

START & RUN A CREATIVE SERVICES BUSINESS

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GETTING STARTED

Freelancing can be big business if you follow a few simple steps to build a solid foundation. There has never been a better time to market yourself as a freelancer in the creative services field. With the web overcoming distance and travel, computers replacing drafting tables, and typesetters going the way of the Edsel, you can build a business based solely on education and experience.

1. Advantages to Self-Employment

For the first time in history, designers are free to create without specifying typefaces, counting characters, or waiting for type galleys. They can get client approvals from proofs available online. Writers are capable of pumping out turnkey newsletters with the help of software templates and distributing their publications online without spending a penny on printing or postage.

Once you master a knowledge of appropriate font usage and the elements of grid design, you'll be able to use your computer to generate a decent income. Finally, you really can have a profitable home-based business without stuffing envelopes — but only if you have an affinity for isolation. If you thrive on working alone and find that solitude recharges your batteries, you won't miss personal interaction. If you feel energized after flexing your interpersonal skills, you'll need to find outlets for them online, on the telephone, or at appointments.



If you thrive on working alone and find that solitude recharges your batteries, you won't miss personal interaction when freelancing.

In a recent survey, people with full-time jobs cited having a close friend in the workplace and a flexible schedule of prime importance. The same group responded that rank and title were more important than pay. These are easy job satisfactions to arrange when you're a freelancer. You decide your schedule, title, rank, and salary. Of course, the flip side of that equation is making enough money to pay your salary. I know one freelancer with a secret stash of business cards bearing the title "Supreme Lord and Master of the Universe." He says it helps when working with his more frustrating clients and reminds him of his power as a freelancer to walk away.

2. Launch Your Business Effectively

If you can't muster the small amount of capital required to invest in a computer, check out your local university or community college. Trade creative skills for computer time and work with the students on their school newspaper. Besides giving you some hands-on experience, this is a great opportunity to update your knowledge about what's hip in university life.

As an entrepreneur, you might qualify for a low-interest loan from the Small Business Administration (SBA) in the US. Application is simple if you follow the guidelines set out on their website, www.sba.gov, and fill out a few required forms. Depending on your location, you may even qualify for a HUBZone classification. (See Chapter 5 for more information about HUBZone classifications.) In Canada, Canada Business Service Centres, www.cbcs.org, provides information on sources of funding for small businesses, which vary from province to province/territory.

Once you get your equipment, the world is at your fingertips as long as you follow a few simple tips for building your freelance business. Don't get creative like one famous designer who started out in the in-house design department of a major corporation. About a year before he decided to launch his now legendary design studio, he started requisitioning computers, software, and furniture from his employer's purchasing department. These items were delivered to his new studio and were up and running the same day he submitted his resignation. He walked into his completely outfitted studio ready to hire five other designers. Few people knew the trick to how he made this smooth transition; most admire him and marvel at his business acumen.

3. Income Adventures and Other Paths

Unfortunately, most people who go into freelancing don't do so under ideal circumstances. More often, the ad agency you worked for lost a big account and had to cut back; or your salary was unjustifiable against billings. Sometimes you just annoy the wrong person. I worked at an animation studio and jumped when an art direction opportunity came along. The CEO interviewed me and fell in love with my leave-behind cartoon promotional piece. Unfortunately for me, the job he hired me for involved statistical publications: page after page of tabulations without a single cartoon in sight.

For the first six weeks I worked for him, all my employer talked about to his young wife was that cartoon and my amazing talent. She was standing next to him when he said he wanted me to decorate his new mansion because his wife had no taste. This was at a company cocktail party, and even if I could draw the expression on her face, you wouldn't believe it. From that day forward, she decided I was the enemy and hounded him to get rid of me. He couldn't tell me to my face that he was firing me or explain why; he instructed his CFO to do it. This genteel English gentleman walked into my office appearing quite overburdened. "I really don't know why, but I'm supposed to fire you," he said, looking puzzled.

Much earlier in my career, I worked at a downtown advertising agency and found myself working with an accomplished copywriter who turned out to be a great mentor for me. This creative director sported a Bette Davis pageboy hairstyle, smoked unfiltered Camels, and drove an old MG with the top down even though she was in her late forties. She lived with her gal pal in a big house in the suburbs.

