so you want to be a freelancer?

A Guide for Creating and Growing Your Own Web Design Business
So You Want To Be a Freelancer:
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Meet iThemes.

iThemes Media, LLC was founded in 2008 by Cory Miller, a former newspaper journalist and public relations/communication practitioner, turned freelance moonlighting web designer, turned full-time entrepreneur. Miller founded iThemes in his home, fulfilling a lifelong dream of running his own company.

Since then, the company has grown into a full enterprise providing professional, premium themes (iThemes.com), professional plugins (PluginBuddy.com) and over 350 hours of professional web design and WordPress developer training – with 15-20 new courses being added each month (WebDesign.com). These three brands make up what is generally referred to as the iThemes brand.

Benjamin Bradley champions the WebDesign.com brand, and was, himself a freelancer at one time. In addition to running his own business, he was also the Global Business Development Manager for a start up company, so has a keen understanding of the challenges and rewards of starting and managing freelance and start up businesses.

Because of Cory and Benjamin’s unique backgrounds and experience, they are committed to helping freelancers make it professionally – not just to create successful businesses, but successful lives as well. This ebook, as well as the new private coaching programs being developed are two ways we help freelancers gain the knowledge and experience they need to make it on their own. This is also part of our Make Waves 2012 initiative.

If you are interested in business coaching with either Cory or Benjamin, please contact us.

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Introduction

So, you want to be a freelancer? It’s an exciting and challenging world of working in your pajamas and being your own boss.

Freelancing is exciting and scary. It’s a lot of work and a lot of fun. There can be huge rewards and there are massive risks. If you’re going to be a freelancer you need to know what you’re getting into.

Freelancing can give you a lot freedom. You can set your own hours and make your own decisions. You can pursue the work you want to do and find your own fulfillment, not someone else’s.

But it’s not easy and it’s not for everyone. All that freedom comes at a price. You don’t have a steady paycheck. You may be your own boss, but in the end the clients who write the checks are in charge. You can set your own hours, but the work still has to get done. You can’t just clock out at quitting time. If you want to be a freelancer you have to weigh the costs.

We’ll talk about the ins and outs of being a freelancer and give you the full story of what it takes. It’s not an easy path, but it can be extremely rewarding for those who do it right. We’ll cover everything a beginning freelance web designer needs to know.

Let’s get started…
Get Philosophical.

First and foremost we need to talk about why you’re getting into this. You need to make sure you understand what you’re getting into when you start your own freelance business - and if you can handle it. Freelancing is a big change—it’s not like switching jobs or even switching careers. It’s a whole lifestyle change. It requires a different way of thinking, a different way of working and a different way of being. You shouldn’t make a change like that without some serious thought.

Start With Why

Regardless of what business you are in, in order for it to be successful you have to believe in it and be passionate about it. This is what we mean by “Start With Why.”

What is your “why” for your business? Why are you doing this? What do you hope to gain? Hope to experience? Want to give? Is there a legacy you want to leave? How will your life, your family life or a part of the world be better because you are doing this work?

Starting with identifying your personal WHY is critical.

Self Exploration
It may seem strange to get a little philosophical before diving in, but you need to slow down and weigh the pros and cons.

Sit down and ask yourself some serious questions:

