

Getting— and Keeping— GOOD CLIENTS

BY RACHEL DAVIS, *Member*

Plenty of technical communicators who have made the leap into freelance writing struggle with the same questions. You know that your services are marketable; you know there's a strong demand for good writing and that there are plenty of clients "out there." But where are they? How do you find them, get their business, and make them regular customers?

The difference between success and failure is your ability to be creative, plan thoroughly, and follow through. Using my experience with Red Dog Writing Services, my own freelance business, I'll show you creative ways to generate new clients and job leads, as well as unique ways to maintain strong business relationships and keep your existing clients coming back for more!

Making a Good Start

The first—and most important—element of any good marketing plan is to identify your ideal customers. Who are they, and how will you reach them? When I first started freelancing, I mistakenly believed that my ideal customers were large corporations. After all, they were more likely to have the financial stability to afford my services, right? I soon realized, however, that large businesses are already staffed with full-time writers, designers, and editors who do the sort of work I offer. In addition, it's notoriously difficult to "get in the door" at large

corporations. By refocusing my efforts on smaller companies and startups, I've more than tripled my client list. I was surprised to learn that small companies are happy to pay my standard rate; it's much more economical for them than hiring (and providing benefits for) a full-time employee, especially when their demand for such an employee might be sporadic.

Once you've identified your ideal customers, you need to contact them. But before you do, make sure you're creating the right impression with the materials you offer. The list below contains just the basics—all those marketing tools that everyone else is sure to have. But while everyone may have them, yours can stand out from the crowd!

Business Cards

Get good business cards, and pass them out to *everyone*. There are lots of options and approaches for making your cards unique. When I first started Red Dog Writing Services, I used very simple (and very inexpensive) black-and-white business cards. Truly, as you can see in Figure 1, they were nothing special. As my business grew and I recognized the importance of good business cards in creating my desired image, I invested in three-color, textured business cards with a rotated orientation (see Figure 2). Later, I even created bookmarks to distribute to prospective and existing clients. The bookmarks were a big hit—and everyone who received them commented on the unique way I chose to extend my business name (see Figure 3).

Figure 1. The author's first business card.



Think creatively when creating cards for yourself. You could even distribute your “cards” as stickers, buttons, magnets, or other items. One word of warning, though: a standard-sized business card is usually your best bet for securing precious real estate in someone’s wallet or card file.

Web Site

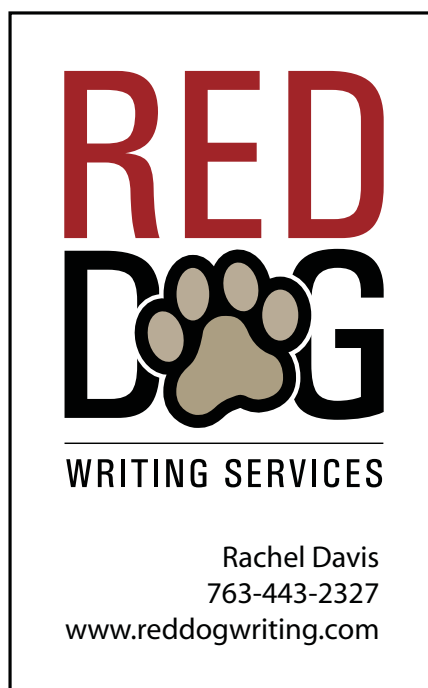
“Of course I need a Web site,” you think. And you’re probably right. But too many freelancers assume their Web site will be all they need to get off to a good start.

Don’t overestimate the importance of your Web site. While it’s a great way to showcase your skills and abilities, it’s not likely to generate much business unless it gives your readers a reason to come back. Perhaps appropriately, this “reason to come back” is often referred to as “heroin content.” William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* describes heroin as the ultimate product “because people would crawl through the sewers and beg to buy it.” While you’re probably not offering products and services as addictive (or dangerous!) as heroin, you can take steps to keep clients coming back to your site.

Approach your site with the mindset of potential clients. Is there a good reason for them to come back? Are you offering new, fresh content with regular updates and relevant information that they will find useful?

