



airGid
media



web designer's **Success Guide:**

< how to profit from freelance web design />

kevin airgid
www.airgid.com



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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my wife Crona, without her patience and positive support this book and my successful career would not be possible.

“Marriage is our last, best chance to grow up.”
Joseph Barth

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Forward

< by Jonathan Clark />

Have you ever stood at the beginning of a path and following your eye along it.... up, up and up – there, way out in the distance, a vast mountain lies with its peak hovering above the clouds. And you, the intrepid adventurer, have to climb this mountain. This same thing can be said for many things in life, freelance being one of them.

Everybody needs a hand they can hold along this journey, someone they can look up to and say, 'help!', when the going gets tough. Sometimes that hand is there, and very often it is not. What Kevin aims to offer you with this guidebook is a helping hand – some reassurance or even a kick start along this journey. Kevin points out crevasses where he or other people have fallen into, but he also provides good pointers for short cuts on the path and things you can do on those quiet days where not much is happening... and very importantly, he teaches you to ration your food (money) wisely.

An indispensable book for the first timer and a good read also for somebody with a bit of experience already on those paths, as everybody can learn from other peoples experiences.
Let your journey to the top of that mountain be a challenging and fruitful one and don't forget to take your camera with you!

Jonathan Clark
www.jonathan-clark.com



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"The Rejects"

Below are some logos that didn't cut it for the book cover, but I thought they were pretty good and so they see the light of day as "The Rejects" page.



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CHAPTER ONE

starting up

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Introduction

First and foremost, thank you for buying my book! The money you spent will go to a good cause – most notably my daughter's education fund. In turn, I hope to repay your kindness and interest in freelance Web design with fruitful chapters, chock-full of useful tidbits and practical advice. This will enable you to amass an empire fit for taking over the world, to strike out on your own or to at least work in the evenings to make some extra cash. I have tried as much as possible to make this book "fat free". We have all purchased books where there were large amounts of filler just to make the book look thicker on the shelf. So no fat here, just what you need to know to build your freelance Web design business.

After doing a little market research, it became very apparent that there were no books that really taught people the ins-and-outs of running a successful freelance Web design business. Yes, there are other small-business books that try to cover everything from creating a business plan to doing your taxes, but these are rarely industry specific. They are nifty if you want to be a jack-of-all-trades and master of none. This book is aimed specifically at creative individuals, and it will teach you how to maximize your creative talent in order to make money. Nonetheless, there are some books that offer valuable insights on how to run the accounting and legal side of your new business venture. I list a few I highly recommend at the end of this book To keep you focused and on task, I decided it was better if we did not cover those subjects in depth.

I love designing interactive Web sites, and it is fantastic that people pay me to do something I love. I have been working freelance since 1993. There is nothing more rewarding than managing your own creative process and producing creative that has not been tampered with by an overly opinionated supervisor. Being the master of your own domain is truly a pleasure, especially when it comes to producing a flawlessly designed Web site. Of course, freelance is not without its headaches, and I hope to help you avoid some of them in the following chapters. Learn from my mistakes and successes, and you will find building your freelance Web design business to be a very rewarding endeavor, both for your ego and your pocket book.

Why designer's freelance – fun or fear?

It has been my experience that designers freelance for one of two reasons: for fun or out of fear. You need to decide what "f" word is motivating you. It was the fear factor that drove me into freelance. I was employed at a small interactive firm that laid me off due to an economic down turn. I tried to find a full-time position that paid as well as my last one, but there where no job opportunities in my area. For fear of loosing my house, my car and the shirt of my back, I had to find paying freelance clients and fast. Fortunately, I had been freelancing on the side for several years and I was able to convert some of my part-time clients into full-time revenue streams. For any Web designer wishing to freelance in the future, that is what I recommend. If you are working full-time right now, either inside the interactive field or in another discipline completely, I highly recommend you start to build up a small base of freelance clients. This makes the jump into full-time freelance less difficult and not as overwhelming. That way you can be as motivated by the fun factor as you are by the fear factor. The problem with starting freelance full-time or "cold turkey", is that you do not have enough business to sustain even a modest income. There is nothing more stressful than trying to find new clients simply because you have too many bills to pay. It is much better both for your mental health and your bank account if you

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build up a small base of clients first. By acquiring a list of clients and potential clients before you go freelance full-time, you can achieve the following:

- ➲ Build your project management and creative management skills.
- ➲ Give yourself the confidence and experience necessary to be successful.
- ➲ Build a network of client connections.
- ➲ Decide if you can handle the headaches of freelancing full-time.
- ➲ Learn how to better manage your finances.

By doing a little freelance on the side you can learn a lot about what being a full-time freelancer is really like. I think it is crazy when I read get-rich-quick advertisements claiming to give people everything they need to open their own profitable business in thirty days or less. It's never that easy. Being self-employed is not for everyone. If you can not manage your own time or your part-time freelance clientele, or you have trouble with self-motivation, then starting a freelance Web design business may not be for you.

A line of credit: a lifeline or a rope to hang you?

A few years before I began freelancing full-time, I had the good luck to become friends with a financial planner. At the moment I was working full-time for a world-renowned advertising agency and I was pulling in a good salary. Financial problems were the furthest thing from my mind, but my friend insisted I apply for a line of credit for a rainy day emergency. His advice paid off because a few years later I used that line of credit to help jump-start my full-time freelance business.

The best time to apply for a line of credit is when you are already employed full-time. This way the bank is more likely to give you an amount of credit sufficient to meet all your emerging needs. Think of the line of credit as your insurance policy and not another bank account or credit card. You will need to suppress the impulse to shop until you drop. I will talk more about that later when you consider updating your software and purchasing the \$2500 PDA with built-in digital camera and electric toothbrush. Like my friend said, the line of credit is more like a rainy day fund to help get your new business through the rough spots.

I recommend anyone who is going to jump into the freelance business full-time to either save enough money to cover your expenses for at least three months, or to obtain this line of credit. I do not claim to be a business or financial expert (keep in mind I have a visual art's degree), but my own experience has taught me that running your own business can have numerous ups-and-downs. You need to be prepared for when you experience the down times.

SUCCESS TIP

Freelance is a family affair.

When I decided to freelance full-time, I had a long talk with my spouse. The decision to move from a bi-weekly pay check to the roller coaster income of a freelancer was a decision we needed to make as a couple. It is important that you consult your significant other before you begin this risky adventure. You will need the emotional and possibly the financial support as you grow your business. Without my wife's consistent income, I would have been unable to help pay the mortgage in the first few months of starting my freelance business.



Designing your freelance Web site

One of the most important parts of your advertising arsenal is your Web site. Your Web site is the place where you display your product to potential customers. Your product is design and interactive media, and it is important that these potential customers can view a wide range of projects. Often interactive designers will post what they feel is their best work to their Web site. While this is a good idea, I have learned that it is better to have a wide range of styles and types of projects posted online. Even if some of the work is not your best, it is better to post projects that represent a wide range of work. For instance, I have work posted in my portfolio from when I helped design the 1999 refresh of the Chevrolet.com Web site. The designs look old and dated, but the brand name recognition helps build my credibility with new clients. As designers we are often very critical of our own work. I have been pleasantly surprised by how much a new client likes a past project of mine that I consider old and inferior to my more modern work.

When you design your freelance Web site you need to think about your target audience. Every designer has their own style and market niche. You need to decide if you want to do work for any or all of the following: advertising agencies, B2B organizations, B2C organizations, non-profits and mom-and-pop shops.

It is a good idea to do a little research before you begin sketching out the design. Try to learn about what your target audience looks for when they select a freelance Web site designer. In the case of my site, Airgid.com, I have gone through many iterations over the years. One of those iterations consisted of a heavy Flash interface that infused aliens and robots throughout the Web site. The theme was a 1950's horror movie.

"The Attack of the Killer Web site" (Fig. 1.1) generated a tremendous amount of attention in the online design community. When I launched the Web site it was featured in several design portals around the world. My Web site usage statistics skyrocketed and I even had to move up to a new hosting plan to keep up with the bandwidth the site used. Although it was receiving a lot of attention from the Web design community, it did not generate new work. I did a little digging and talked to some of my clients. Most of them did not really understand why I had a slew of aliens and robots dominating my site. They could not see the "business logic" behind it.

Another big problem with this version of my Web site, was that access to the most important information was four clicks deep. An analysis of my server logs revealed that users went straight for the portfolio section, they viewed a few projects and then they left. The time spent searching for this area and the hindrance of not being able to view brief highlights of my work became a major concern. Users were forced to follow this path to look at my portfolio pieces:

Splash page > home page > portfolio page > portfolio piece

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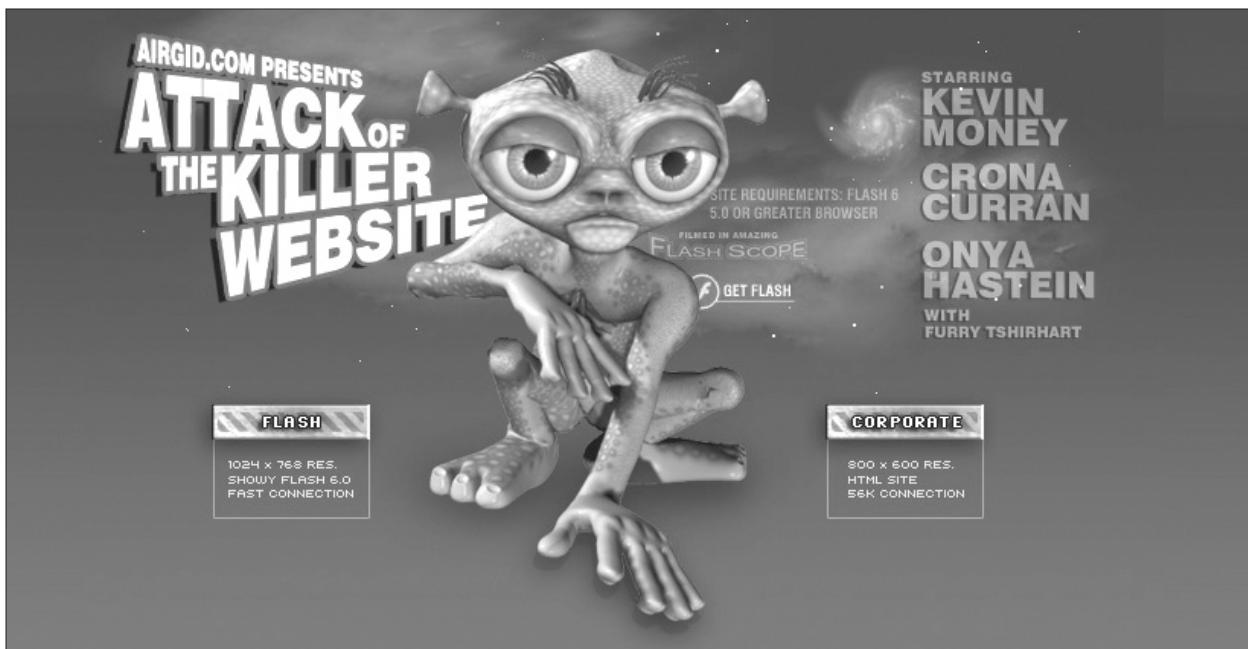


Figure 1.1 -- "The Attack of the Killer Web site" gained a lot of attention in the design community. It even won a few awards, but I lost business because it did not communicate the right message about my entire skill set. You can view an archived version at <http://www.airgid.com/flash>

Another issue with this Web site was the fact that the home page was extremely overweight. It required a download of a little over one megabyte, and secondary pages were not much better. So even with a fast DSL connection, the Web site took a good deal of time to load. All of these mistakes coupled together made for a bad user experience. My target audience is full of busy marketing managers, creative directors and CEOs of fast-paced companies. They do not have the time to click, click, click, to find valuable information. They want it now and often they need to make a decision fast... should I hire Kevin Airgid to do my work, or should I look elsewhere?

I have since created a leaner, meaner Web site (Fig. 1.2). Even though it is much more business-oriented, it has just the right touch of creative flare and professionalism. I have gained both highly creative and engaging projects, as well as steady corporate design assignments. The portfolio now follows the popular Amazon.com one-click methodology. When the user arrives, my portfolio is the first thing they see. The home page is cleverly disguised as the portfolio page, and my product is served for consumption by the masses. Keep the following lessons in mind as you design your next freelance Web site.

- ☞ Your work should sell itself. Do not worry about lengthy explanations or marketing jargon for each project. A short, punchy paragraph emphasizing the skills utilized is sufficient. Most users only skim text online.
- ☞ Make your portfolio easy to access and fast to download. Keep in mind even speedy corporate T1 connections partition bandwidth and can slow down.
- ☞ Even though your clients may want to hire you for your Flash animation skills, do not make them wait to see your portfolio. Resist the temptation to use your portfolio interface to flex

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Figure 1.2 -- My new Web site is only 41Kb in size, and the portfolio is one-click access.

your animation muscles. If you need to show this off, create a separate "demo reel" that users have an option to select.

- ☞ Corporate design may feel boring to Web designers, but in my experience it helps keep a Web site grounded in reality, especially when you have a lot going on in your portfolio. If we do our job, the information architecture and interface design should compliment one another and provide a pleasant user experience.

Finding work – the cold e-mail campaign

So how do you go about getting a small base of paying clients? The way I started was by simply using my network of friends and associates. I heard it once said that philosophy is common sense dressed up in a 3-piece suite. And it is true even for a one-man-show freelance business. E-mail your friends, family, associates and acquaintances and tell them you are looking for freelance work. You will be surprised how fast e-mails can get passed around. Before you know it, you may have your first freelance project. For instance, I e-mailed a friend of mine who was looking for work. She interviewed at a large advertising agency in Detroit, Michigan. While on the interview she learned they needed to hire some interactive designers. Her e-mail gave me the scoop that this particular agency needed help. The lead got me a 3-month contract that I would have never learned about if I did not e-mail her.

SUCCESS TIP

When NOT to send an e-mail.

Never send cold e-mails on Friday or Monday. I have found that most marketing managers, creative directors (and the like) are fried by the time Friday rolls around. A cold e-mail sent on a Friday will probably be ignored or deleted. If you send an e-mail on the weekend and it is viewed on Monday, it will most likely get lost in the rest of the SPAM and internal company memos that get sent out. I have found sending e-mail the rest of the week to achieve better success. This is also true with cold calling.