- **How well do you work alone?** Freelancing can be a solitary life, and if you’re an extrovert who craves personal interaction, that might be hard to swallow. You can always find ways around this, from working at a coffee shop to co-working, but it’s an important consideration.
- **How do you drive and motivate yourself?** Being a freelancer means being your own boss. Unfortunately there are no underlings to boss around. It’s just you. So you need to be self-motivated. You need to be willing to do what it takes to succeed—whether that’s high-powered business meetings or taking out the trash. It’s all you. If you need someone standing over you and telling you what to do, you won’t get far.
- **Can you meet deadlines?** This one is important. If you can’t hit deadlines, it’s not going to work. Sometimes free-wheeling creative types have a hard time with deadlines. If that’s you, either get serious about deadlines or find another line of work.
- **Are you willing to make sacrifices?** Freelancing is hard work and it will require saying no to other opportunities. There are times when you’ll need to miss out on fun things with friends or important family obligations. The upside is that there are other times when you get to set the priorities. But being a freelancer means you can’t just call in sick. It’s easy to get distracted and there’s nobody to hold you to the grindstone.
- **Can you be organized?** Not every freelancer is super organized. It’s not a must-have requirement, but you need to be organized *enough*. If you thrive on chaos, you’ll have to make a special effort to be organized. Be chaotic in your creative process or in how you keep your desk, but make sure your business files are perfectly organized.
- **Can you work hard without an immediate reward?** Sometimes people think freelancing is an easy way to get rich quickly. It’s not. At least not usually. It’s hard work and requires consistent effort over time. And sometimes it doesn’t pay well, especially in the beginning. You’ll have to make sacrifices and it may be years before you make decent money. You need to be willing to put in the time, work hard and wait for your investment to pay off.
- **Is this really something you want to do?** If you’re a half-hearted freelancer, you’ll completely fail. Your business is really just a hobby in that case. Being a hobbyist is fine, but leads to failure as a business owner. You need to be passionate about this. No dragging your feet.

Test the Waters
Try freelancing part time before you make the leap. Test the waters and find out if this is really for you. Whatever you do, don’t quit your day job (more on that later).
Get Advice

Definitely get some advice from other freelancers, business owners and even mentors or business coaches. This is a big decision and you need to get all the input you can. Ask lots of questions, talk about your fears and find out how it worked for them. You may not agree with everything and not all advice is good advice. But iron sharpens iron and it’s good to share ideas and get some outside perspective.

You should also consider exploring some classes or training programs, especially if you don’t have a background in business. There’s no shame in going back to school. Consider a couple quick workshops on how to create a business plan. It can mean the difference between success and failure, so if you feel like you’re lacking, enroll in some classes.

The freelance life is not for everybody. It takes hard work, sacrifice and commitment. But if you can survive the good and bad, you’ll thrive.

**Tip:** You should also ask friends and family for their input. They likely know you the best and can give some helpful insights. But don’t weigh their input too heavily; sometimes friends and family can be overly generous with their praise—or worse, overly stingy. They may see your weaknesses as roadblocks instead of just caution signs. So take their advice with a grain of salt.
Get Organized.

If you’re going to be a freelancer you’ve got a lot of work to do. It’s time to get organized and get your ducks in a row.

Lawyer Up

If you’ve decided to freelance then it’s time to get serious. As serious as a lawyer. One of the first things you should do is protect yourself legally by setting up a separate business entity. Maybe you’ll be an S-corp or an LLC—ask a lawyer for the details. But you need to do this.

Setting up a separate business entity is an important legal step to protect your personal assets. It puts a legal buffer between your company and yourself. It’s a way to protect yourself and your family.

Let’s say you start a business and neglect to incorporate. Or maybe you decide you’ll just do it later. Either way, six months down the road you have a client who seemed nice, but they don’t like your work and it gets ugly. They decide to sue and suddenly they’re going after your personal assets. Your house, your savings, your retirement are all in jeopardy.

But if you had a business entity then this sour client could only sue for your company assets and cash. They couldn’t go after your personal savings.

And don’t say it’ll never happen to you. Because that’s when it happens to you.

Tip: Hire a lawyer and get some expert legal advice on this. It’s worth the money. Laws vary by state and country, so you need to do your research and talk to an expert. Depending on your needs and your own expertise you might be able to do some of this yourself. But still get that expert opinion so you know you’re making the right decision, even if you decide to do the paperwork yourself.

What’s the Plan?

Another thing you need to do right from the start is make a business plan. This is the kind of stodgy thing they teach in business classes, so if you steered clear of anything so practical in college, it might be time to hit the books. While a business plan might be stodgy and boring, it’s also crucial. You need to write out on paper a plan for how you’ll make money. You can’t just say you’ll do work and people will pay you.

But a business plan doesn’t have to be boring. You can put your creativity to work as you design your business plan, so that it is a reflection of you and the business you want to create. Just make sure you address everything that needs addressing.

