GROWING YOUR FREELANCE BUSINESS

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Whether you’re moonlighting on the side and feeling insecure about your job, have always wanted to run your own business, or just want more control over your job security, now is the time to be a freelancer.

Look at it this way: When you have a job, you essentially have one main client who can fire you at any moment. But when you’re a freelancer, you can have as many clients as you like, which reduces your dependence on any one.

But freelancing isn’t for everyone, so it’s important to see if it’s right for you before jumping in head first. Here is a checklist of 10 skills and personality traits you need to run a healthy and successful freelancing practice. A lot of these skills are interrelated and build on one another. Some will be obvious; others, not so much. But none are inherent. With work and practice you can develop them, especially if your livelihood depends on it.

1. Curiosity. When you’re curious, you see any and every interaction with a client or prospect as an opportunity to learn more about what they need and how you can help them. But many designers consider themselves to be introverted or shy, which often impedes curiosity and the interaction that goes along with it. As a freelancer, the more curious you are, the wider your network will be and the greater your potential for growth. That type of curiosity is worth developing.

Not everyone is cut out for freelancing. Learn the 10 skills and personality traits you need to succeed as a solopreneur, and decide whether a freelance career is your best bet.
2. **Self-Discipline.** For both new freelancers and veterans, self-discipline can be a challenge. You have no boss to tell you what needs to be done. It’s up to you to determine and then to do it. This goes for everything from what time you get up in the morning to how you plan your workflow to ensure you meet project deadlines. You are accountable to your clients for the work they’ve contracted you to do. But as a self-employed person, you’re especially accountable to yourself. So self-discipline is critical when it comes to the tasks that help your business grow but for which you aren’t paid. This strength must come from within, which takes practice, particularly if you’re accustomed to having a boss.

3. **Professionalism.** A reputation for flakiness precedes most creatives. So you have to work against that preconception by being more buttoned up than you may be on the weekends or than you feel like being. This applies to every detail about how you run your business, even what you wear. There’s nothing wrong with working in your pajamas—as a freelancer, you’re free to do that. But getting dressed to do your work can have a psychological effect on you; it’s often more conducive to being productive.

4. **Organizational Skills.** Success doesn’t spring naturally from chaos. With piles of paper on your desk and your inbox overflowing with e-mail, you won’t be able to find the things you need. The time you waste searching could be spent developing new client relationships. In fact, when you’re disorganized, you’ll miss opportunities without even knowing it. Order is essential and it’s a skill you can learn, but it requires discipline (see No. 2).

5. **Self-Awareness.** Being self-employed is one of the best ways to learn about yourself; at least it can be, if you’re curious (see No. 1). Your own business is a laboratory for your personal growth, and your clients are an ongoing flow of people to experiment with. Every day is different, and you get to see how you respond in all sorts of situations, especially if you choose to challenge yourself and try new things. You learn what types of people push your buttons and trigger your least productive behaviors. And when you’re a freelancer, you can choose to either get better at dealing with those responses or decide not to deal with those people at all.

6. **Self-Confidence.** “I don’t have the confidence to do that,” is a common (and accepted) excuse for not doing something new, like presenting your pitch to a new prospect. But self-confidence isn’t a “thing” you either have or don’t have. And it isn’t a prerequisite for action. In fact, it’s a byproduct of action—and it develops through practice—practice running a business every single day, doing the marketing, and negotiating with and managing clients, vendors or subcontractors. The only way to develop confidence is by doing, by experimenting, by trying something out, and by making mistakes and learning from them.

7. **Patience.** It’s a muscle, a weak one in many people, completely hidden in others, but well worth strengthening because, as the saying goes, “Good things come to those who wait.” And there’s a lot to wait for. It will take time for your marketing efforts to take hold, for prospects to respond and for people to be ready to work with you (i.e., in their moment of need). Because even if they love your work and want to work with you, timing is essential. You have to wait for the right time, which requires patience.

8. **Flexibility.** Freelancers are actually in the best position to be flexible. You must be ready to adapt: your services, your clients, your prices, how you package your offerings. You must listen closely to hear what the market needs, then turn on a dime and offer it, even if it’s something you never thought you would provide. As the future moves more and more online, you, too, must move in that direction, whether that means allying yourself with partners who have services to complement yours or learning the basics of WordPress design so you can say yes when a prospect asks for it.

9. **Strong Communication Skills.** You can’t control how someone receives your “communications,” but you certainly can control what and how you communicate, verbally or in writing. Whether in response to an unsatisfied or impatient client or because a vendor has made a mistake, if you haven’t thought through what you want to say, you may say the wrong thing or, at best, something unclear that can be easily misconstrued. This happens often via e-mail, which people read quickly or simply skim. So it’s worth putting some communication processes in place—even if it’s just you—about how to respond in common situations, especially the difficult ones when emotions are running high and there’s a lot at stake.

10. **Commitment.** If you’re a new freelancer, you may not be ready to commit 100% to running a business, but you must be committed to giving it a try, even as it changes and evolves. If you’re committed, you return calls and e-mails in a timely manner, you meet deadlines (or communicate clearly when you can’t) and you bill your clients right away. Clients and prospects can tell if you’re not committed.

If you focus on these 10 basic elements, you’ll put yourself on the right track. Over and above these, the real secret to success (which is really no secret at all) is perseverance. Built on commitment, invigorated by confidence and made possible by patience, perseverance will allow you to bypass everyone who isn’t committed, confident or patient.

Your clients will take you seriously if they realize that you’re serious, that you’re not going away, that you care and that you’ll be there to help them. Perseverance builds trust, an essential element of every successful business. By doing good work and staying in touch, you send a message that says, “I’m reliable. I’m consistent. You can depend on me.”

