

SUCCESSFUL FREELANCING FOR WEB DESIGNERS



Imprint

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Preface

Being a great web designer or developer is one thing – running a successful freelance business another. Whether you already have work experience in companies or you've just graduated from design school: Being self-employed entails a number of tasks you most likely didn't have to deal with so far. As a freelance web designer you also have to be a project manager, office administrator, accountant, controller and IT expert.

Juggling all of these, among most designers not exactly popular, tasks while conceiving creative ideas and producing splendid websites, can be very arduous. To help you with this feat we have compiled 21 selected (+2 new) articles about successful freelancing that have been published on Smashing Magazine and Noupe in 2009 and 2010 offering you invaluable tips and guidelines from professionals in web design. The focus lies on communicating with clients and co-workers, including marketing strategies and pitching, as this tends to be most problematic for freelance web designers.

We hope this carefully edited and especially illustrated ebook will make you even more successful and helps you master “juggling”.

Sven Lennartz, Vitaly Friedman, Manuela Müller

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Basic Skills of Freelance Web Designers

Essential Habits of An Effective Professional Freelancer

by Rob Smith



There's very little to stop anyone becoming a freelancer. In a highly competitive and, in most places, saturated market, you need to make sure your reputation as a freelancer is well-managed and continues to grow. It's very possible to get a good reputation without being the best in the world, and it's even easier to lose that reputation. In this article, we'll explore 15 habits that are essential in helping freelancers effectively safeguard and grow their reputation, and we'll also discuss how to make freelancing work for you.

Marketing and Relationships

1. The Presentation Habit

Your website should be at the centre of your marketing strategy. It's where people go to see who you are, what you're about, whether you know what you're talking about and what work you have done. It's your silent 24/7 salesman, and it needs to be right. Fortunately, what your website needs is straightforward:

- Well-presented work with a good description of the roles you played
- A brief history of who you are and why you're where you are
- Contact details that are easily accessible
- Content that is continually tweaked, added to, and updated



Other than that, you can go wherever you want with your own website — and so you should. Personality is key. *Jason Santa Maria goes the whole hog with a new design for each post — a lot of work but he stands out from the crowd as a result*

2. The Networking Habit

They say that within 6 degrees of separation, everyone knows everyone. So you need to make sure that everyone within your 1st degree (i.e. people you know), know exactly what you do. It needs to be exact as well. If you're a developer you don't want people saying you're a website designer, and so on. Your current network of friends,

family, and associates are your free word-of-mouth marketing – so get them talking about you right now.

Once this is done, your network needs to be extended and enhanced. Register with any social networking platforms that can work for you — LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Within those places, start getting into the right circles. On LinkedIn you may join some appropriate discussion groups that are either local or skill based. On Twitter you may start tweeting and including appropriate hashtags so more people can see your tweet on that subject.

There are many ways to network and connect with people, so it's crucial that a freelancer not be afraid to talk to people and share information and contacts. Learn the networking habit and get yourself known.

3. The Niching Habit

Freelancers can get into the habit of not only finding their niche, but creating niches. A niche in this case is an area in your overall field of work in which you particularly specialise. If you've become very good at creating websites for golf courses, for example, then that's a great niche.

The reasons having a niche is valuable are simple: It's easier to become an expert in a niche. It's easier to sell to other prospects within that niche as they can see what you have done before. As an

expert in that niche you can charge a premium for your depth of knowledge.

The key to this habit is to proactively build your own niches. Seek out profitable areas in which you can work and concentrate on building niches.

4. The Pricing Habit

How you price your projects can easily be the difference between winning and not winning some work. Your pricing needs to be transparent at all times and should be agreed upon up front. Things go wrong when hidden costs appear later on. Clients like to know how much they're paying, when they're going to pay it, and what they're paying for. So make it clear from the start.

Second part of the pricing habit — protect yourself. It's easy to get so wrapped up in winning a project that you forgot some simple rules. If you have never worked with a client before, ask for a small percentage of the fee before you do any work. At this early stage, you won't know whether they will pay! Reduce your bad debt by either only working for clients you trust or having some remuneration first.

