

Find customers,

Do work,

Get paid

TechWrite STL virtual meeting
March 31, 2020

Find customers

You may be the best technical writer in the world, but if you can't find customers, it won't matter because you won't be in business very long.

Here's how I found customers well enough to support myself (adequately and without much other income) as an independent for 25 years:

Referrals

- One satisfied customer tells another, and soon you have plenty of business.
- Keep your customers satisfied with the quality and reliability of your work.

Repeat business

- Multiple projects for the same customer.
- Projects with a different department or person in the same company.
- Be wary of having only one customer. Things change and you don't want to be out of work when your favorite retires or the business gets sold.

Working for a consulting company or agency

- Once or twice, working as a contractor was OK.
- Rates tend to be low; work tends to be on-site; you have much less control.

Advertising

- Didn't work for me. The only responses I ever got was from other writers wanting me to hire them.

Cold calling

- Usually based on a news article about a business I was interested in or a startup; I'd call and offer my services. Didn't work for me.

Job listings for STC St. Louis chapter and TechWrite STL

- One project in 2019. It was fun; the pay was right.

How do you find customers successfully?

Do work

This heading implies accomplishing the tasks of writing for customers. Let us agree that you know how to write effectively, creating the types of documents that your customers need.

Determining what to charge for the work that you do is just as important as knowing how to do the work. Set your rate too high, and your customer will fall off the chair and you won't get the project! Set it too low, and you will starve to death. You have the right amount when your customer gasps, then says OK after a bit of explanation.

You may charge by the project, the page, or the hour, but you need to have a baseline desired rate; the dollar amount around which you negotiate each project. I recommend an hourly rate as your baseline. Multiply by 8 for a daily rate. Calculate time and materials accurately to determine a project rate.

Determine your hourly rate

- Start with your FTE take-home pay.
 - ✓ Could you live comfortably on your take-home pay? Scale up or down.
 - ✓ You'll starve if you only use take-home pay as your hourly rate, but start here.
- Find out what your FTE benefits cost.
 - ✓ Benefits might be an additional 50% of your hourly pay.
 - ✓ You must cover most or all of your own benefits: healthcare, retirement, life insurance, others.
 - ✓ You must cover all of the Social Security deductions, 15% of your total.
- Know about estimated tax payments.
- Factor in other sources of income: a spouse's salary, a side job, inheritance funds.
 - ✓ Is your writing a real business, or is it a hobby?
 - ✓ Remember that low, low rates undercut the value of what we do as a profession.
- Salary surveys can be helpful.
 - ✓ STC has one available online free to members, at a cost to nonmembers: go to stc.org
 - ✓ AMWA has one at amwa.org
 - ✓ EFA, the Editorial Freelancers Association, has one at the-efa.org/rates/

Estimate with expertise

- Plenty of online resources; possibly advice on organization websites.
- Possible topic for another meeting. Anyone interested?

Negotiate with confidence

- Plenty of online resources; possibly advice on organization websites.
- Possible topic for another meeting. Anyone interested?

How do you figure your fees?

How do you explain your rates?

Get paid

There's only one rule here: ***Get it in writing!***

Without a written agreement, signed by the decision makers, you open yourself to disappointment and failure of your business.

Written agreements

- Contract: the legal stuff
- Letter of agreement: project description
- Scope of work: details of project procedures and responsibilities
- Memo: might be enough for smaller projects

Your document or theirs

Keep your attorney in the loop

What's your best advice about getting paid?

Resources

Books, old but relevant today

- *Getting to Yes: How to negotiate to agreement without giving in*
 - ✓ Method used to reach the Camp David Accord.
 - ✓ Available on Amazon and elsewhere.
- *The Perfect Consultant*
 - ✓ One of a long series of HR and management titles.
 - ✓ Available on Amazon and elsewhere.

Articles and samples posted at amwa-midamerica.org/

- Scroll to the bottom of the page to find “Resources for Freelancers.”
 - ✓ Sample contract and letter of agreement
 - ✓ Contracts 101, article from STC Intercom
 - ✓ This handout
- Postings to come soon:
 - ✓ Is the Independent Life for You?, article from STC Intercom
 - ✓ Managing Your Customers’ Expectations, article from STC Intercom
 - ✓ Working with Customers, Chapter 9 of the online book, Getting Started in Consulting and Independent Contracting
 - ✓ Contracts and Letters of Agreement, Chapter 11 of the online book, Getting Started in Consulting and Independent Contracting

Please send your best resources about our topics today to Joanne and Lisa for possible inclusion on the website.