

# When Business Stops

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An outstanding freelancer, a ghost-writer of best-selling trade books, called recently. Her backlog of assignments was running out. Her bread-and-butter gig of editing a publication for a financial services firm had just been cancelled. The firm, battered by market panic, was being merged, and thousands were being laid off. Then, a solo practitioner called to let me know a long-time client couldn't get credit and had halted consulting contracts, including hers. A third practitioner sent me an e-mail suggesting we should talk about what she could do for our firm. (We didn't have work.) All three are furiously marketing after years of steady business when they didn't have to sell themselves. However, in a downturn when business stops, everyone is looking. It is a poor time to be raising awareness of oneself amid a cacophony of competing voices.

Marketing only during downturns is not just a phenomenon of solo practitioners and freelancers. Consultants in well-established firms behave the same way. When business is good, they serve clients. When business turns bad, they write papers, send letters and do studies to snare new work. If questioned, the freelancer, solo practitioner and consultant all will tell you they know they should have consistent marketing programs that keep them before potential clients, but they lack the practical means of doing so. Their real challenge, it turns out, is not marketing when business stops but before it does. Marketing during good times prepares for bad times.

## Keep it simple

Experience with consultants and practitioners has identified one principle essential to services marketing – simplicity. If a marketing plan is elaborate, it won't be implemented. If it takes too long, it won't get done. Marketing takes time from client service, and there is no immediate return. It is logical to dispense with systematic contact of prospects when you are on deadline and working until 1 am. The temptation to push it off until tomorrow and then, the day after is over-powering.

Choose a small number of marketing tactics that are suitable for you and which you can do easily then exploit them consistently. Make marketing a habit in which you budget daily time and keep the budget. Awareness comes slowly to prospects, and sales are often long-term courtships. Your consistent presence may be ignored for months, before a prospect asks you to stop by or to respond to an RFP. Give prospects a reason to talk to you and to initiate conversation. Avoid selling and concentrate on making yourself a resource.

Your objective is to make yourself a pick in prospects' mental Rolodexes. Many jobs come from a sudden need to get help, and a prospect will call two or three people. Your aim is to be one of the two or three. This means you need to give prospects reasons to think about you regularly. You need to maintain frequency.

In choosing marketing tactics, be different and pragmatic. Use whatever works for you and for potential clients, but look for media others aren't using in order to set yourself apart. For example, now that nearly everyone uses e-mail, go back to regular mail. Think twice about starting a blog. There are millions of them, and one more isn't likely to work. If you do a web page, ask yourself what it would take to make it a destination. If it requires too much work, use your web page as a brochure and choose another marketing tactic.

Practitioners often fall into a trap when they get a steady account of failing to ask what would happen if they should lose it. It is only when bad news arrives does the loss sink in. The wary practitioner understands that business is fickle and markets accordingly.

### **Keep it inexpensive**

The marketing tactics you choose should be ones you can afford in good times and bad. Budget for expense as well as time, and make sure that what you charge clients in hourly billing defrays the cost of marketing. Keeping a tight rein on expenses means you need to use your creativity. It is a sad fact that most people do the same things to market themselves and end up one more voice in crowd. Items such as pencils, caps and calendars are often thrown away or in a drawer and forgotten. E-mailed jokes get deleted with spam. Dinners and outings build rapport but one may not be able to afford to do them often. Intellectual capital, such as studies or a book, takes time and work to create. The question is whether one has the time to spend.

The most expensive item is not necessarily the one that gains the most awareness. It might be something as simple as meeting with a prospect once, then supplying a thought that applies to the prospect, a mini-case, a question that gets a prospect thinking, a comment based on news about the prospect's company, a fact the prospect might have overlooked. Finding a right idea is harder than executing it. However, don't let fear of failure prevent you from starting. Marketing entails rejection and worst of all, silence, when one isn't sure a prospect has received a message one has sent or whether it was successful. Be careful, though. Maintaining a presence is not the same as badgering prospects. Whatever you do should be beneficial for both the prospect as well as for yourself.

## **Demonstrate your skills**

Many freelancers and practitioners have broad experience but sell themselves short by presenting themselves only as one thing. – e.g., a writer or media placement person. This is usually a skill they prefer to practice and perhaps the one about which they are confident. However, this is a wrong way to market oneself. One should search for a number of paths to identify prospects' needs and to fill them based on your experience. Most importantly, in demonstrating your abilities, show clients how they can make money by using them. Quantify what you have done. This might be hard at first but it gets easier with time. Think like a businessperson, not a writer or media placement person.