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One of the things I learned early on when I started doing freelance is how powerful e-mail can be as a tool to gain new business. We all use e-mail to communicate with friends, family and co-workers, but we really do not think of it as an advertising medium. E-mail is one of the best ways to find hot leads for new business. If someone is not interested in your e-mail they just delete it, and if they are interested they can reply to you within seconds. It is the best way to reach out to potential clients without bothering them on the phone or knocking on their door.

When I e-mail someone looking for work I keep my e-mails very short and to the point. Think about who your target audience is for your e-mail and what they would be most interested in knowing about what you have to offer. E-mails with long-winded "marketing" speak really do not work. Most of my clients have one thing in common – lack of time! They are grazers when it comes to information, and they typically skim e-mails from people they do not know or delete them without reading them. You only have a few milliseconds to catch their attention before your e-mail ends up in the trash.

I have found a method that works extremely well for gathering qualified candidates for my e-mail campaigns. This method takes more work than just sending e-mails to the arbitrary info@company.com, but you will achieve better results and your efforts will be rewarded. For this example I will demonstrate how I would go about finding the name and e-mail address of a creative director at a large advertising agency. You could also use this method for the marketing manager of a B2B company or any other related field.

Step 1: Finding the name

The fastest way for me to find the name of a creative director for an ad agency is to look at trade publication Web sites. For instance, in Detroit (near where I live), there is a magazine called Big Idea. This magazine helps represent the local communication arts community. Many creative directors' names are published here when they win awards or land new projects. It is an excellent resource for finding potential leads. You can also find the names of these people by reading company press releases. Often they will mention the names of those individuals involved with generating new business. Sometimes a Google search on a company name (or the agency's clients) will yield key contact names. Okay, we have followed these steps and found our name. For illustration purposes we will call our lead "John Smith".

SUCCESS TIP

SPAM is bad for business.

Want to kiss your freelance business good-bye? Keep sending e-mail to people who have not replied to you. The Internet is a small place and if you constantly send e-mail to people who are not interested, you will cause yourself more harm than good. People have a long memory when it comes to annoying e-mails. You do not want to tick off the head of an interactive group for a major agency – one day it will come back to haunt you! My rule is one cold e-mail does the job. If they are interested they will respond, or even keep the e-mail for future reference. Keep a list of everyone you have e-mailed and make sure you do not cold e-mail them twice.



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Step 2: Finding the e-mail

Most companies have a strict naming convention for staff e-mail addresses. You can crack this naming convention by looking for clues on their Web site. Start by searching for a sales contact. You can use this to decipher the naming convention. For instance, the sales manager is listed as Jim Doe, and his e-mail is jdoe@company.com. So the naming convention is "letter of first name, then full last name".

Step 3: Writing the effective e-mail

Here are some examples of effective e-mails that have landed me work in the past.

Target Client: Contact at medium-size company.

Comments: This e-mail landed me several medium-size company Web site redesigns.

Ever thought of a Web site redesign? Something to make your site stand out above your competition online? I have done work for clients such as Ford, Marriott Hotel and Lexus to name a few, and I can offer a range of freelance prices.

To learn more, please view my Web site:

<http://www.airgid.com/>

Why hire airgid.com?

http://www.airgid.com/why_hire/

Target Client: Creative Director

Comments: This is the standard e-mail I send to any large ad agency. This e-mail includes a resume as well. Your work history can sell you just as much as your portfolio of work.

Ever need a freelance Web/Flash designer? Please consider my services:

Portfolio Web site:

<http://www.airgid.com/>

Why hire Kevin Airgid?

http://www.airgid.com/why_hire/

Resume:

<http://www.airgid.com/resume/>

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Amnesty 40th Time line (Copyright Amnesty International)

Target Client: Office Furniture suppliers - UK

Comments: I sent this to probably 100 different companies. It gained me one qualified lead, which is actually a good ratio considering the number of companies I e-mailed.

I have recently completed a Web site for a company similar to yours:

<http://www.russellofficecenter.com/>

Ever thought of doing a Web site redesign to make your site more interactive, and easier to update? My client, Russell Office Supply, can now update their Web site themselves. It is easy to do. Let me know if you are interested in a cost estimate.

You can learn more here:

<http://www.airgid.com/>

Why hire airgid.com?

http://www.airgid.com/why_hire/

P.S. - I am based in Canada, and the exchange rate from British Pound to Canadian dollar is an added benefit to you.

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Other places to find work?

Another excellent way to get your feet wet with freelance is to volunteer your skills for a charity. If you are working full-time and do not know where to start looking for work, a recommendation is to start off with charity work. Volunteering to do a Web site for a charity will enable you to test out your project management skills, and more importantly your ability to deal with a client directly. The other excellent benefit to doing a project for free is you can typically dictate the design. This means you can add a really nice project to your portfolio, which can help you sell your services later. There are many charities out there who would benefit greatly from your talents.

My first big freelance project was a pro-bono interactive Flash timeline I did for Amnesty International. This piece landed me paying gigs with clients such as CBC News and General Motors. More importantly, Amnesty International enjoyed working with me, and actually hired me to do more interactive pieces.. However, doing freelance work for charities is not without its frustrations. Often charities have an intense bureaucratic structure, and you will need to be patient with committees and several layers of approval. Yet, working with charities can give you a great sense of accomplishment as you help build something for a worthwhile cause.

Chapter Summary

Typically publishers force authors like me to write these blasted summaries for every chapter I never read them, do you? They are a waste of time - who needs a summary of what they just read! After all, this is not a schoolbook. So, from this point on, no more summaries at the end of chapters! Like I said, no fat in this book!

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CHAPTER TWO

tooting your own horn

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Finding free advertising online

Your mother always told you not to brag, well that is not going to get you anywhere in the freelance world. You need to shout from the hilltops your successes, so that you can turn past projects into future projects. The best way to do this is to broadcast it to all your past clients, and to as many news boards and Web designer portals as you can. By having Web design portals such as Pixelsurgeon.com, Surfstation.lu and Creativebehavior.com "news" your latest creation, you start to build link credit online. The more places that post links to your work, the more reputable your credentials become. The more link credit you have, the more likely people are going to find you when they type "Kick Ass Web site Designer" into Google. Google will rank your site as important if more people are linking to you. Thus, your search engine ranking will go up, and people will be more likely to find your site.

About Us

AirGid Media Inc. is a design studio that builds dynamic media solutions. Services include: Flash media, web site design, content management systems, 3D animation, presentations, illustration, branding and kiosks.

For instance, in this layout you can see the description of what my company does on the first part of the page, which loads after the title. Research shows that advanced search engines do not just read the top of the page, but they also scan down the page to the bottom to find other keywords.

If you were to repeat the paragraph at the top, and use some of the same words, you would help increase your search engine placement. Search engines such as Google use sophisticated mathematical formulas to pick up how many times a particular word is used on a page. It then indexes the page according to this word count and several other factors.

I also recommend posting to as many forums online as you can. More popular forums, such as Ultrashock.com and Macromedia.com, will let you "market" your latest creation for free. Even if you are working full-time for a company you should still "news" your projects online. Your client will not mind the additional exposure for their company. Having your name associated with a full-time project also helps build your link credit for your part-time freelance.

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Google Yourself

by Scott Allen

<http://thevirtualhandshake.com/> (Reprint by Permission)

In December 2002, Randy Cohen of the New York Times answered a reader's ethical question regarding a friend who had used Google to do some background checking on a man she had been on a date with. When she learned that the man, a doctor, had been involved in several malpractice suits, she had a much lower opinion of the man, which presumably affected the relationship.

The ready availability of information on the Internet makes it easy for people to do free basic background checks on people before entering into business relationships with them. This is something you should definitely do yourself before hiring anybody as an employee, consultant, or contractor.

So what does Google have to say about you? If you don't know, you'd better find out. Those skeletons in your closet may not be as hidden as you think. Or worse yet, you may have someone else's skeletons!

First of all, you want to make sure that you're one of the top people in a search for your name, or preferably the top person. This is not so difficult when you have a distinctive name, such as David Teten. A moderate amount of online activity and publishing will ensure that you rise above the handful of other people with the same name. On the other hand, if you have a very common name, like Scott Allen, with numerous other people with that name being active online, you have to work especially hard to even be on the first page of listings (at last check, I had finally gotten to the #1 spot!).

In the case of a personal name, the strategies for improving your search engine placement are simple. Make sure your name is included in the <TITLE> tag on your page, and prominently used throughout the page. The other thing to work on is getting inbound links to your site, preferably containing your name. Two excellent ways to do this are:

- ☞ Develop an HTML signature to use in Web-based discussion forums that has your name as a hyper link to your Web site. Every message you post then becomes a link to your site for the search engines to add to their index.
- ☞ Publish articles anywhere and everywhere you can, making sure that they always include an extended byline that links to your Web site, preferably with your name as the text for the link.

These strategies will improve your link popularity significantly - one of the major factors in most search engine ranking algorithms.

Now, what about those skeletons? Don't just go through the first three pages—look through everything. You might want to put your name in quotes, i.e., " (around 5,000 results) vs. Donna Fisher (over 250,000 results), to reduce the number of results.

So what do you do if you find some dirt on yourself? If it's downright inaccurate or slanderous, you can, of course, try to contact the site and have them remove it. If, on the other hand, it's a matter of public record, like the malpractice suits above, then you need some damage control.

You may just want to provide an ample supply of good information about you well positioned

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in the search engines, and the other can just languish in obscurity. Or, you may want to make sure people hear it from you first, or that you at least have an answer about it on your site to "set the record straight". If the issue is major enough, you may want to hire a professional PR person to handle it, but it is something you can take care of yourself, as well, if you're on a limited budget. But the first step is awareness. Make sure you know what "the virtual you" looks like to the rest of the world—Google yourself.

Note: You can read more from Scott Allen online at his site <http://thevirtualhandshake.com/>

Keeping in Contact

One of the biggest struggles I have found being a freelancer is keeping in contact with my clients. Sometimes my clients will go five months before they do another project with me. Over time I have learned I need to keep my name and e-mail address in front of them constantly, so they think of me first when they have a new project they are considering. But how do you do this without bugging the hell out of them? These are busy people, so sending them jokes and 'hi how are you doing?' e-mails will only annoy them and damage your reputation. You need to make sure you are a valuable asset to these individuals. Approximately once a month I send a link to all my clients (both current and past), regarding new technology that is directly related to a past project I completed. For example, I do a lot of Flash development for my clients. Many times they ask me if they can convert MS Office documents such as Word and PowerPoint to other formats such as Flash and HTML. So as I am surfing the Web, I am always on the lookout for software or technology that will help solve their problems. Then, once a month I send an e-mail broadcast to my client network with a short paragraph pointing them to new software or a Web site. My clients love these e-mails because it is information they can use.

I also send out e-mails whenever I create a really innovative and successful project. Often old clients will see the new Flash piece I have created, they will like it and want to do something similar. Showing past clients your current work on a regular basis is an excellent way to generate new work. The best way to stay in touch with clients is via e-mail, but I have found a better solution than just using your e-mail client to send out these mass mailings. I use a small server PHP application called "PHPMailList". I use PHPMailList to store all the e-mails of potential, current and past clients. When I am cold e-mailing and a client e-mails me back saying they are interested in my work, but do not have a budget for the project, I add them to my client mailing list. This way I am certain that this potential lead will at least see an e-mail from me

SUCCESS TIP

Google Tips and Tricks

Google can now search .SWF files on your server. As you send out your project URLs into the world, you can rest assured that Google will attempt to spider your .SWF files as well. I have done a little research on this topic and it appears that while Google will index .SWF files, it seems to favor HTML files first in search queries. If you plan to launch a full Flash site, you might consider creating an HTML version for search engines to crawl. On my site I place an "HTML" link under my main Flash movie. This link will take search engine spiders, and users without Flash to a site that contains all the needed information in HTML. Creating this HTML site will also help build your keyword index. A good idea is to place a highly descriptive paragraph at the top of your HTML home page, which should contain appropriate buzzwords relative to the design services you offer.

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every month or so. By keeping my name in front of the lead I have a greater chance of obtaining a project. The nice thing about using software like PHPMailList is you can enable your users to automatically unsubscribe from the list if they do not want to receive your e-mails. I have yet to have a client unsubscribe. The rule is to not send more than one e-mail a month, and keep them short and useful.

Mailing List Software: The free and the excellent.

Like with all things in life you get what you pay for. I understand that budgets can be tight when you start your own business. This is the reason I offer two tools to achieve the same ends. The following tutorial is how to install a free PHPMailList software. It works well but it lacks many of the features other professional tools offer. If you are looking for a cost effective tool I highly recommend 12all by ActiveCampaign (<http://www.activecampaign.com/>). The software costs around \$100 USD (you host the script so there are no monthly fees) and comes with a whole host of professional features. You can time delay an email blast so it will be sent on a future date. It can track how many times a user reads an email, how many times users click a link in an email... all sorts of goodies that help make each email I send out more effective. The best part about the system is the fact that users can unsubscribe to the email newsletter.

So if one of my clients doesn't want to receive the emails anymore they simply unsubscribe using the handy link at the bottom of every email. By default 12All adds this to each email that is sent out. This is a really friendly tool both for the sender and the recipient of the email. The ability to add custom HTML templates gives users the ability to send professional emails every time. Finally 12all offers a free install service, so you don't have to monkey with CMOD, or other install issues.



If you don't have any money, and want a bare bones mail list software then read on, otherwise I recommend 12all.

Installing PHPMailList

Installing PHP software can be a daunting task for creative individuals like myself. I have a degree in visual arts and I am not a programmer by trade. However, over the years I have learned it is not a bad thing to dabble in this dark and mysterious craft. If you can learn PhotoShop and Flash ActionScript, then you will have no problem installing a simple PHP script. I like PHP-MailList for several reasons.

- 1.) It is easy to install.
- 2.) It is easy to install.
- 3.) It is easy to use.

The following tutorial assumes you are using a Linux based hosting environment (although you could get this script to work on a Windows based host). Your hosting environment will also need to be able to execute PHP scripts on the server. You can contact your system admin to find this out. Most hosting companies allow server side scripts by default. This script requires PHP Version 4.0.2 to be installed on the server. Do not worry if you do not have this information handy. Most good Web hosting companies update their PHP version regularly, so most likely

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this is something you will not have to worry about. Now on to the fun!

