Your Guide
to Becoming a
FREELANCE
WEB DESIGNER

BY ERIC KARKOVACK

OPEN YOUR VERY OWN
WEB DESIGN BUSINESS

HONEST ADVICE ON
WHERE TO START

TIPS TO KEEP YOU
ON THE RIGHT TRACK

And So Much More!

Your Freelance Career
IN A BOX
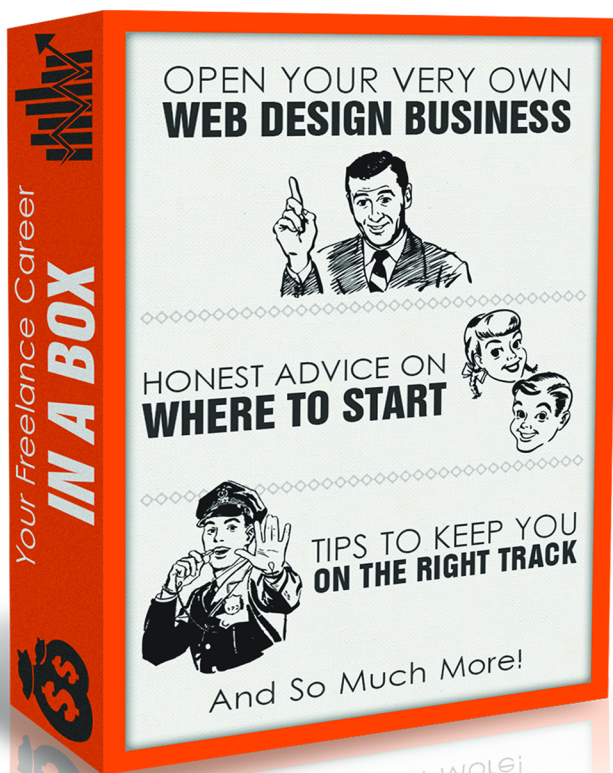
An honest look at the ins and outs of starting your own freelance design business.

What a Freelancer is | Potential Pitfalls | Financial Advice
Finding Clients | Networking | Creating a Work Environment
What to do During Slow Times | Dealing with Clients
Deciding What to Charge + more...

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Acknowledgements

This book was written thanks to my years of experience in web design. I'd like to thank the many people who took me under their wing over the years and provided both great friendship and advice. Their kindness helped me to improve myself and launch a freelance career that has lasted well over a decade.

I'd also like to thank my friends and family for their support. Fortunately, I've never had to look far for an encouraging word. This book is dedicated to my daughter, Natalie.

About the Author

Eric Karkovack has been a professional web designer & developer since 1996. Starting out at his local newspaper, he also worked for a handful of startups before launching his own freelance design business in January 1999.

Since then, his business has continued to grow. He has worked with a wide variety of clientele from both small and large companies.

In 2006, Eric was featured in the book Citizen Marketers: When People Are The Message (ISBN 1419596063, Kaplan Publishing) by Ben McConnell and Jackie Huba. Eric's section of the book recounts his experiences with SaveSURGE.org, a website he co–developed to convince Coca–Cola to revive their SURGE soft drink. SaveSURGE.org also brought Eric exposure in media outlets including The Associated Press, CNN, ABC News, WCBS Radio (New York City) and USA Today.

In recent years, Eric has become a huge fan of WordPress. He even spoke about it at WordCamp Baltimore in September 2012. In fact, much of his business now revolves around the popular content management/blogging platform. He occasionally blogs about it at Speckyboy Design Magazine.

Eric lives in central Pennsylvania with his wife and daughter. In his free time, he cheers hard for his beloved Baltimore Orioles, New Orleans Saints and Philadelphia Flyers.
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Introduction (aka What's a Freelancer?)

Web design is a very unique profession. Unlike many popular career choices, a web designer doesn't necessarily need any formal schooling. The very nature of the internet itself makes it easier to become a self-taught guru of design and/or development.

There's a sense of freedom that comes from being self-taught. And, I think that we creative types enjoy freedom. The freedom to create what we want, work the hours we want, listen to the music we want and earn money the way we want is important to us. Personally, the freedom to dress the way I want is something I hold dear (no suits, please).

That's why so many web professionals have turned to freelancing. What's freelancing, you ask?

Freelancing is:

- Working on your own, with no boss peering over your shoulder.
- Starting your day in your pajamas, if you so desire.
- Taking an early lunch to catch an episode of "The Price is Right" (at least, that's what I do).
- Heading out for a nice walk when things get a bit hectic.
- Playing games when things are slow.
- Listening to your favorite song at full blast while having fun in Photoshop.

Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? But you also have to factor in the negatives:

- Fielding emergency client requests at all hours of the night (and on holidays).
- Keeping track of billing, payments, earnings & expenses (or paying someone else to do it).
- Instead of having one boss peering over your shoulder, now there are dozens of clients (aka bosses) calling and emailing to check the progress of their projects.
- Buying health insurance, if necessary.
- Being a bit lonely when working in an empty house.

So, no, freelancing isn't all rainbows and unicorns. It is work. Sometimes, hard work. Like when you don't have a fellow team member to pass along the difficult stuff to. Or when you receive an irate phone call from a client whose project has gotten lost in the pile of tasks you need to attend to.

Becoming a freelancer means that you'll sign up for all of the above, and more.

Chapter 1: Why Become a Freelancer?

The question of why you should become a freelancer is different for everyone. Some people may want to simply work from home. Others may see earnings potential. Whatever your reason, you need to make sure that it is the *right* reason for you.   After all, it can be quite a risk. Especially if you're quitting your "day job" to strike out on your own.

Being a freelance web designer will change your life. From the moment you declare yourself open for business, you are the key to the entire operation. You'll make all the important decisions, such as how much to charge for a project and what the theme of your office decor will be.

"I can do it better."

