

17 Tips for Designers on Starting a Freelance Business

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As I interact with readers of my blogs, I continually encounter designers who are just getting started in the world of freelancing. In some cases they are very experienced designers/developers who are going out on their own for the first time. Others are trying freelancing part-time to see how it will work for them, and some are planning for a transition process but have not yet started to freelance. Since a large number of readers are facing issues that go along with getting started as a freelancer, I thought it would be helpful to share some tips from my own experience.

The tips in this post will cover all aspects of freelancing and the lifestyle that comes with it. In many cases unexpected issues and adjustments are what new freelancers struggle with, so hopefully this article will help to prepare new freelancers to meet the challenges that will be presented.

1. Make Sure You Have Some Experience

It's very easy to get started as a freelance designer. There's no need to have a particular education (although it can certainly be helpful) and there is no governing body or licensing that requires freelancers to be experienced.

For these reasons there are a lot of freelancers out there, so you will need to be good at what you do in order to be successful. If you have several years of experience working for a design studio or in-house somewhere, most likely you have many of the skills that you need to be successful as a freelancer. However, if you are just getting started as a designer there is a need to gain valuable experience.

Getting experience doesn't mean that you have to land work with high paying clients. You can gain a considerable amount of experience by working on [personal projects](#) or by taking some work for a non-profit organization that may be looking for a lower-priced alternative. Look for opportunities to take on work where you can stretch your skills and make yourself as valuable as possible to future clients.

2. Acknowledge the Downsides to Freelancing

When I talk to friends about the type of work I do, most of them assume I sleep in late and have a lot of freedom to do whatever I want. While there are significant benefits that come with being your own boss, the freelancing lifestyle has plenty of downsides as well. If you are going to pursue this type of work, do yourself a favor and consider the pros and the cons and make sure that it is something that you (and your family) are comfortable with.

Some of the negatives to being a freelancer include:

Work/life balance – Working from home is great, but it also makes it more difficult to separate your working time and space from your personal time and space. In fact, most full-time freelancers work longer hours than they would if they were an employee somewhere. Be sure that you are prepared for the difficulties that can arise with finding an adequate work/life balance.

Benefits - One of the biggest reasons to choose to be an employee over freelancing is the lack of benefits for freelancers. If you have a spouse that works, you will probably be able to have health insurance through their employer. Otherwise, this can be a huge expense. Other benefits like paid time off and 401K plans are non-existent for freelancers (although there are other investment alternatives for the self employed).

Steady Paycheck – There is a big comfort for most people in knowing that they will be getting a

paycheck every two weeks and knowing exactly how much it will be. Most freelancers have very little [consistency in terms of income](#). Some months will be good and other months won't be so good. If you have trouble dealing with inconsistencies in your income, be sure that you have given this sufficient thought before jumping into freelancing full-time.

Personal Interaction – Working in an office as an employee will give you the opportunity to interact with coworkers, as well as customers/clients. Even if you are not the type of person that cherishes your daily interaction with others, working from home as a freelancer will take some adjustment.

3. Start Freelancing Part-Time if Possible

Because of all of the unknowns that come with freelancing, in my opinion (and from my own experience) it is a good idea to [start freelancing part-time](#) while you are working a full-time job. With this approach you won't face the same pressure to produce immediate income because you will still have your full-time salary, which means you can focus on building your business and improving your skills without the need to devote all of your time to work that will produce income.

Another benefit of starting part-time is that you can use the money you are making to invest in your business. If you starting freelancing full-time you will most likely need all or most of your income for living expenses, and you may have little to invest in your business. In general, freelancing on the side while working a fulltime job will allow you to get a taste for what full-time freelancing will be like, but with very little risk.

4. Set Your Working Hours

As I mentioned already, separating work from the rest of your life becomes a challenge when you are freelancing and working from home. Because of this, you may find that you are working considerably more hours than you had intended, and you may struggle to break away from your work for some personal time. From my experience it helps to set a schedule that will let you know when you should be working and when it is ok to relax. You can either have a set schedule that you work every week or you can have more flexibility and set your schedule each week or each day. Whatever the case may be, it's a good practice to start every workday knowing how long you plan to work and when you will be wrapping it up for the day.

5. Set Up a Comfortable Office

If you are freelancing full-time you will be spending a very large amount of time each day in your home office, so make sure that it is a comfortable place that allows you to focus and work without distractions. Ideally, your home office should be separated from the living space in the house to keep distractions away and so that you can stay out of the office when you are not working. For more information, see [Essential Qualities of a Home Office](#).

6. Set Up an Effective Portfolio Site

One of the biggest assets for a freelance designer is the online portfolio. For many successful freelancers, their portfolio site is responsible for [generating most of the leads that convert into clients](#). A quality portfolio site that draws a lot of interest and links can help a new freelancer to get established pretty quickly, so be sure to give plenty of time and attention to your portfolio site. If you're looking for some inspiration for designing your own portfolio, check out my gallery of well-designed portfolio sites, [Folio Focus](#). And if you are looking for ways to gain exposure to your portfolio, see [9 Ways to Get Your Design Portfolio Seen](#).