Third part of the pricing habit — be flexible. Make sure you find a way to make the commercial deal a win-win for both parties. This could be:

- Monthly payments (regular cash flow over the course of the project)
- Payment when you hit certain project milestones (e.g. project performance)
- Deposit and balance on completion (best avoided for cash flow reasons)
- Possible exchange of services

5. The Growth Habit

It's been claimed that it costs seven times as much in resources to acquire a new client than it does to grow an existing one. So the growth habit is about proactively looking at your clients in detail so you can discover new ways to help them.

One practical way to do this is to cross reference. Write all your services across the top of an excel sheet, then put your clients down the left hand column. Now place an X in the box where a service you have done matches a client. The boxes without X's are potential growth opportunities and should all be explored before spending too much energy trying to acquire new clients.

Business and Time

This section is less screenshot, more serious business.

6. The Time Management Habit

Lacking good habits in time management could cause you to over-committing yourself at certain times, which could lead to:

- Missing a deadline and disappointing a client
- Producing sloppy or inaccurate work
- Causing yourself stress because of the pressure to get everything done

The solution to this is an effective planning mechanism. Estimate how long the work will take you, then add a buffer to your estimation. This will ensure that, if it does take longer, it won't eat into other projects. A 50% buffer works well. That may sound like a lot, but if you go over by 25% and then there are additional client emendations, you'll need it. Once you have the total time allocation, add it to your diary. Now, here's the crucial part: Do not move it, shrink it, or change it in any way. If you have to do something urgent that will interfere with that scheduled work, make sure the time is reallocated elsewhere.

A simple calendar application like Google calendar or Outlook can help you plan your time as a freelancer. If you struggle with where all that time goes and want to get serious about making improvements in time management, something like [Rescue Time](#) can really help.

7. The Flexibility Habit

Being flexible, responsive, and effective at what you do will allow you to handle unexpected situations, such as when a client contacts you with urgent needs and expects you to help. Having set aside time in advance for such urgent situations will ensure that you earn a reputation as a flexible worker.

What happens if nothing comes up to fill that pre-allocated time? Well you might finish that other project early and can add something special. What happens if the whole day is taken up by urgent project? No problem, you had already planned this might happen, so you won't let anyone down.

Of course you're not going to be able to foresee *everything*, but a certain level of flexibility will allow you to please your clients and be relatively free of stress because of time constraints.

8. The Honesty Habit

Agencies will not use you again if you let a client down, and your chance of repeat work is slim to none. In the same way, you should not over commit your time, but stay within your capabilities. We all need to stretch ourselves on new projects and learn new techniques and practices — that's not what this is about. This is about promising to do a task in a specified time when, in actuality, you don't have any idea whether it's feasible or not. Above all else, people appreciate

honesty. You're better off being honest about whether you can handle a project rather than taking the risk of letting them down.

So how can you grow your skills and help your clients? By being honest and asking some good questions:

- "I don't think this project is right for me. I don't have much experience in [insert technology here]"
- "I can really help you with the [insert service here] part of this project, but I know another freelancer who can help with it. Would you be happy if I managed the project for you but outsourced this other work?"
- "I'll need more information before I know how long this project will take. Would you mind if I spent a couple of hours doing some research so I can give you an accurate timescale?"

9. The Over-Delivery Habit

Do not deliver your projects early. Sound strange? It's not. If you deliver early, there's a possibility the client will think you overcharged, and may expect part of his payment to be returned. They might also expect future work to be completed ahead of schedule, which may set a bad precedent.

Instead, use the extra time to focus on whizz-bang elements — those extra bits of polish and creativity that will gain you the reputation you deserve and let you grow. For a designer this might mean spending

time adding nice touches to your graphics; for a developer, it could mean more time to implement a cool piece of JavaScript to replace the plain functionality you originally settled for. The “over-deliver” will earn you a solid reputation, whereas finishing early could get you into trouble.

10. The Business Advice Habit

Although as a freelancer you’re skilled at what you do, don’t assume you’ll be able to do your accounts and bookkeeping, fill in tax returns, produce an invoice or write a proposal all by yourself.

Seek regular advice from respected professionals to help you with these aspects of running your business. This might include speaking with people who run their own operations and understand the ins and outs better than you do. Learn as much as possible from their experiences and mistakes.