Note: All the screen captures look as if I am using Windows 95 (which I am not). I have turned off all the settings in the OS to make the windows print better for this book.

Step 1 : Download PHPMailList

You can download PHPMailList at this link. The ZIP file also contains more technical instructions if you wish to follow them.
<http://php.warpedweb.net/maillist/>

Step 2: Unzip the Archive

Create a directory on your local hard drive of your Web site and call it "maillist", and unzip the contents of the "maillist.zip" to this directory. (Fig. 2.1)

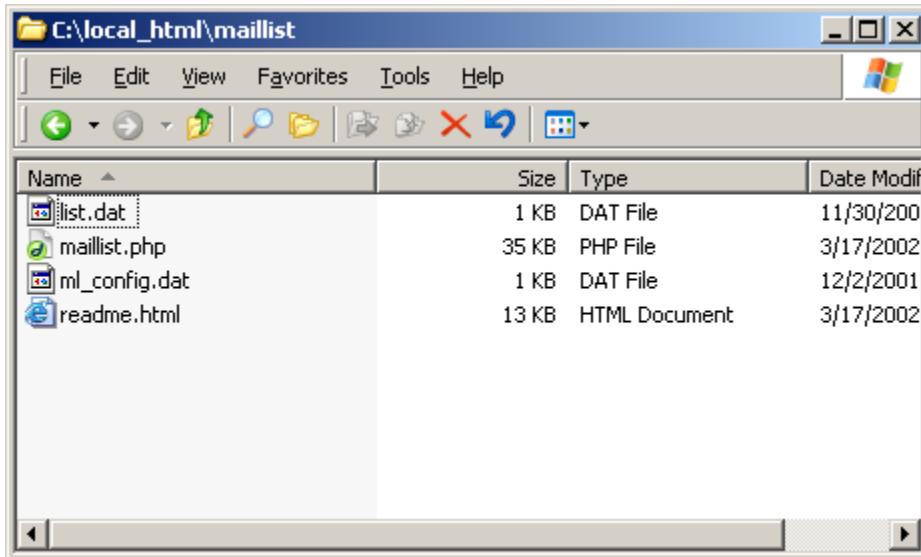


Figure 2.1

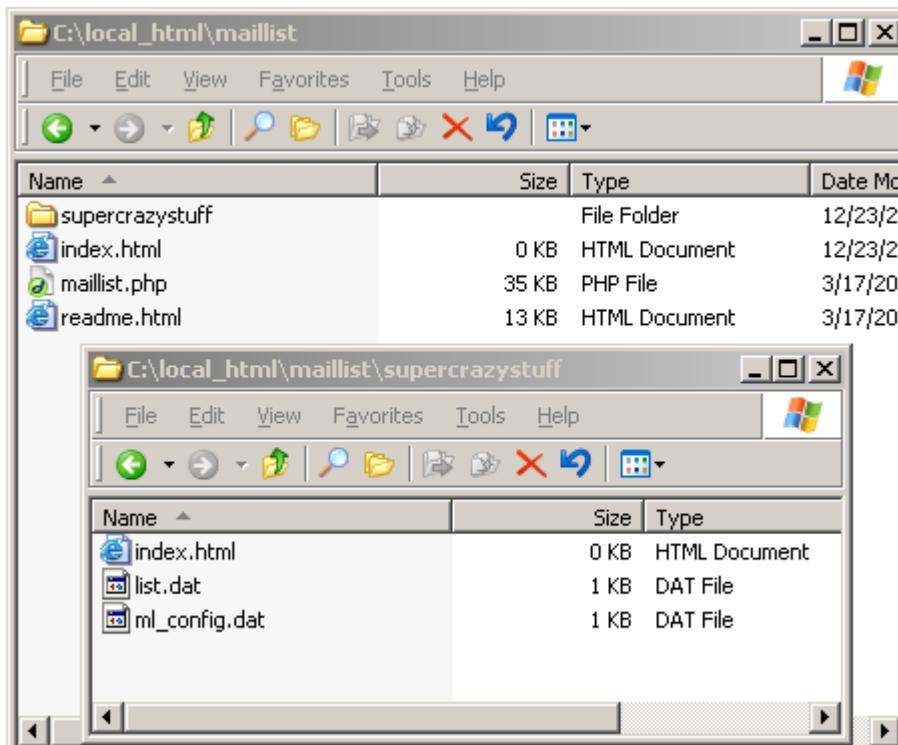


Figure 2.2

Step 3: Secure your data.

Create another directory outside the "maillist" directory and give it a unique name. This is where you are going to store the mail list data and password information. I named this directory "supercrazystuff" (make sure you give yours a different name for security reasons), and now move these two files from your "maillist" directory into the "supercrazystuff" directory:

1. "list.dat"
2. "ml_config.dat"

Finally, create two blank “index.html” files and place both of them in the “maillist” and “super-crazy” directories. This way if your system admin has enabled directory browsing, potential attackers will not be able to see the contents of the directories. Your directory structures should look like this now:

(Fig 2.2)

Step 4: Upload the files to your server.

Upload the files to your server using your favorite FTP program. I use CuteFTP, but any FTP program will do. You can place your “maillist” directory in your root directory on your server. Some Web hosts will not allow PHP (or any other script for that matter) to run outside the CGI-BIN directory. Check with your server admin if this is the case for your host. You will need to place just the “maillist” directory into the CGI-BIN directory if this is the case.

What does “Full server path” mean?

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In as simple terms as possible, “full server path” refers to where your file is in relation to the server your file is sitting on. This will almost always include directories that are NOT Web accessible. It basically STARTS with the very root of your server and works down the folder/hierarchy chain from there.

You may wonder why I just don’t hand over your particular server path and tell you to swap out the folder names. The problem is that many servers are set up differently. Depending on who you host with, what type of server it is, how it’s organized - there can be huge variations. There’s a few things you can do to try and figure out what your server path is.

Option 1) Build first, read directions later.

Obviously, this is not completely recommended. LOL! But if you do happen to have a script running, and it’s spitting an error out, pay close attention to the error messages. If the problem is with the path you’ve provided, the error will probably look like:

Warning: you did something wrong blah blah blah in /home/jsmith/public_html/myfile.php on line 10

Just a little side track about using error messages to help debug your scripts - it may be too simple to mention, but when you get errors like this, GO LOOK AT LINE 10! (or whatever line is mentioned in the first error) Examine it VERY carefully. If it looks okay to you, GO LOOK AT LINE 9! Then, GO LOOK AT LINE 11! If the line mentioned in the error isn’t actually causing the problem, sometimes the *real* problem is occurring on the line before or after the line mentioned. Okay, getting back on track. You see that path in bold. THAT, my friends, is your full server path to your file. If ANOTHER path is mentioned in the blah blah blah part - and it’s missing some parts or directories that you see in bold - you’ve entered in the wrong path in your script. (and this could very well be the cause for the error in the first place!)

This is huge. I can’t tell you the number of times people miss that very easy clue. PHP knows your server path! It’s handing it to you on a platter. Listen to it.

Option 2) I repeat, PHP knows your server path! Listen to it.

There is a great little function in PHP: `phpinfo()`. And actually, another sidetrack. If you’re not

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sure if your server is running php or not, using this simple little function will tell you. Just create a file that has the following and nothing else in it, and upload it to your server:

```
<?php  
phpinfo();  
?>
```

Pull that page up in a browser, and you should get a TON of information about php, your server. It's pretty cool actually. And... this page will also tell you what your server path looks like!

Once you have that page loaded up in your browser, find the variable "PATH_TRANSLATED" or "_SERVER["PATH_TRANSLATED"]" (I'm relatively sure that should show up on the majority of configurations - if there's a better variable you suggest, please feel free to correct me in the comments). The value of this variable

will be the full server path to the file you're looking at. It will probably look like:

/home/jsmith/public_html/testphpinfo.php
or maybe even:

C:\wwwroot\myfiles\testphpinfo.php

Option 3) Hold my hand please

If you have a really nice host, that doesn't mind being bugged - you can also try directly asking them. If they don't get what you're asking for, you can explain you're trying to run a php script, and the instructions required your using the server path to the file.

~ Jennifer Stuart
scriptygoddess.com

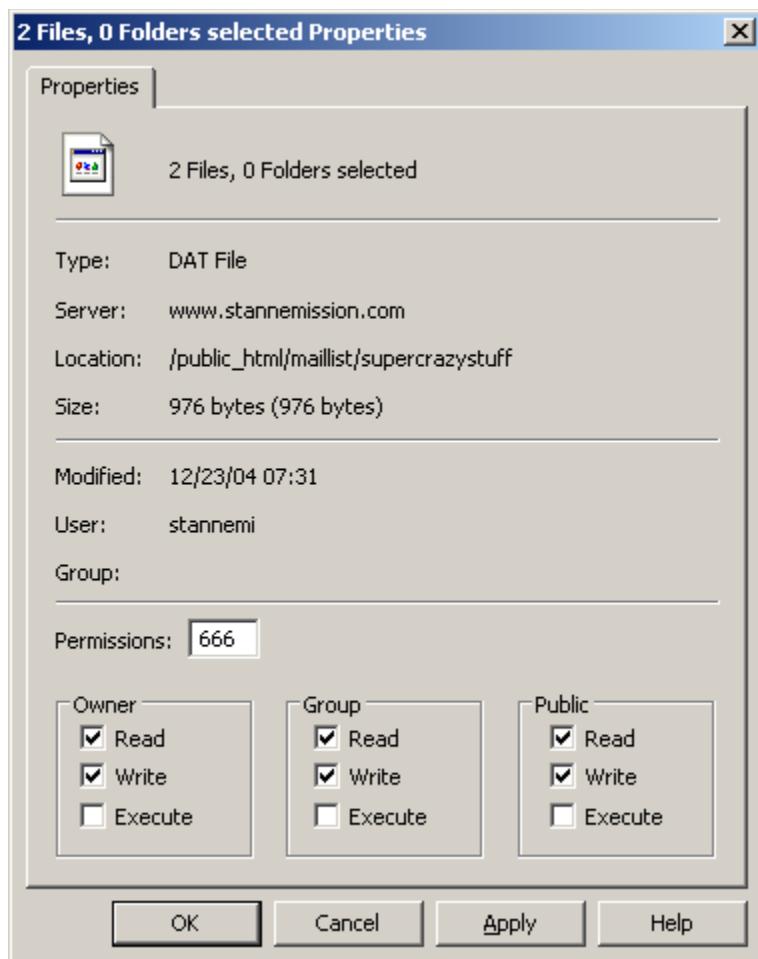


Figure 2.3

Step 5: Edit the Configuration Setting

(Yes, one line of code to change! I told you this was going to be easy!)

Using a simple text editor, you can now edit the configuration settings. I use Notepad on the PC. (You could easily use Macromedia Dreamweaver, or Simple Text on the Mac). Open the "mail-

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list.php" file and find the line that says:

```
// The full server path to the configuration file.  
$config_file = "c:\\path\\to\\ml_config.dat";
```

Now change the path to the path of the file on your Web server. If you do not know the full server path, see the help box title "What does "Full server path" mean?" For instance, my server path to the "ml_config.dat" is

```
/home/stannemi/public_html/maillist/supercrazystuff/
```

So I would change my server path in the script to look like this:

```
// The full server path to the configuration file.  
$config_file = "/home/stannemi/public_html/maillist/supercrazystuff/ml_config.  
dat";
```

Step 6: Upload and CHMOD the files

Now upload the changed "maillist.php" to the "maillist" directory and overwrite the old file on the server.

Now CHMOD the files so they have permission to be edited on the server. CHMOD is a fancy Unix term for "change mode". This is the Unix command and system call to change the access permissions of a named file. You will want to set the two files in your "supercrazystuff" directory to the following:

- list.dat: CHMOD 666 (or 777 if that fails)
- ml_config.dat: CHMOD 666 (or 777 if that fails)

The screenshot shows a web form titled "Subscribe to: My List". It has a text input field labeled "Your Email Address" and two radio buttons: one for "Subscribe" (which is selected) and one for "Unsubscribe". Below the form is the text "PHPMailList" followed by "A script by David Broker.", the URL "http://php.warpedweb.net/", and "Version 1.8.0a".

Figure 2.4

Most FTP programs will allow you to (right-click if you are using a PC) or (Control-Click on a Mac) to set the file permissions. See your FTP software documentation on how to change file permissions. In CuteFTP on the PC, I just right-click on the file and this dialog box appears, allowing me to set the file permissions. (Fig. 2.3)

Step 7: Testing it out

OK, if everything went well, type this URL into your Web browser:

```
http://www.yourservername/maillist/maillist.php
```

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And you should see the following screen:
(Fig. 2.4)

If you see this screen you have successfully installed the script. If you do not see it, or you see an error message like "Could not open configuration file.", then re-check your full server path. Most likely you have a typo there. If that does not seem to be the problem, and the script says something like "Script Error", then you may need to try to install the script into your CGI-BIN directory. If all else fails, go online and post your question to one of the many PHP news boards online for help. You will find (as I have) that this community is always willing to help out us newbies!

PHPMail List Options

- Send a message
- View Subscribers
- Add/Remove Subscribers
- Administration

Submit

Figure 2.5

Step 8: Running the Admin

Now using your Web browser, go to this URL to access the admin (you will want to bookmark this URL for later use):

<http://www.yourservername/maillist/maillist.php?action=admin>

The admin login screen will appear. Use the default login and password:

Username: user

Password: pass

You need to change this default login and password NOW! so others will not get into your system. Here is how to do it: (Fig 2.5)

Select the "Administration" radio button, and click the "Submit" button.

You will now see a form field with all of the default settings. You need to change the following settings:

- ☛ Username.
- ☛ Password.
- ☛ List Name.
- ☛ The full path to the "list.dat" file (same as your "ml_config.dat" file earlier).

Now change the other variables to match your site (Fig. 2.6). The rest of the program is pretty easy to use. Users can sign up and subscribe to the newsletter if you place a public link on your site. The public link would be:

<http://www.yourservername.com/maillist/maillist.php>

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Configuration

Shortcuts:

%list_name% = The name of the list.
%email% = The email address the email is being sent it.
%confirm_url% = URL user must go to to confirm subscription.
%subscribe_url% = URL users go to to resubscribe.
%unsubscribe_url% = URL where user can unsubscribe.