Ilise Benun, founder of Marketing Mentor and co-producer of the Creative Freelancer Conference (www.creativefreelancerconference.com), works with creative professionals who are serious about building a healthy business. Follow Benun on Twitter (@MMToolbox) or sign up for her Quick Tips at www.marketing-mentortips.com.
Some creative professionals are forced into freelancing by a relocation or layoff, while others long dream of life as a solopreneur. Either way, making the transition from full-timer to successful freelancer takes preparation, hard work and often a mindset shift. If you’re thinking of going out of your own—or if you have a feeling that path is in your future—start planning and preparing now. Here are the first few steps to take.

**STEP 1: START BY MOONLIGHTING**

Moonlighting can be good practice for freelancing. Take a few projects on the side to see how you do. Do you enjoy working on a variety of different projects or do you find it chaotic? Do you manage your priorities well or do you procrastinate? Can you meet your client’s deadline?

“Moonlighting will let you know if you are disciplined and will prepare you for being in business for yourself,” says Kristin Maija Peterson of Grand Ciel Design in St. Paul, MN. “My moonlight projects allowed me to build my confidence working with clients of my own, not to mention expand my creative range. In the end, the lessons I learned moonlighting made for a smoother segue to freelancing full time.”

**STEP 2: BUILD A NETWORK**

Freelancing or working on your own doesn’t necessarily mean you’re working alone. Technology makes it supremely easy to get help from people just like you, no matter where they are. To Lidia Varesco Raсoma of Chicago-based Lidia Varesco Design, this support was invaluable. “Simple questions such as, how important is a second phone line and how to handle taxes can seem overwhelming until you talk to a seasoned pro. Over the years, I’ve paid it forward by being an adviser and cheerleader for others who have taken the solopreneur plunge,” she says.

**STEP 3: GET YOUR FINANCES IN ORDER**

Getting started as a creative freelancer doesn’t take a lot of money—which is both good news and bad news. Because the barrier to entry is so low, most creative professionals don’t do enough preparation, especially on the financial side. That can be a problem when it takes longer than you imagine to get your business off the ground. That’s why you need to save a minimum of three to six months of your basic expenses as a cushion. Otherwise, you’ll be desperately taking whatever jobs come along.

When Heather Parlato of Los Angeles-based Parlato Design Studio was laid off in late 2007, she was lucky to have three months’ notice to prepare, plus severance and steady work from one client to get her going. “I took stock of how seriously I had been running my business as a moonlighter and ramped up in preparation for it to be my sole source of income,” she
says. “I bought and read the most recommended books on running a freelance design business (see Resources sidebar above) and noted the recurring advice: Stop doing your own taxes, solidify your contract, distill your services into a process, and figure out your operational and profitable hourly rates. I also lined up an accountant, set up Quickbooks (accounting software), downloaded the AIGA sample contract, and started creating basic project intake forms.”

Parlato also stresses the importance of lowering your overhead by paring expenses and paying off loans. “My overhead has never been lower, which has really helped in the leaner times when my own clients were caught up in the recession,” she says.

STEP 4: GET SOME MARKETING TOOLS
It’s never too early to start talking about your independent services to friends and family or even to do some extracurricular networking, which only takes a business card and a portfolio of work. But if you’re going to be serious about it, you need a few basic marketing tools in place. “A website, samples and references (even LinkedIn ‘references’) are the most important things from the start,” says Alisa Bonsignore, a Northern California-based writer. “These initial tools prove that you’re a real designer/writer/etc. who can meet client expectations.”

Parlato got started with her first identity and a rudimentary marketing piece. “Of course, all of this would change once I got to know myself as a freelancer, but these formative pieces got me out the door,” she says.

Note that these initial efforts are all preliminary and will evolve, so don’t stress over any of it. Your website doesn’t need to be perfect before it goes live. Even the name of your business doesn’t have to be final. What you call your company might change as your work evolves. In fact, Bonsignore’s company name, Clarifying Complex Ideas, didn’t come until she’d been working solo for two and a half years, when she refined her focus on a target market at a business conference for freelancers (see Resources sidebar).

STEP 5: BALANCE YOUR TWO JOBS
Until it’s time to take the leap, accept the fact that you’ll essentially be working two jobs. “You need to have both the time and mental energy to balance two schedules,” Parlato says. “Though it may be tempting, don’t do anything to jeopardize your job by working on side projects at work if it’s frowned upon— you never know, they may be your next client. The trick to balance is getting to know yourself and how you work. Maybe you can get a little extra correspondence in before your workday, and then give yourself a couple hours of work after dinner, keeping in touch as needed through the day.”

Bonsignore acknowledges it can get ugly: “Honestly, I don’t know that I could have done it now that I have a young kid. It’s long hours and merciless schedules, and kids don’t exactly tolerate Mommy being preoccupied with the computer. And don’t think that you can get anything done while they’re in the house. People assume that ‘working from home’ means ‘working at home with the kiddo.’ I’d be out of work if I did that. I can’t get anything done when he’s here, and frankly I’d rather have him in day care/preschool while I work so that I can give him my undivided attention when he’s at home.”

STEP 6: MAKE THE LEAP
Sometimes, your current employer will provide the push you need, whether by laying you off and/or by becoming your first client. But if it’s up to you to decide, it’s best to have a cushion of cash and a cache of clients, ideally a couple of regular clients who need ongoing services.

Bonsignore’s advice: “If your finances are in order; if your business is booming, so much so that it detracts from your day job; if you have a spouse with health insurance (a huge plus!); if you’re comfortable with uncertainty; and if you’re prepared to meticulously document hours, receipts and other expenses—then and only then are you really ready to rock this thing the right way.”

You’ll know you’re ready when it feels like you’re working way too hard and something’s gotta give.

