



Getting ahead

Paul Wyatt ventures down the rocky road of freelancing to give you the definitive guide to getting on the right track...

Freelancers have an easy life: working when they want, taking late lunches, having no boss or workmates to drive them nuts.... Not a care in the world.

Apart from: dealing with the tax man, finding new work, promoting themselves, making contacts, cancelling holidays and, oh, delivering jaw-dropping work on time and to a brief. Just those small cares.

Leaving the relative security of a studio or agency can have its plus points. "At certain points most jobs become repetitive and you stagnate as an artist," says illustrator and designer Scott Hansen. "The control you gain as a freelancer enables you to stay fresh and take on more interesting and varied projects."

But this control doesn't come without a price. Going freelance means you need to plug in the left-hand side of your brain a little more and develop some business acumen. In an agency, you may never see the clients, let alone a balance sheet of what money goes in or out of the business. You just need to create. Freelancing means being front and centre in all aspects: creative and financial. You'll be meeting, greeting, pricing and doing all the work.

Paramount to becoming a successful freelancer is getting your name out there. You'll need to produce a print and online portfolio of your best work. Make these as innovative as you can. Don't include birthday cards you made for your gran. Keep it professional and full of client or experimental work. Organise it well and know your folio like

the back of your hand. Don't sit in front of a prospective client scratching your head trying to remember what a piece of work was for and when it was created.

The best portfolio in the world is nothing if no one gets to see it. Typographical guru Luke Prowse knows from experience that no one will shout about you unless you do it yourself. "Sell, sell, and sell your services. You can't expect to have work piling up if you're not making the calls, schmoozing the clients or promoting yourself," he says.

Competitions and blogs

Entering creative competitions can help get your name out there and bring in business. Illustrator Ossi Pirkonen notes: "I've won competitions in Finland and these have brought in work. My experience is that if you work hard, you will be noticed."

Illustrator James Jean also believes in the competitive route for gaining more work. "I enter the competitive annuals and keep my website and blog updated. The major design blogs help spread the word when I complete a major update," he says.

Creating your own blog can be an important self-promotion tool for a freelancer. If you publicise your blog and portfolio on sites such as [FWA](#), [Computerlove](#) and [Moluv](#), it will instantly reach a vast network of art directors, designers and commissioners. Some artists have used blogs to develop an active fan base which helps spread the word about their work.

MySpace is also a hot favourite amongst networking savvy artists and designers. This encourages the buzz and word-of-mouth promotion which is vital to gain recognition. MySpace is also a good forum for receiving feedback on new work.

"Be careful, though," warns Tom Harding of Weeworld.com. "If a potential client were to check out two potential freelancers on MySpace and one profile is filled up with images of drunken nights and the other one has a clear focus on art and design, well, I know which I'd go with."

MySpace profiles and blogs need to be kept updated as often as possible. Don't think of this as a chore when you're desperately trying to get on with a client's work. Think of it as a necessary step to ensure more business. It's something that can help stop you worrying about where your next meal or set of art supplies is coming from.

James Jean agrees with making sure your online presence is as fresh as possible and also that a little bit of diversification can't do any harm either. "I make sure to maintain a healthy and regular presence online. I also sell my prints and original artwork, which has a very active secondary market, so that continues an aura of excitement around the work that I produce," he says.

Illustrator extraordinaire Serge Seidlitz has a similar entrepreneurial streak. His artwork is featured on badges, T-shirts and even lamps. It's an effective and fun way to promote work. He works with an agent on promoting his portfolio. "Ninety per cent of my jobs come from my agent, [Debut Art](#). They handle the folio and call outs," he says.

Agencies and source books

Debut Art is an agent for photographers, illustrators and fine artists. Founder Andrew Coningsby has had over 25 years of representing creatives. "We offer specialist marketing tailored to a particular illustrator. Most successful and commercially viable illustrators have an agent so they can concentrate on producing the work. We look after contracts and credit control to give them more time for what they do best," he says. Seidlitz also makes use of the [Contact](#) range of freelancer source books. These are collections of paid-for submissions by illustrators, photographers and visionists (web and multimedia creatives). Contact distributes these to over 10,000 senior designers, art buyers and creative directors in the UK.

