

Kasey Jones, Ink: The Fine Art of Creating a Business

Author : Laura Randall

Date : May 11, 2016



Kasey Jones, Ink. founder Kasey Blaustein went from managing another company's brand to building her own—in just two years—by embracing her creativity and her own unique style.

When **Kasey Blaustein** turned 30, her boyfriend threw her a big party in her mom's Los Angeles . There were taco and cocktail stands, a playlist of her favorite Motown and R&B tunes, and a guest list that included childhood friends and her 85-year-old grandmother. On a whim, **Blaustein**, a **brand** manager who dabbled in art as a hobby, also created an eight-by-eight chalkboard announcing "It's Kasey's Birthday" in eye-catching colors and **designs**, then enlisted a photographer friend to set up his tripod in front of it.

"We created this big interactive photo booth with balloons and random props," **Blaustein** says. "You could tell people had such a good time. It was very different from your normal photo booth experience."

Unlike a typical green-screen photo booth, there was plenty of room for guests to dance, jump and strike all kinds of exuberant poses. It wasn't long before **Blaustein's** guests started sharing the party photos on **social** media and changing their profile pictures to these funky new snapshots.

"It got a little bit of buzz, and from that, I started getting cold calls asking, 'Do you guys do weddings?'" she recalls.

That led **Blaustein** to launch [CHALK SHOT](#) in 2014, which provides custom photo packages for special events with personalized artwork, theme props and on-site high-resolution printing. She started booking weddings and birthday parties on weekends while continuing to work full time at her job with an independent specialty-drink company.

Then the TV show *Extra* hired CHALK SHOT to take photos at a 2014 awards ceremony. **Blaustein** and lead photographer Royal Binion squeezed into a backstage room with their chalkboard backdrop and equipment and took photos of the winners, fresh off the podium.

"I rarely get starstruck, but to see these celebrities who are so pumped because they just won, jumping around and having fun in something you created—it's the craziest feeling," she says.

The awards ceremony gave **Blaustein** the exposure and confidence to leave her **brand** management job and devote herself full time to CHALK SHOT, using savings and money she had earned from her part-time weekend gigs. "I took a leap and decided to build a business around it full time. It was all so bootleg," she says.

As CHALK SHOT grew, she used a four-figure loan from an angel investor to upgrade equipment and added more personalized services such as gifts, illustrations and live art installations created on-site at **marketing** events and trade shows. These services, along with CHALK SHOT, are now all part of [Kasey Jones, Ink.](#), a name inspired by **Blaustein's** childhood nickname and the ink that drives the entire operation.

"For the first year, the services kind of grew off demand," she says. "What I do has been built on the demands of what people approach me with." [Kettle Brand](#) potato chips, for instance, approached her about doing live chalk-art murals for its booth at the Natural Products Expo West, a trade show for natural, organic and healthy products. "I had never done live art before, but I said I'll try. I ended up being on site for five days and creating this really fun live art wall. People could come by every day and see how the wall grew," she says. Now Kettle **Brand** hires **Blaustein** and her team every year to create new live murals at the Expo.

Blaustein is the only full-time employee of Kasey Jones, Ink., running things out of her home studio and hiring freelance artists and photographers on an as-needed basis. She relies on a lead photographer to oversee photo services at CHALK SHOT and enlists a business development consultant to help with **marketing** and strategy.

You have to be really hungry and able to do anything to get your name out there and show your stuff. Had I been a little more picky about rates in the beginning, I probably wouldn't have the clientele I have now.

—Kasey Blaustein, founder, Kasey Jones, Ink.

A self-trained artist inspired by her creative grandparents ("My grandmother would oil paint and make our stockings and paint tiny Santas on cinnamon sticks, and my grandfather was a woodworker who made two-seater planes in his backyard."), **Blaustein** creates all the **designs** at Kasey Jones, Ink. She works with clients to develop a unique personalized look, from a confetti and cap-and-gown backdrop for a law-school graduation party to a drink-menu wall mural for the [Beverly Hills branch](#) of a boutique coffee shop chain.

Blaustein only recently took a hard look at her rates, calculating and locking down the cost of materials and value of her time and measuring profit margins. Raising rates did not result in any significant loss of current or new customers, she says, though she has no regrets about her

initial, less-structured approach to the bottom line.

"In the beginning, I was just so honored that people liked my work," she says. "You have to be really hungry and able to do anything to get your name out there and show your stuff. Had I been a little more picky about rates in the beginning, I probably wouldn't have the clientele I have now."

That clientele includes corporate customers like Kettle **Brand**, **Lacoste**, **NIVEA**, and ShoeDazzle, which make up about 80 percent of Kasey Jones, Ink.'s custom art and **branding** services. **Blaustein** landed many of her corporate clients through networking and relationships she built during her tenure as a **brand** manager. "I kept up good relationships with these people, and they were all aware of what I was doing," she says.

But the biggest challenge about working with established **brands**, she notes, is finding a way to marry her own unique style with the specific requirements of a **brand**.

"You know how much money is spent in creating **brand** assets and the look and feel of a company," she says. "It's about making sure this client is happy, and I can please them by getting their guidelines and even adding something that they haven't thought of—that's what I love."

Two years after her pivotal birthday party, **Blaustein** is starting to focus on expansion. She wants to hire a full-time artist and an events manager, as well as create **brand** partnerships on a retainer basis that allow her to play a larger role in a company's long-term **marketing** strategy. She envisions opening a CHALK SHOT shop, or studio, in New York to help steer events there and expanding her reach by creating chalkboard templates for birthdays and weddings that clients can purchase and use at home.

"If we had more consumer-facing offerings [...] it would create something that's more accessible," she says. "We would be keeping our events very exclusive, but also making it available to others."

Photos: Amanda Friedman

//