

How can you market yourself when you're not a marketing professional?

As a freelancer your 'specialist subject' could possibly be marketing, which is handy, but it's just as likely to be IT, writing, photography, design, software development or whatever. At any rate, the reality is that freelancers can't afford marketing consultants, and if you're not one, how on earth do you market your own services?

Basically, every freelancer has to be a marketing manager, as well as doing the day job. But most freelancers hate the thought of having to 'do marketing', especially when what they are marketing is themselves! I heard a great phrase recently which is that a freelancer must 'spend as much time working ON their career as they do working IN their career'. Which roughly translates into, there's no point being good at what you do if no-one knows you're out there.

There's nothing more frustrating than losing out on a piece of business because the potential client did not know you existed, only to find that the person who did succeed didn't make half as good a job of it as you know you could have done. You might well be better, even a lot better, but often the work goes not to the best person for the job, but instead the one who got themselves in front of the customer at the right time.

So the question is, what do you need to do to change yourself from someone who, on a bad day, might even consider handing out business cards at a funeral, into someone who can double their rates and still have to turn business away? Here are five things to consider:

1. Be responsive

This seems glaringly obvious, but it's still something that many people get wrong. The simple fact is that the job often goes to the person who is the most responsive and communicative, not the person who is the most talented. It's that 'customer service' thing again . . . As soon as you become aware of a potential business opportunity you need to make contact, let them know you exist and that you can do the job. And if there's more information they need and you have to go away and find out, make sure you get back to them quickly, and when you said you would.

This works because clients want to use freelancers who make their lives easier! If you don't call back or provide information quickly, they will immediately think that working with you is going to make their lives harder instead. So if you are responsive, even going the extra mile to provide more information than they asked for, you immediately stand out. And that's what gets you the job, because it makes your client's life easier.

2. Increase your rates.

Millions have been spent trying to understand the psychology of pricing and one thing those researchers have learned is that without realising it, people automatically assume that if something is expensive there must be a reason for it. If you price yourself at the bottom of the market may be doing yourself a huge disservice, as prospective clients look at someone who is cheaper than their competitors and think, "they must be bad, or they wouldn't be so desperate for work they are prepared to charge such low rates."

Also, even if you win new business by charging low rates, you tend to end up with a set of clients who are all more concerned with price rather than quality, and who will beat you down on price at every opportunity! Which only causes problems further down the line. So, even if you don't feel comfortable setting your rates at a higher-than-average level, be careful about going too low as well.

3. Don't take on speculative work

It's easy to make the mistake of thinking that working on spec will give your client an idea of your skills, and they will then be happy to work with you. But instead all it does is reduce the perceived value of what you do. If you're prepared to 'give it away', why should they pay for it? It also comes back to giving the 'you must be desperate for work' impression again. If someone requests speculative work, refuse politely, but tell them you would of course be willing to discuss their concerns, should there be any, after the job is done (but before invoicing) if they are not happy with the finished item in any way.

However, if your business model is based around charging up-front for the first project with a new client then you can use something called 'risk reversal'. Basically this means charging for the job as normal, but giving a written undertaking that, should they not be happy with the work afterwards, you will refund the charge. It shows the client that you are willing to share the risks of a new relationship until your worth is proved, and also make it that much harder for them not to pay you, as to get their money back they have to physically request it, which is actually quite a hard thing to do.

4. Develop the relationship before quoting a price

The 'value' of a piece of work is not just about the job itself and your talents in producing it. The value is also in the service you provide, the levels of communication (as outlined earlier) and ultimately in the ease of doing business with you. Therefore it is important that you demonstrate these factors as soon as possible. If the client gets on well with you from the start and knows that you will be easy to do business with (back to making their lives easier again!) then they are more likely to be mentally in favour of using your services before price is even discussed.

This relationship development can be done by taking time to ask questions about their business and to answer questions about your own, using anecdotes and examples of past situations to demonstrate not only your skills in doing the job, but also your customer service mentality and your communications skills. Once you have developed a rapport, their decision will not be made solely on price but instead on an understanding of your overall value to the project. By the time you get to the fine detail, the conversation should then be more about 'when can you start?' rather than 'how much do you charge?'

5. Ask for the sale - and in a confident way

This is a hard thing to do and goes right back to the initial comment about freelancers being bad marketing people. Generally they are even worse sales people! If you've ever had any involvement in sales training, even from the sidelines, you'll know that the one thing which gets said over and over again is 'ask for the sale'. Many sales people are very bad at this, so there is no shame in being bad at it if you're not a professional!

But, having said that, you do have to ask at some point whether you have won the business or not, and ideally this should be at the end of a meeting, assuming it went well. If you walk away and wait for the call or the email it may never come. Not because you weren't good, but because the potential customer got distracted by the day-to-day, or even got talked into seeing another candidate because they perceived themselves to be 'still looking'. So, at the end of a meeting, aim to agree the next stage. At the very softest that should be "OK, so where do we go from here?" or ideally something more like "I'm sure we can work very well together. I have some capacity next week so would you like to send me a brief and we'll take it from there?".

As long as your 'rapport development' has been effective, the answer should be a positive one at this point!