RESOURCES
Creative Freelancer Conference: June 23–24, 2011, Chicago; www.creativefreelancerconference.com

“The Creative Professional’s Guide to Money” by Ilise Benun; MyDesignShop.com (see also the companion DesignCast series)

“The Designer’s Guide to Marketing & Pricing” by Ilise Benun and Peleg Top; MyDesignShop.com

“The Business Side of Creativity” by Cameron Foote; MyDesignShop.com

The Graphic Artist’s Guild’s “Handbook of Pricing & Ethical Guidelines;” MyDesignShop.com

“Talent is Not Enough: Business Secrets for Designers” by Shel Perkins

“The Graphic Design Business Book” by Tad Crawford; MyDesignShop.com

“Get Clients Now” by C.J. Hayden

“The E-Myth: Why Most Businesses Don’t Work and What to Do About It” by Michael Gerber

“The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles” by Stephen Pressfield
LAST WORDS OF ADVICE
Make a plan but keep it loose. Don’t get attached to anything about the way you start: who you thought you’d be working with, on what, how or where. Everything will change as your business evolves, as you get to know yourself as a freelancer and as you get to know your clients and their needs. If you can be flexible from the start, that ability will keep you on course.

Ilise Benun, founder of Marketing Mentor and co-producer of the Creative Freelancer Conference (www.creativefreelancerconference.com), works with creative freelancers who are serious about building healthy businesses. Sign up for her Quick Tips at www.marketing-mentortips.com.

ALISA BONSIGNORE PLEASANTON, CA
www.clarifyingcomplexideas.com

HEATHER PARLATO LOS ANGELES www.parlatodesign.com

KRISTIN MAIJA PETERSON ST. PAUL, MN www.grandciel.com

LIDIA VARESCO RACOMA CHICAGO www.lsvdesign.com

FREELANCER SPOTLIGHT
Neil Renicker, Renicker Studio, Dayton, OH
www.renickerstudio.com

I just made the transition to freelancing. Here are a few key things that did it for me:

1 A goal. I determined that I’d make the leap by date “x” (about one year away at that point). I told my current employer and other friends and family about the plans, so it would have been hard to back out.

2 Talks with inspiring, successful people. I had meetings with people who gave me good advice and told me it could be done. I believed them. They told me to have a vision, get help from others and don’t spend much money. That made sense to me.

3 A commitment to hard work. When you realize that your venture is going to have to keep bread on the table, you don’t have much choice but to work like crazy. The commitment to work tirelessly to get this thing off the ground helped me out a lot.
As a freelancer wearing all the hats in your business, you can’t afford to waste a second or a penny. That’s why it’s important to streamline your marketing efforts—which means you need to focus, focus, focus. Focus requires discipline, which doesn’t come naturally to most of us. Focus means committing and then recommitting every day. But focus doesn’t mean rigidity; in fact, it requires flexibility so that as business conditions change—and they’re changing constantly and quickly—your focus can shift naturally.

Focus on what? On what you’re trying to achieve (your goals), on how you’re going to get there (your marketing tools) and on who’s going to help you (your target markets).

So what does it mean to focus on a market? Here’s what it isn’t: declaring your target market today and revamping everything overnight. I’ve seen more than one designer choose a target market, spend time and money (lots of both) redesigning their website, creating a brochure, doing everything to get ready to present themselves to the target market—everything except the most important thing: assessing whether that market is viable. As a result, they abandon everything and revamp again in six months when they discover the market isn’t able to sustain their business.

Finding your focus can (and should) take months, even years. And it doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Think of it as an evolution. You begin to explore a few industries and start to understand the challenges and the struggles of the people who work in those markets. You take a step in their direction. You listen for what they need and offer up resources to help. You assess the responsiveness of the people, slowly turning more and more attention to the most positive responses. And you don’t give up quickly or easily when you encounter quiet or even silence.

Paradoxically, focusing doesn’t necessarily limit you to that one area. It’s like juggling. You get one ball in the air by starting to focus on one market, then add more later. In fact, the ideal situation is to develop two or three areas of focus in case one becomes the epicenter of an economic downturn. That way, you have the flexibility and the agility to shift gears without starting from scratch.

**HOW TO CHOOSE A MARKET**

First, look at the markets you’re currently serving or those you’d like to. A successful business is centered around the needs of a market, not around the business owner’s wishes and desires. Don’t start with “Who do I want to work with?” Instead, ask, “What does the market need and how can I satisfy that need while doing something I love?” Ideally, what you want will overlap with the needs of the market.

How do you find out what the market needs? Follow business trends in the news and watch where investors and the government are putting their money.

Second, look at what you know. Whenever possible, don’t start from scratch. The foundation of your business should be rooted strongly in a subject you know well and in which you already have some experience and connections. Even if you’re just starting out, you’ll get farther faster by building on past employment, a recent pro-bono or freelance project, even a hobby. Clients don’t want to be your guinea pigs. If you can confidently say, “I understand your business and can help you,” your prospects will respond more positively than if you say, “Well, I don’t know too much about this market, but I really like the things you make.”

For example, Denver-based freelancer Lauren Hybinette started her business in 2010 with a focus on her personal passion—the outdoor industry. And it’s working. “My clients know that I know their market because I’m intertwined with every aspect of it. This provides a win-win for both sides,” Hybinette says.

Third, look at the industries you’ve served in the past. Unlike a major design firm, you don’t have excess resources and a vast experience base. Your clients need to know that you not only understand the specific challenges that they face, but also that you have
explicit experience that will help them. For example, many companies in the health care market are currently hiring contract workers—and they’re focusing their spending on technology (like administrative and record-keeping systems). If you have a background working with health care clients, consider also reaching out to the tech companies serving that market.

Fourth, look for markets that are growing. Don’t focus on a niche that’s on the decline, no matter how much you love it. Keep an eye out for growth, whether it’s happening in the markets you know or in related areas. For example, if the publishing world is in flux, consider the way it’s changing and find the growth areas. (Hint: Think e-books and interactive publishing.) Or what about higher education? State universities may be taking a funding hit, but private schools and for-profit online schools are expanding.

Finally, look for markets with money to spend. Unless you have a trust fund, seek prospective clients with budgets and a demonstrated willingness to spend them on design. Can they pay you what you need to earn? If not, don’t even put a niche on your short list. How do you know? Research an industry segment; if every company you run across has a poorly constructed website and horrible business cards, you can sniff out a lack of emphasis on effective design.