If you have ever worked for someone else, be it a large or small company, chances are you've said the above phrase to anyone who would listen (except maybe the boss). Well, freelancing is your stage to prove it.

When viewing things through an employee's eyes, it's easy to see where a project (or even an entire company) have gone wrong. Whether it's incompetent sales people who over–promise what you can do, a lack of communication between departments, a lack of resources to do the job right or general mismanagement, you have seen the mistakes and have confidence that you can and will do better.

Being a freelancer will give you that chance, in good time. But it's up to you to not only dissect the mistakes you have witnessed (or have been a part of), you must also figure out how they could have been avoided in the first place.

A major part of being in business is learning how to avoid costly mistakes. Mistakes will happen, no matter how much you prepare. But learning from the past will help you avert large–scale disasters and also provide you with a sense of how to deal with the smaller ones that will eventually rear their heads.

What Went Right?

If you are already an experienced designer, then you'll also want to look back at the things that went right during your employment.

For example, think back to a project that went well. One where you were able to use your creative talents to develop a website that the client loved. Ask yourself:

- Why did this project go so well?
- What made this project different from others you worked on?

Taking the time to analyze both the good and the bad elements of your previous experiences can help you put your best foot forward in your new venture.

Create Your Ideal Working Environment

One of the tougher aspects of working in an office full of people is creating a work environment that lends itself to creativity. For some of us, it may be nearly impossible to do that in a cubicle. Limited space and the threat of co-workers popping in at any moment can really mess with your creative mojo.

If you're a freelancer working from home, however, you have the power to set up your workspace to match your personality. You can hang inspiring art on your wall, invest in a comfy office chair, listen to your favorite music and even install a lock on your office door to ensure privacy (Tip: this does not work for kids and pets).

Probably the best part of setting up your office space is stocking up on the hardware and software you'll need. No longer are you limited to that clunky old Pentium 4 machine running Windows XP. Now, you can rock whatever processor and OS that your budget allows. As a bonus, you get to setup your gear the way YOU want it.

Find Financial Freedom

One of the greatest risks of starting your own freelance web design business is also one of its greatest rewards. In the beginning, you may have no clue how much money you're really going to make. Another, more positive, way to look at things is that there really is no limit to what you can make.

Because you're not necessarily locked in to a specific set of hours or terms with an employer, you can charge what you want (more on that later) and take on as many projects as you want. So, you do have some sense of control over your salary. Whether you book one $50,000 project or ten $5,000 projects is up to you.

It's a good idea to set (realistic) goals for your business and then get working to achieve them.

Family Time

One of my greatest joys since starting my freelance career has been the extra time I've been able to spend with my family. Because I work at home, I get to spend extra time with my daughter. It's truly a priceless benefit that I wouldn't want to miss out on.

While it can be tough to strike a balance with kids, ("Daddy *is* home, but is working right now and can't play"), the opportunity you have to watch them grow up is worth the effort.

Working at home gives you the flexibility to take the kids to school and be there when they get home. It's much easier to get to school plays and sports practices. This is definitely a perk for parents.

The Lowdown

Becoming a freelancer can be very rewarding, if you're doing it for the right reasons.

Just remember that freelancing means:

- A change in lifestyle (for better and/or worse).
- Potentially more time with the ones you love.
- A responsibility to balance all aspects of your business.
- Freedom!

Chapter 2: It's Not For Everyone

No, this chapter isn't meant to rain on your parade or spoil your great idea. The aim here is to simply give an honest look at the pitfalls of freelancing. I promise, I'll keep it brief and to the point. After all, nothing's perfect, right?

The Business Side of the Business

As a creative person, my best days are when I get to, you know, be creative. The last thing I want to do is worry about sales, accounting and customer support. The truth is, there are days when I see more spreadsheets and troubleshoot more problems than I care to remember. That's the price of freedom.

Working for someone else generally means that you are assigned a specific set of tasks. Other co-workers will take care of their department and you'll take care of yours. Freelancing pretty much throws the whole idea of departments out the window (and yes, you're now responsible for washing the windows).

Instead of focusing solely on great design, your role as a freelancer will grow exponentially. And, while design may be the "fun" part, the other areas of your business will be just as important.

Consider:

Accounting – No fun at all. But, how else will you pay your bills? More importantly, how will your clients know how much to pay you? Time and money must be invested here to keep your business running smoothly.

Sales – This is one I've personally dreaded for years. I don't consider myself any sort of salesman. Over time, I have realized the importance of the job. I've actually developed a philosophy that, since I'm not enamored with the idea of being a salesman, I can go out there and represent my company the way I want to. Instead of pitching products and features my clients don't really need, I go in with a smile and an honest answer to their questions. My goal is to make the sale AND make my client feel good about their decision. Sales are crucial to staying in business. If you aren't prepared to have some fun with it, then this may not be the business for you.

Networking – As someone who started out in this business as an ultra–shy 21 year old, networking wasn't exactly my idea of a good time. While it's not 100% required, think of it this way: Networking

can pay off when you really need it. When your business is going well, it's easy to think that networking with others in your industry isn't necessary. However, wouldn't it be nice to have some connections for when times aren't so great? Knowing the right people can bring in projects during a rough patch.

A personal example: Recently, I lost my second largest client. They had been with me for years, before their corporate parent went with a national web provider. A few months later, some acquaintances came through with several projects they needed help with. It's worked out so well that I've nearly recovered every penny I lost with the other client. That's the power of getting to know others in the design industry. Whether it be through in–person events or even just social media.

Customer Support – Ah, the joys of dealing with the public! Just ask any cashier, server (the human kind) or customer service rep. Yes, as a freelancer you will be spending time with the public in several different capacities. Sales, as mentioned above, is one way. Just as important is customer service and support. Whether it's helping guide a client in updating their own website, trying to figure out just what they want you to do with their website or even helping them get their email setup – it's a necessary evil in this business.

