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A Guide to a Freelancer's First Year

By Melissa Tydell

The first year of freelancing is tough. Trust me; I know. I am in my first months of freelance work, and although I love the challenges and constant opportunity to learn, I have to confront uncertainty and insecurity too.

New freelancers face big questions: Where can I find clients? How do I set fees? How do I handle negotiations and contracts? Where can I find answers to all my questions? A great way to start is by reaching out to more experienced freelancers.

Whether they've been freelancing for one year or ten, experienced freelancers have learned valuable lessons and gained knowledge that new freelancers can integrate into their own day-to-day work. Below is the advice of two experienced freelancers who were willing to share some tips with those of us in our first year.

Connect with Colleagues and Mentors

As a freelancer, you may be working on your own, but you don't have to be isolated. Seek support from fellow freelancers. With the freedom to build your own network of contacts, you'll have a constant well of experience at your fingertips.

Lila Stromer, CWIP's website editor and co-chair of February's "Freelance Edge" event, has been freelancing full-time for about one year. "There's going to be a ton of fear the first time you go out," Stromer warns. "Talk to people! Everyone is scared; everyone is trying to figure it out. There are people out there who want to guide you."

Tap into People You Know

Finding your first client (or tenth) is sometimes the most difficult step. The best place to begin is with people you know — former colleagues and managers, contacts from previous jobs or your alma mater, and your friends and family. Spread the word that you're freelancing, and let them know about your qualifications and what type of projects you are seeking.

In the beginning, it may feel like you're spending a lot of time on marketing. Stromer recalls a conversation she had when she first started freelancing: "I said, 'I just want to be looking for work or doing the work. I'm spending so much time sending out e-mails'... and [the woman I spoke with] said, 'You know that's part of the job. You're *doing* the job.'"

Continued on page 7

IN THIS ISSUE

Q&A with CWIP Panelist
Dana Kaye

2

Member Focus:
Cynthia Clampitt

3

Review of *Social Media
for Social Good: A How-
To Guide for Nonprofits*

4

New Members
CWIP Corner

5

Industry Notes

Note About
Membership Dues

6



A Guide to a Freelancer's First Year

Continued from cover

Get Involved

Groups, associations, forums, alumni clubs and social media provide non-intimidating ways to network. Sign up for classes to further sharpen your skills. By getting involved, you continue to build your knowledge and develop relationships that can lead to more clients.

Stromer took a course through Mediabistro, as well as networking classes. “If someone were to ask me for my elevator speech ... I’m the ABCs of editors. I do academic, business, and creative [work].”

Karin Horler, who has been freelancing since 2003, advocates joining groups to make contacts and build experience. “My involvement with CWIP was the best marketing — many of my clients came through personal CWIP contacts. I worked hard and tried to present myself as professionally as possible in my work with the CWIP board. I also wrote some articles for *Clips*. Through that work, I showed people that I was good at what I did, so they trusted me with their projects and referred me to others.”

Maximize the Internet

The Internet may seem like an overwhelming expanse of time-wasting websites and contradictory information. But really, the online world is a key tool for new freelancers — not only for marketing purposes, such as building a website and generating a social media presence, but also as a valuable space to learn and network.

“Today, everyone needs an online presence, but there are also many online resources for freelancers that were not available [when I started freelancing in 2003], such as FreelanceFolder.com (www.freelancefolder.com) and FreelanceSwitch.com (www.freelanceswitch.com),” says Horler.

Stromer also recommends online resources, including Nolo.com (www.nolo.com), a website with information on creating contracts. “One of the things I learned was never work with someone without a contract,” she says.

Be Organized

The need for organization touches every part of a business, from time management to accounting. This year, Stromer plans to work with a business coach to create a business plan, allocate her time more wisely, discover where to focus her marketing, and understand exactly how much income she needs to generate.

She also realizes the importance of tracking her time in detail. “I knew to track my hours. What I wish I’d tracked better was *what I was doing* in that 4-hour period.” By tracking how long certain tasks take, she can better estimate how much time she’ll need for a project and how much to charge.

Branch Out

Even if you write within a specialized area, don’t be afraid to explore new types of projects. The beauty of freelancing is having the opportunity to choose what kinds of work you want to do and how much time you are willing to invest. And by diversifying, you won’t have to panic if one of your revenue streams dries up.

“If I had been aware of the many other types of companies and organizations that also need editors, I would have branched out from traditional book publishing a bit sooner,” Horler says.

Stromer is also thinking bigger as she begins the new year. “This year, it’s about adding recurring clients. It’s about continuing to find one-on-one authors *and* being with certain [publishing] houses that can send me work so I’m not looking for every single client this year.”

Stay Strong

Freelancing means you also need to run your own business. You have to think about every area of your business, continue lining up work, and manage your schedule — all at the same time.

As Horler says, “The hardest part [for me] is turning down work, mostly because nearly every project I am offered interests me for one reason or another. I wish I had more hours in the day so that I could say *yes* to everything.”

Stromer cites the irregular flow of work as the most difficult aspect. “Everyone says the hardest thing is the ‘feast and famine.’ It is. I haven’t adjusted, and I was told, ‘Don’t bother trying because you never will.’” But she also says, “This year for me, it’s about trusting somehow something will come through. Because in all the times last year when I was really worried, something at the last minute did pop up.” 



Melissa Tydell started her freelance writing business, Melrose Street Custom Content, in 2011. She will receive her Master of Arts in Writing and Publishing from DePaul University this

spring. She can be reached at melissa.melrosetstreet@gmail.com.

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