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How to stand out and land the best gigs in an ever-growing sea of freelance talent, according to seasoned freelancers and the people who hire them

Abbie Gonzalez updated 07-22-2022 12:00 PM

The freelance market is bigger, both in budget and talent. Andrew Bret Wallis

- **The pandemic is expanding companies into finding ways to cut costs, one of which is to hire gig workers instead of full-time employees.**
- **With a surge of talent pouring into the talent pool, it's far tougher to differentiate, and yet it's now one of freelancers' biggest challenges.**
- **Business insider asked seasoned freelancers, the companies who hire them, and talent marketplaces what it takes to get hired and make it on your own.**
- **When it comes to marketing yourself, experts said to avoid a generalized approach.**
- **Emphasize your specializations, craft targeted pitches to the right people, optimize your online presence, and foster long-term relationships with current clients.**
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As the pandemic wears on, companies worldwide are looking to cut costs.

One of the ways they're doing so? Opting to hire gig workers instead of full-time employees.

Freelance reports that freelance job opening increased 20% in Q3 compared to the second quarter of the year, and Upwork's "Future Workforce Report" revealed that 47% of hiring managers are more likely to hire freelancers than they were pre-pandemic.

That's good news for side hustlers and freelancers looking, though the surge of hastily-minted freelancers has made it tougher to stand out. In the words of Upwork, which posts more than 3,000 jobs every day, "Freelancers are competing against a much larger sea of talent 50% since the country began to reopen in the pandemic.

So how does a new freelancer stand out in this sea of talent? Business Insider asked seasoned freelancers, the companies who hire them, and the talent marketplaces that bring them together exactly what to do to get hired and build a thriving business.

Market yourself as a specialist, not a generalist

When they're starting out, many freelancers are open to many types of gigs in order to pick clients.

But according to Shirley Tong, VP of community at freelance marketplace for creatives, enterprise like Dribbble, Reddit, and Blue Cross Blue Shield with highly skilled freelance technical talent, that's not the right approach.

Shirley Tong Courtesy of Shirley Tong

"Even if you're at least a generalist, specifying a niche is the best way to get noticed," she said.

Nancy Von Brunet, director of freelance and agency success at Upwork, also emphasized specificity. "Instead of presenting yourself as a jack-of-all-trades, focus on demonstrating that you are an expert in someone's organization and find ways to demonstrate that that specific purpose, and build your portfolio around that specialization."

Nancy Von Brunet Courtesy of Nancy Von Brunet

Abby Braden, freelance event producer and owner of Los Angeles based Table Sea Co., has seen first-hand success with this approach.

"Early on, I noticed when I put myself out there as a 'freelance event pro,' I would get calls for a DJ or to work on weddings, or 'Can you help my friend with her birthday bash?' she said. "While I appreciated the offers and the referrals, it's not what I was passionate about and did not fit my particular skill set."

Abby Braden Courtesy of Abby Braden

When she turned these jobs down and instead shared the type of event she was passionate about, she was referred to an expert in her field and her business grew, she explained.

"It's differentiator yourself from the pack, be brave enough to turn down the jobs you don't want so you can excel, grow, and be recognized for the jobs you are proud of," Braden added.

Tell everyone you know — and don't know — that you're available

One of the best ways to stand out from the crowd is to enlist the people who can vouch for you. Ann McNeats, CEO at The Hampton Empowerment, who frequently hires freelance workers, shared that she always starts her search looking for people who've been recommended by others in her network.

"Knowing that someone's work is endorsed by a professional peer makes my job easier," she said. "I've rarely been let down by following someone's word of mouth recommendations."

Ann McNeats Courtesy of Ann McNeats

When Kat Boogaard, a Wisconsin-based freelance writer who's earned $126,000 of Income in 2019, started out, she sent emails to people in her network to let them know that she was open for business and shared the types of work she was looking for. Word of mouth accounted for over 60% of her clients in her first year of business (her way).

Kat Boogaard Courtesy of Kat Boogaard

In addition, Boogaard has found success sending cold emails to companies she's interested in writing for.

"I think people feel really icky about cold emailing, because we have been conditioned to think of cold emailing the world with this spammy generic message, but that's never my strategy," she said.

Rather, she puts in research to find the right person to reach out to, finds something to connect with that person about, and then sends a highly tailored email. "I would say 10% of the clients that I actively work with now I've gotten feel like reaching out and saying, 'Hey, I'm so sorry for looking for additional writers or blog contributors, I'd love to be considered,'" she said.

Kat Boogaard Courtesy of Kat Boogaard

"Even if they don't need your services right now, they often very enjoyed and you can start a relationship," Boogaard added.

The cold outreach approach has also been useful for Olamide Michael Gbenro, who runs a PR agency and represents professional athletes for connecting them to brand deals.

"I reached out to brand owners on LinkedIn and second not with my pitch deck that said a story about why I represent these athletes and showed these entrepreneurs looking to connect with brands that would be a fit for them," he said. "Often, I believe business is too transactional in I try to stand out by creating real, authentic relationships."