They Think You're a Donut Shop

While clients may not specifically ask you for a glazed donut and a cup of coffee, they may want to treat you like a 24/7 entity.

The problem is, they know you work at home. Thus, some think that you are always connected and always available. So don't be surprised if, once in awhile, you get a call at dinnertime asking about the status of a project.

To be honest, most people are pretty good about this. My strategy is to let them know my office hours and that I only handle emergencies after 5pm. Back in the day, I used to respond to virtually every request I received, as soon as I received it. It led to doing at least *some* work 7 days a week and becoming mentally burned out. If you're the type who just can't let an email sit there until the next morning, you're going to stress yourself out.

The key is to set boundaries and stick to them.

The Lowdown

The more quickly you realize that being a freelance designer means doing way more than just design work, the better off you'll be. If you think going into business for yourself will be all about doing what you want when you want, you will be sadly disappointed.

The bottom line is that you must be prepared to commit yourself to the grunt work. It may seem like an enormous task at first. But if you have a plan and are willing to put in the effort, you business will greatly benefit from it.

Chapter 3: Getting Started

A friend once told me that starting a freelance design business is as easy as waking up one morning and declaring to yourself (and anyone else who will listen, including your cat) that you are now open for business. That simple step will make it so.

Well, okay, it's a little more complicated than that. Once you have decided to go into business there are still a lot of decisions to make. In terms of freelance web design, here are some of the biggies.

Office Space

To work at home or rent office space? Determining where you'll be working is a huge decision. It's one you should make based on the following factors:

Working at home:

- **Is your home environment conducive to getting work done?** If you've got 5 kids and a couple of dogs running around, you may need to really think about this.
- **Does your home have the space you need?** While web design doesn't necessarily require a large amount of space, you should have enough of it to fit yourself and your office equipment.
- **What kind of connectivity is available?** In some parts of the world (and even some parts of the US) this is a real concern. Trust me, you do not want to work on an old-school dialup connection! Make sure there is a way to get your office a high-speed internet connection.
- **Will you welcome clients into your home?** Personally, I like to keep my business life separate from my personal life. I generally try not to have clients come to my home. But your house and personality may be different. If you'd like to hold meetings your home office, do you have a good space to do so?

Renting office space:

- **Can you afford office space?** If you decide that a traditional office is best for you, how much can you afford to spend? Don't overburden yourself with overhead costs, especially when you are first starting out.

- **How far will your commute be?** Picking a location for your office is critical. If you find an ideal space that is 30 miles from home, is it really *that* ideal?
- **Who is minding the shop when you're gone?** If you expect current and potential clients to stop by your office, you need to have a plan of what to do when you're not there. Depending on your situation, it may be as simple as having a friend or family member present when you are out conquering the world. Or, you may want to designate certain times each week that you will conduct business outside of the office and be sure to let everyone know about it.

Staying Within the Law

Before you officially open for business, do yourself a huge favor and make sure you have any necessary licenses and permits. Check with your state and local governments (or other proper jurisdictions if you live outside of the US).

Depending on where you live, you may have to do such exciting tasks as register your business and/or collect sales tax. State governments are usually pretty good at having this kind of information on their websites. Speaking to an accountant or attorney may not be a bad idea, either.

A little research in the beginning can save you a lot of headaches later on.

So, What Do You Offer?

It may seem a little obvious. Perhaps so obvious that I needn't ask you. But it's imperative to think about what products and services you're going to offer. For example, when you start booking design projects, it's logical to assume that people will start asking you where the website will be hosted. Is that something you're willing to do? What about taking over maintenance of an already existing website? Will you provide SEO or social media management? How about online marketing campaigns? Will you bill clients for 3rd party subscription services, or will you require them to use their credit card to pay directly?

This really depends on your personal preference. My advice is simply do what you feel comfortable doing. Before jumping into any of these services think about the pros and cons of doing so.

Hosting

Offering hosting and email services can become a steady source of monthly revenue. Just realize that there is also some responsibility that comes with it:

- If you are leasing space from a hosting provider, then you're going to have a monthly, quarterly or yearly bill. Ideally, you'll sign up enough clients to pay the bills and make some extra money.
- If the server goes down, the first person your clients will call is YOU. Most hosting providers will only provide support directly to the person who leases space (that's also you). When problems arise, you will be the go-between with the client and web host. From experience, I can tell you that it can be a real hassle.
- Email is the same deal as above. If you're going to offer it, you're going to have to support it. Even in this technologically advanced world we live in, there are still people out there who fear it. This is especially true when it comes to their email. Have a strategy in place to handle it.

Maintenance

This is something that some web designers simply want no part of. They build the site and make it clear that their role does not include updating content, etc. Others see it as a way to sell annual packages that keep revenue flowing.

Maintenance is a decent way to make some money when there is a lull in design work. However, it can get quite hectic when you have both types of work going on simultaneously. There can and will be times when you want to rip out some hair (if you have hair, that is). Learning to budget your time is crucial.

Whatever you decide to do in this realm, make sure your clients know and understand your policies and extra fees.

3rd Party Subscriptions

There are a lot of 3rd party services out there that will add functionality and convenience for your clients. It's your job to set a policy on just how these types of services are handled.

For example, do you...

- Roll the subscription costs into a monthly, quarterly or yearly fee that you charge clients?
- Require clients to use their own credit card to pay for subscriptions?

- Become an affiliate member of these services and resell them?

It's important to figure this out because it's going to come up sooner or later. If you decide to directly pay the service vendor, you certainly won't want to run the risk of a client failing to pay you. In that case, you might be well served to stipulate terms in a written contract. You may also want to charge an extra fee on top of the vendor's, just to make it a bit more worth your while.

Are you a Jack of All Trades?

Over the years, I've had clients ask me to do everything from install a copy of Windows, setup their WiFi network, remove malware from their systems, troubleshoot their file servers and everything in between.