Specific Business Areas

What’s out there to help you run your business and what areas do you need to focus on? In this section, we’ll discuss some applications that have earned reputations for helping freelancers do their jobs and be more professional.

11. The Email Habit

Email is toxic. As a freelancer you can easily become what's commonly known as a busy fool. You might spend a significant part of your day just sending and receiving email without ever getting any work done. Instead, be in the habit of controlling email, and not letting it control you.

To do this you need to:

- Turn off all the little reminders, message counts, and other indicators that may catch your eye
- Configure your email client to run a "send and receive" at longer intervals, maybe as little as once per hour
- Set aside blocks of time in the day to deal with all email, then switch it off; if something is urgent, people will use the phone
- Use the 'touch it once' philosophy; fully read and deal with every email you open, instead of half-reading some and coming back to them later

12. The Project Management Habit

Some clients will want you to fit in with their processes, while others will not enforce this. You need to have very clear processes for how you start working with a client and start a new project. What questions do you ask a new client? Where do you store the information they tell you? How do you keep track of how close the

deadline is? Where do you store all the files they send you?

Email is not sufficient for this! Things will get lost, forgotten or overlooked. You might prefer cardboard folders or ring binders or whatever works for you — but use something and stick to your own system. There are applications like [Basecamp](#) that can help with this.



13. The Research & Development Habit

Sounds like a big company thing to do but R&D is essential to a good freelance operation. You need to be ahead of the curve or at the very least on it to be servicing your clients most effectively. Be in the habit of investing time for research and development. Expand your current skills and learn new ones. Never designed a billboard before? That's development.

Set aside time every week to do R&D. Build up a list of blogs that feed

you new thinking and new ideas. Listen to informative podcasts.

14. The Sales and CRM Habit

How can you allocate your time and resources and figure out whether or not you need to be hunting for new work or concentrating on servicing current clients? You should know at any given time what your work pipeline looks like, how likely is it all to materialize, and at roughly what value.

The image shows a promotional banner for Highrise CRM. On the left, the Highrise logo is followed by the text: "Track your Leads, Contacts, & Deals with Highrise CRM. The smarter way to keep track of your customer relationships. Know who you talked to, what was said, and when to follow-up. Simple contact management. See Plans and Pricing 30-day free trial, sign up in 60 seconds." On the right, a screenshot of the Highrise CRM interface is shown, displaying a contact profile for "Blue Ridge Realty" with fields for name, phone, email, and address, along with a "Notes" section containing a handwritten-style note. Below the banner, there are two video thumbnails: "Mazyar Hedayat Attorney at Law" and "Workforce Translation Services". To the right of these videos, a list of features is provided: "Track leads & deals", "Manage email better", "Easy import & export", "Review conversations", "Follow-up on time", and "Easy contact management".

Highrise is used by many to manage their sales and leads at low cost

15. The Accounts Habit

Making sure you have any easy way to produce, send, and track invoices is essential, as is getting into the habit of running your

accounts professionally, because such habits will ensure regular cash flow. Applications like Blinksale, Freshbooks or Simply Invoices can help formalize the accounts side of your business and give a good professional feel to how you operate. Clients will need invoices for their accounts – make sure they're not hand written or unbranded.

Support

Fresh! Our new **Bronze plan** gets you six invoices for just six bucks a month.

Blinksale

Still the easiest way to send invoices online.

Home Blog Contact Us **Start Now** or **Log In**

Start sending and tracking invoices in five minutes.

Since 2005, we've been making sending invoices and tracking payments simple. You stay focused on what you do.

- Send elegantly formatted invoices
- Customize invoices with your own CSS
- Automate billing with recurring templates
- Import your clients from Basecamp

FREE TRIAL, SIGN UP →

FREE TRIAL - NO CREDIT CARD NEEDED

Have a look around

- Your dashboard
- Create invoice
- Browse invoices
- Payments & follow up
- Elegant invoices
- Follow-up emails

FAQ's Testimonials News & Updates

[Blinksale](#) can help you create, send, and track professional invoices

The Authors

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Peter Smart

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