START BROAD, THEN EVOLVE
As you go through this process, assess the temperature of the markets and the responsiveness of the people by looking for answers to these questions:

1. How many prospects are there (locally, nationally, globally)?
2. What’s the average project or purchase size?
3. How often would they need your services?

For example, if there are thousands of prospects nationwide, the average project carries a healthy budget and prospects have a need every quarter (like a regular publication), it could be a very promising market. On the other hand, if there are 15 major companies in the market, they would only need your services once a year and have no history of investing money in design, steer clear.

After you’ve done this initial research, select one market to focus on first. Then, strategically choose the most effective marketing tools for that segment and carefully craft a targeted message that speaks directly to the needs of those prospects. Blanket that communication across multiple media so you connect with potential clients wherever they routinely turn for information: social networks, e-mail, direct mail, industry blogs or publications, trade shows. Through repetition, your message will have a much stronger impact and this group of prospects will start to trust you, without even knowing you yet.

Spend the first six months assessing response to see what’s working. Is your e-mail list growing? Are your posts on industry blogs prompting traffic back to your website? Have prospects heard of you when you make that initial sales contact? Use this information to hone your promotional efforts. And as your marketing machine starts to generate results, take stock of whether your target category will keep you busy enough, or whether you’re ready to investigate another related niche. All of this takes time. Be patient.


Lauren Hybinette Denver www.laurenhybinette.com
5 Steps to finding the right clients
The secret to closing a deal with new clients is ushering them through a step-by-step qualifying process that weeds out the tire-kickers. Follow this tried-and-true formula to find the clients you really want to work with. 

BY ILISE BENUN
Many designers claim to have trouble “closing the sale” and getting the client to sign on the dotted line. They sometimes even imagine there’s some secret to closing that they don’t know yet.

If there is a secret to closing, it’s that you can’t close someone who isn’t closeable.

That’s why it’s essential to qualify your prospects first, so you only spend your time on the ones who are most likely to actually become clients. This article will present a step-by-step process for qualifying prospects so that your closing rate is higher and you don’t waste time on tire-kickers.

Many creatives shrink away from selling—of which closing is the most important aspect—for fear of being perceived as a salesperson or slimy (or both). But if you think about it, all creative entrepreneurs, solopreneurs or self-employed freelancers are commission-only salespeople—you don’t make a dime until you close the sale—and can therefore barely afford to avoid selling. It’s best to learn to do it in your own style.

The idea of qualifying—deciding if a prospect is good enough for you—may be a foreign concept if you’re in the habit of taking whatever work comes along and/or blindly assuming that every prospect is a viable one. It’s your job to put your prospects through a process to determine whether they’re qualified to work with you, just like they’re doing when they approach you. If you don’t, you’re putting yourself in an extremely vulnerable and desperate position: waiting to be chosen.

Qualifying is the process of finding closeable prospects and converting them to clients through your strategic marketing process. You’re not necessarily in control, but you’re guiding those prospects through your system from one level to the next, as they become ready to focus on their needs, available to hear more and able to give you increasingly more of their attention.

Know Who’s Qualified

In order to be closeable, prospects first have to be “qualified.” This isn’t about who is or isn’t good enough to work with you. It’s not even about who you want to work with. Qualified prospects fit certain objective criteria that you set for your business. You use that list of criteria to determine whether a prospect is a good fit so that you can do your best job. Here are some general criteria to serve as a basis to develop your own list:

- **Mindset:** They behave like professional clients, not amateurs (and especially not like children), and they don’t have mental obstacles to working with you because of your location or the size of your business.
- **Pricing:** They’re aware of your pricing, because you’ve told them up front your general price range or they’ve seen it on your website, and they can afford you.
- **Timing:** Both their expectations and timeframe are clear and realistic.
- **Influence:** They’re the decision-maker or have enough influence over the decision-maker.

When you know who you’re looking for, it’s so much easier to recognize them when you see them. (See the Web Extras at the end of this article for a link to sample qualifying materials.)
PRE-QUALIFY THEM
Once you know who you’re looking for, you can use your marketing tools to pre-
qualify prospects. The best tool to use is content marketing to draw the right people
to your front door, your lead-generating website. This clearly positions your firm and
quickly discourages the “wrong” people from knocking, while capturing the quali-
ified prospects and ushering them smoothly into your process. If you refuse to use
your website this way, you’re destined to deal with unqualified prospects.

Mark O’Brien, author of “A Website That Works” and president of Newfangled.
com, says, “An expertise-based approach to search engine optimization, paired with
content strategy, makes your site increasingly effective as a marketing tool. The
process goes something like this: You add content to your site that interests your
prospects. Google indexes it and brings the right people to your doorstep. Once they
arrive, they’re convinced of your expertise through the mass of focused educational
content that seems to have been written just for them. They identify your site as
an educational resource they need, and they act on a call-to-action form, which is
based on your content strategy (e.g., “Sign Up For Our Newsletter”). This strategy
works because, by the time the prospect gets in touch with you, they’re already well
on their way to making the decision to work with you.” (See O’Brien’s Interactive
column on page 80.)

Another effective element of a lead-generating website is a page where visitors
can get a sense of your general pricing. But there’s an ongoing debate about whether
posting your prices publicly is a smart business move since it can “scare off” certain
prospects and reveal information that you may not want competitors to have. Both
of those things are true, but the benefits may outweigh the downsides.

In a LinkedIn discussion on this topic, John Arquette, the vice-president of
Delphine, a letterpress invitation and design company based in Charleston, SC,
 wrote that, “Putting pricing up on our site was the best thing we ever did. It stopped
tons of time-wasting calls and e-mails about pricing from those who could have
weeded themselves out. Higher-quality prospects will not be scared away by general
information about pricing.”

On the other side of the argument is Jeff Fisher, a veteran logo designer in
Portland, OR, who wrote, “My design business has been online since 1998, and
from the very beginning I knew that I would never be posting prices online. First
of all, the specifics of each project vary so much that generic price posts might just
complicate matters and confuse site visitors. Second, posting prices would elimi-
nate the opportunity to have a business dialogue with a potential client. Those truly
interested in my services contact me via phone or e-mail. ‘Tire kickers’ are quickly
weeded out by the initial pricing information I then provide. I have an e-mail that I
send out immediately upon getting any request for additional specifics.”

