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Freelance Writers: How to Partner with Your Competition

By Melissa Brewer

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Freelance writing is an unstable occupation sometimes. We already have to struggle with dividing our time between marketing our skills, writing queries, and seeking out new clientele. Sometimes there's not enough time; sometimes there's not enough money.

With the current economy, many freelance writers wonder if it's time to return to a "steady paycheck." This has always been my personal "backup plan", but at the same time, it isn't very logical. The current economy is creating MORE freelancers, and fewer opportunities for full-time staff positions and W-2 paychecks. Many of my dot-com clients are probably at the unemployment office or working for "the man" right now. Small businesses have tightened their budgets, and are trying to do as much in-house production as possible.

So much for the steady paycheck, right?

Not necessarily. There are hundreds of corporations and government agencies that award large contracts to agencies and groups every year. They don't hire freelancers because their project needs typically require a mixture of graphic design, desktop publishing, editing, and long-term communication strategies. Corporations and government entities typically have a budget and a regular contract with an agency for marketing, PR, and other communications that MUST get used by the end of the fiscal year, or it will be allocated to another area. This is great for the vendors that they hire; last minute projects are thrown in their laps with bigger-than-anticipated budgets. And usually, they need to outsource to pick up the pace...

So how does a freelancer gain access to these opportunities? The key to success in these areas is a little research and a lot of networking. There are many types of contracts that you, as a freelancer, can join forces and gain access to. Here are three of the most lucrative:

1. Government RFP and RFQ's

Government Requests for Proposals (RFP) and Requests for Quotes (RFQ) are typically published in the "Public Notices" section of daily newspapers. Honestly, the descriptions of these services are usually

vague — if you want to bid on these projects, you'll need to contact the government entity and ask them for their specifications, then write up a lengthy proposal incorporating all of these specs. This can be time-consuming and complicated. You'll also have to fill out paperwork to be considered for all future posted projects.

How can you skip these steps and get in on the action? Find your state's Business Registrar's office and keep track of who is winning these RFP's. They typically post a "Notice of Award" for every contract issued on their website. You can also find out information about Federal Agency contracts awarded by visiting their office of procurement's website.

Keep track of who is winning communications contracts. When you see a project awarded, you can pitch your freelance writing services to the company that won. Congratulate them in your letter, send samples of your writing or your resume, and express interest in that specific contract. You can also offer to help pick up other work while they focus on their new projects. Even if they don't need you now, be sure to follow up and keep track of their accomplishments by visiting their website. If the government agency is happy with their work, they'll most likely be regularly contracted to in the future. If you can establish a repertoire with a government contractor, you'll have a client relationship you can rely on. (At least until the next election, when the government department heads may change!)

2. Big Corporations

Big corporations either do their work in-house or hire an outside agency to implement their marketing and PR plans. They outsource because these agencies have more resources and good track records. These agencies have an account manager that delegates tasks to regular employees and freelancers.

How do you find them? If you are interested in PR or marketing work such as press release writing, brochure work, etc., check out the corporation's website and see what contact name is on the press release. If the press release lists an agency, you'll have a contact name to send your pitch letter to. You can also call the corporation's procurement office and flat-out ask what company handles their marketing, advertising, or PR work.

If you're interested in copywriting for a website, you can usually find the name of the web design firm that handles a corporation's online presence through a search engine. Type in the company's name (example: Timex) and the words "client list" into a search engine and see what you come up with. Then pitch your services accordingly.

3. Big Web Projects through Online Partnerships

If you're interested in becoming a service provider on a service-auction website or just breaking into the online industry, but you're not interested in paying a lot of fees, you may want to consider partnering with a web design firm or programming company that uses these websites for big contracts. You'll have to approach other independent contractors to do this and establish a good sense of trust. Online partnerships are becoming more popular, and more lucrative, as clients approach online marketplaces as a one-stop-shop. You'll want to have a signed contract in place and check the client references for anybody you partner with.

Online partnerships can help retain customers; a programming firm can offer your user manual writing skills as part of the software design package and a web design firm can include web content as a part of their web design package. Your skills partnered with another independent contractor can help save the client money and help their projects become seamlessly integrated.