A business plan covers everything. It’s one of these catch-all, far-reaching documents that answers all questions, covers all contingencies and tells you where to go and how to get there. It can be pretty overwhelming to write, but it will help you immensely.
Different schools of thought will tell you different things to include, but in general your business plan should cover your company’s vision, goals, marketing plan, some market research and some numbers (we’ll go deeper into this later, but things like your expenses, your expected income, how much you need to break even, etc.).

You’ll need to think through things like how many jobs you’ll need to do in a year to pay your bills and keep yourself fed. It’s very specific stuff that may seem hard at first (that’s the point), but you really have to think it through.

This is a good time to do market research and think about what kind of freelancer you’re going to be. How are you going to stand out from the crowd? There are lots of developers and designers out there and they’re all competing for the same bucks you are. What makes you different? We’ll talk more about branding in one of the next sections of this ebook, but make sure you put it in your business plan.

Tip: Freelancing is often a feast or famine business. You’re either super busy trying to keep up with all the new clients or you’re waiting around for the phone to ring. Inevitably all the new work comes in at once—it doesn’t automatically space itself out to make your life easier. Remember that when you’re busy and tempted to turn clients away. Sometimes it’s better to take on more clients and just push through the busy season. Also remember that when times are slow and you’re tempted to quit early. Slow times are a good chance to catch up on paperwork, clean off your desk, do some research – or better yet, reach out to your market through marketing and genuine connection.

Be Flexible
While any successful freelancer needs to get organized, be official and create a business plan, don’t think that you can’t change. A successful freelancer has to keep an open mind and be willing to adapt. Always keep learning, always keep growing, always keep pushing. You need a plan, but you have to be willing to change it.

Especially in the online world, things change - and change quickly. Social media has sprung up in the past five years as a force to be reckoned with. YouTube was just getting started in 2006 and now online video is ubiquitous. Blogging isn’t even that old in the scheme of things.

The tech world changes quickly, so be prepared to adapt. Rather than being rigid, a solid organization structure should give you the flexibility to change as needed.

Tip: We talk a lot about hiring experts—lawyers, accountants, coaches, etc. Here’s a tip from experience: Spend your time getting paid for what you’re good at and pay someone else to do what you’re not good at. You may think you’re saving a few bucks, but you’re wasting your time (time you could be getting paid) and you’re no expert. Save yourself time and make sure it’s done right by hiring an expert.
Get Money.

You’re going to need to look at some hard numbers in order to make freelancing work for you. If math isn’t your thing, hire an accountant. You’ll be glad you did.

What Should I Charge?

One of the first things you need to figure out—and the most common question for new freelancers—is what should you charge? It’s an important question, unfortunately there’s no simple answer. In order to figure it out you need to do a lot of work, ask some important questions and even do some trial and error. Arriving at your freelance rate is not a simple calculation, but it is very important to your success.

There are three major things you can base your rate on:

1) Experience
2) Knowledge
3) Confidence

If you’re lacking in any of them, you’re not going to be able to charge as much. It’s as simple as that.

Experience

When you’re first starting out you lack the experience and you won’t be able to charge a premium. Don’t worry, you’ll work your way up. But you need to understand that you’re starting at the bottom, you’re untested, you have no track record and the rate you can charge is going to reflect that.

Knowledge

The more you know, the more expertise you can provide, the more you can justifiably charge. This is good news, because if you’re lacking in experience you can make up for it with knowledge. You can always learn more, grow and add to the value you offer clients.

Confidence

No matter how much experience or knowledge you have, if you lack confidence your rates are going to be low. You need to be able to stand up to clients, stick to your guns and insist on the rate you deserve. If you have the confidence to back it up, your clients will come around. If you’re not so sure you have what it takes, your clients will sense your weakness and they’ll want a cheaper price.

Tip: If you’re just starting out and don’t have a portfolio, there are a couple of ways you can remedy this – and it will help build your experience, knowledge and confidence. You can design some sites pro bono, perhaps selecting a non-profit or two that needs a new site. But be clear about what’s included in the site design so it doesn’t get out of hand. It’s just as important to be clear about contract boundaries with pro bono clients as it is paying clients.