Don’t underestimate the importance of your site, either. While it may not close any deals, it’s certainly a valuable marketing communications tool and a great place to show off. That means that it should be kept professional, accurate, and up to date. Keep your site clean and organized, with an intuitive user interface. And of course, make sure to list your site with as many search engines as possible. Find sites other than search engines to list your business and link to your Web site, too. Some local STC chapter Web sites, for example, provide free links to members’ businesses. Your hometown chamber of commerce may provide links to local businesses on its Web site. Proactively search for this free publicity. And remember: although a good site won’t necessarily bring in lots

Figure 2. A new logo, some color, and a different orientation.



APPROACH YOUR SITE WITH THE MINDSET OF POTENTIAL CLIENTS. IS THERE A GOOD REASON FOR THEM TO COME BACK?

of clients, a bad site will definitely turn them away!

Collateral Materials

Be creative with your letterhead, envelopes, and other business stationery. (You *do* have them, right?) These speak volumes about your business. Using professionally printed materials for all of your correspondence provides a great initial impression of your business. Be bold and daring (but not ridiculous—there’s a fine line!) with your

use of color and typeface. If you haven’t already, read Robin Williams’ *The Non-Designer’s Design Book* to learn more about how contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity can affect your designs in ways you’d never imagine.

Portfolios

When meeting with prospective clients, you should always carry an organized and professional portfolio of your work. After all, your potential clients want to see what you can do. I use a leather-bound art folio with black inset sheets so my pieces stand out on the page. My portfolio looks something like Figure 4, where the right-hand page contains the sample, and the left-hand page contains a very brief descriptor of that sample—for example, its audience, purpose, and unique challenges. Using this approach allows those viewing your portfolio to put your samples in context and to better understand and appreciate the challenges of each project.

Spreading the Word

In addition to providing your business card, Web site address, and collateral materials to your clients and potential clients, make sure to give them to your daily contacts. Hair stylists, post office attendants, waiters, cashiers, and coffeehouse regulars might not give you business themselves, but they might offer invaluable referrals to others. Also, just seeing your card in the local café or dry cleaners could inspire strangers to ask about your business. Don’t overlook these often-ignored opportunities!

One last note: You obviously won’t have a chance to showcase your printed materials when e-mailing clients, but at least make sure to take advantage of your e-mail program’s signature file feature. On this signature file, include your return e-mail address, a phone number, and a link to your Web site. If appropriate, include a mailing address as well.

Separating Yourself from the Competition

When you’ve got the basics down, it’s time to get a little more creative and proactive. The following ideas will help you spread the word about your business with a very small investment.

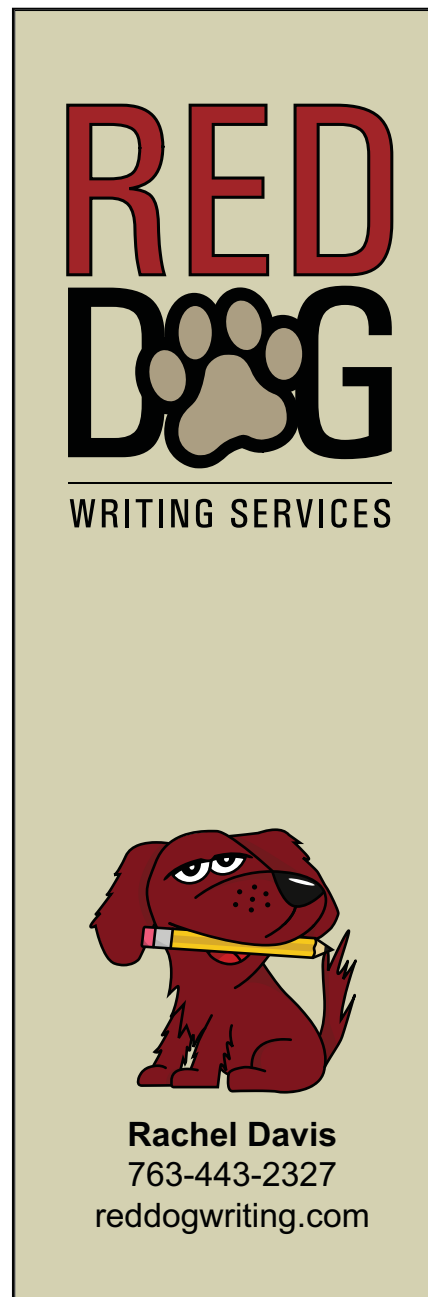
Referrals and Networking

Referrals are a great way to get new clients. Of course, in order to get them, you need to do great work for your existing clients and maintain a strong network of potential referrers. So who are these potential referrers?