The key to building long-lasting client relationships is the networking and follow-up. Once you've introduced yourself, you'll be able to get a feel for how your services fit in with these partnerships. If you see a big project that you don't qualify for, you can pass on the description to companies you are interested in partnering in. Most importantly, you'll be able to have a few professional relationships on hand for when the going gets tough. And you'll be happy to know that you've transformed your competition into powerful allies that may also have the honor of writing your paycheck one day!

Melissa Brewer is a full-time freelance writer and author of *The Writer's Online Survival Guide*, available at <http://www.webwritingbuzz.com>. She hosts a website for professional freelance writers and she publishes a free weekly newsletter, *The Web Writing Buzz*, featuring articles on freelancing, writing jobs and publishing news from around the web.

"Ten Questions To Ask Before Hiring a Freelance Writer"

By Linda Elizabeth Alexander

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Finding quality writers is not easy. As with hiring any employee or contractor, be sure to get the facts first.

1. What am I looking for?

Before you begin your search for a writer, make sure to outline your needs. Do you need a marketing writer that does brochures? A technical writer who knows Visual Basic?

2. How do you charge?

Many freelancers work on a per-project basis and require one-third to one-half of the fee upfront. Others work on an hourly, per-day or per-week basis. Make sure you get the details before you hire the writer.

3. When will payment be due?

It is a good idea to check with the writer about payment scheduling. Freelance writers are often sole proprietors and reluctant to extend credit to new clients. If your accounting department has a history of late payments, you will lose a talented writer quickly.

4. How will you communicate and deliver?

Be prepared for a virtual relationship with your writer. These days, more and more writers are working via email and instant messaging. In fact, you may not deal with the writer face to face at all! Most writers also work by phone, fax and overnight mail.

Since it is not often profitable to meet in person, writers may not be willing to come to your office. However, they should be

flexible enough to attend meetings if it is necessary for the project. If you require it, be ready to be charged for the writer's time.

5. What type of writing do you do?

Ask to see samples of the writer's work. While most professional

writers are talented, they may not have the experience needed to complete the project you need.

If you are confident in the writer's abilities and are willing to give them a shot at your project anyway, be sure to get references. Past clients will be able to confirm that the writer is professional, prompt, and courteous, keeping in close touch with the client throughout the project.

6. What is your turnaround time?

Let's face it, deadlines rule. If writers cannot meet your deadline or fit you in, they are probably too busy to handle your project with care. True, you may have to wait for a qualified writer who is in demand – and it will be worth it if you have a flexible deadline. But if you are on a time limit and the writer cannot meet it, do not expect a miracle.

7. Who will be doing the writing?

Busy, successful writers often outsource writing projects to other writers. Any businessperson who does this will be sure to send the work to someone he or she trusts to do the work to your specifications. However, if you are used to working with one particular writer you may not want your job farmed out. Think about it before you decide.

8. What is included in the price?

Revisions? How many? Will the writer expect to get reimbursed for travel time or long distance phone calls for research? Will s/he charge for meeting in person?

9. What other services do you provide?

Sometimes writers offer graphic design services as well as freelance writing. If this is the case, they might be focused on

more than writing your piece – they also have to worry about design, layout and production. If you want a top-notch copywriter, stick with someone who concentrates on writing.

If, however, the writer is teamed up with other professionals or can refer you to designers or printers, feel free to take advantage of this service.

10. I have another project for you. Will you accept?

If you like the writer's work, by all means, hire her/him again! It is good to establish long term relationships with writers for

several reasons:

*Reliability and dependability are hard to come by. If you find somebody that works well with you, that you can count on to be professional and meet your deadlines, it is wise to hire that person again.

*Style. A writer, or any contracted vendor, will get to know your company and its products over time. The better they know you and your needs, the better able they are to help you.

*Consistency. If you are using the same person to write all your materials, you will send a consistent message throughout your internal and external communications. Your corporate image will flourish as a result.

Ask these questions and you are sure to find a talented, hard working, creative and dependable freelance writer with whom you can build a lucrative relationship.

Linda Elizabeth Alexander is a business writer and marketing consultant based in Longmont, Colorado, USA. Improve your writing skills at work! Subscribe to her FREE ezine. Write to the Point at lalexander@write2thepointcom.com or visit <http://www.write2thepointcom.com/articles.html>.



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