Or, design sample sites that showcase your skills. Develop different types of sites emphasizing different design techniques. Be honest about them being sample sites – it still shows the quality of work you can
deliver. This, in turn, develops your experience, knowledge and confidence, even before you’ve had a paying client.

Calculate Your Expenses
Another crucial component to what you should charge is how much you need to make. This should be a no-brainer, but sometimes people fly right by their expenses and don’t take the time to count the cost of running a business. This is a must.

You need to add up everything you need to spend money on. It’s an exhaustive list, so be thorough. Here’s a start:

- Computers, software, equipment
- Your ongoing education and training (Don’t forget this one!)
- Office space, supplies, furniture
- Phones, cell phone, internet access, utilities
- Healthcare, retirement, savings
- Business expenses: Mileage, marketing costs, business cards, etc.
- Salary (you need to pay yourself)
- Taxes! Don’t forget about taxes. As a freelancer you’ll likely need to make quarterly estimated payments. Don’t forget to factor these in or you’ll be in trouble when the IRS comes calling.
- Vacation, sick days and holidays. You will need some time off, you’re guaranteed to get sick at some point and nobody wants to work on Christmas or a major holiday.
- Give yourself a cushion—there will be times when money doesn’t come in and you need to be charging enough to cover those times.

These are just your business expenses. Don’t forget what it takes to live.

If it sounds like there’s a lot to consider, there is. In general you’ll find that you need to charge more than you think you will. And often clients will be willing to pay more than you think they will.

Test and See
Even after you calculate everything carefully, you may find out that you’re wrong. Test your numbers for your first few months and adjust as needed. Did your expenses come out like you expected or do you need to spend more? Are jobs taking you as long as expected or do you need to set aside (and charge for) more time?

Keep careful notes and adjust your numbers as you go.

Tip: You should build up a reserve of savings to help cover your expenses when business is slow. How much is enough? Experts generally recommend at least three to six months of savings. And this is cash on hand, not locked up in a mutual fund where it can disappear or a credit card bringing on debt. This is your safety net, so no dipping in to fund a new computer. And if you do need to tap into it to cover your expenses, remember to build it back up again. You never know when you’ll need it.
Hourly vs. Per Project

Once you know how much you need to make to cover your bills and expenses, you need to figure out how much you can charge. There are two common approaches: Hourly rates and per project rates.

Pros & Cons of Hourly Rates:
- Ideal if you don’t know how long the job will take.
- Protects you when clients ask for above and beyond the needs of the job, which they often do.
- Can make it easier to estimate your own financial needs.
- Boosts your perceived value (“They must be good if they charge X!”)
- But that high rate may also scare clients away.
- If you’re slow the sticker shock will freak your client out.
- If you work fast you’re robbing yourself of additional income.
- Clients might be turned off by the open-ended nature of an hourly rate and the potential cost.
- It’s tempting to take your time and dishonestly milk the clock.

Pros & Cons of Per Project Rates:
- A flat rate makes everything clear to everyone involved and makes negotiation easier.
- You can easily outsource work and mark up the cost.
- You can make substantially more money if you work fast.
- You can also lose money a number of ways, from working too slow, to a project that gets out of hand to making a bad call on how long it will take.
- You have to spell out deliverables clearly and be able to draw the line with a client asking for more changes. This is absolutely critical.

In the end you’ll need to decide what works best for you. One good approach is to do a little of both. Give a flat, per project rate but then include an hourly rate for changes and revisions that go beyond the original agreement. Or use a per project rate for most work, but use an hourly rate for consulting, training or on-site work. Or use an hourly rate but give your clients an estimated range for how long you think the project will take.
Let’s Make a Deal
This can be uncomfortable for some people, but you need to be willing to negotiate each project. Here are a few quick negotiating tips:

• Be confident in your skills and talent. Don’t let anyone belittle you or make you think you’re charging too much.
• Sell the benefits of your services, not the service itself. Don’t focus on the website you’re going to build, focus on what the website will do for them. How does it save them time, money, frustration? How does it improve their reputation, the bottom line, etc? That’s worth paying for.
• Take the time to educate your clients about what you’re offering and why it’s valuable. They’ll be more willing to pay when they realize what SEO is and how it helps them.
• Be a good listener. Sometimes a client may have an objection, but they’re not coming out and saying what it is. By listening you can often figure it out.
• Have some mutual give and take. If a client balks at your rate, offer a lower rate but also offer fewer revisions and a later deadline.
• Don’t fall for cheap excuses. Don’t take a smaller rate now on the promise of future work.
• It’s OK to say no. If you’re not comfortable or something doesn’t feel right, walk away. It’s better to be safe than sorry. Trust your instincts.