Start by inventorying your abilities. Have you media-trained, done research projects, pitched media, written backgrounders, produced newsletters, authored books, used software programs like Microsoft Excel, Publisher or Access database? Have you kept a record of work you have done over the years? If not, go back in memory and list everything you have done. Ask yourself how many ways you can make a client money.

A skills inventory may seem rudimentary, but it is surprising how many freelancers, practitioners and consultants forget to do it. However, don't let a skills inventory become a trap in which one pitches a Chinese menu of possibilities to clients. Pitch cohesive ideas rather than a broadside of choices. Get prospects thinking about issues and willing to meet with you.

Past experience also provides clues to marketing yourself. For example, anyone who has written annual reports knows the problem is not the writing but the research and negotiation of egos that goes into the process. Each divisional head is eager to preen before shareholders and wary lest another get more copy or photo space. A report can become a time-consuming battleground. Having been through the experience, one knows how to position oneself with prospects.

Don't be afraid to rise above communications and to show your strategic side. Develop scenarios based on experience that allow you to show understanding and that get you beyond being "just a writer" or "just a placement person." Use case studies, but make them come down to the pocketbook – how you helped clients make or save money.

## **Keep marketing effective**

Effectiveness is relative. One successful contact out of a hundred is as much as one can expect and better than none at all. Start with your present contacts. Most success comes from those who know you and respect your work. Their recommendations are a powerful way to gain awareness with others. Don't be afraid to approach clients and ask for recommendations. A freelancer told me

she was working directly for a CEO of a major US corporation. She said she felt uncomfortable asking him to recommend her. The CEO, who liked her work, was the most powerful commendation she could get to reach other CEOs who have the power to engage her services in spite of the recession.

If you have few contacts, get a list— e.g., O'Dwyer's directory of Corporate Communicators. Build a contacts database. Use existing sales contact software or build your own using a spreadsheet like Microsoft Excel or Access. Use the database as well to build a record of communication with contacts so you can hone your targeting. A Web 2.0 program like Linked-in is useful but not sufficient. (Don't fall for the Linked-in trap of forming connections with those you don't know or who don't know you. It is too easy for Linked-in to become an unproductive bookkeeping exercise.)

### **Leads are not sales**

Getting commitment and a contract from a client is a sale. Getting a meeting is not although a meeting is usually a first step in making the sale. A good lead to real work is rare, especially in a downturn. That is why the more leads one gets the better, but even more importantly, it is how one handles a lead that makes the difference. Do your homework before talking to a prospect. With web pages and Google, one should have some idea of a prospect's environment before a meeting. Practice selling before you meet with the prospect, especially if you haven't sold for a while. Selling is not so much talking about yourself as it is hearing from the prospect, determining the prospect's need and showing how you can fill it.

### **Measure**

Measurement should be based on useful responses and not on form letter turndowns. The best measure is leads that lead to meetings and meetings that lead to work. Don't be surprised if these are but a handful for a year, especially during a recession. Gauge effectiveness over time. One mailing is not enough and neither are 10.

### **Deja vu**

Remember this downturn: It may come again. Use it as a spur to maintain marketing when you start working, so you are never again lumped with every other freelancer, counselor and consultant. The key is never to give up, and even though the clock ticks loudly at your desk and hours stretch to infinity, find something to implement that will advance your recognition with potential clients.

## A quick summary

- **Keep it simple and make marketing a habit.**
- **Give prospects a reason to talk to you.**
- **Concentrate on making yourself a resource.**
- **Be different and pragmatic.**
- **Keep it inexpensive.**
- **Whatever you do should be beneficial for both the prospect as well as for yourself.**
- **Demonstrate your skills.**
- **Think like a businessperson, not a writer or media placement person.**
- **Inventory your abilities.**
- **Pitch cohesive ideas. Get prospects thinking about issues and willing to meet with you.**
- **One successful contact out of a hundred is as much as one can expect and better than none at all.**
- **Most success comes from those who know you and respect your work. Their recommendations are a powerful way to gain awareness with others.**
- **Build a contacts database.**
- **Leads are not sales but a good lead to real work is rare. That is why the more leads one gets, the better.**
- **Measure but gauge effectiveness over time.**

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