

Ten tips to becoming a more successful freelancer

A complimentary feature by Lucy Fry. www.lucyfray.co.uk

Freelancing: even the word itself conjures up images of weaponry, of jousting your way towards emancipation. And perhaps that's right. It's certainly my experience that working on an ad hoc, self-employed basis can often feel like a gruelling battle, requiring every ounce of your strength and confidence. Yet that's just the lancing bit of the whole thing. What about if we focus on the free? Being a freelancer of any kind can offer a wondrous and life-affirming flexibility – with this kind of set up you get (in theory at least) to choose the type of work you do, how long you do that work, where you do that work and when you don't work at all. So, how to maximise the free whilst reducing your need for all that battle?

Here are ten of my top tips – ranging from the mundane to the specific, from the esoteric to the downright silly – for increasing your enjoyment of the freelance life, and the success you make of it.

1

Turn things on their head

Contradiction became my friend when I learnt that only I had the power to turn things upside down and make them work for me. Ways of thinking that have helped me through tough times include: i) having no experience = the opportunity to create your brand from scratch. ii) having no work = having more spare time to come up with your best and most lucrative idea yet. iii) having no money = more extreme motivation to get yourself some work and start a fresh, positive phase of your career. iv) having no paid holiday = the chance to take holiday whenever the hell you like and as much as you like v) having to deal with other people's negative bullshit = an opportunity to set yourself apart from it.

2

Procrastinate purposefully

Think procrastination and purpose can't or don't go in the same sentence? I'd agree that generally procrastination is a pesky, unwanted habit that freelancers tend to succumb to a little more than salaried workers (even though we all know that Getting Shit Done makes us feel better than painting our nails or tidying our desks). Sometimes, however, the God of Procrastination takes over and doing the unnecessary feels both necessary and inevitable. It's on days like these, when I simply must put off until tomorrow what I could be doing today, that I try to procrastinate purposefully. I've avoided redrafting a novel by

“Being a freelancer of any kind can offer a wondrous and life-affirming flexibility ...”

genuinely engaging with followers on social media and clearing up the files on my computer. I've skirted around the blank-page beginning of a new creative project by getting lucrative articles done and dusted. I've even delayed finishing lucrative articles by sending out pitches in the hopes of adding to my work to-do list. It might not be the best or most useful thing you could be doing, but it's still all stuff you need to do. Not really true procrastination at all, if you think about it like that...

3

Got an itch? Scratch it early

For those days when The God of Procrastination doesn't sit above your head calling the shots, it's important to make sure you scratch the biggest itch first. What I mean by this is: begin your day by dealing with whatever's bugging you most / whatever you're least looking forward to, be it a gym workout, a tricky phonecall, an email pitch or some creative work. Sticking to this rule allows me to maintain flexibility whilst also staying rigorous about priorities and completion. If you do the hardest stuff first, you'll feel better about yourself quicker and the rest of your day flows better.

4

Too much to do? Prioritise sleep

Don't strive for perfection, just strive for well slept. Every day a new study or article is published about the links between sleep and productivity, memory, hormonal balance and many more wonderful things we should all be keeping an eye on. Why, then, do I know so many freelancers who still believe that the usual sleep-health rules don't apply to them? Whatever your worries, be it too much work or not enough, there's no reason to think sleeping less will help in any way. Quite the opposite in fact: prioritising sleep (7-9 hours per night) is the most productive, professional thing any freelancer can do. Why? If we turn up to work sleep-deprived zombies we directly jeopardise our brand and compromise our ability to get (re)hired.

5

Network network network, but in a way that works for you

One of my friends is a very successful freelance journalist who attends organised networking events 2-4 times per week. She plays the game brilliantly – leaving each event with several business cards in her pocket and following up on all her new connections the next day by email or telephone. Encouraged by her, I tried it a few times, but for me it just didn't feel right, partly because I detest small talk almost as much as I hate cucumber (which is a lot, by the way) and partly because I wasn't very good at pushing myself in front of someone when they were talking to someone else. As is often my way, I turned this inwards for a while, berating myself for my rubbish networking skills and wondering if I was jeopardising my career by not attending corporate events and cocktail parties. But then I real-

“If you do the hardest stuff first, you'll feel better about yourself quicker and the rest of your day flows better.”

ised what networking really means - quite simply, making connections - and that I'd been doing that for a while. After years as working as a journalist and author writing on all sorts of different topics, I know people (who know people) in many different fields - many of whom I call my friends. So I do network, after all. It's just that I prefer to meet for coffees and lunches one-on-one and to catch up with people over the phone.