Get Paid Up Front
A good practice to protect yourself is to insist on half the payment up front before you start any work and the rest of the payment when the job is finished. If it’s a long term project involving a lot of money, you may want to set up a payment schedule that compensates you for the work as you go along. And make sure you get that final payment before you hand over all the finished work. Different companies have different policies and some larger companies require payments after 30, 60, or 90 days. It’s up to you if you want to take that risk of giving a client that much time to pay a bill, but know that it is a risk. Sadly, not every company out there is completely honest and trustworthy.

Don’t Quit Your Day Job
If all this talk of contracts and bad deals, expenses and safety nets is a bit overwhelming—good. You need to understand that freelancing is not easy. The best thing you can do when you’re starting out is to keep your day job. Keep that steady paycheck to fall back on and protect you when times are slow. Moonlighting can be also be a good way to try out freelancing and see if it really is a good fit. If it doesn’t work out, you still have your job. And if it does work out, you were covered just in case.

Tip: People get sick. Maybe it won’t be you, it’ll be your kids. Or a family emergency will take you out of town. Stuff happens. While working on this ebook a couple of us got sick and lost a few days of work. Thankfully we had wiggle room built-in and the project wasn’t slowed down at all. Plan for the worst. Include sick days and emergency time into your planning—both in calculating your expenses and rates and when you’re setting deadlines.
Get Branded.

Branding is the soul of your business. It’s more than a logo or stationary, it’s the emotional connection that people make with your product or service. You need to define and develop your brand.

Why Do You Need Branding?
You may be thinking that you’re just a lonely freelancer and you don’t need a fancy brand. After all, you’re not Apple or Harley Davidson.

Wrong.

There’s more competition than ever before. There’s a bigger global market. There are more people setting out on their own and doing exactly what you are.

Fortunately there are also more clients than ever, but they need to be able to find you. You need to stand out. You can’t get lost in the background of boring, faceless companies. You need to give people something to latch on to, something to connect with and remember who you are and why they should do business with your company. Branding can deliver that.

You also need a brand because you’ll be branded anyway. If you don’t offer something, then people will make up their own mind about you. You’ll get labeled anyway, so you might as well make it a good label.

What’s Your Story?
Great brands have a great story. It communicates something. It gets to the heart of who you are and what you value and what you offer. It’s an image that communicates quickly, a visual shorthand for what you’re about. What’s your story?

Your brand will help you stand out from the crowd, so don’t be afraid to be creative. Come up with something interesting, engaging and memorable. Technical work is often perceived as boring and mundane, so this is an opportunity to flip expectations and surprise people.

And when people are surprised, you’ve succeeded.
Creating a Brand

Ultimately your brand is more than a logo and a color scheme. It’s more than an identity package. It’s the personality of your company and how you uniquely serve your customers.

You create your brand by thinking through specifics of your personality:

- What’s your style? Are you corporate and straight-laced or are you laid-back and casual?
- What’s your voice? Are you commanding and professional or are you friendly and personal?
- What’s your look? Are you refined and clean or are you grunge and chaotic?

Sometimes it’s easier to come up with your brand by asking how you’d respond in different situations:

- How would you celebrate a milestone? Maybe a party for your clients? What kind of party? Or would you send your clients a gift? What kind of gift—something funny or useful? Or would a celebration not even be appropriate—you’re too focused on business to stop to celebrate.
- How would you react to a public mistake? Mistakes happen, but how you respond is up to you. Would you issue a formal apology and make amends? Or would you craft a humorous apology that pokes fun at yourself while moving forward?
- Say you were wrapping a car in advertising—what kind of a car would you want? Something fun and hip like a VW Beatle? Something tough and rugged like a Hummer? Maybe something sporty and sleek like a Corvette or practical like a Toyota Prius.