One day, the owner of the company introduced me to a young man. "This is our new trainee and I expect you to show him the ropes." He had just graduated from the local state college. About a month later I was fired; they said my work wasn't up to snuff. The creative director pulled me aside and informed me the trainee was the son of the agency's largest client. My firing had nothing to do with the quality of my work. The new employee was receiving twice the salary for half the education and none of the experience. After this happens to you a few times, you start looking for alternative ways to earn a living. You, too, can decide to create a job outside the realm of office politics.

4. Find Your Professional Edge

No matter what you may have heard, talented people are drawn to other talented people by sheer magnetism. That inborn urge to raise standards pushes creatives above competitive mode. In the right environment, an encouraging, nurturing spirit takes hold of the principals, and true creatives revel in their compadres' success. If, in contrast, you find yourself mired in petty politics and devoting creative time to tripping up the other guy, you've lost your focus. If you're tired of playing games instead of creating great design or you've had it up to here with secretaries that think they have a better sense of type usage than you, then you are ready to freelance.

Maybe you just want to supplement your regular income. The reason doesn't matter. Nor does it matter what industry you work in now or where your experience lies. If you've got the motivation, you can succeed as a freelancer because people always need literature, websites, business cards, or whatever creative output you decide to sell. The challenge is how to attract them to your particular skill set, how to keep them coming back, and how to defend what's yours. There are some very specific things you can do to jump-start your business and start drawing in customers, and these are not limited to sending out little postcards by the thousands. Above all, don't follow in the footsteps of the famous designer I mentioned earlier. If you have a conscience, you'll spend most of your time looking over your shoulder, which will dilute the satisfaction of your success.

Even if you haven't established good discipline, there are certain characteristics that set professionals apart from amateurs. Read over this list and work on the areas you have not yet developed. Dust off and revisit the business skills you haven't used recently. As a freelancer, you represent yourself and are working for your own profit, not as an employee and not for the financial benefit of another person. If you were a clock-watcher or paced yourself on the job, get ready for a major restructuring of attitude.

4.1 Distinguish yourself from the competition

As a freelancer, you can provide value-added services to your clients. Perhaps you have a unique style of illustration or a working knowledge of local printers. Maybe you can offer an extensive type library and the know-how to use it, or a lengthy history of working in your

client's industry. Whatever your skills, be prepared to describe them in detail. Distinguish yourself successfully, either through a unique promotion or ability, and you will stand out from the competition.

4.2 Showcase your abilities honestly

Your client will be greatly disappointed if you show him fantastic samples but he finds out later that you can't handle projects at that level. Do a little soul-searching before you construct your portfolio and make sure it truly represents the services you are qualified to sell. Remember, you'll be working by yourself and probably won't have anyone to hand off work to that you can't do. As you learn more and your work improves, add samples to your portfolio that reflect your full range of abilities.

4.3 Know your client's business

Before you make an appointment to see a new or potential client, do your homework. Learn as much as you can about the client's business and have a few compelling suggestions about how you can improve his creative work. Focus on how your skills add value, and offer solutions not previously tried. For instance, suggest the use of humor or concept development that stresses soft sell rather than hard sell. If you have examples of work designed for the same industry or service as your client's, make sure you include them in your portfolio. Previous experience in the same area relieves some of a potential client's anxiety about your familiarity with his business or industry.

4.4 Strive to build long-term relationships

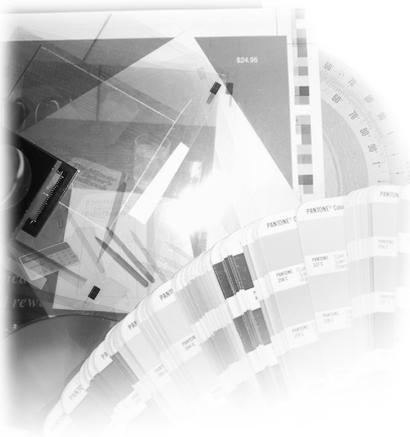
Bring all the same virtues you would to friendship, but don't expect your client to reciprocate until the benefits you provide are realized and trust is established. Trust is built over time, so if you have a prospect who hasn't approached you with a job, take him out to lunch. People want to know they share a similar set of values before they will trust you with their work.