"I've done it for three years now," says Seidlitz. "It's proved to be beneficial and you end up getting your money back by the work it can create. It's investing in your own business."

As well as the more regular ways of self-promotion, a little eccentricity never goes amiss. Creatives are allowed "quirks" as James Jean explains: "My illustration professor used to wear incredibly flamboyant outfits whenever he would visit art directors. They would ask him back just to see what he would wear. Thankfully, with the internet, I can stay home in my jimmies."

Luke Prowse recounts a tale about "a Mother-loving prospective ad-head who chained themselves outside the offices of the agency until someone let them in for a folio showing. Desperate, probably a bit obnoxious, but apparently it worked."

We don't advise chaining yourself to anything. A much safer bet is to submit your work to *Computer Arts'* Exposure section. This is a great area for those new to design to be profiled and show off their work. Or you can submit your work to the Gallery section at www.computerarts.co.uk.

Once you've got your name out there and found some clients, the next step is to keep them loyal to you. Client love is important.

"Obviously, delivering quality work is the number one factor in pleasing a client," says Scott Hansen. "I think the key is to make them feel like you've really added value to the project. If you let them walk all over you and direct every minute detail of a project, they'll see you merely as an implement, a technician. If you show them you're an artist and truly project your creativity on the project, they'll see you as more than just a skilled technician who's replaceable."

Hansen is also a multi-disciplined creative working within print, web, moving image and clothing. This can be very attractive when pitching to prospective clients. "A lot of clients come to me for full-package type deals. This is particularly helpful when dealing with start-up companies. They'll need branding, a website, and promotional merchandise. If you can provide all of these things and deliver on it, you'll have a very satisfied client," Hansen says.

Dave Anderson is one of the creative directors at animation studio [12foot6](#). The company uses freelancers for its projects, which have included the Channel 4 series *Modern Toss* and E4's *Dog Almighty*. What makes the perfect freelancer for them? "Most illustrators are freelance. So from our point of view we hire people who have a unique, singular style and have confidence in that style which can then be applied to a brief."

For animators it's almost the opposite. We need someone who can take any illustration and make it move great. They need confidence in their trade," says Anderson.

Nerves can ruin an initial client meeting and it's important to plan your pitch meticulously. Keep calm, stay focused and don't ramble. One of the joys of freelancing is that the client may have approached you because they want to make use of your unique style. This means you've already got one foot in the door.

Getting ahead in the freelance world means thinking of yourself as your own marketable entity. You have to self-promote and make sure you get the best deal for yourself and your work – financially and creatively. Above all, the golden rule is not to wait until you're out of work before you start looking for more.

FREELANCER'S CRIB SHEET

Ten ways to keep your clients happy...

- 1** Deliver on time. If there are any deadline issues then communicate these to the client. Don't bury your head in the sand.
- 2** Answer the phone and emails. Just because you're working remotely doesn't mean you can ignore these. It will just annoy the client.
- 3** Be proud and confident in what you do. If you have confidence in your own work, other people will have confidence in it too.
- 4** Be reasonable when charging clients, but remember that your skills and experience have helped craft your piece of work. Don't undervalue these.
- 5** Keep your portfolio up to date and spend time each week actively promoting this via design blogs or networking sites.
- 6** Don't over-promise. Keep your timescales realistic. Remember you are the one that will have to deliver on these.
- 7** When solving client problems, a freelancer needs to be as flexible and as speedily creative as possible.
- 8** Make sure all amends are finished in the least time possible.
- 9** Be accommodating, but truthful if you disagree with a particular idea or direction from a client. Add your own spin to a project.
- 10** Be dedicated enough to your own product in order to be dedicated enough to your clients.