These kinds of questions and scenarios can help you see how a brand would play out and help you determine what brand will work best for your freelance business.

This is a quick overview of branding, but there are loads of resources out there to help you understand branding and create your own.

Tip: Branding is far more than business cards, but make sure you have them. Far too often in a crucial moment someone asks for a card and you’re empty handed. That’s no good. Once you’ve nailed down your branding and designed some cards, order a crate of them and stick stacks of them everywhere—in your wallet or purse, your bag, your glovebox, wherever you can stick them. Make sure you never run out.

You can design your own cards for a very low price at VistaPrint.com.

Another Tip: Whatever you do, tend to your own website. Too often web designers find themselves in the proverbial case of “the cobbler’s children have no shoes” – meaning everyone else comes before you.

Obviously you have to focus on your paying clients’ work, but don’t neglect the public representation of your business – your website. First impressions matter, and if your site is out of date, has broken links, etc., you’re projecting a brand image you don’t want.
Get Talking.

As a freelancer, you’re going to find that communication is of the utmost importance. If you’re not talking with clients and prospective clients, you’re going to be losing clients. There are two kinds of communication you’ll need to work on: client and corporate communication.

Client Communication

First and foremost you need to learn to communicate with clients. The best way to communicate is to shut up and listen. Let your clients do the talking and you do the listening. As you learn to listen you’ll realize that much of your job is figuring out what a client really wants.

Another part of client communication is keeping them in the loop. They’ve hired you to do a job and you have a responsibility to keep them apprised of how it’s going. Different clients will expect different levels of contact. Some will want constant hand holding, while others won’t care to talk until the project is complete.

But as problems arise, deadlines shift or revisions get out of hand, you must communicate. This is where you need to keep everyone on the same page, make sure the original project scope isn’t lost in the shuffle and move the project toward completion. If a client isn’t delivering what they need to, you have to let them know. Make sure everyone understands what’s happening and what the ramifications are.

Sometimes this means you’ll need to repeat things. What you heard the client say isn’t always what they meant. And if you want to get paid on time, you’ll need to sort that out. It’s a back and forth process and everyone needs to work on it, but you’re the one who has the most to lose if it goes south.

Often client communication is as simple as keeping people in the loop. If a project is going to be late, give them a head’s up. If your invoice isn’t paid, don’t get mad, just call them up and find out what’s going on. If you’re going to be out of town for a few days in the middle of an important project, let your client know so they don’t worry when you don’t respond. When everybody knows what’s going on people are less likely to get angry.

Tip: Don’t forget that while technology can make communication easier, it also complicates things. It’s easy to miss tone in an email, and that can lead to disaster. It’s easy to fire off a quick email from your iPhone and have a client take it the wrong way. Suddenly people are angry and you risk getting fired. Slow down and consider how your email will be received.

Another Tip: Some experts recommend smiling as you type an email. Yes – smiling. Just like smiling shifts your communication in person and on the phone, it has a way of coming through in your emails, too. If you can’t smile when you’re writing the email, hold off sending it until you can feel confident you’re communicating exactly what you want.
Corporate Communication
The other side of communication that you need to cover is corporate communication. This is how you communicate not just to your clients, but the wider public. Much of this is marketing, from email newsletters to social media.

Toot Your Own Horn
Sometimes it’s hard for people to talk about themselves. They don’t want to be too overtly promotional or be seen as bragging. Well, you need to learn to toot your own horn. If you won’t talk about your own successes, why would anybody else? Ken Blanchard brought this point home when we said “If you don’t toot your own horn once in awhile, somebody is liable to use it for a spittoon.”

Where you land on this will depend on your branding, but no matter the approach you take you’re going to need to get over it and promote yourself. If you’re uncomfortable with it maybe you take a more laidback approach. But if you want business, it needs to be done.