4.5 Share your resourcefulness and problem-solving skills

Provide specific examples of how you might handle a creative problem. Offer solutions and detail how you rescued a previous project.



Focus on how your skills add value, and offer solutions not previously tried.



Resist the urge to give the go-ahead without your client's approval, no matter how much pressure you are under.

However, be careful about making suggestions for improvements to your client's previous design pieces. You never know how much the client had to do with the design, and you might end up insulting his taste. Keep your opinions about someone else's work to yourself, because they may create hard feelings and subtract from the trust you're trying to build with your new client.

4.6 Stay in close contact during a project

Remember that your client has an active interest in his project. Understand that providing timely information is imperative when a decision needs to be made that affects price or delivery of the finished job. Resist the urge to give the go-ahead without your client's approval, no matter how much pressure you are under.

4.7 Treat everyone respectfully

You may only work with the owner, but everyone in the office plays a part in building a business. You never know who will be responsible for projects in the future. Keep in mind that employees share opinions and experiences; make sure all their experiences with you are positive.

4.8 Join professional organizations

Find your local chapter of the Art Directors' Club, the Production Managers' Association, or a local group of professional photographers. Listen and learn. Make friends with your peers and share your experience, even if it's limited. Nobody will understand your problems better than someone in the same business. Most accomplished professionals are eager to help people just starting out and carry a wealth of experience they won't mind sharing.

4.9 Keep boasting to yourself

Your client will be able to see your skill by the specific work samples in your portfolio. Paying unnecessary lip service to your range of talent is overkill. Before you know it, like Narcissus, you'll drown in a pool of your own making. Express all your self-adulation in front of the mirror, where it will boost self-confidence you might lose later while making cold calls.

4.10 Sell clients only what they need

Develop a good understanding of your clients' budget requirements and the competition in their industry, then select the services and products that provide the best fit. Your clients will appreciate your efforts and see through any featherbedding. Always practice the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

4.11 Remember, it's the little things

If you're interested in building credibility, keep your promises. Call back when you say you will, meet your deadlines, stick to delivery schedules, and stay within budget even if it costs you. Jobs are only awarded after trust has been established. A missed deadline is all it takes to shake a client's trust in your ability.

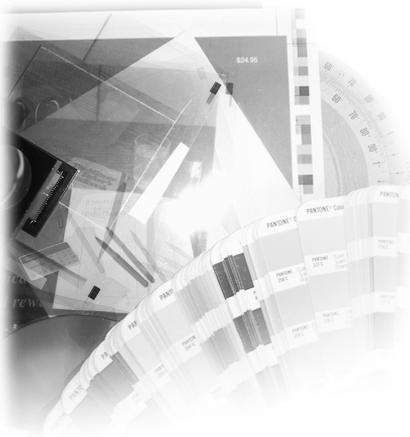
4.12 Be businesslike in all your dealings

Whether you work with the boss's secretary or have access to the chief executive officer, don't drop in unannounced or overstay your welcome. Make sure you only call your client when you really need to. Access to the key decision-maker is easily lost if you abuse your privilege.

Achieving success as a freelancer is easy if you put your mind to it. Computer technology has changed many fields, and you will be required to handle massive amounts of information. For instance, technology makes it possible for you to not only design but also do some data entry, check facts, and do your own proofreading. The scope of services you offer must be greater than ever before.

Turnkey jobs bring in more money because the more work you can do yourself, the more money you can make. How well you manage various aspects of a project will determine your success. As your relationships with your clients grow, clients will rely on you as their communication beacon and will expect more from you than they might have just a few months ago. You must be dependable and progressive, and you must maintain an active interest in your clients' successes.

Create a sense of ease when doing business and provide cost-saving tips whenever possible. Get up to date on paper stock, trends



in ink and varnish applications, or the latest industry catchphrases. (See the CD included with this book for a list of resources.) Present copy and design solutions that overshadow both your competition and the client's competition. Give sound advice gleaned from your own experience as well as the experiences shared by your peers at professional meetings. There are many mediocre designers. Once a client finds a reliable creative source with the right expertise and problem-solving ability, he or she will usually cling to you. But first you must earn his or her trust.

If you thrive on working alone and find that solitude recharges your batteries, you won't miss personal interaction.