General

Username:	admin
Password:	*****
List Name:	Airgid.com News
List File:	/home/stannemi/public_html/maillist/superc
Owner's Email:	myemail@airgid.com
Default # Subscribers/page:	30

Banned Addresses

Addresses:
(New line for each address)

```
example@eg.com
example2@blah.com.au
```

Signature

Signature:
(Include by default on the
bottom of all messages)
Shortcuts not valid in signature.

```
Kevin Airgid
-----
p.s if you do not want to receive any more
email news from unsubscribe here:
http://www.myserver.com/maillist/maillist.ph
p
```

Figure 2.6



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CHAPTER THREE

office on the cheap



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Disillusionment

When I set up my home office I had many grand visions of what I wanted it to be like. I had visions of those cool DOTCOM companies, lots of open space, maybe a loft with exposed brick and hard wood floors.... Earth to Kevin! – Earth to Kevin! * snap * back to reality I came. My office is a small bedroom, in a nice middle-class home in the middle of suburbia. The reason I choose to have my office here is several fold: money, money, and did I mention money? Do not spend your hard-earned (and trust me, when you are self-employed it is hard-earned) money on things you do not need. I learned very early on to only spend money on things that would either directly make me money, or that would make my work better (which inadvertently makes me money). If clients are not going to see your office, then do not waste your money on expensive desks, lighting and interior décor. It was a great temptation when I first started freelancing to go out and spend my first few paychecks on a new desk and cool lighting for my office. While these might have made my office look great, they did nothing to improve my bottom line.

When you are self-employed, it is best to keep the fringe expenses down in the first year. Below are some of the ways I have saved money in my home office. My guidelines for any purchasing decision for my office is two fold: 1. Will this purchase make me money? 2. Will this purchase save me money over time? I like to go cheap on my desk, filing cabinet, drawers and shelving. This leaves more money to spend on important things like the latest version of Adobe Photoshop and RAM!

Help Tips

Below are some helpful tips and tricks to setup your office on the cheap, yet still keeping it looking cool.

Resist the temptation to go out and buy a particleboard desk. While these desks are inexpensive and often look relatively appealing, they do not last. If you move it often, or move it completely from one office to another, it is more likely to fall apart. I know because I have moved many a university friend who own these type of desks, and it always ends up in pieces by the time we arrive at our destination (or in the garbage altogether). If you cannot afford to by a solid wood desk, I recommend building your own “Amazon Desk”. I call this desk the “Amazon Desk” because in the startup days of Amazon.com, the founders could not afford desks, so they used interior doors as desktops. I have found the surface space of a standard 32” interior house door makes a perfect desktop. I initially used a hollow core interior door for my desk. This is a bad idea because you will need to reinforce it with two-by-fours, as I found out the hard way. I recommend searching for an old solid wood door at house demolitions, yard sales or estate sales.

The legs I used are from IKEA. I purchased the “VIKA CURRY” model, which will cost you

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around \$10.00 USD. You simply screw the legs on each corner of the door. I have also seen people use doors with loads of paint on them, which creates an interesting texture and is fun to look at. They also have a piece of glass cut to cover the surface of the door. Although getting a piece of glass cut for this size of door will probably end up costing you more than a solid wood desk, so be careful.

Seating

In the past four years of working out of my home based office, I have gone through two low-end office chairs, which cost around \$300 dollars Canadian. Within the first two years the first chair lost pressure in the cylinder that makes it go up and down. The second chair's fabric surface started to stretch after less than two years, which caused the foam padding to dislodge. I decided it was time to invest some money into a piece of office equipment, which I use 9+ hours a day. If you think about it, we will spend a lot of money on the latest and greatest computer, but when it comes to our bodies (and ultimately our health), well, most people seem to skip that part. I know that when I was building my home office, I did not want to spend the money on a chair. But in the long run I would have saved myself money and trouble if I just went out and bought the right product.

So, I took the plunge and purchased a new Mirra chair by Herman Miller. This chair is very much like the award winning Aeron chair by the same maker, but I think with a few new twists. The first benefit over the Aeron chair is the price. The Mirra cost me \$900 Canadian, with all the options, whereas the base Aeron chair started at \$1000. For those of us building a home office this may be a bit expensive. Having worked at several employers that supplied an Aeron chair, I am well acquainted with the huge benefits of a great chair. I could sit in the Aeron chair for hours at a stretch and not feel any discomfort. After having had the Mirra chair for two weeks, I can say that this chair has the same effect. I can sit on it for hours with little or no strain on my back. (Just a side note, the dealer let me try it out for a week before signing the bottom line. I was hooked within hours.) With my old chairs, my spine would feel horrible. I would have shooting pain up and down my back after sitting for a few hours. With the Mirra chair I quickly forgot about those problems.

All ergonomic specialists will tell you that sitting in your chair for too long is bad for you. As a Web designer, I often need to sit for hours uninterrupted to get into the "groove" to produce good designs - lots of coffee, long hours sitting at my computer and waiting for inspiration to come. I will be the first to admit, productivity is enhanced when one is comfortable. This chair also makes it much more comfortable to sit in when it is hot because the mesh seating surface, called "Aireweave Suspension seat" (similar to what the Aeron chair was famous for) breaths, so you do not get sweaty. It "conforms to the sitter" as the brochure says, and they are not kidding.

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It also has "Flexfront Seat Depth Adjustment", which means the user can adjust how deep the front to back dimension can be. One size fits all. My new Mirra chair is worth every penny. My back and my bank account wished I had purchased it long ago. Over the long haul this chair will save me money and frustration. Herman Miller has a 12-year warranty on it, (and they say three shifts 24/7 on the brochure), which is exceptional. By my calculations I would need five new low-end chairs during that period. Besides, the chair is one of the few things that make my office look really cool. It is a work of functional art that anyone who does a lot of sitting day after day should truly consider owning.

What Hardware?

It is almost impossible to give you a guide on what type of hardware would work best for you. Hardware changes so rapidly that the words on this page are out of date before they hit the paper. I recommend doing research before you purchase your computer system. You need to assess what your needs will be and build a system around your tasks. Below I outline my current computer system and why I chose the components I did. Remember, unlike your Mirra chair, one size does not fit all. Make sure to select your system based on your specific needs.

Dual monitor display

This is not an optional item, and I do not know how I could live without two monitors for my work. Dual monitor support video cards are not expensive and are well worth the investment. I place my image on one screen and my palettes on another. This investment will save you a lot of time. My monitors are 19" ViewSonics and my dual video card is ATI RADEON X800 Series dual monitor video card.

Loads of RAM

Buy as much RAM as you can afford. RAM is like candy – you can never have enough. My system has 2 gig. of RAM.

External USB or Firewire Hard Drives

I use my external Firewire hard drive as a poor man's backup. I have two 120 GB USB backup drives. Each day I backup the contents of my documents drive to this external drive. This way if my internal hard drive fails, I can go back in time one day. Then on Fridays I remove the external drive from my house and swap it with another external off site drive (I take it to a relative's house for safe keeping). I always have at least a week's worth of work off site in case of fire, or someone pulling the five-finger discount on my box! I highly recommend you do this. I have two external 120 gig. USB 2.0 Maxtor drives.

Separate Documents Hard Drive

I have two internal drives. One drive functions as my program and operating system drive, and the other functions as my storage for files. I find keeping documents and programs on separate drives serves many functions. First, you can back up your document's drive knowing that you are not backing up Gigs of page files, program files and other useless items the OS creates (this

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goes for both Mac and Windows)! Second, you will improve system performance by keeping these files separated on two drives.

Essential Software for the Freelancer

The urge to upgrade your software every time a new version comes out is normal. But it is better to let the “MBA part of your brain” make that decision. The way I decide if I need an upgrade is simple. Will this upgrade make me money? For instance, when the latest version of Photoshop comes out, I look at the new features. If the new features do not contain any major useful enhancements, then I do not upgrade. Sometimes, I am forced to upgrade because a lot of my clients (such as advertising agencies) use the latest versions of the software and they require me to use the latest version. I call this the “upgrade virus”, because the only reason you need to upgrade is because others have got the upgrade bug – sad but true! Below is a list of low cost or no cost software that I use on a regular basis. Of course, I have not included the typical software you use, such as Photoshop, Flash, etc.

Mozilla Thunderbird (Mac / PC)

www.mozilla.org | Cost: Open Source (free)

Open source e-mail client. This e-mail client saves your precious RAM for Photoshop. It features a robust feature set and is easy to use. This e-mail client is unaffected by those nasty script viruses, unlike MS Outlook.

Mozilla FireFox (PC / Mac)

www.mozilla.org | Cost: Open Source (free)

I use this browser daily. The following free extensions make it indispensable.

FireFox Adblock Extension (Mac / PC)

<http://adblock.mozdev.org/> | Cost: Open Source (free)

Lets you filter out banner ads by blocking ads from loading. You can download “blacklists” - known banner servers. Even over a high-speed connection it speeds up free e-mail such as Hotmail and Yahoo! by removing the ads.

FireFox Developer Extension (Mac / PC)

www.mozilla.org | Cost: Open Source (free)

I use this extension daily. It adds powerful functionality to FireFox such as the ability to validate Web pages, and turn CSS styles on and off on the fly, helping you see how pages are rendered with older browsers that may not recognize your advanced CSS.

CuteFTP Pro (PC/Mac)

www.cuteftp.com | Cost: Around \$30 USD.

Excellent commercial grade FTP software. The latest version supports several FTP servers. I have found this FTP client worth every penny.

Sorenson Squeeze (Mac / PC)

www.sorenson.com | Cost: \$400 USD.

If you need to add video to Flash, this is the program for you. If you have little or no experience with digital video, do not worry – this program is straightforward, and easy to use. For video professionals it offers many robust features under the hood.

Avast Anti-virus (PC)

www.avast.com | Cost: Free for home use – Professional version \$50 dollars

This software does not consume many system resources as other popular anti-virus tools. If you are using it for personal or home use, you can download a free version.

MS Virtual PC (PC / Mac)

www.microsoft.com | Cost: \$600 USD

It is unusual that you will hear me recommend a Microsoft product. But MS Virtual PC is an amazing piece of software. It can run Windows 95, 98, 98se, 2000, XP and any other OS flavors underneath your installed operating system. This is a must have for any freelancer developing Web sites. You can test your sites against many variations of browsers simply by launching a program on your desktop.

PDF Creator (PC)

http://sector7g.wurzel6.de/pdfcreator/index_en.htm | Cost: Free

This free tool lets you add a PDF print driver to your printer list. You just need to select the print driver and print to PDF.

TransType (PC / Mac)

www.fontlab.com | Cost: \$170 USD

If you use Windows and work with Mac only agencies frequently, then this is the best tool for you. It will convert Mac fonts to Windows fonts.

Back2ZIP (PC)

www.fontlab.com | Cost: Free

This is the software I use to back up my system nightly. It is simple to use and works great.

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CHAPTER FOUR

when projects go wrong



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Egos

One thing that fascinates me about the Web design community is the fact that people never talk about their failures. I think our egos often get in the way of professionalism, and nobody wants to admit they made a mistake. In this chapter I will discuss my failures and how I have learned from them. My hope is that you will learn from them as well, diminishing the likelihood you will experience any failures at all.

Case Study #1 “Brand X” Case study

How poor client communication lead to a creative melt down

I must admit I am hesitant to discuss with people the “problems” I have had with my clients. I guess it is human nature not to want to admit defeat, or that you screwed something up, but it happens to the best of us. I wish I had a book like this when I set out doing freelance. Learning from other’s mistakes is a lot easier than making the mistakes yourself. Lucky for you I have learned that sharing my business troubles is both therapeutic and encourages my own professional self-development. So in a nutshell, as you read this, you will learn and I will repeat the mistake again over in my head ensuring I never make them again!

Even though I have many years of dealing with well-recognized brands and high profile clients, each project is always its own animal. I was very excited when a high profile client approached me to produce a really cool interactive Flash piece for their site. I was fully prepared to impress “Brand X” (as we will call them to protect the privacy of those involved). The creative director heading up the project saw my freelance site and called me with no references. We talked on the phone at some length about the scope and time frame for the deliverables. I wrote up an estimate and the client approved it. Later on that week the creative director from the agency informed me that he was going on vacation for the duration of the project, and my contact would be with an art director and the project manager. This seemed straightforward, and this scenario was pretty typical for my agency work. Creative directors are very hands-off if they trust their team. This gave me some confidence about working with this new client. Later I would learn this was the kiss of death.

Like I said before, “Brand X” was a pretty high profile client, and I was excited to add another brand to my belt. Even though I lived eight hours from the agency, I agreed to drive for a one-day meeting to kick the project off, ensuring everyone on the team would meet me and feel comfortable at the onset of the work. I drove down on a Sunday and met with the team on Monday at 9 am. The meeting went well, and everyone seemed very excited about the project.

SUCCESS TIP

Business Plans are For Banks!

When I talk to other freelance designers and even small business owners, I always ask if they have a business plan. Most of them laugh! Why? Because business plans are for banks. You only need to develop a business plan if others are investing money in your company. Now this is not to say that business plans are totally useless. They can be a good road map to where your business should be, and could be going. I have found my daily business activities to be straightforward enough so as not to require a business plan. Almost every interactive shop I have worked with has created a business plan at one time or another and they never followed them... food for thought!



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Near the end of the meeting I started to ask questions about the style and direction of the creative. Since I did not know the brand identity very well, I asked the art director and the account director. They could not offer me any clear direction, and informed me that I was free to "use my creative judgment". That was a major mistake. When I was an art director for a major advertising agency, I would have never told a fresh-on-the-scene freelancer to use his creative judgment when handling a major time sensitive Flash project. If I were the art director on the other side of the table, I would have done some mockups of how I thought it should look, and gave some very good direction. If I did not have the time to do that, I would have at least given some examples of other creative work resembling the look-and-feel they were after. Unfortunately, I was not on the other side of the table.

I left this meeting feeling a little uncomfortable. The creative director was away on vacation, and the art director decided to wash his hands of any creative direction for this project, which needed to be done "yesterday". I finally informed the client that I would produce three designs for them to review in a short period of time.

Mistake:

When working with a new client, never leave the first meeting without clear creative direction. This is even more important when the project is time sensitive.

Solution:

I should have been much more aggressive when the client did not offer any clear creative direction. If the art director involved could not provide any direction, I should have expressed my concern to the project manager. I needed to let them know my inexperience with the brand would be a serious handicap in producing creative extremely quick. That would have changed their attitudes and their involvement.