Don’t Go Dark
No matter how you decide to communicate, don’t go dark. You should always be visible and responsive in whatever channels you choose to communicate.

• If you opened a Twitter account or a Facebook page, keep it current. Nothing says ‘lame’ like a six-month-old feed.
• If you’ve got a blog, update it frequently. There’s no sense having one if you’re not going to keep it updated.
• If you have email addresses, be sure you’re monitoring what comes in and responding to new leads in a timely manner.
• If you make your phone number public, be sure you actually answer it or have a professional voice mail. And call people back.

It’s simple courtesy and professionalism.

Know What People Are Saying
Set up Google alerts for your company’s name and your own name so you know what people are saying. Be on the watch so you can respond to problems or thank people for saying nice things. It’s part of being responsive and protecting your reputation.

Also set up Twitter searches for your name, your twitter handle, and your company name. With Twitter being such a powerful means of spreading the word, you want to make sure you stay on top of what others are saying about you and your business.
Get It Right.

One of the joys of being a freelancer is that you’re not bound by corporate rules. You get to make the rules. But that doesn’t mean you can be unprofessional. If you want to succeed, you have to do it right. So run your company like a company.

Appearance
People like to joke about freelancers working in their pajamas, and if that works for you, great. But very few freelancers are going to get the gig showing up for a client meeting like that. You have to be professional.

We like to pretend it’s not true, but image matters. Go casual at home or the office if you like, but when you’re meeting with clients or networking, image really does matter. If you want people to think you’re professional, dress like a professional.

For some people, it even helps to stick to the corporate dress code, even if you work in the basement. There’s something about putting on a business suit that means it’s time to get to work. For some freelancers that does the trick.

Be On Time
Punctuality matters. Be early for meetings and nail your deadlines. The world is moving faster all the time and nobody has time for a freelancer who shows up late or can’t meet a deadline. If you want to impress a client and stand out, always finish a project early. That’ll turn some heads.

Office Space
Your work environment has a tremendous impact on how well you do your work. This is a serious job so you need a serious work space. You can’t just set up an office in the living room or throw open your laptop wherever you are and call it an office. You need a space where you can buckle down and do your work. You need somewhere where you can work undisturbed, somewhere where you can take phone calls and not have children screaming or dogs barking.

Getting out and working in a coffee shop can be great, but it’s hard to make that your permanent space. You can always rent an office or consider a co-working location.

Once you have your space, make it professional. Don’t put a TV in the corner. Hang some inspiring pictures on the wall and make it your own (remember your brand?). Give it some color if that works for you—being serious and professional doesn’t mean you can’t make it pretty and fun.

Tip: Do you work at home? Don’t forget that your home office is a tax deduction. You can deduct a percentage of your utilities, mortgage, etc. This is why you want to hire a professional accountant who will think of all these details.

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Boundaries & Expectations

Part of being taken seriously as a business is setting real boundaries and expectations. Let your clients know when you’re working and when you’re not. If you don’t work after 5, let your clients know and then don’t take calls or answer emails after 5. If you don’t do weekends, make it known. If you only do evenings and weekends, make sure your clients know that (and make some reasonable accommodations so they can contact you during regular business hours as well).

It’s easy for the freelance world to be all-consuming, but you also need to take care of yourself and your family. You need some time off to rest and recuperate, and that means vacations, weekends and evenings (or mornings—whatever works). Those times will only exist if you set boundaries with your clients. Let them know what to expect and they’ll respect you for it.

You may also need to set boundaries and expectations for your family. If you’re working at home it can be easy for your family to think you are home. Suddenly they’re marching in with homework questions and just shooting the breeze. Let your family know that when the door is closed you’re working and not to be disturbed. Or set specific hours for yourself. It can be hard to turn the family away, but you also need to get work done.

The flipside is that you can be more available. Just be sure your family understands how the give and take works. If you take the afternoon off to watch your daughter’s softball game and need to work that evening, make sure she understands.

It’s all a balancing act, but when everyone knows what to expect it goes a lot smoother.
Get It Done.

You need to get your work done in a timely manner so you can get paid. That means you need to be your own project manager. It’s tempting to overlook this job, but especially as you get busy it’s going to be crucial.

