kind of developed from there.

Kathryn: Did you pursue college?

Julie: I did. After I got out of high school, I ended up going to Chicago and did College at the Illinois Institute of Art there in Schaumburg and got my bachelor's degree in graphic design.

Kathryn: Do you use those skills in designing your stationary now?

Julie: Oh my gosh, so much. So, I ended up working in the advertising industry for awhile and then I got into video games working for EA Sports as their graphic designers doing all the front end menus on their video games. But then I also was a color artist that would color in the textures for all their 3d models in the game as well. And I believe working for them helped me develop the skills for all my stationary that I do nowadays.

Kathryn: How did you get into being location independent?

Julie: Oh Gosh. I just started out, just working with various clients and then that developed and really maintaining relationships with everybody I've met through my career of

working. I work at home for my own computer and just reach out to people and networking with people that I know and treating my clients as I would want to be treated, with respect. And maintaining those relationships with them and they're very important to me and just getting recommended to people that they know in the industry. So that's, that's pretty much how I did it. Just be good to your clients and they'll come back to you pretty much for anything.

Kathryn: How do you describe your job to people who are just being polite when they ask?

Julie: I could tell them I'm, their magic, their personal magic maker. Pretty much anything they can dream up, I can design for them, whether that be digitally or on paper

Kathryn: And when you're talking to somebody who really wants to know the details?

Julie: Gosh, I just tell them if they see something from Pinterest or they have a magazine that has different ideas in it, come meet with me, let's chat about it. I will get them something on the computer that they can see, pretty much within a week. And then if they want to come apply that to their wedding stationary, I can create a whole suite for them and we'll pick out paper. I'll tell you what looks best on that paper and just get them, you know, their ideas, either down on the computer or down on the paper exactly how they want them and they'll be totally happy.

Kathryn: About how much of what you do is bridal?

Julie: You know, if you would've asked me that five years ago, I'd say 80%. it's kind of switching now with the times and technology. A lot of people are doing just online invitations, whether that means Facebook groups and then they post it or they email it. So now it's a 50/50 split. I do about 50% bridal and then I will do another 50%, more of my graphic design clients.

Kathryn: So as far as the stationary you are, you are only bridal focused?

Julie: That's my main income for stationary. But I do do party events, funding, raising events and all sorts of stuff like that. So, when I say graphic design clients 50% percent, I say about 20-30% will be other events put in with that.

Kathryn: How did you get started in stationary?

Julie: That's kind of funny. I was working for EA and you know when you're working for someone else, a lot of your stuff is art directed. So you might work 12 months on a project and your first initial ideas that you know, you fell in love with, the team fell in love with and everything that you started by the end of the 12 months, 100 people have got their opinion and your original idea that you are so into has changed so much to accommodate everybody that you know you're kind of disappointed at the end sometimes. You're still happy with it, but you're like, man, I really liked my first idea. So, I started doing art at home for myself that I liked and just posted on some of these print on demand companies and there was just so many people that really liked my wedding

stationary, because it was kind of off beat and kind of funky. And that's how Odd Lot actually came about because yeah, I can do, you know, the flowers and this and that, but I'm kind of known for doing the offbeat wedding stationary. So it kind of developed like that. It was just me wanting to do my own art and not be art directed to death and it kind of spawned into this whole business.

Kathryn: Are there any of those print on demand companies that you recommend working?

Julie: I'm a big fan of Zazzle. I've been there for about 10 years and it's just one of my places that I have stationery at.

Kathryn: How did you find your first clients?

Julie: Oh Gosh. Just posting online and getting out there on different message boards and things like that. That really was my first client. I didn't go to family or friends. I just kind of started doing this on my own and I would just say the Internet, just getting out there.

Kathryn: And is that still how you get clients?

Julie: It is mostly, you know, I, I live in a very small town so people know me, but I would say 80% of my business is just online.

Kathryn: Tell us about your first major struggle.

Julie: Oh Gosh. With my stationary, you would think, you know, everybody's like, you have a lot of bridezillas and maybe... I find it's easy to work with the brides cause they're very specific, what they want. But I remember one groom I had who worked at a print lab and they wanted digital invitations, which was fine. But he just, he'd call about 18 times a day and email even more and was very picky and specific and it was just one of those people that was difficult to work with. But you still want to make your clients happy. So you really have been, you know, have some people skills and some management skills on, on navigating through that.

Kathryn: How were you able to kind of get him a little bit more level?

Julie: Yeah, I think it's just a lot of people just want to be heard when it comes down to it. You know, this is a very big event in people's lives and you do it once, you know, theoretically and they just want to be heard. So, it's just making sure that your clients feel that they are special to you. And that you're not just taking what they say and yeah, yeah, yeah. And, and moving them down the road, you know, so. And, and that's one thing I tell people, you know, you can go online and you can order invites from Minted or from all, you know, Vista Print and all these other companies. But when you work with somebody who's a stationer and not just one of these big box companies where you know, we can order a cheap invitation and be done with it, you're going to get more personalized service. And your, you know, in the end going to be happier because you're dealing with someone that cares about their business and they care about you as

opposed to just order an invite and if there's a mess up, you got to weed through, you know, customer service to get anybody to care about your problem.