You can hint at your price range or starting point more subtly by offering on your
contact form a drop down menu that starts at your minimum. Most (but not all)
with budgets smaller than that number will assume they can’t afford you.

Here’s one way to decide what’s best for you: If you need work and want to be
able to decide on a case-by-case basis which prospects are qualified, then don’t post
pricing. But keep in mind that it relieves you of the right to complain about low-
quality prospects. If, on the other hand, you have plenty of work but want higher
quality clients, post your fees, especially if they’re on the high side. At that level,
your time is more valuable and you simply can’t afford to waste it on those who can’t
afford you in the first place.

ARE YOUR CLIENTS ‘AMATEURS’ OR ‘PROFESSIONALS’?

“Amateur” clients complain more, pay less and take more of your time than “professional” cli-
ents. To them, creative services are like fast food. They want the fastest and the cheapest. They
don’t plan ahead and tend to have unrealistic expectations. They’ve never worked with some-
one like you and don’t know the cost implications. They’re impulsive and disorganized, and
their chaos readily infiltrates your interactions. They think they know what they need; your job
is to execute what they have in mind. They don’t understand that you could provide a fresh, profes-
sional approach. Learn to spot the amateurs a mile away, well before you get involved.

After more than 20 years in business, Jonathan Cleveland of Boston-based Cleveland Design has
learned how to spot the unqualified prospects right away. “One big red flag is when they show
a sample of a brochure, for example, and ask if we can copy it,” he says. “That demonstrates no
awareness of what a designer does.”

By contrast, one of the qualifying criteria Cleveland is looking for is a “global marketing mindset,”
which means that his most qualified prospects are good partners, forward-thinking and recognize the
value of what the designer brings to the table.

“You have to listen closely and sometimes read between the lines,” Cleveland says. “Qualified
prospects with a global marketing mindset don’t care where you’re located or what size you are.
They trust you and they realize that doing business virtually is the nature of business in the
global economy. The ones who think they need a multimillion dollar agency in their backyard will
never be convinced otherwise. So if they keep bringing up the issue of location and don’t seem
convinced that e-mail and Skype are good enough, or if we need to sit on a couch together to discuss
this more than once, then they don’t have a global marketing mindset. With experience, you learn
when to let those prospects go.”
USHER THEM THROUGH YOUR QUALIFYING GATEWAY

Those who make it through your pre-qualifying process usually arrive at your “gateway” by sending an email, filling out your contact form and/or calling you to talk about a specific project. They may ask right away for a proposal or a meeting, but don’t agree to anything without putting them through your qualifying process.

No matter what you call this process—free consultation or critique, brainstorming session or preliminary diagnostic—the goal is to assess their qualifications, and that’s best done on the phone or via Skype in real time. Use that time to find out: Do they know what they need? Is their timeframe realistic? Can they afford you? Develop a short list of questions or cheat sheet from the qualifying criteria developed in Step 1.

Once you’ve determined that they may be a good fit, you can even charge a fee for an initial consultation, which is especially effective when the client doesn’t know what they need. You can and should be paid for the strategic thinking that goes into scoping out a project—it’s actually the most valuable service you can provide, especially with crowdsourced designers a click away.

Erin Pheil takes the paid initial consultation one step further. Her Frisco, CO-based web design and strategy firm Timeforcake.com offers a “Website Blueprint” which essentially replaces (and improves upon) the proposal process. “The client pays a flat fee, usually under $5,000, to have us do the exploration,” Pheil explains. “We put together a blueprint containing all the information they need to move forward with us or not. The goal is to generate trust during the process so they of course want to go with us. But even if they hire someone else to complete the project, we get paid well for our work, and our clients get a tremendous value. Plus, they don’t have to take a huge plunge and commit to working with a company they’re not familiar with on a project that hasn’t been scoped.”

ASSESS THEIR READINESS

Once you’ve identified the prospects who are qualified to work with you, the next step is to determine whether they’re ready to be closed.

Often, it’s unmistakable: Their need suddenly becomes urgent, which isn’t always a good thing for the project, but that seems to be the reality of how business is done these days.

Other times, it’s not always easy to tell if they’re ready. Be sensitive to the signals without making assumptions about what they mean. For example, you may assume that because they were really excited in the meeting, they will be a cinch to close. (Maybe they’re that way with everyone.) Or you may assume that because they haven’t yet responded about your proposal, they must have chosen someone else. (Maybe the project got put on hold.)

Don’t judge lack of responsiveness as a lack of interest; it might just be a lack of readiness. In fact, one of the traps many creatives fall into is making excitement or enthusiasm for readiness. There are so many reasons a prospect might be excited. They may want very much to work with you without realizing they can’t afford you—another reason it’s essential to talk about money early. Or they may not know how to say “no.”

Cordelia Norris, a graphic design freelancer in Knoxville, TN, has a lot of experience with excited prospects who never convert into actual clients. “Ah yes. In my experience, they’re typically small business owners who have little experience working with a professional designer,” she says. “They love the idea of design and are very social, but are ultimately commitment-phobic and can waste a lot of your time. I’m still learning how to spot the enthusiastic prospect. I think that letting people know that you’re really busy and not cheap may help.”

To gauge actual readiness, it helps to have objective qualifying criteria as in Step 1. Prospects are likely to be ready if:

• They’re open to continuing the conversation and readily take your calls (mindset).
• You’ve talked price and agreed to a budget (pricing).
• Their need is imminent and they have a realistic deadline in mind (timing).
• They’re the decision-maker or have enough influence over the decision-maker (influence).

