ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Organizing a Freelance Business for Greater Productivity

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Three well-known, long-established AMWA freelance members presented an open session on increasing business productivity to a full house during the 2010 Annual Conference in Milwaukee. This article presents highlights from this session to help established and newer freelance members examine various ways to increase their productivity and, ultimately, their bottom line.

Evaluating Your Business

Periodically, you need to evaluate your entire set of business operations to increase your productivity as a freelance. To accomplish this goal, you need to know your clients, know your projects, and know your deadlines. The purpose of this evaluation is to work smarter, not harder! You want to spend your marketing time and money only on those clients and projects that meet the goals you have set for yourself and your business.

Know your clients

When planning for greater productivity, it is important to remember the 80/20 Rule: A full 80% of your freelance business will come from 20% of your clients or contacts. Your client evaluation, therefore, should focus on identifying which of your clients are–or could be–counted among that important 20%. To do this, list all of your clients within the last year or two and rate them by several factors that are important to you. Factors could include the amount of business given quarterly or yearly, the types of projects, the working relationship, appropriate deadlines, payment schedules, or any other criteria you establish as important to your business. Assign each client a numerical or letter grade for each factor.

Next, list your clients in priority order. Your top tier clients are those who meet or exceed all points in your evaluation and are the ones on whom you should focus most of your attention and marketing efforts. Your second tier clients are those who meet most of your evaluation points and should merit slightly less marketing efforts – unless you desire to raise them to top tier status. For the remaining, lower tier clients, you need to decide if you want to continue with the working relationship. If you decide to keep them, determine how you can improve your relationship with them. It may be as simple as telling them what your other clients provide or do to make them more favorable to your business. If that approach does not yield positive results, or if you decide to drop them from your client mix, you could research other clients to replace them or work to increase the business gained from your other, higher ranked clients.

Know your projects

In addition to knowing your clients, you need to know and evaluate your project mix. List all of the different types of projects you have undertaken, such as regulatory writing, journal supplements, advisory board executive summaries, continuing medical education programs, sales training modules, product monographs, or other categories. Rate this mix according to your priorities. Do you enjoy all of these projects? Do you enjoy one type of project more than another? Are there any recent projects you totally disliked (either by type, subject matter, or client)? Can you increase work in your favorite types of projects and reduce your involvement in others? Which clients give you these favorite types of projects?

Ideally, the types of projects you most enjoy should be those that come from your top tier clients. If not, you will need to reevaluate your criteria and workload to make the match work in your favor.

Know your deadlines

In our business, deadlines are sacrosanct. To stay focused and productive, you may need to establish daily or weekly to-do lists. Some writers try to work on only one project at a time. Others devote the morning to one and the afternoon to another. You may have to work occasionally some nights or weekends to meet a client's deadline. Be sure to stay focused on the project in-hand, take frequent breaks, and only check e-mail occasionally during the day.

Finally, for your own sanity, it is important to balance your work and leisure time. Attempt to forget about your

projects during nonbusiness hours. Remember to exercise, do fun activities, relax, see friends, and get a good night's sleep. By providing a balance in your life, you will be more relaxed and rejuvenated when you return to the projects in hand.

Coordinating Multiple Projects and Writers

Coordinating multiple projects and writers can be as difficult as herding cats, but it is also a great way to increase your productivity and, thereby, your profitability as a freelance.

There are a number of reasons why a freelance medical writer would want to take on the challenge of coordinating multiple projects. First, opportunity literally calls (or e-mails) every day, and if you do not answer, it will not call back. This is because clients and potential clients only call a freelance when they need one. If you get the call and you don't answer, clients are forced to call someone else, and the freelance they worked with last is likely to be the first freelance they will call the next time as long as that person delivered on time, on target, and on budget.

