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"I just downloaded your web designer form packet. EXCELLENT! Thanks a million - I've been meaning to recreate all of my contracts, logs, etc. and these are wonderful! Very affordable too!"

- Melissa Najor

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Client Juggling: The Fine Art of Managing Multiple Projects

BY PATTY J. AYERS

For about the first year I was running my own web design business full-time, the client projects came sporadically. There were dry times, and then I'd land a job and be busy for a few weeks. Projects seldom overlapped much, and I was able to concentrate on only one website at a time.

But gradually business began to pick up. About halfway through my second year I got my biggest job

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ever, one which required server-side code and a database, and which stretched my abilities. I was a little overwhelmed by this one, I'll admit.

During this time, a call came in from a potential client who wanted a website in short order. I was thrown for a loop. It might have been partly because the current project was so complicated, but I honestly didn't feel I could take on another client at the same time. So I told Mr. Potential Client that I could do it, but not for about four weeks.

I didn't get Mr. Potential Client's business. And although I certainly don't get every job, this one stung a little bit. I think I knew that I could probably have taken it on somehow.

After that point, I began working out a system for handling more than one client at a time. The projects began piling up more and more, and I honed and refined my organizational scheme. About a year later, I found myself juggling three major projects at once – all complete new websites, all data-driven, all at the high-end of my normal estimate scale. Plus, by then I had 10-12 maintenance clients who emailed me occasionally or monthly for site updates. I found myself working on as many as 10 websites in a single week.

And it would have been chaos, if not for my system!

Most likely if I hadn't been highly organized, I would have lost some clients, or at least gotten myself known as just another irresponsible, unprofessional web designer, and headed my business towards oblivion rather than success. Think of the phone calls, the emails, the attachments, the faxes, the graphics files and text files and passwords, and the thousand natural shocks a website project is heir to – and then multiply that by ten. This is a situation where being a laid-back right-brained artistic type was just not going to cut it.

Even if you don't yet have ten clients to juggle, I'm convinced that there's an important psychological factor here which necessitates getting organized now. If, deep down inside, you are scared to death of getting a whole bunch of work at once, you're probably not going to attract lots of new business. You won't market your services as eagerly, won't use your best client-fishing techniques when you get one on the telephone; you may actually be repelling new business without realizing it.

Bottom line: you need to be ready. Everybody needs to develop their own system, and of course mine isn't the only way. It's not particularly high-tech, either – but it works for me. If you need a place to start, maybe this will help.

1. **Work orders.** My ongoing clients usually send me work requests by email; occasionally by phone, or in person. However the work request/order comes in, I make sure it goes on a piece of paper. I had a little stamp made up (Staples will do this pretty inexpensively) saying WORK ORDER with a space for the Date Requested and Date Completed. Every time one of my clients asks me to do something, I print the email (or write it down), stamp it, fill in the Date Requested, and pin it on the mighty bulletin board (we'll get to that in a minute). The date requested allows me to prioritize tasks, and when that work is done and I file the piece of paper, I have a record of what I did when.

2. **The mighty bulletin board.** It has become a central strategy in my business, and hangs on the wall just behind my desk. I started out with a small one, but soon had to upgrade, because I found it important to have room to see all of the projects at once.

The mighty bulletin board doesn't hold any random paper. Oh, no. It holds only the names of projects,

written in big letters on bright yellow strips of paper, and the current marching orders for that project. If it's a new, complete website project, I often tack up a work flow plan – a checklist of each major step that needs to happen. If it's a maintenance client, I tack up the email or phone call notes which spell out what needs to be done. It allows me to see the whole picture at a glance.

3. **The Work Log.** If you work by the hour, you obviously need to keep track of time spent. If you work by the project, you still need to keep track of time spent, so that you can improve at estimating in the future. So either way, you need to keep a work log. My simple *Work Log* form is included with the WordPress Freelancer Forms package.

Some people like to do this digitally, and there are programs for that purpose. I like to use paper. In my office, each client gets a separate work log, a blank form designed for just this purpose. If I have seven projects I'm working on that week, there are seven work logs on a clipboard, which lives right next to my monitor, within easy reach. Every time I work on a certain client's site, I write down the date and time. When I'm done (or when I get interrupted and have to stop) I write down the time I stopped, and make a few notes as to what I did during that time.

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Keeping a work log is pretty simple. The hard part is being disciplined about doing it – and even harder, having enough professional self-esteem to clock your hours whenever you're working for somebody. If you're going to succeed at this, you need to be paid for your time, and you need to know how much time you're spending.

If you want lots of clients, get ready for them. And once you are ready, feel confident. Because the beauty of it is that as long as you're working full-time at your business, it's not difficult to juggle many clients at once, because you can use the essential nature of small website clients to your advantage. The very thing that drives us crazy – the long waits for replies to your emails, replies to your phone calls, for feedback on design drafts, and for content – makes it possible to handle a number of projects simultaneously. While the realtor is taking forever to get you his photographs, you can be working on the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick makers' websites.

It really does work. And when it comes time to send out invoices, you'll be glad you learned to juggle.