

SO NOW YOU'RE A FREELANCER...

By Steve Werblow, USA



Going freelance is a little like getting on the roller coaster at an amusement park - there's excitement and the promise of new experiences, along with a healthy dose of fear. But freelancing isn't all fun and games. In order to keep doing the writing and photography and strategizing that we love, a freelance career has to be economically sustainable.

After 10 years as a freelancer, I've learned a few things about keeping the business side shipshape so I can focus on the fun part – the work. Here are a few tips.

Diversify

Just like cattle marketing or seed corn sales, agricultural writing and public relations is a highly cyclical market. It's hot in the fall and winter, and cools off in spring and summer. In freelance terms, failing to plan for the down cycle can mean having to try paying your newspaper carrier with your Visa card by July.

The best way to beat the cycle is to seek opportunities in other sectors to fill the slack times. Fortunately, your agricultural experience probably puts you in an outstanding position to cover related industries. Ever covered a wheat story that landed you an interview in a commercial bakery? You're halfway to writing bakery and snack food articles. Do you write about cattle? Can you take the next step and write for a meat processing or marketing book?

Another great outlet is travel stories that tie in with your agricultural field work. And, of course, there are always opportunities to write about your hobbies - cooking, scrapbooking, Civil War reenactments, breeding puppies, whatever. Check out your magazine pile and poke around publishers' websites for inspiration (for trade magazines in the U.S., Primedia, Reed Business and Stagnito are great places to start; Meredith and Kalmbach are great launching pads for exploring hobby publications).

Seek Professional Help

I'm not just saying "seek professional help" because freelancing seems crazy sometimes. I mean that your first move, on the way to the print shop to get your new business cards made up is to find an accountant who specializes in small businesses. If you think a government agricultural agency fact sheet can be tough to get through, try reading tax codes. It really, really helps to have someone who can explain the rules, help you find appropriate write-offs (and avoid inappropriate ones) and help get you through the quarterly tax payments you'll need to start making.

For help with a marketing plan – or even just with getting your head together about seeing yourself as a marketable entity – you might also benefit from a few sessions with a retired businessperson volunteering with the U.S. Small Business Administration (see www.score.org) or joining a writer's group.

You may want to sign on with an investment advisor, too. I know, everybody knows someone whose friend's brother got rich by day-trading online with no fees. But you may need to roll over your old company retirement funds into accounts that you manage and you certainly want to get some funds in order for retirement. With luck, that's more money than you want to gamble with online.

Of course, remember that your advisor is in the business of selling funds and philosophies, so be a smart shopper... but also remember that some outside perspective on where to put your money can be a good thing.

Get Insurance

If you've got a spouse with insurance benefits, count your blessings and skip the next paragraph. Similarly, if your country offers socialized medical programs, you may not have a problem. But if you are in the same boat as most self-employed Americans, start saving your pennies and shopping for insurance.

Make no mistake - health insurance is likely to be one of your two top expenditures, right up there with mortgage or rent. You might find the best rates as part of a group plan. For instance, many state Farm Bureaus offer insurance to their members (and you may qualify as a "friend of agriculture").

A \$60 membership in the American Small Business Association qualifies you to apply for the group's plan; and residents of New York, Illinois, Florida, California and a couple of other states could join the National Writers Union for access to that organization's insurance plan. Some college alumni associations also offer group health coverage – it's worth a look. As expensive as insurance is, even a simple uninsured visit to the hospital could drown you in debt for years.

Retirement

One of the great perks of working for a company in the U.S. is being able to contribute to a retirement plan. All that pre-tax money accumulates quietly, and if you're lucky, your company boosts it with contributions of its own.

Well, freelancer, say goodbye to all that. You're on your own when it comes to retirement planning – and you sure don't want to forget about building that nest egg. Freelancing is fun, but let's assume you don't want to do it *forever*.

Enjoy It

OK, so we have talked about the tough stuff – death and taxes, accountants and retirement funds. Being on your own can be complicated, so don't try to do it all on your own. Find reputable advisors. Check out some online resources like www.writersweekly.com. Call friends who have been freelancing for a while and see what they've learned.

Get your "business you" running smoothly, and you're ready to get your focus back to the enviable part of freelancing – the chance to pursue great projects, exploring the subjects and people that make this industry such a blessing to cover.

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