The second reason for putting yourself in the position of handling multiple projects is that when you say "yes" to everything, it is unlikely that everything will actually come through at once. Once the writer is brought on board, projects often get delayed or cancelled. The third reason is that freelances do not get paid if they do not work. If a project you have committed time for gets postponed or cancelled, the resulting void can make it difficult to pay your bills.

But then, what do you do on those rare but very real occasions when all the projects you have committed yourself to doing come through at once? You can panic; you can work harder by putting in evenings and weekends to get it all done; or you can work smarter by applying some simple but effective strategies to coordinate your multiple projects, and possibly by bringing in other freelance writers to work with you. Of course, engaging other writers is something you should never do without the knowledge and consent of your client.

There are also a number of reasons why a freelance medical writer may want to take on the challenge of coordinating multiple writers. Coordinating multiple writers can help you meet increased demand, as long as those writers are equally committed as you to quality, timing, and budget. It also increases your productivity because more writers can get more work done, and you can continue to earn money by having other writers working for you even when you are not writing yourself. There may even be an opportunity to increase your income by coordinating multiple writers—but here you need to be careful because when you write, you earn 100% of the fee whereas when another writer writes for you, that writer earns nearly all of the fee.

If you choose to take on multiple projects or writers, these tips will help you overcome some of the challenges you will likely encounter.

Tips for coordinating multiple projects

- *Take deep breaths.* As the number of projects you are working on at one time increases, it is important to keep your stress level low and maintain your perspective. Whether you do yoga, take a walk, go to the gym, or get a good night's rest, that you do something is more important than what you do to keep yourself calm and in control.
- *Keep organized.* Consistent use of systems can help you stay on top of all the projects you have going on at once. Use job numbers and good physical and electronic filing systems to keep track of projects, and use a white board or other visible calendar system to keep track of deadlines. Do not underestimate the value of sticky notes and notes to remind you to look at those sticky notes. Make sure you clean up after every project so you do not get lost in an avalanche of paper.
- *Be realistic.* Not being afraid to overcommit is a vital survival skill for successful freelances, but it is equally vital to your survival that you know the difference between an "impossible" deadline (one that will take a lot of doing to get done) and an IMPOSSIBLE deadline (one you really, truly cannot make without sacrificing quality, your health, and/or your sanity).
- *Set priorities.* Setting priorities can be an overwhelming task when there seems to be a frenzy with every project, but with a little deep breathing to gain perspective, it is usually possible to rank the frenzy before the fire, the fire before the panic, the panic before the urgent, the urgent before the rush, and so on.
- *Be flexible.* When you are a freelance medical writer coordinating multiple projects, the only constant is change. Be prepared for it, embrace it, and you can eventually learn how to profit from it.

Tips for coordinating multiple writers

- *Hire experts.* Writers with less experience charge less than experts, but you'll end up paying for it in the long run with your time to make revisions and deal with problems. Do not be afraid to do the same thing you want your clients to do, that is, pay the freight for the expertise you need to get the job done right the first time.
- *Trust them to do their job.* The writer is the content expert, which makes you the project expert. Provide guidance and support and troubleshoot the logistics so the expert writer you have hired can do his or her job.
- *Maintain total control.* When coordinating multiple writers, it is crucial to remember that the client is yours, not the other writers'. Your reputation is on the line

with every project you deliver. When things go right, you share the glory with the writer who assisted you; when something goes wrong, you take full responsibility.

- *Keep it all straight.* To maintain an efficient freelance business coordinating multiple projects and writers, you must keep every detail straight, including knowing which writers are best for which types of projects, when writers are available and when they are busy, which projects are currently in-house and which are pending, and the vacation and travel schedules of everyone on the team.

Celebrating Project End: What to Do When the Project's Over

The end of a project is often time for celebration, especially if the project was long, drawn out, or fraught with problems. Even when the project had no surprises or complications, many freelances still feel like popping the champagne cork and doing the happy dance after pushing the deliverable out the door. But don't party too long. Once you have met a deadline, it's time to concentrate on 4 issues to help you maintain your productivity: client satisfaction, invoicing, getting the next project, and professional development.