Be Organized
Keep careful notes for each client and each project and keep them organized. You might need a filing cabinet and folders, or a notebook for each client or a document on your computer—but however you do it, keep it organized. Get a calendar so you can track deadlines and know when you’re going to be busy.

Keep Records
You’ll need to keep careful records so when problems come up you can quickly take care of them. Record every decision, every request and every change. Double check each one and keep the confirmation. You’ll save yourself headaches when you can pull out the record and show your client that you were right (in a nice way!).

Create Systems
It helps to create systems to keep yourself organized. Maybe you have a separate folder in your inbox for each client. Maybe you have a system for tracking your time so you can improve your bids and boost your bottom line. Maybe you make lists of what you need to accomplish each week and then each day. Maybe you have a system for invoicing and communicating with clients when a project is nearly done.

Whatever you do, you need to keep yourself on track so you get your jobs done. That’s the important part. Maybe these systems seem like extra work, but when you’re extremely busy and juggling multiple jobs, you’ll need some way to keep it all straight. If you already have a system in place, you’ll save yourself from the chaos.

Do the Work
It’s easy to be distracted as a freelancer. Those beautiful days in the spring when it finally gets nice out are productivity killers. It’s easy to push the work aside and go outside. It’s also tempting to make your own schedule—sleep in and work late or take the morning off and work into the evening—and suddenly you’re shorting yourself and not getting enough work done.

The beauty of freelancing is that you can make those choices. You can decide to take a day off to enjoy the weather or go see a new movie in the middle of the day. But you also have to make the sacrifice on the other end and work late or work on a Saturday. You’ll never get paid if you don’t do the work. So make sure you’re doing the work. There’s no boss to check in and make sure you’re on time—you’re the boss. That gives you a lot of freedom, but it also gives you a lot of responsibility.
**Tip:** Some people need a mental division between work and home. Even if you work at home, it might be important to keep these two clearly separated. If that’s you, do whatever it takes. Maybe you need to leave the house and walk around the block to “go to work.” It might sound weird, but that mental exercise will put you in the proper frame of mind to work. That’s why some people still wear business attire, even though they never leave the house. Figure out what works for you and do it.
Get Clients.
Your freelance career will come to a swift and brutal end if you don’t have clients. Get the clients.

Define Your Client
A helpful early step is to define your client. What type of client are you looking for? What’s your niche? Narrow the field so you know what you’re looking for and who you’re going after. Then start to specifically define them. What type of business are they? What are they looking for? Where would they spend their free time? By defining your client you can begin to think like your client and you’ll be able to find them, pitch to them and land them.

Create a Portfolio
One helpful strategy for getting clients is to build a solid portfolio to showcase your work. Clients will typically want to see your work, so have it ready to show off. A solid portfolio will help you stand out. It’ll showcase your experience and back up your claims. Many freelancers get consistent work based solely on the strength of their portfolio. Let your past work do the talking.

Tip: Make your portfolio portable. Maybe you create a mobile version that’s on your phone so you can show it off while you’re on the go. Maybe you have a printed version ready to go in your briefcase so you can pull it out at a moment’s notice (and you’re not relying on someone else’s spotty internet connection to pull down your online portfolio).

Contacts to Contracts
Finding potential clients and turning them into paying projects is the bread and butter of freelancers. It’s also not a quick topic—in fact, we’ve already covered it in a separate ebook. To get the full scoop, you should check out that resource. It covers everything from building relationships to the importance of keeping your clients. Download Contacts to Contracts.
Get To It.

So you want to be a freelancer? Now you know the ins and outs. It’s a challenging job, full of ups and downs. But you can do it. Just be prepared. Don’t be discouraged. Always keep learning.

We’ve just given you loads to think about and now you have some goals to make. Set some goals for yourself and get to work. People who make goals are the people who meet their goals. People who prepare for the worst can survive anything. Stick with it and don’t freak out when things get tough. You planned for it, remember?

And know that it gets easier. Once you have success you’ll build momentum and more jobs will come in. It does get easier.

Now get to work.
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