I went home and produced three different designs for the project. The first design followed the style and color of their Web site a great deal. The second design used similar colors, but took a new direction, and the third design was really different. I presented the designs via a conference call to the client. They reviewed them, and the initial responses were very positive. They all agreed that design number one was somewhat boring, and they all agreed that the two other designs where fresh and could be useful.

They let me know that they needed to have the account executive view the designs, but overall they sounded pleased. I got off the phone feeling very happy, and relieved. The sun set and a new day began, and so did my troubles for this project. I received a call early in the morning and the client informed me that I was way off track. Apparently the account executive decided

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to play art director. I guess this needed to happen since the art director was asleep at the wheel! The client asked me to produce more creative, so I did, and the second round of creative met with the same negative reactions. Once again, the client could not pinpoint what they did not like, even after I made repeated requests.

Mistake:

I let the creative for the project get out of control. After the first round of design comps were rejected, why did I believe I was going to score a second time around, with no direction or suggestions?

Solution:

Assertiveness. Yes, you read right. You need to be assertive with your clients, and in the end they will respect you more for it. In this case, I should have put the breaks on the creative and let them know I did not think we were moving in the right direction. I should have told them I needed a better creative director, or I would be unable to begin producing more comps. Stating that fact would have been preferable to what came next.

The client decided because the creative up to this point was not what they wanted, that they would prefer fewer graphics, and a more photo oriented piece. I could pick out photos that would suit the project before beginning the design. So, I spent most of the day creating a lightbox on Getty Images, containing the various photographs I wanted to use. I e-mailed my selections to the art director and waited. The next day I was e-mailed a ZIP file with the images he selected for each screen of the project. I asked what was wrong with my image choices and he told me they were not the appropriate style. Needless to say, three of the images I initially selected did make it into the final project. I suppose the art director had not noticed he picked the same images as me.

I proceeded to produce animation and Flash action scripting for the project. It was a multiple choice game where users could select options and at the end it would have different outcomes based on the user input. I programmed some really nice scripting and the first few slides contained some subtle bitmap animations. I presented the piece to the client, again with the same reaction!

They finally decided that they would not use me for the project. They requested the source files for the project, and I had a sneaking suspicion that once they had the files in hand, then I would

SUCCESS TIP: "Focus Daniel Son!"

As a freelancer we cannot afford to do things mediocre. Clients expect the best from us, and trying to handle print, interactive and Web hosting all in one is not a good idea. Focus is key. If you do a few things better than anyone else, your clients will return for more. I do not host my client's Web sites. You can always join a Web hosting provider's referral program to make extra cash for referring clients. Traditionally, I have never recommended Web hosting providers because I cannot control the quality of their service. I always provide a list to my clients and let them choose.



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not get paid. I told the project manager before I released the files I would send her an invoice for half of the project price. I told him that they did not need to pay for the creative since they did not like it, but I worked over the weekend producing the scripting and logic for the project. The project manager agreed, and sent me an e-mail confirming my invoice. I posted the sources for the project and I quickly realized I was lucky to make it out alive after this hellish project.

Later the next day, the project manager notified me that their new developer could not utilize my source files. I asked what was wrong with the files, and she could not produce a clear answer. After a few days of wrangling back and forth, the client decided to honor all the work I did, even though in their rationale they could not use any of the code. They paid me for half of the project 30 days later.

What I learned:

After doing this project I will never produce creative for a project where the client cannot provide clear direction. Short timelines with big brand names can sometimes require serious hand holding, even when you are dealing with supposed professionals. If I could go back in time, I would have stopped the creative until someone could produce examples for me. While the client would not have liked this production halt, it would have been more preferable than the project going bust, like it did. If the project manager dropped the ball, and the art director dropped the ball, I should have reached out to grab it before it fell on me.

Case Study #2 When to Fire the Client!

I remember back in the day when Kioken was one of the hottest Web design shops around. Kioken was the stuff of legends and myths online. One of the things that made Kioken so red hot on the design scene (besides their killer clients such as JLo and Puff Daddy) was the fact that they fired Sony, one of their largest clients. It was rumored that Sony was fired because they were messing with the designs Kioken was producing for them.

Most small interactive shops would never consider firing a client such as Sony. We would suck it up and jump as high as the client wanted. It would not matter if they wanted us to make their Web page green, purple and brown – we would produce it with a smile. As freelancers and small Web design shops, we cannot afford to loose clients. The business climate is still weak, so it is even more important to hang onto the work you already have.

Rules clients must follow

Should we produce work for our clients, even though we know it is terrible, just because they are paying? Should we endure pseudo-creative clients who micromanage design until it looks like something your cousin produced using FrontPage and MS clipart? The short answer to these questions is “yes”, but you need to set some strict criteria and guidelines. I have established some informal rules that I use to determine if a client needs to be “fired”. These rules do not apply to each and every situation, but they are a good benchmark for discovering if your client is a waste of time.

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1. Create a written estimate and a contract.

Have the client sign the contract and the estimate, and have this returned to you no later than the first week you begin the project. I have found that clients that do not return the contract in a timely manner are often the same clients who do not pay. Also, clients who are scared to sign a contract might have other issues. All too often if they are paranoid about people double-crossing them, it means they have thoughts about doing the double-crossing. It is like the jealous girlfriend (or boyfriend) theory. The girlfriend is jealous because she is really the one that cannot be trusted, so she does not trust her mate. While your relationship with your client hopefully will not be so intimate, you have to evaluate why a client is so hesitant to sign a contract.

2. Get at least 30 percent up front.

For all my clients I require 30 percent of the project cost up front, if it is the first time I am working with them. After they have paid for the first project, I normally do not require this on subsequent projects. However, having the client pay money up front tests the waters. First, it ensures they are serious about the project. There is nothing worse than someone who is “trying you out” to determine if you are a good fit. You do not want to spend hours designing something, only to find this out. Keep reading below to find out how I did not follow this rule, and got soaked. Second, having them pay also ensures they actually have money. It is amazing how many people will try to get interactive work done on credit. I have meetings with clients frequently who try to get huge projects accomplished, hoping they will have the money to pay by the end.

3. Use your Jedi powers

I know this sounds like mystic mumbo-jumbo, but in the 9+ years I have been doing freelance Web design, I have always known right from the first meeting whether or not the client was going to be difficult. Do not ignore your gut feelings regarding clients. This is not to say that you need to pitch your client because they are acting a little off. Spend some time to get to know your client – maybe have another face-to-face meeting if possible to understand their personality and the project goals.

The Client I fired.

I would have never thought that I could ever fire a client. After all, I am a one-man-show freelancer, and every project counts towards helping to get the mortgage paid. Yet, with many years of freelance and business experience under my belt, I have learned when to cut my losses and run.

(The names have been changed in this example to protect the innocent... or rather the guilty as it is in the case of this past client.)

The project started when the client saw my Web site and liked the Flash work I produced. He sent me a very positive e-mail asking me for an estimate for his construction billing software company. I called him on the phone and we talked at length about the types of Web sites he liked, and the vision he had for this project. Overall, the phone conversation was very upbeat and the client seemed very positive. The site was basically brochure ware, but he informed me he had other Web sites that needed to be built, and he was looking for a freelancer for the long term. This is always exciting to hear when you are self-employed. I was so thrilled about

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future work that I did not focus properly on the task at hand. One thing he did mention in this conversation was that he was unhappy with his current freelance designer because he was too slow. This normally would have sent warning signals throughout my brain, but the idea of future work clouded my judgment.

The project proceeded, and I sent the client a contract and a request for thirty percent of the cost upfront. The client (we will call him Jim for this article) informed me his accountant would be in the next week, and he would have the check cut then. Because of all the positive energy in the air, and the continual flattery from Jim about how much he liked my portfolio, I proceeded with the project without a contract or the thirty percent payment, thinking it would go great.

I produced three interface designs for Jim and I also produced several logo designs for his software. Two weeks passed. I called Jim up and asked him if he had a chance to sign the contract and cut a check. Jim explained that his accountant was off sick, and he only worked on Fridays. He promised to have it to me by the next Friday.

This same week I presented Jim with the three design studies, and over 15 logo treatments. Jim's reaction was lukewarm to designs one and two, but he thought design three, with a few alterations, could be used. We discussed the modifications and I retooled the design based on his feedback. I presented the design to him the next day via e-mail. He felt design three, even with its modifications, was not "jazzy" enough for him. I e-mailed him back to setup another conference call to discuss the design in depth, so we could arrive at a better outcome.

Jim felt that I could not produce a satisfactory design. He also commented that he did not like the logos I created either. (As an aside, I told him at the beginning of the project I was not going to charge him for the logos, since we were going to do more work together down the line. Big mistake.) All throughout this experience, the client was calling me at all hours of the night. Normally, I would not mind for rush projects, or even for clients who are in a different time zone. I am flexible as a freelancer, but he was in the same time zone and there was no urgency. He was all over the place, and it showed in his behavior towards the project and the design.

Jim decided that even though I did not produce an exemplary design, he would like to continue our relationship. His words to me were, "Kevin, I really like your work, and I think you are a great Flash designer. But your interface designs are not what I want, and the logos are really not what I am after either. I want to hire you to build just the Flash parts of my Web site." I was three weeks into the project and Jim had become the client from Hell. He had not paid me a penny, and he called me at all hours and did not like any of the design I had produced in the three weeks we were working together. At this stage, I did not know how I could produce motion graphics in Flash for him that he would be happy with either.

For the first time in nine years of doing freelance, I came to a crossroads. I knew that I could probably proceed and get paid something for my troubles. Yet, I also knew that this client would consume more and more of my time, and I could never get paid. At the moment, I did not have a lot of projects on my plate. It is very scary as a freelancer to give up work. I decided to fire the client. I told Jim that I felt we were not a good fit. I was honest and explained that it was better we ended our relationship now before he became frustrated with my work. Most oth-

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er interactive companies I have worked for would have turned him over to a collection agency or gone to small claims court to get back the money he owed. I decided not to go this route for several reasons.

- 1.** Being a freelancer, I do not have time to go through a collection agency or to go through court. It takes away from the time I can spend perusing bigger and better clients.
- 2.** The Internet is a small place, and eventually if you send a client like this to a collection agency, or to small claims court, it will come back to bite you. This client was local, so I did not want the relationship to end badly, and I exited in a polite manner.

Firing this client was an excellent decision, and the next week I landed several large projects from various national level clients. That time consuming project would have weighed down my efforts to please them.

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CHAPTER FIVE

how to share your knowledge and make money



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Sharing

Sharing things you have learned is one of the best (and free) ways to gain more business. Clients will come to respect your opinion if you become recognized in your field for a particular area of Web development. For instance, I co-authored a book on Flash usability called *Flash 99% Good: A Guide to Macromedia Flash Usability*. The book generated a lot of positive PR. Macromedia featured the book on their site, and the related book site www.flash99good.com won numerous national design awards. This PR translated into a better Google ranking for my business site, because my name and link to my freelance site was included on the book site. The PR generated with the book helped get my name in front of many senior creative executives. A few months after it was published, a senior creative at TeamUSA advertising (the agency of record for Lexus) contacted me asking me to lend my creative and Flash usability skills to the development of the new Lexus Web site.

How do you find your niche?

When you set out to find a niche for yourself, think about the things in our industry that interest you the most. When I came up with the idea to write a book about Flash usability, it was mostly spurred on by the lack of relevant information I could find online. I knew there was a vacuum, and I knew I could write about the subject matter because of my years of experience building interfaces in Flash. Think about problems or issues you face in your day-to-day work. Is there a book project or article floating around in your head, waiting to be written to solve that problem or issue? Do you see something happening with Web sites or Flash design that you know could be fixed with a particular technique or software tool?

I do a lot of free writing for Web sites like www.pixelsurgeon.com, www.creativebehavior.com and www.commarts.com. When I write an article or software review for one of these sites I always try to think of what my target audience wants to read. I wrote an article for Creative Behavior (that appears in this book as well) on when to fire your client. This article was wildly successful because as freelancers we always struggle with clients that do not pay, and in the end are not worth the effort. This article received a lot of acclaim and many people e-mailed me thanking me for writing it. The article also has additional benefits because the link at the bottom of the article lets people learn more about me, but it also increases my Google page ranking. Google, as you may know, ranks Web sites based on how many people are linking to them. Having more links pointing to your site increases the chances that it will achieve better ranking in Google search results.

There are many online magazines that would love to have articles written for them. While most of them do not have a budget to pay you for your efforts, the link to your Web site at the end of the article can be just as good as money. If you can get published just once or twice through these avenues, then you will help increase your popularity and the traffic to your Web site.

Speaking Engagements

I do several speaking engagements a year for various organizations. I have spoken to universities, at tradeshows and I have had the privilege to speak several times at Flash In The Can (FITC) in Toronto. Some of these organizations will pay me to speak, but often I do it at no cost

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for the free publicity. Every time I speak to an organization I notice an increase in revenue for that quarter, as my name is kicked around in the design community. It always amazes me how people find out about my work.

Several months after I spoke at FITC 2004, I had a prospect call and ask for a bid on a large interactive Web site. I inquired how they had heard of me, and they responded that they had obtained my contact information from the FITC Web site. Even though the person did not attend the conference, being a speaker and having my name associated with FITC gave me credibility. This prospect turned into a full-time client that does a lot of work with me each year. The speaking engagement was worth every minute I put into it, just for the link on their Web site.

"This all sounds good Kevin, but you're a published author, and I'm relatively unknown except to my loving family and friends!"

Yes, this is partly true. It is a lot easier to get speaking engagements if you have written several books for well-recognized publishing companies. However, you do not need to be a published author, or a heavy hitter in the world of design in order to speak about design or technology. There are many organizations that would love to have a guest speaker talk about real world industry experience. I cannot tell you how many e-mails I get a month from students asking me to mentor them, or who ask for advice on how to become a better Web designer. Before I spoke at larger conferences, I did small speaking engagements to university departments on how Flash can be used in their design work. If you have any national brand name clients under your belt, students will be even more eager to pick your brain. Regardless, if you are practicing your craft and getting paid to do it, it does not matter if you have two years experience or ten years experience. You will be pleasantly surprised how much you really know.

Here is a list of organizations you can contact regarding possible speaking engagements. Take a risk and get your name out there!