7. Invest in Quality Equipment

Earlier I mentioned that one of the benefits for starting as a part-time freelancer is that you can re-invest the money that you are making in your business. This includes equipping yourself with everything you will need to be more effective in your work. This could include a computer,

software, a scanner, a printer, general office supplies, and anything else that you will need to do your job well. There is a tendency with most freelancers to avoid as many expenses as possible, but investing in the necessary tools and equipment will allow you to be more efficient and effective in your work. Of course, you'll need to use discretion in what is necessary and what is not, but don't be afraid to spend money on the things that you need to do your job.

8. Work on Reducing Your Living Expenses Wherever Possible

The amount of money that you need to bring in as a freelancer will be directly proportionate to your living expenses. If you can reduce unnecessary expenses you will relieve some of the pressure to make money. Take a look at how you are spending your money. Most of us have a number of ways that we can easily cut back on our expenses if we want to or need to. There are probably some areas that you could cut back on while you work on building your business as a freelancer, and this will help to improve your chances for success.

9. Find a To-Do List System that Works for You

One of the challenges you will face as a freelancer is that you will have to manage yourself and decide how to spend your time. You will most likely have some type of deadlines with most of your projects, so keeping track of them and setting up some milestones that you need to achieve in order to meet those deadlines will keep your clients happy and keep yourself from facing unnecessary stress.

I find it to be a big help to have a list of things that I need to get done each week and each day. That way whenever I finish working on something I don't have to waste time trying to figure out what to work on next, and I can get more efficiency out of my time.

If you prefer, you can simply keep a list on paper and cross things off as you get them done, or you can use an online to-do list.

10. Have an Established System for Tracking Time and Invoicing Clients

Dealing with the business aspects of freelancing is dreaded work for most freelancers. As a result, keeping things as streamlined as possible will help you to stay organized, on top of things, and avoid mistakes. There are plenty of great resources for helping with these aspects, some are paid and some are free. Some popular options include [Fanurio](#), [FreshBooks](#), and [Zoho](#). For a more complete list, see [18 Invoicing Tools for Web Designers](#) at Six Revisions.

11. Plan for the Time it Will Take to Run the Business

Many new freelancers are surprised to find out how much time is required for non-income-generating tasks that are necessary to run the business. This would include all of your work with finances, responding to emails, finding work, networking with other professionals and much more. All of these things are needed in order to be a successful freelancer, but none of them will directly bring in money. Don't expect to be able to spend all of your working time on client projects that will be producing income. Instead, plan your schedule accordingly and account for this time when you are determining your prices or giving quotes to potential clients.

12. Consider Specialization

Some freelancers are able to stand out from the crowd and attract potential clients by being an expert in a particular area or type of work. There are pros and cons to specialization, but it is something that is worth considering. Are there types of work that you enjoy and that you would like to spend most of your time on? Do you have areas of expertise that would make you more valuable to potential clients?

13. Consider Starting a Blog

There are a number of different ways to market your services as a freelancer and one of them is to [start a blog](#), preferably on your portfolio site. Designers generally don't use their blogs to directly promote their services, but it is an excellent way to demonstrate your expertise, to build some name recognition, and to gain exposure for your portfolio. Blogging is not for everyone, but most freelance designers can greatly benefit from it. Starting a blog on your portfolio site doesn't mean that you'll have to write blog posts everyday, but it will involve some work. However, if you enjoy writing and getting to interact with other designers, blogging can be an excellent tool for networking.

14. Set Aside Some Time for Networking

Most successful freelancers have a strong network of other professionals. This could include other designers, web developers, SEOs, marketers, small business owners, and anyone else that you would have potential to work with in some capacity. Networking takes effort, but it can be one of the best things you do for your business. Your networking efforts ideally should include both online and offline activities. Last year I wrote a four part series that covered topics related to networking for freelancers.

15. Don't Ignore Your Local Area

Being able to do business with clients who live in various parts of the world is a big advantage of being a freelance designer, but it makes it easy to ignore opportunities for growing your business locally. Because most designers are not attempting to target local clients, it makes it easier for you to do so. You can optimize your portfolio site to attract local searchers and you can get involved in the community to build you local network. For more information, see [Tips for Attracting Local Clients](#).

16. Have Some Go-To Sources for Finding Work

Most likely, your clients will come from a variety of different sources. Some will probably hear about you through word-of-mouth. Others will come across your portfolio site and contact you. But sometimes you may be looking for work and not getting much interest from some of these types of sources. In these cases it is helpful to have some places you can go to look for work when you need to. For more sources, see [27 Places to Find Web Design Jobs](#).

17. Focus on Gaining Experience and Learning More Than Making Money

If you plan to make a career as a designer, whether it be as a freelancer or if you want to be an employee somewhere, it is more important to work on developing your skills than it is to make as much money as you can. Of course, we all have expenses and bills that need to be paid, but maximizing your income may force you to pass up valuable opportunities to improve on your abilities or gain valuable experience. Planning your schedule to allow time for learning and growth is a good practice if you can afford to do so.