Olamide Michael Gbenro Courtesy of Olamide Michael Gbenro

Marcia Howard, partner production director at career platform The Muse, who hired up to 10 freelance photographers, videographers, video editors, and copywriters each year, regularly had candidates reach out to her or someone on her team, and agreed that she often hired through this approach.

"I did reaching out to the people that you think look talent isn't a bad ways to get work," she said. "It, word, someone doesn't respond, at best, you have a new job."

Marcia Howard Courtesy of Marcia Howard

Make yourself searchable

Boogaard recommends optimizing your social media profiles, particularly LinkedIn, so that they're searchable by the people who could potentially hire you. Just be sure to focus on the keywords that someone might use to find someone like you.

"I've seen people so many times using something like, 'Content Wizard,' but nobody is searching LinkedIn for Content Wizard — put 'Content Writer,' or 'Freelance Writer,' instead," she said.

Jermaine Amada, who started his Denver-based freelance photography business, A Sander Photo, in 2020 and now makes more than $100,000 annually, takes this one step further, using search engine marketing techniques to get more traction to his website.

Jermaine Amada Courtesy of Jermaine Amada

"I noticed a jump on my click through rate when I started to implement structured data on my website using a Schema.org," he said. "As a local business, you are able to tell Google certain things about your business or product and hope that they will find it useful and display those results. This is helpful because, in a world where people are increasingly using voice search, and voice search will be leading in future strategies, the number of reviews for a product, or your FAQs right show in the search results."

Create pitches that are tailored and specific

Boogaard noted that she often sees freelancers comment on job postings saying that they'd be a great fit, but they don't include a portfolio — an approach she said is often ineffective.

Instead, she said, craft a targeted pitch, including specific portfolio pieces that match what the hiring company is looking for.

"You can definitely include a portfolio or website link, but if you don't actually say why you're a great fit for the specific thing something needs to mean, you're not going to do it," she said. "Prove find does the information that you want them to have."

Howard said that while she often reviewed candidates' entire portfolios, "it was much more helpful for them to call out specific work that resembled the type of work we were trying to do."

Michel Kelly, director of Pathfinder Alliance, who started his digital marketing business on Upwork three years ago and is on track to make $200,000 in revenue this year, likes to scope out how other freelancers market themselves.

Michel Kelly Courtesy of Michel Kelly

"Whenever I consult a profile on Upwork, I'm always looking for seeing the client view," he said. "Because I wanted to find SEO work, I'd pick a job request for an SEO professional so that I could see what type of work other people had and how the client responded. This helped me gauge the competition and allowed me to differentiate myself in my pitches."

Be a killer communicator

Don't think that your skills alone will get you the job — make sure your communication is up-notch, too.

"Even if their work looks good, I won't hire them if I don't have confidence in their communication skills," said Neal Taparia, CEO of Unlimited, a Denver-based freelancer talent training, who currently works with 15 freelancers. "Part of this means how they respond to me, and if they communicate clearly and succinctly." For gigs in which there's a good supply of freelancers (think content roles), he said he likes to get responses within a day.

Neal Taparia Courtesy of Neal Taparia

While the quality of a freelancer's work is our more important criterion, people skills are almost as important," McWeeny added. "I want to hire someone who is competent, friendly, proactive in communication, personable, and professional. Whatever the length of the contract, I'd always prefer to partner with someone I actually like."

Keep the customers you have around as much as possible

"One thing freelancers often overlook is the fact that a good client is a potential source of a business supply of great projects for you," Tong said.

"The best freelancers really focus on building a trusted, long-term relationship with their clients," Von Brunet added. Top talent, she said, tends to look for projects that lead themselves to this ongoing relationship. "They are laser focused on the client of projects that they select ... they consider the person's potential and not just its face value."

Nancy Von Brunet Courtesy of Nancy Von Brunet

In fact, Taparia said that ongoing business is one of the key things he looks for when bringing on freelancers. "I look for their number of repeat customers, because that's another sign that they are good to work with if clients keep coming back," he said.

Nancy Von Brunet Courtesy of Nancy Von Brunet

Of course, not every project leads itself to repeat business right away, which is why Amada prioritizes staying in touch with his past clients by sending out an email newsletter four times a year.

"Even if your clients aren't interested in the product you emailed about, it still serves as a reminder of your services," he said. "When I send out the newsletter, within a couple of days, I'll get replies from my past clients saying, 'It's so great to hear from you! We've been thinking about our annual family portraits. When can we schedule something?'"

Tong also added that the end of a project doesn't have to be the end of the conversation. "If a project comes to an end and there's nothing more to do, ask for a positive testimonial on your website or an introduction to someone who needs or remember that exact great your services," she said.

Don't compete on price

When you can stand out in all these other ways, don't think you need to necessarily compete on price. In fact, when Taparia hires freelancers, he often asks them to lower their rates, and he looks for them to say no.

"To me, this is a sign that they know their worth and they aren't desperate to take on just any project," he said.

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