

## Report from Ten+ Years in the Self-Employment Trenches: Building and Maintaining Your Client Base

Ultimately, independents have to figure out the methods that work for them. Until you do, here are some methods that have worked for other independents.

### Garnering More Work from Existing Clients

Existing clients are often a great source of additional work, either directly or through referrals. As you get to know people in different departments, stay alert for opportunities. Here are a few specific ideas:

- Delight your current clients and ask them for referrals. Unprompted referrals are priceless and this is the only way to get them.
- Seek projects with ongoing updates or maintenance work. One way to stay in the loop for updates and maintenance is to seek feedback on how your client's customers are responding to your work. If you are not available but the client trusts you—you delighted them, right?—do an Overflow Handoff (on page 2) to a colleague you trust.
- Cross-sell. Depending on what you started out doing, look to these areas to offer your expertise:
  - ◆ Web site content that is stale, hard to understand, or generally needs improving.
  - ◆ Marketing materials that have typographical or grammatical errors.
  - ◆ Training materials that need updating to fit the new product, service, or workforce.
  - ◆ Product user guides that need updating to fit the new release or market.
  - ◆ Editing just about any type of document you see engineers or developers writing.
  - ◆ Sales or training demos (or lack thereof) that show the product or service benefits or how the product or service works.
  - ◆ User interfaces that are inconsistent, confusing, hard to navigate, or generally need improvement.
- Show what you can do by creating a short work sample and giving it to the right person. Work through the contacts on your current and prior project to find the right person.
- Note periodicals with content germane to your client's business or industry and deliver the article to your client, either by e-mail (URL or full article) or postal mail. The article does not have to be about information development, but simply needs to be stimulating or helpful. If a certain periodical is required reading for key players in your client's industry, read it.
- Send holiday cards to clients to remind them you're still around.
- Send post cards periodically to clients (past and present) announcing new things about your business (new tools, new Web site, new personnel, anniversary, etc.).

## Garnering Work from Networks

- Be active and visible in one or more professional, industry, specialty, or community associations (STC, ASTD, ISPI, IEEE-PCS, ACM SIG DOC, etc.). Do an excellent job on a project at a non-profit, charitable organization and make sure everyone there knows you did it and that it's your business.
- Network with friends, neighbors, anyone you know. Always have at least one business card with you.
- Do presentations at meetings about documentation- or writing-related topics. These are free-sale events that everyone expects from every industry and profession. Just keep the shameless pitch to the end.
- Present at association conferences, like the various STC region or annual conferences, WinWriters, or others.
- Create a Web site that describes what you do (I get a few leads a year directly from mine). Use metatags to help people find your site when searching. In one case, having a Web site that the prospective client could look at was the difference between being just a name and getting the chance to talk to, meet, and land the client.
- Answer questions on e-mail lists (your local chapter may have one) to show your expertise.
- Take an adult continuing education class about a topic of intense professional or personal interest. Get to know the other people in the class and ensure they get to know you.
- List your company on various Web sites that list consultants or technical communicators.
- Carve out a unique specialty that is in demand or about to be.

## Getting Real

Here are a few real examples of how independents found projects (some from the CIC SIG e-mail discussion list):

- Overflow Handoffs: Exchange overflow work with other contractors. Do or do not take a cut of the fee; just make sure you work it out explicitly with your colleague and get your client's consent. It might seem strange to get work from competitors, but we're such a diverse group of people with equally diverse skill sets, it makes a lot of sense.
- If you're a woman, attend networking events geared to women business. There are a lot of them and one independent met the president of a software company at one such meeting, talked to her a bit about her technical communication services, followed up afterward, and is now on her third help system for this new client.
- Some have luck with mailings. Sending 500 postcards or three-fold brochures has garnered clients. If you don't get any response, follow up with phone calls.
- Becoming known in local professional associations has paid off in several referrals over the years for another independent.
- Presenting at a WinWriters conference garnered the opportunity to bid on a large project. That opportunity along with being easy to work with closed the deal.

## The Tangibles

No matter how you plan to find clients, you need some of the following marketing items in your arsenal:

- Business cards; always have several with you no matter where you are
- An “elevator speech” (what you do in 30 seconds or less)
- Web site
- Brochure, postcard, or other document to mail or give to prospects
- Letterhead (print or electronic or both) for letters, invoices, and proposals

## Some More Things to Keep in Mind

Here are some tips to help keep things rolling for you. These may seem obvious, but it’s easy to lose sight of them in the throes of everyday work:

- Always do good work on time and on budget
- Never burn bridges; our community is too small for such situations
- Communicate immediately with your client if anything shows the slightest hint of even beginning to go awry
- Be active in STC and other local organizations
- Network, network, network

## Resources

- [http://www.stcrmc.org/jobs\\_freelance/freelance.htm](http://www.stcrmc.org/jobs_freelance/freelance.htm) — See especially the FAQ
- <http://www.inc.com/home/> — Inc. magazine
- <http://www.sba.gov/> — federal government’s small business web site
- <http://www.stcsig.org/cic/index.html> — STC’s CIC SIG Web site
- <http://english.ttu.edu/gscic/> — STC’s CIC SIG’s *Getting Started in Consulting & Independent Contracting* book
- You’re state’s economic development web site (in Colorado: <http://www.state.co.us/oed/guide/>)
- *Selling Your Services* by Robert W. Bly, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1991
- *Getting Business to Come to You* by Paul and Sarah Edwards and Laura Clampitt Douglas, J. P. Tarcher, 1991 (May be a more recent edition of this book)
- *How to Succeed as an Independent Consultant* by Herman Holtz, John Wiley & Sons, 1993
- *Small Business Kit for Dummies* by Richard Harroch, Jerome S. Engel
- *Flawless Consulting* ISBN 0-89384-052-1
- *Marketing on a Shoestring* ISBN 0-471-63285-6
- *Working from Home* ISBN 0-87477-240-0
- *Making Money in Technical Writing: Turn Your Writing Skills into \$100,000 A Year* by Peter Kent

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