- *Existing clients.* Ask them for written testimonials, and request that they recommend your services to others. It's amazing how many people don't even bother to ask for recommendations! Include any exceptional customer testimonials in your marketing materials.
- *Suppliers and vendors.* Your printers, graphic artists, and translators are very familiar with the work you do. Ask them to spread the word about your business to their clients, and return the favor.
- *Former managers and co-workers.* These people probably know you well and can be a priceless source of leads and recommendations.
- *Writing groups.* Many areas offer writing groups that are open to the public. Join these groups, participate actively, and ask other members to refer you to any potential clients. In the Twin Cities, for example, The Loft is a world-class resource for readers and writers (www.loft.org). Is there such a group in your area?
- *Agencies.* Agencies and contract houses often have loads of available contract and temporary jobs. You might consider joining an agency to help keep your income more consistent and stable. Be aware, however, that you'll have to honor any noncompete agreements.
- *Technical clubs or organizations.* Let's say you develop content for packaging systems. Join the Packaging Machinery Manufacturers Institute (PMMI). Go to its conferences. Interact with other industry professionals. Get your name out there! Know where your customers go, and be there. Prospective customers are likely to be found at industry organizations and technical forums. Many of those prospective customers will not know why they need technical communication services—so be ready to tell them!

WRITING FOR LOCAL NEWSPAPERS GIVES YOU EXPOSURE AND CREDIBILITY.

Figure 3. Two-in-one: bookmark and business card.



- *Colleagues and other business owners.* Perhaps surprisingly, some of my best clients have been referred by other business owners who specialize in similar areas. Make a point to get together with these people at least quarterly. Even if these meetings don't generate immediate job leads, they're great for helping you keep focused, get reenergized, and maintain strong relationships.

Papers and Publications

Perhaps one of the best ways to establish credibility in your field is to write for industry-specific publications. Writing for *Intercom* and other trade and professional publications gives you the opportunity to share your experience and expertise. And writing for local newspapers and rags gives you exposure and credibility that's hard to gain elsewhere.

Creating a business-specific newsletter, no matter how simple, is another great way to reach your clients. Make sure your newsletter includes useful and relevant information that your audience will appreciate; no one wants another piece of junk mail. I post a newsletter on my Web site every two months, then bring a hardcopy of it with me on sales visits or enclose it with my sales letters. Make sure your newsletter is available in an online format—whether e-mail or Internet—so your online clients have easy access to it.

The Little Things

Do you have an extra-thoughtful friend who always remembers your birthday, sends you get-well cards when you're sick and good-luck cards when you have an interview, and surprises you with gifts for no reason? This kind of thoughtfulness is perfect for business. Your actions don't need to be huge or expensive. Sending a small thank-you gift (e.g., a book, pen and pencil set, or candy) makes a great impression. Sending handwritten postcards, birthday cards, thank-you notes, and other seasonal cards is another great way to keep your clients' attention—and appreciation. Even making photocopies of interesting articles and sending them to clients or prospects with a personal note is a great way to remind clients that you're thinking of them.

Staying in Touch

Many of the ideas already mentioned focus on the importance of keeping in touch with your clients. Whether you choose to stay in touch via an online newsletter, personal notes, or small gifts, it's critical that you maintain contact in some way. Keep an updated spreadsheet that includes all of your clients' and prospects' contact information. I include fields for name, address, phone number, fax, e-mail, and notes. If possible, I include client birthdays and other personal information (anniversaries, children's names, etc.) in my file. Remembering this kind of information helps you stand out from the crowd.

If you write for area papers or other publications, distributing reprints to your clients is a fabulous way to keep in touch. These writings also serve to remind your clients of your credentials and expertise.

One of the best ways to maintain client contact is to provide truly exceptional service. Beat *every* deadline, and

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answer *every* e-mail. When you provide superior service, your clients will work hard to stay in contact with you!

The ultimate goal of staying in touch is getting your clients to stay in touch with *you*. Give your existing clients good reasons for maintaining contact with you, and give your prospective clients strong incentives for making contact. Be creative when brainstorming ideas for inviting contact: perhaps you could offer a discounted rate or even a free consultation. There are endless possibilities. Remember that your chances of success are much better when prospective clients contact you, instead of you contacting them. Think about it: would you rather hire a plumber who cold-called you with his sales pitch, or a plumber of your choosing who was referred by a neighbor?