Kathryn: How about your first major success?

Julie: Oh Gosh. First major success was the Colorado Wedding Wars Bridal show, which was very, I was super proud to be a part of that and I was doing it long distance cause I'm in Illinois and they were in Colorado. It used to be a TV show and then now it's held every year in a different city and state. But it's a team of people, so wedding coordinators, florists, stationers that get together and there's maybe four to five teams and you each put on your stuff like you're having a fake wedding and then you get together in a big event center and the public gets to choose who did that wedding theme the best. And we won. I can't tell you what year, I think it was 2016 but we won that one that year and that was, that was something I was really proud of.

Kathryn: If you could start fresh today knowing everything you already know, is there anything you would do differently?

Julie: I would, I would just say I just go for it more and not be scared to take the risk of, of doing it. I really like, there was a quote, I heard once, "you never really fail unless you quit." So I, I always tell people, I'm like just keep going. "You're gonna Stumble along the way. Don't overthink that so much. Just do it. Just keep going." Cause everything you do is alerting process and it's gonna help you be better. So I'd tell my young self, "just do it. So stop thinking, overthinking so much and just do it."

Kathryn: Odds are there's no such thing as a typical day for you. Do you want to give us what a random day looks like?

Julie: Yes. These last three weeks have been kind of insane. I can't start my day without coffee. I'm kind of a coffee addict once I get my kids, I am a single mom. So I, I run my kids for the first hour and a half to whatever they need me to, school, bus. And then I will after I have my coffee, I do eight miles on the bike. I'm kind of addicted to my spin classes. And then I come home, I will answer emails and invoice my clients and then I make a list of what I need to do for the day. I find if I don't make a list, my day is really unorganized and I need to make sure that every hour of the day I have something, something going on, you know, it needs to be scheduled. Otherwise you can really, you can work on one project and it's six hours later and you're like, "oh no," you know, and then other, other people need to be pushed back.

Julie: So I really tried to give everybody their time and then, you know, between saving files, if they're large files and stuff, I'll go, go do some type of errand around my, my studio that needs to be done, while stuff is saving. But, and then in the afternoon I tried to take a little break, call more clients if needed and about 5:00 or 6:00 I wrap it up, my kids come home and then I might be on again from 9:00 to 11:00 just designing. I really like to take the evening and start designing and it's kind of my wind down time. I don't really talk to anybody. After 9:00 I get creative and do stuff like that. And then it's bedtime.

Kathryn: Do you keep up with any kind of continuing education, formal or informal?

Julie: I do actually. I just completed an SEO course last year, which included SEO and marketing. Besides graphic design, I do a lot of technical design, so I build websites and do some coding. All day yesterday I was doing some coding, but I like Udemy. I take a lot of their classes there, whether it be for Facebook marketing, ads, learning different type of coding for Wordpress or Shopify or of the two platforms. I like to design websites then and then all these new social media platforms that come out like Pinterest and Instagram and stuff like that. I like to keep up on all of that because if you don't, you're only as good as how much you know, so I really try every six months to keep up with the different things that are coming out.

Kathryn: What are you excited about right now in stationary?

Julie: Oh Gosh. I love the gold foil on on paper. I still am a big proponent of paper stationery as opposed to digital. I get excited when I get the new papers, you know, from my printing press. And I also like the die cuts that we can do now. It's just, there's so many things that you can do nowadays as opposed to 20 years ago with stationary and some of the rules back then are gone now. Meaning that you can literally word your invitations however you want, you know, and you can have them look however you want. So I'm excited for my Halloween bride that wants to do a spooky and bite. And nowadays it doesn't matter. You know, you're not going to be judged for that where 20 years ago, everyone felt like they had to be within this stationery box, what their parents would want in their stationary and nowadays everybody gets to brief, be creative and express themselves a little more.

Kathryn: Now it's time to get into the numbers. What is your income range

Julie: Okay.

Kathryn: And how long have you been doing this work?

Julie: I've been doing the stationary for over 10 years and the income range, you know, being an entrepreneur and doing this yourself, it's going to vary from year to year. There were some years that I was over six figures. There are some years that I was less than that. Averaging it out, it could be \$60,000 (US) a year, but I, you can't really go a year to year and think that it's going to be stable. I think, advice I can give to people that we're thinking about doing this is, and it goes back to the POD sites and everything. Those sites are great and I've been a part of a lot of them throughout the years and you want to start there and that that kicks off your business. Awesome. But be in charge of your own marketing. Don't rely on those sites to do that marketing for you and know that those sites can close down any time.

Julie: And if you don't have an online presence away from those sites, then you're kinda, you know, subject to whatever they want to do. They're your boss basically. So I always encourage people, get your own website, start learning your own marketing, and really drive your sales that way as opposed to relying on other sites to drive sales to you

because then you're at their whim and, and if they want to change their SEO or their algorithms, you're going to have to jump through those hoops every time they change those as opposed to you doing your own marketing and you're driving your own sales

Kathryn: For people just starting out. What would you say the beginning range would be?