Potential Audiences:

- ➲ Local university, community college or design academy.
- ➲ Local chamber of commerce meeting.
- ➲ Mac user groups.
- ➲ In store (computer store) demonstrations.

Potential Topic Ideas:

- ➲ Effective Web site design.
- ➲ Improving your Google ranking.
- ➲ Current design trends.
- ➲ Hands on tutorials: Dreamweaver, Photoshop, Flash, etc.
- ➲ Using typography in Flash and Web site design.

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There are many, many more topics to discuss. A good idea is to look at well-received Web design books on Amazon.com, and think about what topics these books cover and why they are popular. This will give you a quick and dirty overview of what people are interested in, or a have a need to learn about.

Turning Blogging into Business

I run a very successful Web site called Flash99good.com. I consider the site to be successful for several reasons. The first reason is that it does not cost me anything to operate. The Google AdSense program I employ pays for the server costs, with a little change left over for Starbucks coffee each month. The second reason I consider the site to be successful is because it has generated new business, either directly or indirectly.



The direct business that Flash99good.com has generated for me is through people doing a search for "Flash" in Google or another search engine. They click on a link to my site and cold e-mail me about freelance work. The indirect way Flash99good.com has generated business is through creditability. Often my potential clients will bid work out to several different developers. When the client reviews Flash99good.com and sees that I practice and preach Flash usability, it helps tip the scales in my favor. Clients always like to know when they are dealing with a professional. Flash99good.com gives me that credit and standing in the Web design world.

Picking a topic for your blog

I recommend picking a topic for your blog that interests you. This way you can keep posting topics without having to draw blood for content. The content will naturally come to mind as you go about your day-to-day work. With Flash99good.com, I often write sticky notes for ideas for topics and paste them on my monitor. When I am free or feel inspired, I will post a news item to my blog that I think is helpful. It is much easier to maintain and keep content fresh in a blog if you find the content interesting yourself. A few ideas for blog topics that would attract a client's attention and help build your link credit online:

- ⌚ Designing better Web sites. Styles, techniques and examples.
- ⌚ Software reviews.
- ⌚ Web site design critiques.
- ⌚ General technology articles related to the Internet.
- ⌚ Your own personal thoughts or comments on technology, such as the latest version of Photoshop or Microsoft applications.

Setting up the blog software

You need to setup your blog after you have picked your title or concept. You can either hard code your blog by adding each article manually, or you can setup server side software. Both methods have their benefits. Hard coding lets you control the design of each blog post with much more precision. You can make each page unique and have a unique layout and graphics. The disadvantage of editing your site by hand, is that it can be time consuming and it may

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require a lot of fuss to post a simple text article. Using a server side option like MovableType or WordPress will organize your blog entries automatically for you. Software like this will also include advanced search functions and RSS feeds so others can print your posts on their sites if you allow it. Here is a list of great blogging software:

Movable Type

<http://www.movabletype.org/>

I use an older version of MovableType for Flash99good.com. It is pretty easy to update and offers a great selection of easy to customize templates. The new version is reported to be faster, and has many product enhancements, but it is no longer free.

WordPress

<http://www.wordpress.org/>

This easy to use software is a snap to install, and the admin interface is a joy to work with on a daily basis. This software is licensed under a GNU (General Public License) and is free to use.

Blogger

<http://www.blogger.com/>

This is probably the fastest way to start blogging. If you do not want to mess with installing a server side script, than this is the way to go. Doing an informal test for writing this book, I setup my own blog. It took me less than two minutes to sign up for an account, pick a template for the blog and post my first entry.

Setting up your blog: Installing WordPress

While free blogs like those featured on Blogger.com are really easy to setup, they lack the ability to customize like MovableType and WordPress. In this next section of the book I will teach you how to install WordPress on your server. The reason I selected WordPress is that it is easy to install, easy to use and it has a large developer group supporting it online.

Before you begin this tutorial you need to make sure your Web hosting environment supports PHP 4.1 or greater and MySQL 3.23.23 or greater. You can contact your administrator for more information. An alternative installation tutorial is located here:

<http://wordpress.org/docs/installation/5-minute/>

In this tutorial I will show you how to setup the database using a visual control panel tool that most Web hosts utilize.

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Step 1: Download the latest WordPress build

You can download the latest WordPress build here:

<http://wordpress.org/>

Step 2: Unzip and get ready

After you download the program to your desktop, unzip the files and place them in a directory called "wordpress" on your local hard drive. For this tutorial I will place my wordpress directory in this location:

C:\website_html\wordpress

Step 3: Setting up the database

This may seem like a scary task, but it really is not all that difficult. Many Web hosting companies provide visual tools to create and maintain databases. For this tutorial I will be using a popular Web hosting control panel, which was provided by www.mediatemple.com. Even if your Web host does not have the exact same control panel, the interface commands are typically the same. This step might be slightly different on your hosting control panel, but it will give you the basic concepts.

I log into my Web site control panel and access the "MySQL Database" control area. (See Fig. 5.1)



Figure 5.1

From here I click "Create Database" (see Fig. 5.2) - you will notice that in this control panel my hosting provider gives the database a name related to my hosting account. In this example I named my database "fuffy_com_-_wordpress".

Step 4: Set the MySQL Database Password

Using the "MySQL Database" control area, change the name of your database password by clicking on "Change MySQL Password". Make sure you make it a long one with a good mix of numbers and letters together.

A screenshot of a "Create Database" dialog box. It contains instructions about uniqueness and character limits. There are two input fields: "Database Name" containing "fuffy_com_-_wordpress" and "Database Admin" containing "superadmin". At the bottom are "Save", "Reset", and "Cancel" buttons.

Figure 5.2

Step 5: Fill in the database configuration settings

Open wp-config-sample.php in the wordpress directory you created earlier on your hard drive and fill in the configuration settings. Fill in your database name and password. For this example this is how mine will look. (See Fig. 5.3)

Figure 5.3

```
<?php  
// ** MySQL settings ** //  
define('DB_NAME', 'fluffy_com_-_wordpress'); // The name of the database  
define('DB_USER', 'superadmin'); // Your MySQL username  
define('DB_PASSWORD', 'ou8122w243ccee12'); // ...and password  
define('DB_HOST', 'localhost'); // 99% chance you won't need to change this value
```

You can probably ignore the code below this, as the rest of the settings will work fine with most hosting environments.

Step 6: Save the configuration file

Now save the file out as a new name in the same wordpress directory. Call the file wp-config.php. Now upload everything to your hosting environment. Upload your files to the root directory so the URL path to your wordpress directory would be something like this:

<http://www.yourdomain.com/wordpress>

Step 7: Launch the WordPress Installer

Now point your web browser to this URL (replacing "yourdomain" with your actual web domain name):

<http://www.yourdomain.com/wordpress/wp-admin/install.php>

You should see this screen now (Fig. 5.4)

If you do not see this screen, then I recommend going over to the WordPress forums and asking for help. You post to the forums here:

<http://wordpress.org/support/>

WordPress

Welcome to WordPress installation. We're now going to go through a few steps to get you up and running with the latest in personal publishing platforms. You may want to peruse the [ReadMe documentation](#) at your leisure.

[First Step »](#)

WordPress, personal publishing platform.

Figure 5.4

Step 8: Complete the WordPress wizard setup

Now follow the setup screen questions. I have listed them here in order to give you a reference, and what my answers would be for this tutorial. Feel free to add your own:

First Step:

Weblog title: Airgid.com

Your e-mail: modf234@mayway.com

Second Step:

Finished! Print this screen because it contains the random password and your login to access your blog. Click on the login link after you have printed this screen in order to log into your

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blog.

Step 9: Write your first blog post

After you have logged into the system you will be presented with the “dashboard screen” (see Fig.5.5). Click on the “Write” link in the top left-hand corner of the screen. This will bring up the “Write Post” screen (see fig.5.6). You can then fill out the content you want for your blog and simply click “publish” when you are done. WordPress will present you with a light blue box with a hyperlink entitled “View Site”. Click that to view your new blog! (Fig. 5.6)

Step 10: Enjoy your blog

Now your blog is live (See Fig. 5.7) and it is very pretty indeed! The cool thing about WordPress is that you can do a lot of enhancements to it to really customize it for your needs.



Figure 5.5

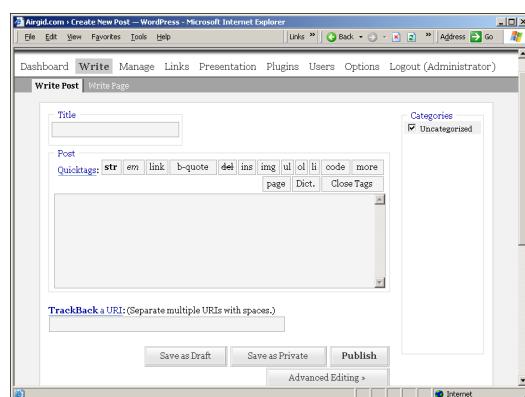


Figure 5.6

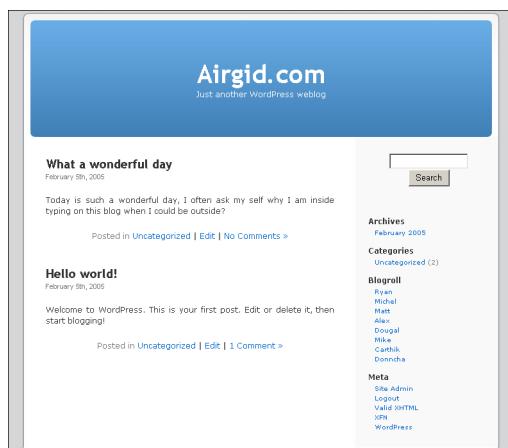


Figure 5.7

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CHAPTER SIX

Project Management & Pricing



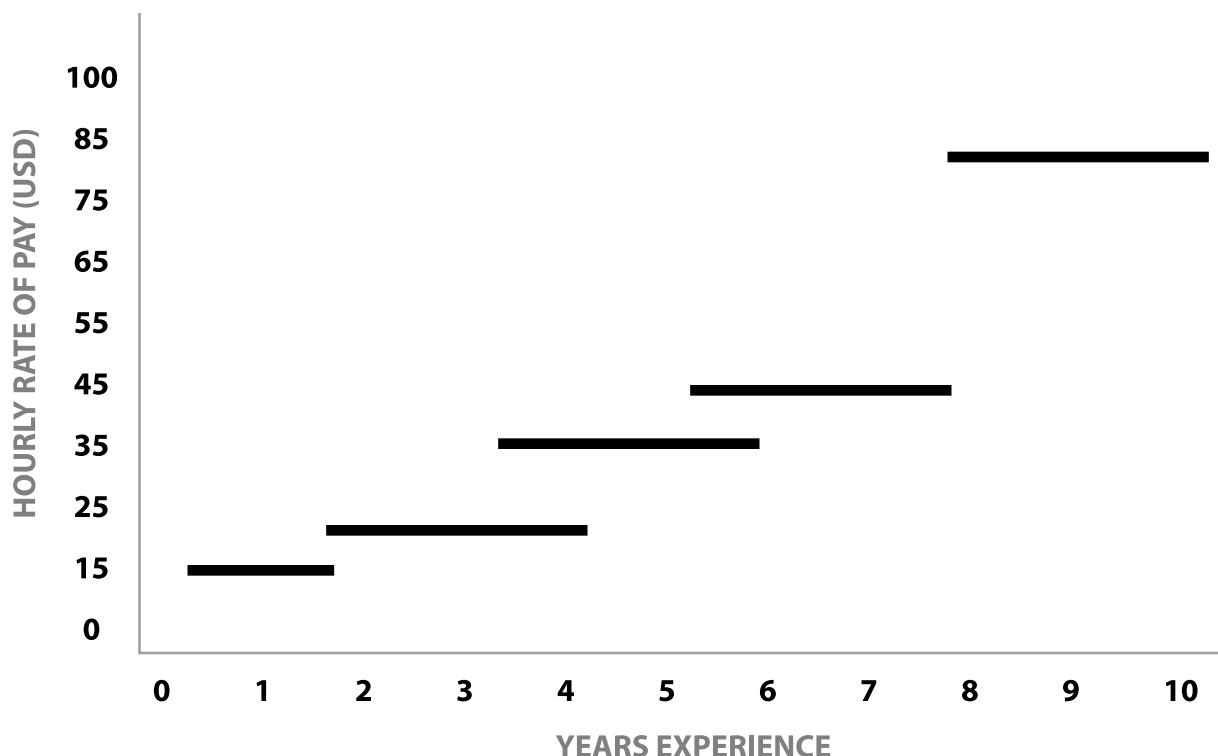
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Pricing?

Determining what to charge for your services can be very a difficult decision. "It will forever dominate your destiny", as Yoda once said to Luke in Star Wars. In my experience, you do not want to start your hourly rate too low, because once you land a few larger clients you will have great difficulty migrating them to a higher hourly rate (that is, if you decide to charge hourly). What you charge hourly should reflect what the market would bear. So in other words, you should try to charge as much as clients are willing to pay. This sounds straightforward, but what do clients want to pay? You need to do some research, and find out what others are being paid with similar skills sets as you. There are a few Web sites that will help you determine what hourly rate other freelancers are charging. Two salary calculators that I have used in the past are available at www.salary.com and www.monster.com.

All of the information you find online regarding salaries and hourly rates should be taken with a grain of salt. In the creative business people can charge a lot more for their services if they have the creative portfolio to back it up. Below is a graph of how much I charged hourly as my career grew. You will notice that the more name brand experience I obtained resulted in an increase in my hourly rate.



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- ⌚ 0 - 2 Years - \$15/hr
Small flyers for print, university department Web sites, PowerPoint slides
- ⌚ 2-4 Years - \$20/hr
Local small business Web sites, Bell Canada
- ⌚ 4-6 Years - \$37/hr
Cadillac, Chrysler
- ⌚ 6-8 Years - \$45/hr
Chevrolet, Various small business's
- ⌚ 8-10 Years - \$80+/hr
Toyota, GM, Ford, Lexus, Amnesty, CBC.ca

As you can see there is a direct relationship between what I was paid and my experience. I would not use this as an absolute rule though. Very talented people can jump out of the gates making "mondo-cash", but this is rare.

Even now people tell me that \$65-80/hour for what I do is very cheap. I know other freelancers who charge upwards of \$100/hr for their work. Once again, it all depends on your talent and experience. Someone with loads of talent can get far. Remember though, it is hard as a designer not to be excited by your own work. So you need a reality check every now and then.