People tend to think that, because I'm a "web guy", I'm also their IT guy. They see the roles as one in the same. While some of you may be very comfortable assuming that role, I have found that the best strategy for me is to stay away from those type of requests.

While you certainly could make some extra money doing this (great when you're just starting out), it can also bog you down quite significantly. Again, it all comes down to personal preference. To a lesser degree, it may come down to your need for cash. If business is slow, the idea of de-crapifying someone's 10 year old computer may seem a little more attractive. Tread lightly if you follow this path.

Gear Up

This book assumes that you are already a very talented web guru. So, I really don't need to tell you the hardware and software you need to do your job. You most likely have your favorite operating system, hardware configurations and software by now.

Still, I do know that software in particular can be expensive. Especially for a startup. Even if you can't really afford everything you want right off the bat, look around for some cheap or free alternatives. For every $500 program, there is usually a decent open source app that will get you by until you can afford the real deal.

No worries if you have to start out using the technological equipment of an old AMC Gremlin. Work hard and you'll be sporting a Benz before you know it.

Hope for the Best, Plan for the Worst

What I'm about to tell you may just save your business someday: <u>BACK UP YOUR DATA!</u> I know, you'll get to it later, right? Trust me, that hard drive crash/fire/flood/tsunami/volcano isn't going to put itself on hold until it's most convenient for you. It cares not about your to-do list or your feelings.

Please, please, please do the following so that you don't ever have to suffer the embarrassment and financial loss that goes with losing precious data:

- Get an external hard drive and pair it with some backup software. Your operating system may even have backup software installed and ready for you to use.
- Schedule a backup at the end of each day.
- Sign up with an online service like Mozy, Carbonite, Dropbox or Google Drive.
- Schedule an online backup at the end of each day.

The idea here is to have at least two ways to get your data should the worst happen. Having an offsite backup may seem like overkill. But online storage is pretty cheap these days and it's worth every penny to get that peace of mind, just in case.

Find Your Routine

This one may take a bit of experimentation, especially if you're working at home for the first time. People love to talk about staying in their pajamas all day. But do you *really* want to do that?

The truth is, you certainly can stay in your PJ's if that's your bag. If you'd prefer an Armani suit, then go for it. Remember that this is your business, so run it your way.

Hours of Operation

Another part of your routine will be determining what hours you work. Me? I still go for the 8am–5pm, 5 day a week, working-stiff schedule.   I do it because that's when most of my clients are working and it allows me to be around to serve them. I also do it because I really like TV, and I don't want to miss my nightly programs.

But, since we're talking about *your* business, you can work the graveyard shift if you really want to. As long as you're getting work done and making happy clients, let your freak flag fly. You're driving the bus. Take it where you want to go.

The Lowdown

Once you've decided to go into business, decide on a plan. Prepare for as many eventualities as you can think of and don't be afraid to ask other designers their advice. Remember the old saying that if something's worth doing, it's worth doing *right*.

Take the time to figure out the basics, such as:

- The services you're going to offer.
- The hours you'll work.
- Where exactly you'll be doing that work.
- What kind of hardware and software you'll need to do the job right.
- Cover your rear end in case the unthinkable happens.

Think of these steps as the building blocks of what you want to achieve. Now that you've made a plan, go out there and execute!

Chapter 4: Managing Your Finances

Money means different things to different people. Some see it as simply a necessary evil. Others see it as a gateway to the "finer things" in life. Regardless of your view, the ability to manage the finances of your business is crucial to success.

While I am neither an accountant nor a financial planner, I do have some advice to offer for keeping your finances in order.   For really in-depth advice that is specific to your situation, you may want to consult someone in one of the aforementioned professions.

Keeping Track of Earnings

Chances are that if you earn money you'll have to pay some form of tax on those earnings. The first step in all of this is very simple: Keep track of how much money comes in to your freelance business.

There are several ways to go about doing this, but I recommend investing in some basic accounting software. Whether your choose an old-school app like QuickBooks or a new-fangled cloud-based app, accounting software will make your life a bit easier. Most offer ways to keep track of your clients, produce invoices and list payments.   In the case of QuickBooks, it'll even allow you to keep track of your expenses.

In the event you are ever audited by the government, you now have a way to easily put together a report of your earnings.

A Note Regarding Accounting Software Add-ons

Some of these apps may try to also sell you credit card processing, check writing and bill paying services. When you're first starting out, use caution when signing up for these services. Not because they're necessarily bad – just make sure you need them before you shell out hard-earned cash for them.

Depending on your clientele, most may prefer to pay you by check. I personally offer bill payment through my business website, but only a few clients ever use it. So, instead of signing up for Intuit's (maker of QuickBooks) expensive credit card processing service, I use a simple PayPal account paired with a WordPress powered shopping cart. It gives my customers convenience and I only pay a fee when someone makes a payment.

The Cheapskate's Way Out

If you just aren't able to invest in accounting software, you can always create a spreadsheet that you can use to track your earnings and expenses. You can even set it up to automatically tally up your totals for each category. It's an effective method for generating the basic data you'll need at tax time.

Simple Math

One of the basic principles of business is to take in more money than you spend. Fortunately, there are some easy ways for freelancers to do that. Especially so for those of us who work at home.

Here are some easy ways to keep your costs down:

- **Skimp on Equipment & Software:** I know you want that 30 inch monitor and $2,000 software bundle. But when you're first starting out, <u>buy what you can afford</u>. In the case of software, there are a lot of great free, open-source apps out there. Get the bare essentials for now. You can always upgrade later on when business is booming.
- **Don't Go Overboard with Server Space:** This is another area where it's more cost-effective to start small. If you'll be offering web hosting to your clients, sign up for an account that allows you to host a few sites and upgrade as needed.
- **Do it Yourself:** As mentioned earlier, freelancing means doing some things that you may not be accustomed to. Take care of as many administrative and accounting tasks as you can until you can afford to pay someone else to do it for you.
- **Be Careful with Credit:** Once companies find out about your business, they will start sending you credit offers. While it's not a bad idea to have a line of credit for emergencies, don't be tempted to go on a spending spree. Putting yourself in thousands of dollars of credit card debt may be fun for the banks, but it will put a lot of stress on you.

