Freelance Startup Guide Sample Chapters

by Matt Lambert

Freelance Startup Guide

Sample Chapter

For roughly the past 15 years I've been working as a part-time or full-time free-lancer. From late 90's angelfire hosted client sites up to national web and print campaigns, I've pretty much done it all. Over that time I've learned that freelancing is a rollercoaster ride of freedom combined with pockets of poverty. Don't let that scare you though, it's a great lifestyle if you can swing it. The goal of this book is to teach you just that. These are my experiences, I hope you find them useful.

Qualities of a successful freelancer

Freelancing is not for everyone. If you aren't driven to work hard and be the best designer you can be than this line of work is not likely for you. You also need to be willing and able to wear a lot of different hats in your new business.

This is hard work

Freelancing is a ton of hard work. It's harder than a regular job because you are the sole employee. If you want to be successful as a freelancer you have to be ready to hustle. If you are just starting out you may want to consider freelancing on the side to start. Get a full-time job, where you can learn from senior designers/developers, and do client work on the side. That way you have the security of a full-time job but can bring in some extra cash in your free time.

Organization is key

Being the only employee of your new company you're going to wear a bunch of different hats. First of all you need to find client work. Next you have to complete said client work while communicating with your customers along the way. Your other less sexy responsibilities can include accounting, budgeting, and contacting vendors. The constant through all these tasks is organization. You must be organized! Some tools I like to use to keep myself organized are:

- **Things** - to do list app for Mac

- **Basecamp** - project management service

- **Billings** - Project timer and billing service

- **Google Drive** - for spreadsheets and docs

- **Dropbox** - for file storage and sharing

- **Evernote** - for note taking (this book was written in Evernote)

- **iCal** - a calendar app is a must

Do or do not, there is no try

One of the biggest hurdles for freelancers is self motivation. If you want to make it in the business you have to work hard and motivate yourself to keep moving forward. You don't have any client work this week? Get out there and find a client. Create a WordPress theme to sell on ThemeForest. Grab your camera and go take photos to build up your stock photo library. Take an online course to learn a new skill you can offer to clients to get more work. You should never not have anything to do. If you find yourself sitting on your hands, find something to work on to keep you busy that is work related. If you don't understand what that

means or aren't great at motivating yourself, this line of work might not be for you. Later in the book I'll go into some other types of work you can focus on when your client work load is light.

Customer service is more important than design skills

Yep I said it. The most crucial part of your new freelance business is customer service. You could be the greatest designer in the world but if you're an *a$$hole* clients will not want to work with you. I often see clients hire less talented designers for the simple reason that they provide excellent service. A business owner has many things on their plate, they don't have the time or desire to babysit you. That want to work with someone who they can hand a project off to and feel confident that it'll be delivered back to them on time and on budget.

Customer service keeps clients

Once you've smoothed talked a client into hiring you, you're goal should be to make them a repeat customer. The exception to the rule here is the crazy or over demanding client. When you run into one of those, finish the job, act professional, and move on. Anyhow back to building the customer relationship; the first job is the most important. First impressions are critical. How you perform from a service (and design) stand point will determine if the customer will be back for more.

Why should I care about service?

You may be asking yourself, why do I care about building a customer base? If you want to be successful at freelancing long-term it's critical to build up a stable of good clients. Do you want to spend your time looking for work or doing work and getting paid? Do you want to have some financial stability that comes

with regular work? Do you want to work with a group of clients who respect your process and value your input in their projects? Then you need to build up a group of clients that trust and value your business.

But why is service more important?

Everyone may not agree with me on this one, but based on my 15+ years of free-lance experience, this is what I've found to be true. If you are new to design, or even a veteran, you need to come to terms with the fact that there will always be someone better than you at design. That doesn't mean you can't be an excellent designer, but the odds of you achieving "rock star" status are slim. At the end of the day, who wants to be known as a "rock star" anyhow?

For the other 99% percent of us, there is still lots of work to be done and money to be made. Designers often fall into the trap that all the client cares about is the end product. That's what they're hiring me for; that's the product. Now imagine if you took that attitude and applied it to any other service based industry. If you received a negative customer experience at your local coffee shop, odds are you wouldn't return. Hell, there's a coffee shop on every corner. There's also another designer on every corner.

In reality, not all clients are going to understand good design yet every client understands good service. If you provide competent work, coupled with awesome service, you'll be a successful freelancer. If you remove service from the equation, you should start looking for your next full-time suit and tie job. Noooo… I want to work in my underwear, so how do I avoid falling into the no service trap?

Here's the solution

So what's the magic answer? It's pretty simple, don't be lazy and provide good service. In a sea of freelance designers, if you are looking for a way to stand out,

this is your secret weapon. Almost no one is using it! Sure agencies use it; many agencies started out as small 1-2 person shops. Hmmmmm… maybe they figured this out and we're successful? Seriously, the biggest complaint I hear from clients about designers is "my last designer flaked out on me, he/she wasn't dependable". The solution seems obvious to me.

Tips for providing great customer service

Here's a starting point to start providing excellent service. Look at yourself and examine if you are following these best practices. If you're not, I highly recommend you start.

- Always be on time for meetings, calls, etc…

- Reply to emails as fast as possible. If it's going to be an extend time before you're reply, make sure you give the client a heads up.

- Under promise and over deliver. If a job is going to take 2 weeks, tell the client 3 weeks to give yourself some breathing room. This also makes you look good when you deliver early.

