



You Gotta Give a Little

It's truly a shame that some organizations think it's OK to pressure independent professionals into performing certain tasks for free. Often, they'll use an argument like this: "Doing work for free for us is like free advertising for you. The exposure alone would cost you thousands to get on your own, and you still wouldn't have our clout in the marketplace." Horse pockey!

I've been an IP for 14 years, specializing almost entirely in health-care, medicine, and science. My general rule of thumb is: if a task takes 15 minutes or less and there are no out-of-pocket costs beyond local phone calls, send the client an invoice but mark it as "Provided as a professional courtesy." This gives the client three distinct messages: the assignment has a value; I value them as clients; and I'm willing to work with them on a professional-to-professional basis. Sometimes that involves doing a small favor for free.

In some cases, I've charged clients for out-of-pocket expenses,

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

How can we have letters from readers when this is our first issue? No, we didn't make them up — they're from our webzine at 1099.com. To share your thoughts with your fellow free agents, send your brilliant insights or ... ah ... mindless drivel (we prefer the former, actually) to either the email or snail mail address at the end of this section.

but split my invoice into two parts: cost recovery and professional fee. The cost recovery reflects my actual expense, and the professional fee is charged to "professional courtesy."

No one yet has abused the courtesy, so perhaps I've been more fortunate than most. The practice has also led, in some cases, to larger and longer-term assignments. I probably adopt this approach a couple dozen times a year and it has been a good investment. It's just a matter of being careful.

*Patrick Baker
Caledonia, Ontario, Canada
Principal Counsel, Strategic Realities
<strategy01@sprynet.com>*

Making It Past the Honeymoon

After five years of being an IP, I have witnessed first-hand the phenomenon I call the client curve. It starts with the honeymoon, enters the "working hard together" phase, and then for some reason devolves into the "scapegoat" or "blame" or just plain "Twilight Zone" phase.

One of the toughest things we IPs face is that we're outsiders. We're not privy to the goings-on at our clients. I can't tell you how many times I've begun to get paranoid when I don't hear from clients or they don't return my

phone calls. Most often, I eventually do hear from them, and they call to say they've been swamped. Sometimes I'll write them a note to remind them I exist. And they remember the note, even if they don't respond for months.

Having been on the "inside" for a number of years myself as a corporate communications staffer, I know first-hand about the "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" rule. Those freelancers who stayed in touch with me, without being pests, always got more work.

*Michael Tevlin
Lake Oswego, Oregon
Writer*

The Best Kind of Respect

One of the things I have always liked the most about being a freelancer (ahem, independent professional) is the fawning respect I usually get from my clients. Even clients who have been critical of my work are usually thankful for the fact that I was there, saber in hand, slaying the ridiculous deadline dragon while munching on a cheese sandwich instead of attending the two-hour lunch at the local sports bar to watch the play-offs.

The other kind of respect we IPs get can be even more ego-gratifying. It is the total interest displayed by the wage slaves at our clients'

companies about every detail of how we, the independent professionals of the world, manage to do it. They want to know how we work (in pink fuzzy bunny slippers?), how we bill for our time, how much money we make, how we do our taxes, how we get home loans. The wage slaves of the world secretly long to be in our shoes. Even the snidest of comments still comes across as hero worship: “Keeping banker’s hours, eh, Russ? Did you get in 9 or 18 holes this morning?” Hero worship, pure and simple.

“The wage slaves of the world secretly long to be in our shoes.”

My career has waffled back and forth between being an IP and a wage slave. It is a constant struggle that we all deal with. When you are the star quarterback for a client, they naturally want to bring you into the fold. My absolute worst experience with this was the time I talked myself into actually taking a job with a retail chain’s creative department where I had been freelancing for over a year. When I realized they were staffing up the department (i.e., eliminating the freelancers), I presented myself as a potential hire out of fear. I was immediately hired, but lasted less than 90 days before they fired me. Not only did I become unemployed, I lost a good client in the process.

IPs who waffle back and forth between the freedom (and frustration) of being your own boss and being a slave to corporate rules should take one simple piece of advice. Never, ever go to work for one of your clients. If you must find a full-time job, hire on with a company you have never worked with. If you decide you don’t like this situation after all, you may still have a client from your past that will lovingly take you back into their arms and worship you like the god you are.

*Russell Phillips
Alexandria, Virginia
Art Director, Digital Commando,
Hired Gun*

No Parties for Us Gunslingers

When you’re an IP, you are not “of the body” — you work with and for a client, but you’re not on staff. This makes you incredibly desirable to corporate clients — at least for a time. It’s like first-date fever. But I’ve found this fades with time and exposure, until you eventually have the client’s “tribal scent” on you. Then you seem to them more and more like an employee. The trick is not to do too much work for any one client.

I’ve done a lot of freelancing for a wide range of advertising clients. They desperately need help from IPs. They covet it, eagerly anticipating our unpolluted point of view. Our fresh insights. But their gratitude only lasts so long: we deliver our work on deadline ... and then nothing. No follow-up

calls, no updates. Why? The client doesn’t have a problem anymore, doesn’t need us anymore. Now they have the ideas they need. Our ideas now smell like their ideas. But we — the IPs — are still not “of the body,” and the simple truth is that no matter how valuable our contribution, we don’t work there. We don’t go to office birthday parties for the cute receptionist. Or have hallway chats with the boss. We are the guy on the fax machine, the gunslinger called in to kill the psycho who’s terrorizing the town. Once the psycho’s pushing up daisies, our services are no longer required, thank-you-very-much. But they’ll call when the next headcase comes through town.

No matter how well you’ve done the job, you don’t work there. You work everywhere, and nowhere. And that takes getting used to.

Clients don’t throw virtual office parties in our honor, do they?

*Howard Margulies
Los Angeles
Writer
<TheHMan@aol.com>*

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1099 Magazine
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