Julie: I'd say probably \$30,000

Kathryn: So \$30,000 US?

Julie: Yes.

Kathryn: And where do you see it topping out?

Julie: Oh Gosh. That depends on how hard people work and how hard they understand the marketing and SEO that they need to do on the computer.

Kathryn: How do you decide what to charge?

Julie: I always charge what I think my art is worth. And my designs are different than other people's on there. I create a lot of my own art. You can go and order stock art off of 10,000 sites online and put together an invite, but if you want unique custom stuff, you're going to pay a little bit for, more for it because it is tailored specifically to you. So I look at what other independent designers are doing and do a price range that's competitive with them. I don't price myself real cheap just so I get more sales because I believe my art is worth paying a little bit more for because I have had so much experience and I do take pride in the art that I do and you will get an amazing design and awesome customer service from me. So I price that accordingly, based on those.

Kathryn: What if anything do you do to keep your income stable?

Julie: I don't keep it all in one place, if that makes sense. I believe in passive income. There's anything that you can do that you can bring passive income in. So for me it was the print on demand side where I have some of my designs and load it up and people can go pretty much customize their texts, how they want, order it from this site that supplies all the materials. And then I get a commission of whatever that sells. I also have my stationary in different brick and mortar stores. And then I also, you know, offer my graphic design services to different businesses. So I do logos and websites and business cards. I also design apparel for some boutiques in California. So I, and I do social media for about six different clients. So, I took pretty much everything I learned for my business and I also offer that to other businesses. Find what you love to do and you can then start seeing different ways of expanding that into other things

Kathryn: As far as getting your stationary invitations into brick and mortar stores, did you go in person? Did you reach out online? How did you, how did you get that started?

Julie: Right? It's all about who you know and who you network with. And I was told years ago, don't burn your bridges. And that is so important. We're all human. We all have different personalities and sometimes you don't like people and sometimes you do, but you keep that stuff to yourself because you never know when that contact is going to turn into a lead. Pretty much everybody is a lead and you don't want them to remember that you're acting a certain way the day they met you and you might, you might get, miss out on a \$10,000 job just because you decided you didn't like that person. So you keep that stuff to yourself and you act business professional with, with everybody. That's just good business. So, and again, that's the, my clients come from people I meet. Here in town, I'm known for doing stationary and, and a few other things and it's just networking, getting out and networking with people and letting people know what you do.

Julie: I had a friend in the wedding industry here who is a wedding planner and then started her own party business here in town and thought of me to do different lines of greeting cards for birthdays and parties. So now I have my line in her store. I was doing graphic design for this lady in California who's been my client for about six years now and she uses me for a ton of things in her stores, her brick and mortar stores. Just other people I meet that have started their own businesses and have turned into brick and mortar stores and then they think of me to have lines in their stores. So that's kind of my advice is everybody can be a lead, don't burn your bridges.

Kathryn: What tools and gear do you recommend beginners start with?

Julie: I'm a big fan of the Adobe suite that you can get online. I just do a monthly subscription and that's how I have the creative cloud from Adobe. I just pay for that on a monthly basis. And that comes with all of the tools I need. Photoshop, Illustrator. And then it comes with, you know, Dreamweaver and all these other tools. But mainly I use Photoshop and illustrator for my stationary.

Kathryn: And do you use a Wacom pad or is this more of a, a mouse and pointer kind of thing?

Julie: I'm old school. I don't know what it is with those Wacom pads, I just don't like them. I use the mouse. I have this weird shaped ergonomic mouse, but that's what I use.

Kathryn: What's your number one tip for women looking to get into stationary?

Julie: I would say, develop your own style. Don't do what everybody else is doing. There's a, there's so many people that claim to be a stationers out there nowadays and they're buying all these premade suites and throwing them together. Develop your own style of stationary and get known, you know, niche down and get known for doing a certain style.

Kathryn: What are your next steps?

Julie: Oh Gosh, just keep expanding. And I always, I always think, "how can I be more wild?" Just because I like pushing now envelope on stuff. So, you know, I just recently did this

Jack Skellington, you know, Jack and Sally Wedding, and we did these, the gate invitations, which means the end by opens like a gate. I hand sketched everything and you know, she got to pick her fonts and it was super exciting. So for me, my next step is finding my clients who want to have those crazy weddings like that. Because I'm into that. Let's, let's do something, you know, a little extra and let me design some really killer stationery for your wedding. And let's kick this thing off, right.

Kathryn: Where can listeners find you?

Julie: They can find me online on my website at oddlotpaperie.com and I'm all over social media on Facebook at Odd Lot Paperie and Instagram or they can call me directly.

Kathryn: Julie, thank you so much for joining us. This has been great.

Julie: Awesome. Thanks so much for having me. I appreciate it.

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