Depending upon how your business is setup, overhead costs should be fairly easy to control. More than anything, it's all about knowing what you need to do your job and making smart decisions.

What To Charge

This is perhaps one of the most difficult decisions any freelancer has to make. Of course, we all think we're worth a million bucks. Only a few of us can actually get away with charging that much! So, how do you decide?

First, you have to decide *how* you're going to charge for projects. Should you charge an hourly fee or a flat rate? Personally, I work up an estimate for each design project using a flat fee. I then charge hourly for website maintenance. I find this gives my clients some cost certainty when their site is being built, and later on a fair charge for use of my time in the future.

When I create an estimate for a design project, I always make sure the following tidbits of information are included:

- Which services are included.
- Which services are NOT included.
- A list of optional add–on services.
- Disclaimer that additional features & functions not listed in the estimate may mean an extra charge.

Those are just some basic ideas. This will be your business, so you can set things up to suit your needs.

But, How Much?

The other part of this equation is deciding how much to charge for your services. This one should be determined by several different factors, including:

- **Your Market:** The prices you charge will largely depend on where you're doing business. While a freelancer can certainly work with clients from around the world, you may have to start out working with local clients. There is a difference between working with businesses in New York City and Flint, Michigan. Big city prices don't always go over too well in smaller areas. More on this in Chapter 7.
- **Your Workload:** Is it reasonable to charge more if you're exceptionally busy? Sure, it's called "supply and demand". Your time becomes more valuable as you have less and less of it.
- **Your Ability:** Are you truly an expert in your field? Or, are you somewhat new to web design? That should play a part in setting up your fees. Don't worry if you don't necessarily fit into either category. Just think about what it is you do and your talents.

In most lines of business, a good bit of advice is to check out the pricing structure of your competitors. This would be really nice to do in web design. However, you may notice that not a lot of designers are putting their prices out there in public.

I believe in at least putting out my hourly fee and explaining that my fees for design work are specific to each project. But I have found that I'm a rarity in that area. As you get settled in to your business and start a dialogue with potential clients, you may get a better understanding of what your competition is charging.

Yeah, But Can You Live On It?
Whatever you decide to charge, try to make some projections on what it will take for you to make a comfortable living. It's great to give customers a good deal. But it's also great to, you know, eat!

I recommend setting a realistic income goal and then calculate what it's going to take to get you there. When you have a clear understanding of what you need to do, you're in a better position to go out there and do it.

The Lowdown

The financial side of being a freelancer can seem overwhelming at first. But you're smart. You couldn't do what you do for a living without some brain power.

Develop a process for tracking your earnings, expenses and customer invoicing. Get into a routine of marking down each payment you receive, dollar you spend and fee you charge as you go along.

Figure out how you'll charge for your services and how much you'll charge. Work towards your goals and do what it takes to achieve them!

It's really not that hard to manage finances. Some basic organizational skills will allow you to focus on what you do best: DESIGN.

Chapter 5: How to Find Clients

Clients are the lifeblood of your business. No clients, no money. No money, no business. Pretty simple formula. One of your biggest challenges will be finding enough clients to sustain your business.

Word of Mouth Works

Over the years, I've found that word of mouth has become the absolute best way to bring in new clientele. My goal is to do a great job and make customers happy. Those customers may tell their friends and associates, who will hopefully contact me to discuss their website. <u>There is no more powerful sales tool than a recommendation from someone you trust</u>.

Chances are that your clients will have dealings with other related businesses. Vendors, suppliers, financial companies and business–to–business clients to name just a few. Do great work for your client and it won't be long before a rep from one of these other businesses will ask them "Who did your website? It looks fantastic!".

If you are fortunate enough to get a referral from an existing client, the whole process can happen again and again. Just picture it: Satisfied customers spreading your name throughout the community. They're coming to you because they *know* that you do great work. The beauty part is that <u>it takes just one happy customer</u> to start the ball rolling.

Build A Network

We touched on the subject of networking in Chapter 2. Like it or not, networking can be a very helpful tool for your freelance design business.

Even if you're a bit shy, there is some good news. You don't necessarily have to join you local Chamber of Commerce and attend all of their mixer events. Networking can be done effectively using online services like LinkedIn and Twitter. You don't even have to make small talk!

Network Beyond Consumers

The goal of networking is, of course, to gain more business. But you don't necessarily have to find your more traditional types of clients in your adventures. It may be even more effective to reach out to other designers, developers, SEO and social media experts.

For example, I have some great relationships with people in those fields. They really can generate referrals and even a steady flow of work. Consider:

- **Different Specialties:** There may be a web designer out there who is very talented in their field, but not so much in the development area. They need someone they can trust to turn their designs into a real, working website. Maybe your area of expertise can be of use to other professionals.
- **Cross–Promotion:** In the old days, this meant "I'll swap links with ya". These days, it's more about referring each other's clients for services. For example, you might partner up with someone who is really doing good things in the areas of SEO or social media. They refer their clients to you for design work and you refer your clients to them for social media management. That can be a win–win.
- **Barter:** Sometimes it can be beneficial to barter services with someone. Perhaps there is a plugin developer out there who needs a fancy site to sell her creation. Maybe you can do a straight up trade of your web design for use of their plugin?

Working with other professionals who are in related fields can be very fun and rewarding. They are the kinds of connections that pay off for your business.

What To Avoid

One of the biggest mistakes I made as a young freelancer was to sell myself short. I took on projects that paid next to nothing and were a ton of work. I was so desperate to build a portfolio that I would literally work on any project I was offered (at just about any price).

In the end, those projects did very little but frustrate me and take up time I could have put to better use. I've learned that lesson so hopefully you don't have to.