Go through this checklist with each prospect. And if they’re not ready, don’t be discouraged. Just get them into your marketing system. Send them your e-mail newsletter. Connect with them on LinkedIn. Follow them on Twitter and, when appropriate, friend them on Facebook. This will automate the process of staying in touch and keep you on their radar until they are ready—which could be months or, sometimes, years.
CLOSE THE DEAL ON THOSE WHO ARE CLOSEABLE

After all this qualifying—which is very labor-intensive but worth every minute—you’ll end up with a batch of high-quality prospects who are ready or almost ready to be closed. This is what you want! What can you do to close the deal?

• **Mindset:** Don’t be cocky and don’t count your chickens before they hatch. The best attitude to have is, “We’ve got plenty of irons in the fire. This would be good to get, but we don’t need it. We’ll do everything we can, but if it falls through, there will be opportunities in the future.” Then focus your attention on someone else.

• **Pricing:** Make it clear that you’re ready to negotiate if necessary, but keep desperation out of it and don’t volunteer any discounts.

• **Timing:** Give them a deadline to nudge them toward a decision. Say, “We can hold time for you in our production schedule if you sign the contract before the end of the month. But next month is looking very busy.” Provide a process for moving forward with language like, “Here’s what’s next if you decide to move forward.” This shows your professionalism.

• **Influence:** Continue to exert your influence and remember that the ball is always in your court. Keep looking for ways to demonstrate your enthusiasm and competence.

So you see that, in fact, there’s no secret to any of this marketing and sales stuff. It’s really a question of focus, hard work, persistence and effort, every single day. And you’ll know it’s working when you no longer say, “All I get are tire-kickers” or “I can’t seem to close enough clients” or, the most common, “I need prospects/clients with better budgets.”

Ilise Benun is a national speaker, founder of Marketing Mentor and co-founder of the Creative Freelancer Conference (www.creativefreelancerconference.com). She works closely with creative professionals who are serious about growing their businesses. Her most recent business tools for creative professionals include “The Proposal Bundle” (with 11 actual proposals to use as models) and “The Pricing Bundle,” as well as seven traditional books (visit MyDesignShop.com). Sign up for her free Quick Tips from Marketing Mentor at www.marketing-mentortips.com.

**WEB EXTRAS**

Visit HOW’s website for related information on finding the right clients, including:

- sample qualifying criteria
- a real-world client proposal
- a podcast of Ilise Benun’s interview with Mark O’Brien

HOWdesign.com/HOW-September-2012

PRE-PROPOSAL QUESTIONS CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU WRITE

Once you’ve qualified the prospect and decided it’s a good fit for both of you, you’re ready to agree to write a proposal. Adapt this checklist of questions (excerpted from “The Designer’s Proposal Bundle;” MyDesignShop.com) for your gateway process:

- What is your budget?
- What is the timeframe?
- What are the big-picture goals of this project?
- What is the specific objective you need to achieve?
- How will you measure the success of this project?
- What/who is the market for this project?
- Who is the main decision-maker on this project?
- What models are you using for this project?
- Where is the source content coming from?
- How much research will be necessary?
- Are there specific technologies you do or do not want used?
- How does this project fit into your big picture?
- Have you ever done something like this before? If so, what?

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You run your own freelance business so you can make a living doing something you love with people who won’t make your life miserable. Right?

Even if that’s not your current reality, it could be—if you decide to be the boss. That means taking charge of the way you run your business, rather than letting your clients boss you around.

Isn’t the customer always right? To an extent.

Two skills can help you retain control of your work, your schedule and your sanity: No. 1, choosing the right clients and No. 2, managing their expectations. You need both of those capabilities, because if you choose the wrong clients, all your excellent client-management skills will have little effect. And if you manage the right clients poorly, you’ll create avoidable problems for yourself and for them.
SKILL NO. 1: CHOOSING THE RIGHT CLIENTS
Start by accepting the fact that not every client who comes your way is a good fit.
Who is a good fit? That’s up to you to decide, and the definition changes over time. But we can say that clients who respect and value your work and are willing—and able—to pay for it in a timely manner are most likely to be your ideal customers.

Often, it’s easier to spot those prospects who aren’t right for you than it is to identify those who are. These red flags seem obvious, but if you’re feeling desperate or unsure about where the next job is coming from, you’ll probably ignore them.

Watch for these warning signs:
• Their first question is, “How much does it cost?”
• They want it yesterday.
• They don’t answer your questions completely—or at all.
• They don’t know what they want or keep changing their mind.
• They don’t want to pay your rates, or they keep trying to renegotiate the project fee.

Being the boss of your business means you stop ignoring those ominous signals and politely decline the clients who don’t fit, so you can find clients who do and then get busy managing them.

SKILL NO. 2: MANAGING EXPECTATIONS
Although you can’t control your clients, you can manage their expectations. But you have to train them first—which you’re actually already doing, whether you’re aware of it or not. With every action, you set precedents, which are very hard to change once they’re in place. Respond to their first e-mail right away, and your client will think that’s normal for you and come to expect it. Turn a project around in a day because you happen to have the time, and from now on they’ll assume that’s your style.

If you want more control over your time, you must train your clients to work on your schedule. Veteran Los Angeles-area solopreneur Luke Mysse suggests dedicating one day per week to focus on your business, with no client work or contact. “This may seem impossible at first,” he acknowledges. “How will they wait a whole day when they can barely stand to wait an hour for you to return their call?”

“They will,” Mysse affirms. “If you set aside one day a week, or even one morning a week to start, they will eventually get used to your new schedule, especially if you give them some warning so they can prepare.”

What else can you do to manage your clients’ expectations? Here are several strategies:

- Put absolutely everything in writing, in detail. That’s what Kristin Maija Peterson of Grand Ciel Design in St. Paul, MN, does. “In our first meeting, I outline the process so they know what to expect,” she says. “Once they sign off on a proposal, I back up my verbal process with written phases of the project and timeline. I include what needs to happen at the end of each phase. I adjust my level of communication to accommodate their style and schedule—they know I’m there for them. In return, they’re equally respectful of my time and schedule.”