Standing Out

Some things you do must be truly unique to capture the attention of your audience. So what are some distinctive and creative ideas for standing out?

Figure 4. An organized and professional portfolio is a great way to show off your stuff.



Create shirts, pins, buttons, bags, pens, pencils, and notebooks that include your business name and contact information. Use or wear these items yourself, and give them to clients and prospects.

Establish an annual “best client” award to recognize a rewarding business relationship. And remember: the best clients aren’t necessarily the highest income providers. I, for one, appreciate respectful correspondence and realistic deadlines much more than an extra \$1,000.

Sponsor a contest or other event. Creating a “best short technical article” contest, for example, is a good way to spread your name and establish credibility in the field. Distribute small gifts and rewards to thank participants, and ask local companies to help prepare your grand prize for the winner.

I’ve known several business owners who use both their Web sites and outgoing voicemail messages to communicate a “tip of the day” (or week). I love the possibilities of this idea—as long as your tips are relevant and interesting, and as long as you have enough of them to follow through each day or week.

Management and Organization

To maintain a successful freelance business, you need to follow some basic management and organizational principles.

Give your business a narrow focus, and know your skills. You can’t be everything to everyone, and you’ll only hurt yourself—and your business—if you try. Develop your own niche, and learn to position yourself in a way that separates you from your competition. If you specialize in online help systems, for example, don’t advertise your book editing skills.

Develop a specialty—or at least be willing to learn about and research your clients’ specialties and markets. With Red Dog Writing Services, I specialize primarily in medical writing, but I have been able to learn a lot about information technology to maintain that business segment as well.

Again, maintain regular (but not annoying) contact with your existing and potential clients. Keep an updated mailing list, but *never* send junk mail or annoying promotions. (If you don’t know what I’m talking about, check your mailbox

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tomorrow.) Maintaining contact is critical, but making that contact valuable and rewarding is even more critical.

Keep an organized and always-evolving filing system. Maintain files for your receipts, invoices, works in progress, client correspondence, future business ideas, contracts, and anything else that’s relevant to your business.

Financials

Many of the freelance writers I know *loathe* dealing with the financial side of business. Unfortunately for them, financials are the root of business. You’re in business, after all, to make money—so learn how to manage this side of things sooner rather than later!

First and foremost, learn not to sell yourself short. Sure, you might be willing to reduce your fee to secure a great client or gain much-needed experience, but let this be the exception. Know the standard industry rates, and adjust according to your experience and other variables (turnaround time, project complexity, specific deliverable needs, etc.).

Remember that you’ll want to save a large portion of every paycheck you receive for Uncle Sam. I put away 40 percent of my checks—just to be safe. Read and understand your tax obligations before they cause you a huge April headache.

Next, remember to save yourself vacation and sick time. Too many freelancers don’t know when to take a break. When setting up your hourly or project rates, make sure to figure holidays, vacation, and sick time into your equation. Working for yourself doesn’t mean that you *always* have to be working!

Reward your good clients with a discounted rate on their next invoice. Or create a referral benefit program, offering, for example, 20 percent off a client’s next service when it refers a new paying client.

Getting paid on time can be the most difficult and frustrating part of freelancing. Make sure you’ve got a penalty clause clearly specified in your services contract. (Mine, for example, reads that a 1.5 percent monthly penalty will be applied to the invoice total if it’s not paid in full by the due date. That’s equivalent to 18 percent annual interest.) I really dislike enforcing this penalty, though, and have found a simple solution for my always-late-to-pay-but-still-very-rewarding client: by offering a “quick pay” discount option (e.g., \$300 off the invoice total if paid within fifteen days), I’m providing a benefit both to myself and my client. A note here: before you offer a “quick pay” discount or other alternative, make sure that you truly *want* to keep the client. If a client is financially disrespectful, perhaps it’s not worth keeping.

Business ownership is rewarding and satisfying in countless ways. But working independently, while a dream come true for many, offers lots of unanticipated challenges. The secret? Prepare yourself as well as you can *before* starting. Learn about business ownership laws in your area, and talk to other experts in your field. When you set clear goals, make thorough plans, and follow through with your ideas, your business will expand as quickly as your wallet! **i**

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