Here are some things to avoid as you strike out on your own:

- **Bid for Service Websites:** They look so great on the surface. Wow, there is a community full of people who need a website! The trouble is, there is an even larger community of designers out there bidding against you. It's darn near impossible to successfully bid for a project and make any money on it. Unless you like rolling out large e–commerce projects for less than $100, don't waste your time here.

- **"I'll get you exposure" Projects:** The client can't afford to really pay you for your work, but they will tell all of their friends about you. Chances are, the guy's friends are just as cheap as he is.
- **Design First, Discuss Payment Later:** When you're first starting out, this one may tempt you. Once they see your brilliant design, they will definitely pay you the big bucks you deserve. Don't fall for it. These days, I won't let anyone see a design until they have paid a deposit.
- **Entities Without Money:** As an example, I would generally advise staying away from entities like local bands. They generally have very little money and will argue amongst each other about how to spend it. A promise from the drummer to pay you $1,000 means nothing to the guitar player. There are just certain types of situations you'll need to look at with a cynical eye. *One caveat:* If the band/organization is made up of your friends, just do the site pro–bono if you really want to help.

Depending on your financial situation, it may be very tempting just to pick up a project – *any project*. Remember that you are a professional and you deserve to be treated like one. Enter into any of the above situations at your own risk.

The Lowdown

Finding clients can be difficult when you first start out. The good news is, that if you do a great job for the ones you find, referrals can almost automate the process of signing up new ones. Obviously, that doesn't mean that you can't or shouldn't actively market your business. It just means that word of your quality work has the potential to spread like wildfire.

And whether or not networking is one of your favorite activities, think about the benefits of knowing others in both your own and related fields. It can lead to great friendships and be mutually beneficial for the businesses involved.

Chapter 6: When Hard Times Strike

During your career as a freelancer, there will be times when you are so busy that you'll wonder how you'll ever get everything done. And then, there are the hard times when things are so slow that you'll feel like you're going to die of boredom. If they last long enough, you might question whether or not your business can survive. They don't call them "hard times" for nothing.

While it's easy to dwell on the negative, you're better off seeing a slowdown as an opportunity rather than a death sentence.

Be Proactive

When work slows down, it can be the perfect time to assess your business and your clients.   First, think about your business and ask yourself the following:

1. What has been successful for me and what hasn't?
2. What about my business makes me happy?
3. What makes me miserable?
4. Is there anything missing from the services I offer?
5. How do I see the next 6 months shaping up?
6. Are my marketing efforts working?
7. Where can I safely cut costs without negatively affecting my customer service?

Figure out the state of your business and think about any changes you want to implement. If there are things that either aren't working or making you unhappy, you're much better off taking a hard look at them and making changes.

Then, take a look at the work you have done for your clients and ask yourself:

1. Are there any clients in real need of a redesign?
2. Who might benefit from adding feature x/y/z to their existing site?
3. Does anyone have really outdated content?
4. Do I have any proposals out there that have stalled?

When things are busy, it's easy to just let clients come to you with requests. During slow periods, it's beneficial to be more proactive and get a dialogue going with clients about the services you are providing for them. You might be surprised when one of the clients you approach about a

redesign takes you up on your offer. It'll get your business going again and give you the confidence to make recommendations more often.

Be Productive

Caution: Step away from that couch! Just because work is a little slow that doesn't mean that you can't still find things to do. Take advantage of some of your extra time by being productive. Here are some things to do while you are in–between projects:

Learn a New Skill

One of the great things about being in the web business is the never–ending array of resources to help you learn new skills. Many of them are even free of charge. You can learn a new programming language, find out more on the latest design trends or discover some new techniques in your favorite software.

Whether you choose to learn in a more formal environment by taking online classes or simply scour the web design community for some quick tutorials, you have the ability to improve yourself. Each new piece of knowledge you gain can benefit your business.

Take on a Pet Project

This one is simple. Find a project your are passionate about and get to work! Maybe you want to blog about your favorite team. Perhaps there is a WordPress plugin you've always wanted to create. Maybe you're like me and want to save your favorite soda.

Whatever your passion, create a shrine to it on the web. This is a great way to experiment with new techniques and have some fun. Who knows, you might even connect with some others who share your passion.

Discovering a new pet project can also really boost your morale. Even in busy times, you can always take a few minutes off to work on something you love.

And Now for Something Completely Different...

Ok, perhaps this slowdown has come at a perfect time for you. Maybe you're a bit burned out by all the long hours you put in a few weeks back. Now is the time to just get away from your desk and do something totally unrelated to web design.

It's ok to take a day off and go outdoors, visit friends and family or just goof off. There might be a list of things you have been wanting to do around the house that needs tackling. Whatever it is, take advantage and enjoy a little time away from the office.

The Lowdown

Hard times don't necessarily have to be negatives for you or your business. Finding ways to be proactive and productive can actually help set you up for a brighter future. Wallowing in a state of "endless bummer" won't accomplish much.

Every business, no matter its size, goes through ups and downs. Stay positive and use the experience as a life lesson.

Chapter 7: The Secret Sauce

Here's the chapter you've been waiting for. I'm going to share my secret for having successfully maintained a freelance design career for well over a decade.

Well, it's just slightly more complicated than that. You see, it really is a combination of factors. I'm going to walk you through a few that I feel are the ultimate make-or-break factors for finding success as a freelancer.

Customer Service

Assuming that you're very good at what you do, and that most of your competition is also very good – what sets you apart? <u>Your attentiveness to the needs of your clients</u>.

To me, this is the biggest single reason why I've been able to stay in business for so long. It really can (and does) separate companies of all sizes.