- Recap key information verbally. Sometimes, putting it in writing isn’t enough, because clients often don’t read a detailed agreement. So Heather Parlato, of Parlato Design Studio in Los Angeles, has learned to preempt potential problems by verbally highlighting certain details. “I’ve learned to tell clients everything up front,” Parlato says. “I tell them what my process involves, what a typical timeline will look like for the project in question and the limitations. I’ll say, ‘We do two rounds of revisions to refine the content, and that is included in the price. But if there are additional revisions that cannot be avoided, those will be extra, so anything we can do to revise as completely as possible in those two rounds is best.’”

- Most important, address the questions your clients may not know to ask. Parlato outlines the points in her contract that are most often misunderstood, especially regarding payments, usage rights and ownership. “Clients don’t read the fine print, and they react much better to what’s in the contract when it’s explained verbally,” she says.

- Make sure their expectations are realistic. Parlato also asks up front about the client’s expected results for the project. “Often, my clients don’t have a firm success metric they’re looking for, so I define what I think we

FREELANCE SPOTLIGHT
Neil Renicker, Renicker Studio
Tipp City, OH; www.renickerstudio.com

I’m learning that the most important antidote for client confusion or disillusionment is simply communication. It’s also important to be aware of your client’s communication style and preferences. The challenge lies in being perceptive enough to understand the way our clients communicate best. One of my clients is incredibly busy and fast-paced. I imagine him receiving a large number of e-mails per day, so I try to ensure that all of my communication to him is brief and to the point. Another client is painstakingly detail-oriented and organized. Repeating expectations, asking questions and clarifying with this man is hard to overdo.

We should ask a few questions up front that will aid us in wisely communicating with our client throughout the duration of a project (i.e., “How do you prefer to communicate—in person/telephone/e-mail?”; “Do you welcome frequent updates and appreciate keeping tabs on small changes to the project, or do you prefer I work in the background until your input is mandatory for progress?”). When in doubt, err on the side of over-communicating.
GET COMFORTABLE WITH DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS
By Luke Mysse; www.lukemysse.com

People are always surprised when I dive right into an awkward conversation with little or no fear. The truth is, nobody (myself included) likes awkward conversations. But I would much rather talk about the elephant in the room when there’s still hope of getting him through the door instead of waiting until he grows so big that he punches the roof off the house.

Here are a few things that I’ve found helpful when approaching a tough subject with anyone, including a client:

RESPECT
Regardless of how awkward or hurt you feel, a little respect for others can go a long way. You blow your top and nobody wins. Be mad at the situation, yes, but not at the person. This takes humility, but everyone wins when people are humble.

CLARITY
Being clear about how you feel and defining the desired outcome will help you keep some of the emotion out of it. Being passionate is fine, but if your emotions get the best of you, that’s when the false accusations start to fly. If the situation warrants, you may also want to put together a list of things to cover or solve in order to keep the conversation on target. In some situations, this list can be e-mailed in advance to prepare everyone for some elephant herding.

COURAGE
It takes courage, but approach the situation with the end in mind. How much energy and time is wasted avoiding awkward conversations? The truth is that some things just won’t go away on their own. You can wish all you want, but at some point that conversation needs to happen. The sooner you dive in, the sooner it will be over, no matter the outcome.

If you want more control over your time, you must train your clients to work on your schedule.

Keep them in the loop. Constant communication is a key to managing expectations. You can’t read your clients’ minds and they can’t read yours. That’s why keeping clients in the loop is worth the extra effort and attention. Sometimes all it takes is a quick phone call or an e-mail update. Rienzo sends a lot of messages saying, “Your bio is 75% ready. I’m putting on the finishing touches and will send it over for your review on Friday.”

Parlato also sends little reminders or check-ins about a project’s progress, especially if a problem crops up, as often happens. “I contact them as soon as I know I might have to reschedule something,” she says. “That way, even if a milestone isn’t on the exact date we’d planned, they know I care about their work and won’t leave them with any surprises.”

Being the boss with your clients isn’t about being a bully or getting your own way. “To me, it boils down to being a professional,” Mysse says. “Take control and lead others to greater prosperity and understanding. A bully sticks around and tries to force his way, no matter how bad the fit. Be a professional and know when things don’t fit. A pro knows when he’s a bad match and when to bow out.”

Ilise Benun, founder of Marketing Mentor and co-producer of the Creative Freelancer Conference (www.creativefreelancerconference.com), works with creative freelancers who are serious about building healthy businesses. Sign up for her Quick Tips at www.marketing-mentor.com.

WEB EXTRA
Establishing rules and policies for your business—in writing—will help you maintain control in your client relationships. Download a sample policy document: HOWdesign.com/businesspolicies
How many times have you submitted a proposal and then never heard from your prospect again? Or worse, learned that the project was awarded to someone else because your price was too high?

If either of these is a common occurrence, you’re probably wasting valuable time writing proposals you will never win. The only solution is to learn how to distinguish the viable prospects from the deadbeats before you agree to write anything. And that means you have to find out what the prospect’s budget is.

Discovering a prospect’s budget isn’t that complicated; it just requires some creativity and persistence. It’s one more business communication skill you can learn if you want to save yourself time and, more important, anxiety.

After being in business for six years, Ashleigh Hansberger and Sunny Bonnell of Myrtle Beach, SC-based Motto Agency have learned that skill. “Proposal writing can be a huge waste of time,” Hansberger says. “We learned to talk more and write less, and to agree on cost verbally before we put it in writing.”

TALK ABOUT MONEY EARLY

Broaching the subject of money as early in the process as possible puts you in the driver’s seat. It positions you as the professional you are, planting the seeds for the client to trust they’re in good hands. It also allows you to weed out inappropriate candidates. Your goal in
LET’S TALK ABOUT MONEY

There are several ways to segue into the money conversation:

1. Be matter-of-fact. “We’ve talked about everything else. Now, let’s talk about the cost.” Note the use of “the cost” and not “our fees.” This is about what it costs to do what they need done, not what you will charge. Precise language makes it more objective and professional.