- Never miss deadlines

- Never charge the client above and beyond the agreed contract price without running it by them first. For example, that new feature you added is going to cost $500 more, do you still want to add it in?

- If you're client needs something outside of your skill set, take the time to help them find someone else to help them.

- When going on vacation, give your clients at least 2 weeks notice in case they need anything before you go.

- Take the time to explain your rationale/process to your clients so they feel included.

What do I need to start my business?

One of the great things about a freelance design business is that you don't need a ton of things to get started. Unlike other small businesses, your overhead should be small and easy to manage. At the very least you need a decent computer and all the related software. Don't cheap out here! Get yourself a good computer and DO NOT pirate your software. Nothing sinks a business quicker than a client finding out you used stolen software in the creation of creative for them.

People often ask me if they should have some money in the bank to fall back on when they start freelancing. When I started freelancing full-time I barely had two nickels to rub together. Would I recommend you start the same way? It depends, not having a bunch of cash to fall back on definitely motivates you to get out the door and find work. However, having some money to fall back on for bills in those first months would also be helpful. In the end, extra money never hurts but don't let that be a reason not to start your business today. If you keep waiting for the day that you have enough money in the bank, you'll likely never start your freelance business. Take it from someone who started and stopped a couple of times until I figured out how to motivate myself.

Another important thing to have is a dedicated office space for yourself at home. Freelancing is a job and you need to treat it that way. Having an actual workspace can be useful for blocking out distractions when you are trying to work. When you're first starting out, I'd suggest just working from home. Having an office is great and all but it's overhead you don't likely need. I've never had a dedicated office space outside of the home and it didn't stop me from being successful. As you start to grow your business after the first year or two, revisit this decision. If you are trying to gain larger clients, then the professional aspect of your

own office is important. In the short term, there's shared office spaces in every city that you can rent or keep a desk at for cheaper than renting your own. If a home office is not an option for you, look to those shared spaces first to save yourself some money.

Finally one of the most important things you'll need when you start your business is a website. Having an online portfolio of your best work is key! Don't feel you have to show your entire history of work here; 10-12 good projects will do. If you're not a web designer, check out portfolio platforms like [Dunked](#) or [SquareSpace](#). They have awesome templates you can use for a minimal monthly cost. It's easy to upload your work and you can even use a custom domain name for a small fee. Also make sure you have a presence on social media platforms like [Twitter,](#) [Facebook](#), and [Dribbble](#). You may not find a ton of clients on social media but it's a good way to start building your personal brand and getting your name out there. These services are free advertising so make sure you take advantage of them.

Should I freelance full-time to start?

If you're goal at the end of the day is to be full-time freelancer then yes do it full-time from the start. You need to make that commitment, to jump in with two feet and trust yourself that you will work hard to make it happen. If you sit around the perimeter of this lifestyle hoping it will just happen someday, that won't work. You need to free yourself up during business hours to search for clients, work on personal projects, and focus on your own business. Going at it part-time will always just be a side project of your regular full-time job.

It's important to keep in mind that part-time is not a bad path either. That's actually what I do now. Part-time freelancing can be a great way to earn extra income for vacations and luxuries you wouldn't normally be able to afford. You may also not be the kind of person that wants to do this full-time but you have

marketable skills that customers want. Get out there and make yourself some extra cash.

If you are just starting out from school, I would also encourage you to freelance. The sooner start working with clients, the sooner you'll start learning customer service skills and how the design business works. I would encourage you to also look for a full-time job but don't be afraid to do some freelance too. I think students need to go and work somewhere full-time because there are many skills you don't learn in school that you'll learn on the job. A great example of this is print production. Another great example is how to plan and execute a project with a client. When you're first starting out, doing work for a friend is not a bad idea. In most cases they'll be easier on you and you can give them a good price. Both parties get something out of the experience and you continue to move forward.

Should I be a generalist or a specialist

This is a great question that I hear a lot from designers that are just starting out. Should I learn all the apps or just focus on being a great type designer? I don't think there is a wrong answer here but when I was starting out I was more of a generalist. I think this is a good path to follow because it exposes you to more types of design. This will allow you to find out what you enjoy and excel at. Some of the services I offered over the years included: web development, graphic design, marketing, branding, advertising, and video production. As time has gone on I've become more of a specialist in web development. I may do the occasional print project but primarily I make websites and apps nowadays.

If you've already figured out what you are good at then specialize from the get go. However, do your research and make sure there is a market for that specialization. In some cases there may not be. The safest route when you are just starting is to keep trying new things until you find something that sticks.

Should I do spec work?

I did. This is a controversial subject but I honestly don't see the issue. As long as you're paid properly and it's a good client, I don't see the issue with doing one off jobs. The spec work complaint seems to mostly come from agencies and I have to wonder if they're just trying to avoid freelancers from taking their business away. Anyhow, use your best judgement here and if the job passes the smell test than take it on. At the end of the day, you're a company of one and you need to put bread on the table.

The Golden Rule

Above all be a humble freelancer. People want to work with designers they enjoy interacting with. They don't want to work with rock stars with huge egos. Collaboration is key and a client wants to feel involved in the design process. Take the time to educate your client if they don't understand and be there to answer their questions. To often designers have this mentality that they are better than the client because they have this special design knowledge. Share your knowledge, be humble and clients will follow.

Thanks for reading