But just what *is* customer service? What makes for *great* customer service? Believe it or not, it comes down to the little things:

- Returning phone calls and emails in a timely manner (within 24 hours if at all possible).
- Being up front about your pricing and any questions or concerns you may have about a project.
- Setting reasonable deadlines and adhering to them.
- Doing what is right for the customer, even if it means you take a small hit financially in the short-term.
- Listening to your clients and doing your best to understand their point of view.
- Treating customers with respect.
- Generally being nice and working without an attitude!

I do realize that, depending on who you're working with, some of these items may be hard to achieve. But by doing them, you're going to come out of it looking professional and successful. More times than not, you'll also have a satisfied client.

You might be surprised at the number of times I've met with a prospective client who has been through a customer service nightmare with another designer or design company. I've heard more

than a few stories of emails going unanswered for weeks, updates left undone, promises never fulfilled.

It's almost laughable (or sad) to think of the number of good clients I've worked with over the years simply because somebody else couldn't (or wouldn't) practice the basics of customer service. I find it amazing to think that so many otherwise talented people are so inept at it. Then again, have you called a phone or cable company lately? Perhaps bad customer service is an epidemic.

Remember that no matter how talented you are (or think you are), arrogance will get you nowhere fast. Not only does it turn people off in the short-term, but in the long-term it leads in a failure to build trust.

Full disclosure here, I am NOT perfect when it comes to customer service. I have made and will make the occasional mistake. My philosophy is to put my best effort forward and try to treat others the way I would want to be treated. When I do make a mistake, I do my best to rectify it.

Build Trusting Relationships

Did I just mention trust? There's a reason. If you do right by your clients and treat them well, they are much more likely to trust you with their business for years to come. And don't be surprised if they start telling everyone they know how great you are to work with. That means positive word of mouth and more business coming your way.

The problem with trust is that it doesn't happen right away. Trust, of course, must be earned over a period of time. It requires patience on your part but is well worth the time invested. It is one of the most important things you can use to build a successful freelance business.

Being Responsible

I've had conversations with a few people over the years that have told me they couldn't handle the responsibility of working at home as a freelancer. On the other end of the spectrum, I've conversed with folks who seem to think that freelancing means having no responsibility whatsoever.

There's not a doubt in my mind that you must be a responsible person to succeed in this business. Otherwise, the temptations to attach yourself to the Xbox or go play golf for hours on end will lead to the death of your freelancing days.

It's not that you can't check in with your social media accounts (I do plenty of that) or head out of the office on occasion. It does mean that you must do what it takes to get your work done. Then you can play around (a little).

Being responsible also applies to your finances. Avoid foolish and impulsive spending sprees. Scrutinize the purchases you do make within reason. Yes, I'd love to buy that new $3,000 computer but it's not worth clearing out my bank account the month before taxes are due. If it's going to put you in a tough spot financially, don't do it.

While most of being responsible is just common sense, we all need to be reminded of it. Have you taken a look at Wall Street lately?

Know Your Market

I live in a small town in Pennsylvania. Sometimes, I dream about what it would be like to run a business out in Silicon Valley. I think about how much money I could make in a bigger market. That said, I realize that there is a big difference between Harrisburg, PA and San Francisco, CA. Check that, there's way more than just one difference between those two places.

The point is, you have to know the area you work in and charge accordingly. Unfortunately for me, there just aren't a lot of companies in my neck of the woods willing to pay big city prices for a website. On the bright side, the nature of the internet means that I can try to snag a few big city clients of my own. After all, what is appalling in my area might seem a bargain somewhere else.

But when working locally, you have to adapt to your market. Finding out what the market will pay can be difficult. As mentioned earlier, your competition probably isn't going to let you in on their pricing philosophy.

If you have some friends who work at a local business, try and find out what the company paid for their website. That can at least give you a good starting point for figuring out the market.

Other than that, a lot of it becomes clearer to you as you gain more experience in business. You'll eventually find the price point that works for both you and your clients.

The Lowdown

While design and development of a great website can be complicated, the "secret sauce" of running a successful freelance venture is quite simple. You don't need the social skills of a talk show host or the vocabulary of a professor.

All you need is some basic politeness and some organizational skills. Make your clients feel like their needs are important to you. Make them happy. Not only is it the right thing to do for them, it's going to benefit your business in the long run.

Chapter 8: Putting it All Together

Now that you have a better idea of what's involved in being a freelance web designer, you can actually get to work! In this chapter, we'll discuss some ways and ideas that can help you in your daily grind.

Massive Loads of Email (and Other Buzz-kills)

For me, one of the hardest things I've dealt with (and continue to deal with) is a large volume of email. A lot of people like to advise us to only check email a few times a day to avoid constant interruptions. But, in the real world, is that actually a good idea?

It sure sounds great on paper. Unfortunately, it can also really hurt your customer service. Just imagine that your client, who's currently in a meeting, sees a big error on their website. They send you a quick email from their smartphone.   But you aren't scheduled to check your email for another few hours. That doesn't make you look very responsive, does it?

While I'm not suggesting that you have to reply to every message immediately (I used to do that, it was frustrating!), you should always be on the lookout for situations that do require a quick reply. Even if it's just to say "I received your message. I will get to this ASAP..." will show that you care about a customer's needs.

The key of dealing with email overload is to use some common sense. It's up to you to determine what should be dealt with right away and what can wait an hour or two. It may be hard to do, especially when you first start your business. However, as you gain experience, you'll also gain a sense of what can and can't wait.

Prioritizing

Just like email, prioritizing your projects is vitally important. Of course, it's easy to rationalize that you prioritize the projects that are paying you the most money. After all, if someone is making a large financial commitment to you, they should rightfully receive an appropriate amount of your attention.

However, the personalities of the people involved also have a little something to do with this.   We all have those clients who are, shall we say, a bit high-strung. Everything's an emergency to them and they expect you to take care of their needs quickly.

As they say, the squeaky wheel gets greased. In these cases, you have to find a balance of keeping the client happy and not playing the part of their bumbling assistant, scurrying to get things done.

