

jim coudal

WEB ENTREPRENEUR

Interview by Steven Heller

In 1994, Jim Coudal was fed up with the midsize Chicago ad agency where he was creative director. He decided to form his own small studio to enable himself, with any luck, to have some fun while increasing his earning potential. The result was Coudal Partners, a design and advertising firm specializing in sports teams and restaurants. One of Coudal's first official acts was to launch [coudal.com](#), a quirky personal website that became an online salon years before the term “weblog” had been coined. This pioneering venture proved so successful (spiritually, that is) that Coudal decided to transform himself into a design entrepreneur to take greater control over the work he produced. Today, [coudal.com](#) comprises a series of sub-sites focusing on other businesses and experiments. They include Jewelboxing, a short-run DVD and CD packaging system for creative professionals; *The Show*, a service that records, designs, and markets recordings of live concert performances; *The Deck*, a network of sites targeted at web, design, and creative professionals; *Pinsetter*, which sells alphabet button sets; and the Swap Meat, devoted to trading and consuming designer-made swag. Coudal also produces films related to design and culture. Altogether, the sites draw 20,000 visitors each weekday. Given this fervent web practice, Coudal Partners proves that being “regional” is no longer a handicap. In this interview, Coudal, 47, talks about the impact of the internet on his design business and how he intends to grow his empire and rule the world, or Chicago—whichever comes first.



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Blind Box of ephemera, offered for exclusive sale for a limited time on Swap Meat. Artist: Douglas Wilson, Springfield, MO.

HELLER: When did the internet become a part of your daily routine? **COUDAL:** We started [coudal.com](#) on Halloween, in 1999. We started it as a sandbox, a place where we could try stuff out. We had some particular ideas about web design, publishing, and commerce and have always operated the site as an ongoing experiment in those areas. Now, in many ways, it *is* our business.

HELLER: I started seeing [coudal.com](#) pop up on blogs a few years ago. How long did it take for “Coudal” to be a household link?

COUDAL: It became fairly popular right away—of course, there were fewer sites competing for attention back then. People have always seen us as a reliable filter for interesting things, and although we write essays, hold contests, produce films, and develop ongoing features, the role we fill as editors is what drives people to the site.

HELLER: What percentage of your work is client-driven versus web entrepreneurial?

COUDAL: About 60 percent of our revenue comes from our own businesses and 40 percent from work-for-hire. **HELLER:** Speaking of entrepreneurial businesses, you’ve launched many internet assets, ranging from the Swap Meat to a slew of

online guides about books, museums, and more. Are you doing this for fun or profit? **COUDAL:** A bit of both. We send “Infrequent Mailings” e-mails to a large audience of people who have signed up to receive them. We usually include a subscriber-only contest in each e-mail, and the Swap Meat started as one of those. Since we have a fairly high-profile site and people tend to follow our links, we receive unsolicited stuff—T-shirts, books, posters, CDs, etc.—all the time. We love getting it, and most of the time we return the favor by sending back some of the stuff we’ve made. The Swap Meat is just doing that on a slightly larger scale. It was just going to be a quick monthlong thing, but a couple of days after we announced it, we started getting dozens of really cool things in the mail every day. **HELLER:** Aside from the fun of it, is it good business? **COUDAL:** It didn’t take us long to realize that this was just about the worst business model possible. The more popular it became, the more time and postage it would require. But an idea presented itself. Some of the items we received that we totally loved were not available to buy on the web. We decided to commission limited editions of these items

and offer them for sale at the same time we were swapping. **HELLER:** Doesn't Swap Meat have the potential to be a viable business model? **COUDAL:** I'm afraid to run a spreadsheet comparing the time we have put into it against the revenue we have made, but as it gets bigger, it actually gets easier to manage. It also allows individual creators to get exposure and maybe even make some money, too. All things considered, it's a success, but where it goes from here I don't know. As with most of our projects, we're making it up as we go along. **HELLER:** Do you see your different sites as nodes that may or may not spin into larger entities? **COUDAL:** Perhaps. Jewelboxing and The Deck are our two biggest "clients" at the moment. So, although we have a very short attention span as a firm, we have been able to convert some of our "experiments" into ongoing businesses. **HELLER:** What's involved in creating a site? Do you test? Do you intuit? Do you follow a business plan? Can any bozo do it? **COUDAL:** Yes, any bozo can do it. Our default behavior when we have an idea is to try it out in public and see what happens. It's very easy to talk things to death; we try hard not to do that. Business plan? Yeah, that's a good idea. Maybe we'll try that one of these days! **HELLER:** How do you measure success? **COUDAL:** By how happy we are. Running the site and the related businesses is a gas. We're not getting rich, but we're managing to pay our mortgages and our kids' tuitions and grow up without being all grown up about it. **HELLER:** What has been your biggest failure? **COUDAL:** We're planning it right now. It's going to be great. **HELLER:** How do you compare coudal.com to Speak Up and Design Observer? **COUDAL:** We're alike in many ways, and we are dedicated readers and link-stealers from both of those sites. Speak Up has a much stronger community feel than we do, as they foster long, interesting threads of passionate comments on various subjects, and Design Observer dives deeper



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Ghost Print, a poster by Billy Davis of Orlando, FL, was originally sent to Wilson in exchange for his *Blind Box*.

into subjects than we do. Additionally, both sites are probably a bit more design focused than coudal.com, as we tend to stray a bit further afield. **HELLER:** What kind of traffic do you get in relation to these other sites? **COUDAL:** Our traffic varies, but generally we'll have 15,000 to 20,000 people visit us each weekday. Of course, when we make a movie about cleaning your computer keyboard in the dishwasher or something else goofy, that number can be quite a bit bigger. **HELLER:** What other kinds of films are you doing? Are they for designers? **COUDAL:** We're currently in preproduction on a short film called *72°*. This is another experiment. We saw a photo from an old computer magazine and decided to make a film about the beginnings of the web and ubiquitous connectivity, using that photo as the point of departure. We're more than a little interested in filmmaking and especially in art direction and cinematography, and [the '70s] seemed like a cool era to do a period piece about. Our last film, *Copy Goes Here*, was much more of a designers' film, about the tension between words and pictures in our studio. **HELLER:** Do you believe that regionalism is no longer an issue, given the presence of the internet? **COUDAL:** I'm not sure. I do know that in Chicago we have been on the same track with two other firms who have gone from being strictly design consultancies into

being much more entrepreneurial. SkinnyCorp and 37signals are good friends, and we share a lot of ideas with them. SkinnyCorp is responsible for Threadless, a huge design and community-focused T-shirt retailer; and 37signals, with whom we share an office, created Ruby on Rails and web-based communication and collaboration tools called Backpack, Basecamp, and Highrise. Maybe it's just coincidence and this kind of design entrepreneurship is going on everywhere, but for us, it feels like a regional thing. **HELLER:** Has your visibility increased beyond your expectations? **COUDAL:** Nah, I think we're just getting started. Although it's practically impossible for us to explain to our families exactly what it is that we do for a living, we're going to keep at it. **HELLER:** What's new on Coudal Partners' sites? **COUDAL:** Late this summer, we had a major-league relaunch of our Photoshop Tennis concept, with a big new partner on board and 12 live web events being held on Friday afternoons. Also, we're starting a new consumer brand called Field Notes, which will be a collaboration with Aaron Draplin of the Draplin Design Company. That will debut with a supercool, all-American-made, vintage-style notebook, and as mentioned, we're also working on *72°*. For a share of the glory in that, if there ever is any, people can sign up to be an executive producer for just \$199.99. **P**