2. Take the pressure off. “It’s helpful to get the money thing rolling. We don’t have to settle it this minute, but I wanted to give you some ideas about what we should be thinking.” Note the use of “we,” which implies a collaborative process.

3. Give them your thinking. “Here’s how we think about the money.” This approach implies you’ve given it thought and you’ve done this a lot, instilling confidence and credibility.

4. Make a joke. “Here’s everyone’s favorite part of the conversation.” A little levity goes a long way.

The first conversation is to determine whether you can provide what they need and, if so, whether it would be a profitable project for you.

Asking directly for the prospect’s budget should be one of many basic questions you ask to achieve that goal. It’s no different from “What is your timeframe?” or “What is your objective with this project?” This may seem obvious, but many people neglect to ask this basic question. (Some creative professionals don’t address money at all, so when they go to bill the project, they find themselves in a bit of a pickle.)

In the best-case scenario, and especially if you’re talking to a corporate professional, your prospect will simply tell you their budget. Big-company clients don’t take any of this personally, as many small-business owners do. They know you need to know, and they don’t want to waste their time reviewing a proposal that doesn’t work within their budget.

Here are a few phrases to try:

“What budget have you allocated for this project?”

The construction of this question presumes they have allocated a budget.

“What do you have in mind to spend?”

“What can you afford?”

If they reply, “I don’t know”—meaning, someone else has established a budget but your contact doesn’t know what it is—they may be looking for you to tell them how much the project should cost (you are, after all, the expert here). If you sense this could be a viable project, it’s worth probing to make sure you’re at least in the same ballpark.

However, you should consider certain responses to be red flags, such as: “I don’t have much to spend,” or “We don’t really have a budget.” Those answers signify that you should push to get a number before the end of the conversation so you can decide whether or not to pursue the work. You can say:

“If you’re looking for the most inexpensive designer, I’m not your best option. Can you give me a general idea of what you can afford?”

FLOAT SOME NUMBERS

Just because a prospect says they don’t know their budget doesn’t mean you can’t find out what they’re thinking of spending. Call on your creativity: Throw out some round numbers to see how they react. As soon as there are numbers on the table, people tend to respond, even when they claim not to know. Start with:

“I can think of several ways we could approach this depending on how much you want to invest. So tell me, are we talking about $2,000 or $20,000?”

Giving them a wide range, even if they didn’t know their budget, will trigger a response such as “Well, we don’t have $20,000, but somewhere in the middle could work.” This gives you something to start with.

If they say, “Well, $2,000 would be ideal but we probably couldn’t go higher than $5,000,” then you know to outline in your proposal (if you decide to pursue the project) what they can get within that range. This alone will save you time estimating higher or proposing services they don’t need or can’t afford.

You may worry that when you throw out numbers, the client will automatically choose your lowest. Not so. Good prospects know that the lowest price indicates low quality. If they affirm the low number, that may be your cue to walk away.

Plus, at this point you’re just trying to gauge budget—you’re not quoting a price—so be sure to let your prospect know that these numbers are not yet firm.

All of this back and forth should be done in real time, either on the phone or in person, so you maintain control over the conversation. Asking these questions via e-mail doesn’t give you the opportunity to see or hear their reactions and respond accordingly, and is therefore much less effective. When someone e-mails you to ask for your price on a project, call them immediately or reply via e-mail with a request for a phone meeting to discuss their needs. Unless you don’t want the job, don’t respond via e-mail with numbers.

TRY A MINI-PROPOSAL FIRST

Sometimes, no matter how you ask or how creatively you probe, the prospect won’t reveal their budget. One alternative is a mini-proposal. You can say:

“OK, I understand you can’t provide the budget. So I’m going to work up some numbers and a brief scope of work, and then present it to you before doing a full-fledged proposal. If the numbers work, I’ll go ahead. If not, I won’t.”

This mini-proposal can be as short as a paragraph or as long as a page. It should include a recap of what you discussed with general price ranges. Think “executive summary,” and make it easy to skim, with an emphasis on bullets and lists. The mini-proposal lays out a price that the prospect can respond to, without taking too much of your time to prepare.
This process of getting the budget isn’t easy for most creative professionals, but it does get easier once you’ve learned the art (and it is an art) of finessing questions that will uncover the information you need. It’s a worthwhile habit to develop. And it’s your responsibility to yourself as a business owner, whether a solo-preneur or an agency owner, not to waste time writing proposals that you never get, just because a prospect doesn’t know or won’t share their budget.

To run a successful practice, you have to be a clear communicator, especially when it comes to money. Some prospects may not be willing to share the numbers when you ask, and you risk annoying them if you push too far. But the more you welcome these exchanges and learn how to communicate more clearly, the stronger your financial footing will be.

Put this into practice and you’ll submit fewer proposals, but all of them will be legitimate. The result: less time with tire-kickers and more time with serious opportunities.

Ilise Benun, founder of Marketing Mentor and co-producer of the Creative Freelancer Conference (www.creativefreelancerconference.com), works with creative freelancers who are serious about building healthy businesses. Sign up for her Quick Tips at www.marketing-mentortips.com.

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FREELANCE SPOTLIGHT
Aimee Yllanes, Aimee Yllanes Design, Basalt, CO
www.aimeeyllanesdesign.com

Some designers have no trouble when it comes to asking corporations for their budget, but can’t bring themselves to pop the question when talking to a nonprofit. The myth about nonprofits having no money is exactly that, says Basalt, CO-based freelance designer Aimee Yllanes:

“Grassroots organizations that are just starting out may not have a marketing budget, but larger nonprofits or those that have been around a while have a budget for marketing. You may need to find out what they need to focus on and then adjust the scope of the work.

“I recently worked with a nonprofit that wasn’t used to paying for design. When I gave them an initial price for their event collateral, they nearly fainted. But we worked it out so that the scope of the project was adjusted, not my fee. When I went back to give them a quote for next year, they didn’t complain about my fee, even though it had increased due to an expansion of the project’s scope. They realized the value I added to their event and agreed to pay my higher fee for next year.”