6

Only no means no (so don't stop chasing until you get one)

I've talked to so many freelancers who've abandoned creative pitches if they didn't get an affirmative response within a week. Yet I'd estimate that about a quarter - perhaps a third - of all the paid commissions I've got as a journalist have only come about because I followed up on my original pitch. One recent example was something I wrote for a very well-known women's website. Getting the yes please took four follow up emails during a period of six weeks. But I did get that yes, and I wrote the piece, got it published and got paid. That's why, as a general rule of thumb I tend to chase until I get a no. If that makes me akin to the writerly version of a rabid hungry dog, so be it - at least I believe in myself and my work to try emailing or calling someone a second, third and fourth time. That said, there are good and bad ways to chase things... Try once a week or perhaps every few days, and suggest that you are merely following up on an idea, rather than checking if they'd received your email (because the chances are they did).

7

Develop yourself for thirty minutes every day

I don't have a line manager - I'm entirely my own boss - so I need to find other ways to ensure I keep pushing myself to be the dedicated and audacious writer that I'm committed to being and further becoming. That's why I always make sure I spend half an hour each day developing myself - not because I think any one book, speech or guru will finally 'fix' my remaining negative patterns or make me rich but rather because the very act of doing this daily work (and it is work) it inspires and enlivens me, and that's ultimately what gets me hired. Whether it's reading the words of NLP master, Tony Robbins (talking about the power of language and goal-setting) or qualitative researcher Brene Brown (exulting the virtues of vulnerability) or listening to The Science of Success podcast on-the-go... It's all part of facilitating my personal and professional growth and for that I can find time.

8

Thinking of locking down? Time to open up (and invest) instead

I got this idea from my brother-in-law, and something he said once about his marriage: "The times I want more than anything

"Getting the yes please took four follow up emails during a period of six weeks. But I did get that yes, and I wrote the piece, got it published and got paid."

to take out, I try more than ever to put in.” It’s not so different with any freelance career. Just when you feel like giving up - your emails are being ignored, payments are late and nobody, repeat nobody, seems to be interested in what you have to offer - it’s time to (re)invest in yourself and your business. (And, by the way, I reach this stage about once a year at least) Behaving in this way requires a leap of faith, not to mention a working credit card, because it seems like the time when you should be holding back, particularly if you have limited funds. Yet it’s exactly during these low moments that we need to re-motivate or add another string to our proverbial bows. Ways to do this include booking in for a professional development course, (re)building a great website that does justice to all you offer, attending a relevant talk or, if you’re really broke, just scouring the internet for an inspiring and relevant website or blog. Whatever you do, make sure to record it all in some way, so that it embeds itself into your psyche. I often take out my Inspiration Notebook, write quotes and phrases down and stick in important images so that I can come back to them when I need. It’s a solitary deal being a freelancer and if we ourselves don’t take action to become (re)inspired in our careers and our purpose, it simply isn’t going to happen.

9

Get spiritual, now

Yeah, I know... The idea of developing some kind of spiritual belief purely to benefit your career sounds both crass and unlikely. Yet I’ve learnt the hard way that, when facing any kind of challenge - be it getting work as a freelancer or dealing with a tricky personal situation - we need to trust that things will somehow work out for us exactly as they should, otherwise it becomes too difficult to take those all-important risks that can make life so meaningful. Exactly what or who you decide to believe in is entirely your own business - be it a deity, nature, the collective unconscious or just the transformative power of the arts - but finding something other than success, money, love, sex or the mirror to worship, has stopped me either exploding or burning out, not to mention made me happier outside of work.

10

Get an electric toothbrush

Disclaimer: this one has nothing, repeat nothing, to do with freelancing, but honestly it’s one of my best life tips ever. It’s a cost-benefit analysis thing: for 2 x 2-minute tooth brushing sessions daily with an electric brush, my levels of oral (and general) smugness have increased tenfold. Seriously. I actually feel like a better human with an electric toothbrush on my side.

By Lucy Fry

www.lucyfray.co.uk

“Yet it’s exactly during these low moments that we need to re-motivate or add another string to our proverbial bows.”