SUCCESS TIP:

Sometimes clients are really slow at getting me my thirty percent down payment for projects. Well, this is no more a problem, as I have setup a portion of my Web site to receive PayPal payments. Just sign up for a PayPal account and follow the instructions for placing a "Pay Button" on your site. Place the code on a hidden page, and only give your clients private access. I now have many new clients pay me the deposit this way. It makes it easy for them, and it gets "real money" into my pocket so that I can start work on the project right away.

Fixed price or hourly?

This is always a question I wrestle with, even in my own freelance business. For quite a long time I charged hourly for my projects. The problem I found with this type of billing was that the client rarely wanted to pay me for the extra hours it took for fine-tuning. It was always a struggle telling them that there will be a "scope change" if they made any more changes to a design or added more interactivity to a Flash piece. I have found most of the time I would set an hourly rate, but end up charging a flat fee for the project, regardless if I went over a few hours. So I switched to a flat fee pricing structure.

Why I switched to fixed fee pricing

- ⌚ Takes out the stress

Clients can depend on a fixed project price and not worry about additional charges. I can relax

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and not worry about how I am going to claw an extra four or five hours pay out of my client when they go beyond the project timeline. It makes for a better client relationship.

☞ Easier to increase price over time

Charging on a fixed price enabled me to increase my prices slowly over time without upsetting my current clients. This is really the best benefit to fixed pricing. Now do not get confused. Fixed pricing does not mean my clients get to change the scope of the project and still pay the same price. However, fixed pricing does enable me to go over (or under) a few hours without sweating it. I always buffer the time by several hours to ensure that the client is paying upfront for “expected” changes. Also, after you work with a client for some time, you will understand how demanding they are and adjust your pricing to reflect the changes they typically request.

☞ Foreign currency exchange rates

A lot of my clients are based all over the world, and I live in Canada. So when a foreign currency is worth more than the Canadian dollar, I make more money on every transaction. The problem with hourly rates is when the Canadian dollar becomes close in value to the foreign currency, such as the US Dollar. I actually loose money. If I were still charging hourly for my projects it would be difficult to adjust my hourly rate upwards to compensate for the exchange rate. Because I charge a fixed price per project, I can increase my rates without causing too much concern for my clients.

Typically your clients will not mind paying between ten and thirty percent more if you keep them really well serviced. I cannot stress that enough to people starting freelance for the first time. You can easily recall poor service when you eat at a restaurant, and the concept is the same in any business venture. Doing freelance is no different, and you need to bend over backward for your clients. This means quickly returning phone calls, prompt service and quality work above and beyond. If you follow through with good service you will not have as much trouble raising your rates with existing clients. They do not mind paying more, so long as they value your efforts.

Managing the creative process

Nothing kills the creative process faster than lack of communication. Sometimes the “creative dance” can be hampered through an honest misunderstanding regarding the project goals. It is important that you listen to your client’s needs. Then, deliver those needs with results. It seems simple enough, but when you get it wrong it can be a nightmare to fix.

As a freelancer you will probably have the opportunity to work with a more diverse group of clients than you would work with at a traditional company. Some months I am working for national charities, and other months I am helping sell sheet metal for a local Detroit-based automotive company. The way I communicate and interact with my clients needs to be adaptive to their style.

The Process

This is the typical process I follow when I work with a new client.

1. First phone contact

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Evaluate the scope of project. E-mail them my "Why Hire Airgid.com" Web site to give them something to look at while I prepare their estimate. This keeps them interested just in case they are scouting other freelancers.

2. Provide estimate

I e-mail my estimate as a PDF printed from Excel. You can get a free PDF print driver at http://sector7g.wurzel6.de/pdfcreator/index_en.htm if you do not have Acrobat.

3. Client signs contract

I have all my new clients sign a standard contract. I recommend you go to a lawyer and have a good contract drafted. You can also buy template contracts online, but remember to read the fine print.

4. Client fills out project questionnaire

I have all my new clients fill out a project questionnaire. I ask questions about the target audience, technical limitations and target launch date. You can download a sample of these questions at <http://book.airgid.com/secretgoodies/>.

5. Client pays thirty percent

I will not start a stitch of work until I have the cash in hand and the check has cleared. Be sure your client has money allotted to pay for your services.

6. Sitemap and content guide

For small and large sites I always create a sitemap. You can download a sample site map at <http://book.airgid.com/secretgoodies/>. I also create a content guide for larger sites. Basically, a content guide is the full site built out with no images (a text only representation). The navigation is static text in a table. The content guide helps clients visualize how the links work and where content will go. If you do not create a content guide for the whole site, make sure you create one for the home page and one secondary page. This way they will be able to better visualize what content goes where. This will help you understand what types of content you will need to deal with in your designs.

7. Create three designs

Typically I produce three designs for a client to review. Make sure you have a good thorough conversation about what the needs and goals of the project are before you start on design. Also, it is helpful to show clients samples of different site designs before you begin. I often provide screen captures of other sites that might get the creative conversation going.

8. Present designs

Most of my clients are located thousands of miles from me, so I am forced to present my designs over the phone and through e-mail. I typically do not just fire off an e-mail with a link to the new designs and wait for feedback. I setup a conference call and personally show the designs to the clients. This way I get to explain my vision for the design and how I see it working out for the rest of their site. This is even more important when you are showing comps for interactive media such as Flash. Your explanation is very important. I have found that clients can have a totally different view of a design without my explanation. My advice is to show your designs in

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person or over the phone. Do not post the designs and shoot off an e-mail, because you are asking for trouble.

9. Client modifies designs

At this point the client makes tweaks, or in some cases, takes your design and runs it into the ground! But fear not, and remember that the client is always right. Be constantly aware that they are paying you. Some clients just need to have it their way. Some are controlling and want to play creative director. If the design looks terrible after they are finished tweaking, make sure you point out to them that you feel it could look better. However, at the end of the day they are paying for the project, so you will need to ensure they do actually like it. Just make sure to document your comments and suggestions.

I always try to get my clients to focus on the target audience for every project. This way you can deflect their poor aesthetic tastes and try to bring some rationale to what you are doing. For instance, I had a client – lets call him “Larry”, who said, “I showed the Web site to my 17-year-old daughter, and she does not like the color and the fonts you are using.” I explained to Larry that the site was designed for older adults and his daughter did not represent the target audience. This answer helped him understand that we were trying to build a better site for his target audience, and not for his daughter. Explaining your design decisions can help you avoid creative struggles with clients. I have big and small clients who do this sort of thing all the time. Just back up your ideas with solid answers and most clients will come around. If they do not and the Web site is not successful, then you can review your notes, and politely suggest in the future that they heed your warnings.

10. Client approves design

Now you need the client to approve the sitemap and the design for the site. If it is a complex site, then it is very important to have the client approve the sitemap. There is nothing more frustrating than building out a design, only to have the client add new navigation.

11. Start Build

Now you start the build process. From here I have the client check in daily to make sure I am on course. This way there are no surprises.

12. Client approves final build and project launches

I typically transfer the site from the development area on my Web host over to the client's hosting environment. With all my clients, I do not release source files (PSD, FLA, etc...) until final payment is made. This way, they may have the site, but they will have difficulty editing it without the source files. Especially if you are using Flash. Make sure you spell this out in your estimate, contract and invoice. Again, this way there are no surprises.

13. Get paid!

Most of my clients pay me in less than thirty days. Very few take longer, but make sure you stay on top of it. After thirty days notify them that their account is past due. If for some reason they will not pay, then you may want to get a lawyer to draft a letter stating the obvious. Often this letter is enough to get the ball rolling. If that fails, then you have an option to take them to small claim's court (depending on your country). My advice is if the project is below \$5,000 dollars, then eat the cost. Lawyers are expensive and you can easily spend that cash in legal bills.

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Project Extranet

It is important to document the creative process as much as you can. I always setup a project extranet for every project. The project extranet can be something as simple as a directory under your Web server with a list of files posted. I typically date each file each time I post one. For instance, as I work on a Web site design I post the iterations of the designs online. This creates a historical record of how the creative has evolved. Creating this historical record also helps clients see how the changes they requested modified the look-and-feel. When my busy clients ask for the same change twice, I point them back to the project extranet. You can see a sample extranet I use in my daily work here:

<http://book.airgid.com/secretgoodies/>

You can see by looking at this template that it is quite uncomplicated. The updates are added by hand in Dreamweaver, and it has all the contact information for the client right at their fingertips. They do not have to hunt for my e-mail or phone number when they want to call to discuss the designs. I have also included a special Dreamweaver auto date function in the right hand column that updates the time stamp when the extranet "index.html" file is saved. I have researched other extranet solutions, such as server side project management software. I find these systems to be a pain to upload media and a pain for clients to view. I believe in the K.I.S.S method: Keep It Simple Stupid. One of the benefits to using a static one-page site like this is that you can take down the extranet and keep it for your records offline. The problem with database driven solutions is once the project files come down you have no easily accessible record of the old extranet site.

Billing

There are many ways to do your accounting. There are great programs like Simply Accounting and QuickBooks that offer a lot of great easy to use tools. I have found however that this software is often too complicated for my needs. I do not do more than five or six projects a quarter, so tracking inventory and taxes is not an issue. I use Microsoft Excel to do all of my financial work. I use excel to write invoices, receipts, and estimates for clients. I also use Excel to track my expenses and project taxes. If you do not own a copy of Excel, or do not want to make Bill Gates any richer, you can download a free copy of OpenOffice.org, which includes a spreadsheet program similar to Excel. In fact, the spreadsheet program for OpenOffice.org is compatible with Excel.

You can download samples of the Excel files I use for my day-to-day work here:
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Customer service: Keeping them coming back for more

By Kathleen Hickey

No matter how great your work is, you can lose a client and damage your reputation if you don't make a practice of good customer service. Your client wants to know that the money they're spending on you is worth it. They'll even pay more money for you than your competitors if they value the relationship. So the key is to endear yourself to your clients by giving them the highest quality service possible.

Here are some basic points on maintaining good customer relationships that can set you apart from the pack:

1. Respect your clients.

Let's face it, clients can drive you crazy, especially when you're working in the creative world. Everyone thinks he/she knows what good design is and wants to put in his/her two cents. But nine times out of ten, it isn't arrogance that makes clients think they know how to design, it's the passion that they have for the project. Remember, they have far more invested in a successful outcome than you have. You may lose a client, but they could lose their job. And they want to be sure that after all the hard work, the outcome will be something they can proudly show to the top brass. As well, they generally know much better than you do what's going to fly at approval time and what won't. So it becomes their baby, and they may get a little more involved than what you consider optimal.

Replace impatience with respect for their position. They want to do a great job. They want it to be the very best. So do your best to understand what the project goals are and what they are personally trying to accomplish. Then carry it out in your work. Make it your personal goal to make them look like heroes in front of the boss. They will appreciate you beyond measure for it, and they'll come back because they do feel your respect.

Once in a while, you will serve a client that you have a difficult time respecting. Evaluate the relationship honestly and determine whether it's your bruised ego that's the problem or whether they really are sub-standard people. If you are serving someone that you cannot possibly re-

SUCCESS TIP:

Use subcontractors to manage overflow

As you start your business the idea of having subcontractors lined up might seem very foreign. After all, starting out and having enough work for yourself is the first priority. However, you will be surprised that in a short time frame business can pick up drastically, and it is important to line up qualified subcontractors before the \$@!\$ hits the fan. Here are some tips when selecting subcontractors:

- ➲ Always have them sign a non-compete agreement for your current clients. You want to make sure your subcontractors do not become the competition as a result of your hard salesmanship!
- ➲ I pay my subcontractors per project because I do not like surprises in my budget. Get a fixed price.
- ➲ Mark up the subcontracting work as much as you can. I pay my subcontractors via PayPal and I always pay them immediately after the project. This way they will want to do business with you again.



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spect due to a lack of professionalism, dishonesty, or the like, then you need to walk away from that client as soon as you can.

2. Be consistent.

You need to be consistent with your clients, even if they are not. That means you must be consistently on time. Don't set unreasonable deadlines that you can't possibly meet. And when you set a deadline, meet it at all costs. If a problem arises that is going to make you late, then tell the client about it as soon as possible and be ready with a new promise date. But being late should be the exception, not the rule. I always tell my clients that I don't mind waiting for them, but I never want them waiting for me.

Hand in hand with being on time is being on budget. If you are consistently overbudget, then you may need to hone your quoting skills. Or you may need to learn how to say no. Not every change request is a good one, and you must be able to diplomatically say so to avoid racking up unquoted hours. More on that in "Be the Expert" following.

Being reachable is another critical consistency. Having been on the client side of the tracks during my career, I can tell you that nothing is more unnerving than not being able to contact the person you paid good money to complete a job. Going back to the respect issue, unavailability can be interpreted as a lack of respect—that the client and the work they gave you is not important.

All of this can be summarized in three words: Be consistently professional. Freelancers who maintain a high level of professionalism--being on time, on budget, available, calm under fire and maintaining a positive attitude and high respect for the client—will develop the best reputation in the marketplace.

3. Be honest.

This is Kindergarten, Golden Rule stuff. It's this simple: lies grow like a cancer, they require tremendous energy to cover up and they are disastrous to your reputation. So don't do it, period.

4. Be the expert.

You are the one that trained in your field and worked hard to develop your skills. So have confidence in your skills and be an advisor to your client. They need and want help; so you should provide it. For example, if your client has an idea that is out of date and can't even pass for retro, tell them so. But tell them with respect and kindness. Explain clearly and gently why their idea isn't a good one and be ready to offer an alternative solution. Listen to their ideas, making every effort to understand what it is they're really trying to accomplish. The worst injustice you can commit with your clients is to be an order-taker. You should be the one that is guiding the creativity, using your experience and talents to reach the client's goals in the best possible way. And sometimes that means you have to diplomatically tell them that the course they want to take is not the best.

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A couple of years ago, I was on a major long-term project that spanned the globe and involved 22 different cultures. Decision-making often was difficult because cross-cultural and political issues complicated matters. The temptation was high to just go with the solution that could reach a group consensus just to get a decision made and get on with the work at hand. But a bad idea is always a bad idea, and eventually someone would recognize that a bad decision was made. Since I was the hired expert, the finger naturally got pointed at me, and rightfully so. I learned quickly that speaking up about a bad idea, even when that course of action was unpopular with the client, was far more effective in reaching the best decision. Inevitably, everyone recognized it as the best decision, and I, in turn, was earning my keep as the expert consultant.