I find that the best thing to do is establish a timeframe for getting things done with the client from the start of your relationship. Even if you are able to handle their request immediately, you may actually be better off waiting an hour or two before posting it. Why? With certain types of people, if you do something immediately the first time they'll expect it EVERY time.

Use your best discretion when dealing with clients. If there truly is an emergency, then by all means take care of it as soon as you can. Just be wary of people who treat every revision like a life or death situation. You want to provide great service, just don't lose your dignity in the process.

Pay Up or Shut Up

No matter what type of business you run, at some point you'll have to deal with a client who won't or can't pay their bills. It's no fun for business owners and it can be embarrassing for clients.

I like to divide clients who don't pay invoices into two categories:

1. Those who are facing some sort of hardship and can't pay.
2. Those who are busy, lazy and/or disrespectful.

Depending on which type of person they are, I can be either very sympathetic or quite annoyed. After all, as a human being I'd prefer to create some separation between how I deal with the two types of people mentioned above. Large corporations could generally care less about the circumstances of why a bill goes unpaid, but as small business owners we have the ability to look at the human side of things a bit more.

Here are a few tips for dealing with clients facing hardships and those who just don't pay.

If a client is facing hardships:

1. If you know the client well, it's ok to ask for further detail on what is happening. Letting them vent their troubles may make them feel better. It may also compel them to pay you sooner. If you don't know them very well, offer your general support for them.
2. For a client that owes you a significant amount of money, offer to switch them to a more affordable payment plan. Show that you are willing to work with them. Again, this is not only helping the client, but it is also making them a bit more sympathetic to your situation as well.
3. In truly dire situations, you may consider eliminating some or even all of the debt. Only you can judge whether a situation warrants this kind of action. If you get the sense that you're only going to be able to collect on a portion of what is owed, then this might be the quickest way out.

For those who just won't pay:

1. There are some clients out there who just take extra time to pay invoices. I have had a few over the years who are always a few weeks late. As a businessperson, you have to decide whether that is acceptable or not. Personally, I don't worry about the due dates so much for smaller invoices, as long as they consistently get paid.
2. For those who keep asking you for more work while your invoices pile up, kindly explain to them that you can't do any further work until they have at least made significant progress in their payments. If they scoff at such a notion, then you have my permission to fire them!
3. Don't give people like this any sympathy. If they are repeat offenders, they don't deserve a break. You have held up your end of the bargain and they must do the same.
4. As a last resort, you can use a collection agency to bug the life out of the client until they pay. Just remember that collection agencies do charge a fee, and you're unlikely to get everything owed to you. That said, in the cases of a large balance, getting something is better than nothing.

In general, know the differences between these two types of clients. Also, don't be afraid to forgive a first time offender. Once in awhile, people either don't receive an invoice or simply forget to pay it on time. Good people do make mistakes. However, it's time for concern when you start to see a pattern of non-payment.

Don't Be Afraid to Ask for (or Hire) Help

As a freelancer, you may have the mindset of feeling like you must do every bit of every project. While that can work out just fine on the majority of your projects, there are times when it just would be nice to have some extra help.

If there is a project that is just bogging you down with small tasks, it may be a good idea to outsource that portion of things to another freelancer. That way, you'll be able to focus on the big picture and helping out a fellow freelancer in the process.

Of course, it's best to have a level of comfort with the person(s) you hire. You want someone who is talented, trustworthy and (hopefully) won't bust your PayPal account.

If you're unsure of someone that you've approached about a project, ask to see examples of their work. You might even consider hiring them on for another, smaller project just to see if they can be counted upon to do the task.

Ideally, you'll hire a friend or acquaintance. If you don't know anyone in the industry, you could try to work with someone you find on one of those bid for service websites I told you to avoid in Chapter 5. Well, I told you to avoid bidding on projects there. Posting projects is fine!

Remember to be cautious when it comes to things like passwords and other security measures. You don't want to give administrator access to the wrong person. Also, if you have signed any sort of non-disclosure agreement with your client, make sure any other people you bring into the project do the same.

Lastly, be sure to research any tax repercussions that may arise from hiring a freelancer.

Stay Connected with Industry Trends

Web design and development is a field that changes constantly. There are always new techniques, software releases and design trends that are important to know about. While you don't necessarily have to learn every new thing that comes out, you should focus on those items that may affect your niche.

For example, if you're always touting the use of WordPress to your clients, you'll want to stay informed on new releases, bugs, plugins and tutorials. They can help you better understand your craft and thus provide better service to your clients.

There are plenty of great blogs out there that can help keep you on top of your game. In no particular order, here are a few general sites that I check regularly to stay informed:

- [Speckyboy Design Magazine](#) (I occasionally write articles for them. [See them here](#).)
- [Smashing Magazine](#)
- [Webdesigner Depot](#)
- [Freelance Folder](#)
- [Stack Overflow](#)
- [Six Revisions](#)
- [Web Design Ledger](#)

Of course, there are also many sites that cater to specific software or programming languages. I encourage you to check out what's going on in the world of web design at least once a week. You may be inspired by what you see.

The Lowdown

Perhaps the best part of being a freelance designer over a long period of time is that experience will help you to keep things running smoothly. You develop that sense of what works and what doesn't. You can tell, with some degree of accuracy, who will pay their bills and who won't.

But as a newbie, you're most likely going to have to figure things out for yourself. My main goal with this book is to help prepare you for some of the challenges you'll face. Unfortunately, there are indeed some things that you will just have to experience for yourself.

It doesn't happen overnight. Over time, you will develop a daily routine, learn how to deal with current and potential clients, how to improve your efficiency and a whole lot more.

My advice is to stay patient and stay aware of what's happening with your business. Learn from your mistakes. That will help you to become a very savvy and successful freelancer.

Questions or Comments?

Thank you so much for reading this book! Whether you are new to the web design business or a grizzled veteran, I hope you found something here to help in your success.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me. I'd love to hear from you!

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