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How To Build A Successful Freelance Editorial Career

By Yuwanda Black

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by: **Yuwanda Black**

In the current job market, many editorial freelancers have turned to freelance work as a matter of survival. I receive many queries from applicants regarding this part of the market. Addressed here are the key building blocks necessary for a successful freelance career.

EXPERIENCE: You need a minimum of three years (five is ideal), preferably as a full-time employee. Clients will feel more comfortable in your knowledge and abilities if you can demonstrate that you've performed your duties in the past, full-time, at an established institution.

Each industry has its own "lingo". Experience in an industry allows you to understand it and communicate effectively with your clients. As a proofreader, a potential client [eg, a reference book publisher] might say:

"I have 300 pages that need to be proofed. The footnotes and illos will be sent separately. Please make sure there's a hole for each illo and that all footnotes run consecutive, beginning anew with each new chapter. The chapter title is the right running head, there is no left running head. How long do you think it will take to complete this job?"

With no experience in publishing, it would be difficult to begin to assess the job. Before giving an estimate, some questions you would ask are: Is this typed or handwritten copy? Are there inserts to the existing copy that need to be proofed? What style of proofreading do you use? Are changes to be made on disk or hard copy?

There may be four or five more questions that need to be asked before you can realistically assess how long it will take you to complete this job.

Experience in the industry allows you to have the necessary knowledge to ask the right questions to judge each project.

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Knowledge of your industry will also enable you to decide how to charge for the job. Some jobs are billed on an hourly basis, others are billed on a project basis, and still others are billed as a page rate.

Again, if you know your industry, you will be able to effectively calculate how much time the job will take and what billing method to use.

EQUIPMENT: Working from home means you must to have all the necessary equipment. Minimally, a phone, computer and fax machine. Ideally, a [color] copier, modem, fast Internet access, scanner (if your field requires it) and separate work room in your home would complete the picture.

CONTACTS/REFERENCES: The most obvious place to start building your customer base is previous employers. Remember the saying, "Don't burn your bridges." It has never been more true than when trying to build a freelance career.

As companies cut back, employers like to use former employees because they already know the work, routines, and systems of the company. Therefore, very little, if any training is needed.

These same industry contacts also make great references as you continue to expand your customer base. There is no better assurance to a potential new client than an ex-employer who says: "I'd hire her back if I could. She does great work for us as a freelancer. One of the reasons we use her as a freelancer is because she did such excellent work as an employee."

Wouldn't you feel confident if you were a potential client?

SAVINGS: In utopia, six months expenses (rent, food, cleaners, credit card bills, student loans, travel expenses, etc.) will be in the bank before you embark on your freelance career. In our experience, it takes about two years to build a solid base of clients that will (hopefully) keep you busy.

If this is not possible, try to plan as much in advance as you can. The "fear of the first blues" [when rent is due] can be frightening if you have no income and no prospects on the horizon.

PART-TIME JOB: I suggest that instead of going from a full-time job into a freelance career, get a steady, part-time job for a while. This will allow you to: 1) transition between the two without taking the financial hit (especially if you haven't planned); and 2) get a feel for how to organize as a freelancer.

Freelancing usually means intense periods of work, eg, four 12-hour days, and then maybe a week with "nothing" going on. Nothing is in quotation marks because as a freelancer, just because there's no client project on your desk, does not mean that you should be idle.

During these down times is when you should be organizing your books, re-stocking supplies, prospecting for new clients, tracking advertising — in short, running your business. If you think of freelancing as a business and organize yourself accordingly from the beginning, it will make this existence infinitely easier (especially at tax time).

PERSONALITY: Freelancing is an enjoyable experience for some, a painful existence for others. Do a

personality check to see if you can ride the roller coaster of this up-and-down existence. Do you like working alone; can you handle economic uncertainty; are you naturally motivated; are you organized — all of these, plus other elements are key traits in successful freelancers.

If you don't take one other thing from this article, remember this: No matter how talented you are, what your background is, or how well connected you are, there will come a time when work just seems to dry up. At this point you may start to question your abilities, seriously consider a full-time jobs, and/or wonder if freelancing is for you.

If this is the existence you've decided you want, stick with it. Continue to advertise, even when it seems that no one is interested. The average consumer has to see your advertisement at least 7–28 times (depending on what article you read) before they will act on it. So, be confident that if you advertise consistently, when they need a service/product that you offer, you will be at the forefront, rather than the hit-and-run advertisers.

After all, the quickest way not to succeed is to quit.

Good luck!

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Yuwanda Black owns Inkwell Editorial, an editorial temporary staffing agency in New York City. She is an entrepreneur, author and syndicated small business columnist. Yuwanda has been an entrepreneur for 11 years and has over 16 years experience in the editorial industry. Contact her at

for interviews and/or a link to the book for review.

The Work Flow Cycle of the Editorial Industry

By Yuwanda Black

As an editorial professional, I'm sure you're aware of the market slump right now. What you may not be aware of is that this is due to more than just the economy.

Editorial work is a seasonal profession. From mid-June through Labor Day and from Christmas through the end of January are usually pretty slow.

If you are a regular reader of a newspaper, ever notice how thin it is during the summer — especially the Help Wanted section?

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What is the point in bringing this to your attention? First, to get you to relax and not worry.

And second, focus on preparatory work during down times. For example, rework your resume; order new supplies; take care of administrative paperwork, etc. FYI, there are some great resume tips geared specifically toward the editorial industry on Inkwell Editorial's site at

I hope you find them helpful.

May be reprinted with inclusion of the following: Yuwanda Black is an entrepreneur, author, speaker and syndicated small business columnist whose focus is controlling your destiny through small business ownership. Her most recent e-books, *How to Really Make a Living as an Editorial Freelancer* and *Advice from Successful Freelancers: How They Built Their Careers & How You Can Too!* are available for immediate download at

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