Client satisfaction

Client satisfaction is a combination of 3 variables: quality, delivery, and cost. If you produce a high-quality product that's on target, deliver it on time (or even earlier than expected), and provide outstanding value, you will have a satisfied client. Fall short on any one of those variables, and you could have an unhappy client.

   Never send a project out the door without follow-up or assume your client is thrilled with your work. Always inquire about the client's satisfaction via e-mail or telephone, followed by your next question, "What else can I do for you?" Remember, it takes less time and energy to maintain clients than it does to cultivate new ones. Don't hesitate to remind your clients when you've delivered on time, on target, and on budget.

Invoicing

Timely invoicing is the key to maintaining adequate cash flow. It's not a good idea to wait 20 days after you have delivered the project to send out the invoice. If the client takes 60 days to cut your check, which is not uncommon these days, then you will not get paid until 80 days after you completed the project. Progress invoicing is one tactic that can improve cash flow. With this method, you establish benchmarks with your client to determine when you will send interim invoices, usually after you've supplied a specific deliverable. Progress invoicing works best when you work on a large project with multiple deliverables.

Some freelances also invoice a portion of the estimate at project initiation, which can amount to 10% or 20% of the total estimate.

   Always invoice for the agreed-upon price unless there have been scope changes or other surprises that were not part of your original estimate. If the project was a victim of the dreaded "project creep," you should have discussed this with your client as soon as the project went out of scope and provided a second estimate that took into account the unplanned changes. If you did not, and the project simply took longer than you estimated, then you need to invoice for the original amount and estimate more accurately next time.

Getting the next project

The time to look for work is not when you need it. Because you never know when a project you expected will be postponed or cancelled, you need to engage in constant marketing to avoid down time. Concentrate your marketing efforts in 4 areas:

- *Social media via LinkedIn, Twitter, and other networks.* Social media marketing is all about building and nurturing relationships. After you have finished a project, send out a tweet telling your followers you're available for the next one. On LinkedIn, leverage your group memberships and ask members for leads to new projects. Always ask clients to supply recommendations via LinkedIn so you can easily direct prospective clients to your online references.
- *Previous clients who were happy with your work.* A job is not finished until it starts working for you. Leverage each project so it helps you get the next one. Your previous clients might be interested in learning about the project you just completed. A short e-mail like this points them to your latest work and reinforces your capabilities: "I just finished a project on topic X and thought you might be interested. Here is the link…"
- *Potential clients you want to cultivate.* Thinking you have an unlimited number of prospects can be a comfortable illusion. But in reality you can't be everything to everybody. It is much easier to build a reputation within a specific niche. Focusing your marketing efforts on a specific target audience enables you to reach your market with less effort. Think about it. People in the same niche go to similar meetings and talk with one another. Once you build credibility with one of them, your name and reputation will spread quickly.
- *Colleagues.* Marketing to colleagues who do similar work as you may seem counterintuitive, but busy colleagues may be interested in funneling you their overflow work.

   Keep in mind that good news travels fast, but bad news travels faster. Clients who are happy with your work will

come back to you with more work. They might even pass your name on to colleagues (if they don't want to keep you to themselves). In contrast, unhappy clients will not hesitate to tell others about the bad encounter they had with you. The key to getting the next project is keeping your clients happy.

Professional development

At the end of each project, ask yourself, "What did I learn from this project?" Perhaps you learned how to use a new software program or you improved skills already in your repertoire. Maybe you were introduced to a new program you never used before and discovered you really weren't that good at it. Learning what you did not know is a helpful reality check that shows you where you need to go with regard to professional development. You are your best resource. Do not hesitate to invest in yourself if you want to grow your business.

Author disclosure: The authors note that they have no commercial associations that may pose a conflict of interest in relation to this article.

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