5. Listen.

Sometimes in our eagerness to show off our abilities, we get over zealous with chatter about our ideas. You can walk away from a meeting feeling like you really got to shine, and they'll walk away wondering if you understood at all what they want. Instead, you should make them feel that you listened and you heard them. You can do that by, well, listening. Let them do the talking about the project. Ask questions to keep them talking, like:

- ⌚ What is the purpose for this project?
- ⌚ What are its goals?
- ⌚ Who is the intended audience?
- ⌚ What have you envisioned as the final product?
- ⌚ What key messages do you want to communicate?
- ⌚ What elements must be included?

Once you've given them the time to explain expectations, then you can prove that you listened by giving them feedback. Recap what they told you, and tell them how you interpret it. This then becomes a great time to offer some preliminary ideas for discussion and tell them what you can do to accomplish objectives.

6. Go the extra mile.

There are two car washes near my house. One car wash does a very good job, offers a good value for services rendered, and the line always moves quickly. But the lady at the cash register is scary, there is a tip box positioned at the drop-off point before the car is even washed, and attendants are too busy talking to each other to care about me. The other car wash has no tip box, the guy taking the money is extremely polite and, here's the clincher, the attendants who dry the car recognize me, thank me and ask me to come back again. Prices are comparable, work quality is comparable. I go back to the second car wash every time, even if there is a long, slow line, and I tip the attendants.

People are looking for a good experience, and it's no different whether you're selling car washes or world-class design capabilities. Worry less about the money you're being paid and a lot more about doing an excellent job, one that you can be proud to put in your portfolio. Provide detailed project timelines and give regular status reports during each project phase so that the client always knows exactly what's going on without calling you first. Follow up after delivery

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to make sure they have everything they need for the corporate review process. Offer to accompany him/her at a review meeting with superiors so that you can explain the creative intent. This will not only help the person to whom you are directly reporting, but it also will get you in front of the decision-makers. And, as often as you can, respond quickly to emergencies. Nothing will endear you more to your clients than getting them through the tight spots.

7. Reflect and Take Note.

When you begin new personal relationships, you spend time noticing the things they like, what they don't like and what is important to them. Do the same thing with your clients. Take note, and if you don't have a good memory, literally take notes, about your clients. I have found in working on creative teams that scheduling a debriefing meeting post-project is very helpful. We are able to discuss what we've learned about the client, what went wrong, what went right and document suggestions for improvements. When appropriate, I've even shared our debriefing documentation with the client to express our desire to continuously improve our work and understand them better. Whether the job was a smashing success or was one that you are thanking heaven that it's finally over, you should take the time to reflect on the experience and learn as much from it as you can. You can do this if you work alone as well. A good way to keep all this information straight is to keep an up-to-date electronic card file on each client, documenting the points noted above, that you can refer back to with each new project. Before you meet with them or start new work, review your previous notes so that successes are repeated and mistakes are not.

All of these points really translate to nothing more than being a caring, genuine service provider. By consistently practicing them, you'll keep your clients coming back for more.

Industry Leaders Speak

Up until now you have only heard my advice. I thought it would be a good idea for you to hear how others manage their freelance business. Below represents responses to questions from leading industry professionals.

Jason Vaughn – CreativePublic.com

How long have you been freelancing as a Web designer?

I have been doing graphic design for almost 15 years. The last 10 years of my design career has involved Web design.

How did you get into freelance Web design?

I always wanted to start my own business and I figured the only way to do this is to start freelancing on the side. Once I realized I could make really good extra cash, I kept it up. I had several opportunities come up during the Dot Com Bomb. That left me hurting some, but I picked myself back up and kept going.

What is your education?

1-year of college, 2-year correspondence course with Art Instructions School, and 4-years of

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high school art class

What software do you use on a daily basis?

Illustrator CS, Photoshop CS, InDesign CS, GoLive CS, Flash MX 2004, & Dreamweaver MX 2004

How do you keep track of your finances? Excel? Book keeper? Simply Accounting?

I use QuickBooks Pro and do my own bookkeeping, however, I have an accountant to do my taxes

When you engage a client, is there a process you follow (i.e. - have them follow a client questionnaire, sign a contract, pay thirty percent up front.)

My design process is to have an initial conversation by phone or in person and ask them questions based of a creative strategy. From this point I discuss with the client options and base pricing. Once the client is ready to begin a project, I have them sign a contract agreement and place a 50% deposit. The remainder of the balance is usually due after the job is completed.

Do you charge hourly or on a fixed price?

My pricing is by fixed rate on most items. However, I limit the amount of hours I will work for that fixed rate. If the client exceeds the allotted time by doing too many revisions, then I bill at my hourly rate after the initial base price and set time. Example: 1-splash page = \$800 for 11 hours of work. Over the 11 hours, my customers will be billed at \$75 per hour or at a negotiated rate.

What do you charge an hour?

\$75 an hour – Low end \$60 an hour

What is the worst experience you have had working with a freelance client? What would you do differently if you could go back in time?

Not getting paid. If I could go back in time, I would punch them and ask for a deposit.

Have you ever had a client not pay you?

Yes! I have had many clients not pay. At onetime, I had \$30,000 in collectables. I got some of it back, but lost a lot due to not getting deposits and putting too much trust in those I do business with. I was really young and trusting back then.

How do you find work? Word of mouth? Past clients from full-time work? Networking?

All the above. I get quite a lot of business online. Mostly local businesses in the Dallas area, but these folks seem to use the Web to find local designers vs. the phonebook.

Do you have secrets or tips for people looking to wrestle up new work (i.e. - cold e-mailing?)

Search engine marketing is one key for finding business for me. Also signing up with online phone directories. But for the most part, cold calling and networking. One thing I always do is to take my business cards everywhere I go. Many times, I will happen to get into a conversation with an owner of a company (such as at a restaurant) and drum up some business that way. I am always trying to sell.

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How do you keep clients coming back for more? Any advice for the newbie?

Provide great customer service and don't nickel and dime your customers with extra charges for this and that. Keep things simple and easy for the client and they will come back.

What type of computer equipment do you use, and what does your home office look like?

I am running a Mac G4 dual 1.25 GHz with 1 gig of ram. I have an HP 10ps large format printer & HP scanner. My office is just an extra room in our house, which is getting very small since my wife and I both work out of the house. It is either time to move or convert the dining room into an office. We have thought about moving into a retail location at one time, but we cannot justify the expense and much of our current freedom would be lost. Heck, I would have to hire employees then and I really don't want to do that. I like things simple and easy!

Can you recommend three books for a freelance Web designer just starting out?

These are not really Web design books, but I think every designer should read these. 1. The business side of creativity – by Cameron Foote | 2. Graphic Artist Guild Handbook | 3. AIGA Professional Practices in Graphic Design

What advice can you give to someone who is thinking about freelancing either full-time or part-time?

Study up on business practices. Most designers only think about design and just don't get the business side of things. Don't start freelancing until you have a basic grasp of bookkeeping, tax law, and basic business practices. Start off slow and build your client base. Jumping into freelance full-time without clients or business knowledge will soon be the end of things.

Can you please provide us with a bio?

I started off several years ago designing for a local T-shirt shop after my short time in college. I had just enough design knowledge to get myself into the job at a great pay of \$5 per hour (joking –ha ha). It sure did beat the \$3.25 an hour I was making washing cars at a local car dealership. After this job, I went to the US Navy for 2 years. During my Navy days, my job was to paint the sides of the ship, not much of an artist career going on there. However, the captain found out about my design skills and had me do things from paint murals to designing the bridge wing symbols and ships annual.

My Navy career was up after 2-years (honorable discharge by the way) and I then went back to the same T-shirt shop I worked for previously. During my second time at this company is when I landed my first big Freelance gig. I had always done freelance, but this gig would be the one that would start me off on my own and get me out of that low paying job. The project would be to design posters for high schools, which would pay me \$8,000 in 3 months. This project alone helped me launch my design firm that I had for 3 years.

My design firm was small but very busy. I had up to 7 employees and worked with clients such as Blue Cross Blue Shield, Texas Tech University, United Blood Services, Kraft Foods and more. I also landed a client that I design the inside of a restaurant for and became 7% owner of it. Most of our projects consisted of Print back then, but Web was becoming a big part of our business.

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We also did TV and radio commercials too.

Over the 3 years of having my design firm, I eventually had to close it down due to business partner embezzlement. I lost about \$500,000 total, including the restaurant. This was a heart-break moment and just about destroyed me. Eventually, I moved to the Dallas Texas area and started over again. My current firm Art Space has been doing well since 1997. I had to work full-time for someone else during my rebuilding, but now I have things squared away on my own and have built a successful online business called CreativePublic.com – a graphic design resource site. I have also developed an online store called SilkFlowerDesign.com that my wife and I operate together. Both sites are our main sources of income and I have geared the majority of my time to these sites and to Web design in general.

Overall, freelance has been good to me and enabled me to make much more money than when I worked full-time for someone else. It has taken a lot of hard work and I have made so many mistakes down the line, but if you don't get out and try things, nothing will ever happen for you. If you want to freelance and own your own business, you have to be willing to make mistakes and take risks.

Jason Vaughn – CreativePublic.com

Kirill Brusilovsky - www.crossmind.net

How long have you been doing freelance web design?
since 1998

How did you get into doing freelance web design?

I first began my career first as an employee. I just started as a junior designer and worked my way up to a senior graphic designer. I decided I wanted to get a good design education so I quit my position to be able to go to the University. I wanted to take a break from "work" but found myself in a middle of the internet boom, and in my first year of studying I had plenty of freelance jobs to do – it was a nice great time...

What is your education?

During the last ten years of my designer career, I have always tried to study, parallel to my practical activities. As a junior designer, my employer kindly paid for my private advertising academy, which I attended in the evenings. After working in a big multimedia company for a while I decided to continue my education and went to Essen University to study visual communication.

What software do you use on a daily basis?

I am proud to say, that I have worked with Adobe Photoshop since the version 2.0. Now I work with Creative Suite, of course :-) I found out, that making small layouts for print is very easy with Freehand and the software of choice for bigger print projects would be InDesign. My Flash knowledge ends with manual animation (I prefer to leave the development to professionals) – that's why I use an older version, which is easier to use. A question of software is should come

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second. First, you have to have a good idea of what you want to do, and then choose the appropriate software.

How do you keep track of your finances for your freelance? Excel? Book keeper? Simply Accounting?

As with most designers, I am quite chaotic. I keep my receipts (MS Word-Documents) in one directory, moving them into the subdirectory "payed", as soon as I receive the money on my account. I write them in MS Word because it is universal – I know that some designers do this in QuarkXpress and I think this is a bad idea. I leave the actual bookkeeping who does all my accounting.

When you engage a client is there a process you follow. (i.e. Have them follow a client questionnaire, sign a contract, pay 30% up front)

It differs from client to client. I try to be as flexible, as possible. Longer projects (over a month) I usually split a total amount in three parts. The last one should be paid as the project is finished. I have tried to develop a questionnaire, but have quit. There are thousands of possible questions, which differ greatly from client to client and very few common ones, which I always have in mind, when talking about a new project.

Do you charge hourly or on a fixed price?

It depends on the job. Normally, I find fixed prices better. It gives the client a secure feeling. For the designer it is important that the job description is clear, and fixed in written form.

What do you charge an hour?

Pricing is a very complicated subject in the design field. It is true, that it is the most asked question, but frankly, I hate the hourly charging for creative jobs. It is like selling paintings by square meters!

Clients often forget that you can not just compare two designers by price. There always will be somebody, who will demand less per hour, but is he/she as quick, as experienced, as professional? Your client can buy a watch for buck, a tie for five and a suit for fifty, which would probably do the same job, as the things (probably much expensive ones), than he has – ask him why?

The best way to give a client a sense for your price is to show similar projects from your portfolio and to say, what they have cost. It does not work with every client, but the best way is to ask for a budget, a client is willing to spend and to tell him what you are able to do with this money. In 99% percent of my clients have a very precise idea of what they want to spend and just pretend stupid.

Of course, internally I do count my working time and convert it into money if I plan a project. And if a client would insist on this model, I will name him the hourly charges. That would be around 60 Euro/hour, depending on the job type. I would charge an agency rather a bit less, than a final client.

Have you ever have a client not pay you?

Twice in my whole career, both very small projects between friends. Beware of making deals

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with friends! For a friend, rather work for free of charge fully!

How do you find work? Word of mouth? Past clients from full-time work? Networking?

Probably, since 9/11 and with the end of the internet boom it has become harder to find clients everywhere. In Germany, where I live and work the situation is critical – there are very few spending clients and endless crowds of designers, most of them of a very poor level.

In this situation it is almost impossible to find a new client without a recommendation. No matter what effort I have invested in self-advertisement, clients have come only from one direction: personal connections. Some of them were from the past jobs – that's why it is a good idea to gain some experience as an employee, before starting a freelance career.

My tip is: don't just sit in front of your computer all the time – go meet people and make new friends! Make sure that everybody in your circle knows what you do.

Do you have secrets or tips for people looking to wrestle up new work? I.e. Tips for finding new clients. (I.e. Cold emailing secrets? Or anything else?)

Cold emailing or lettering did not bring much in my experience. If you do it (it's still worth a try), I would try to personalize the communication as much as possible. Analyze the clients' needs and make precise offers. The best way is still meeting new people personally – on exhibitions, for example.

How do you "keep" clients coming back for more? And any advice for the newbie...

A fair client would probably notice your effort. Do rather a bit more, than exactly what was agreed. Make a client understand, that he has done a good deal, engaging you.

What type of computer equipment do you use? What does your home office look like? / Configuration? Do you have a fax machine? Extra phone line?? Mac, PC (specs please)

I used to have a separate office for a few years as I used to work with a partner and a few other people. Now I have rented a bigger apartment, where I work and live. Having a working room and a bedroom in the same place has many advantages to me: I save time, not having to go to work, I can work (or rest) whenever I want. This way is good for people, who are not afraid to mix private and work life.

In my working room I have three working places: for my girlfriend, for my developer, who works both here and at his home, depending on a project, and for myself. I try to make it as home-like and comfortable, but have everything workplace needs, including phone, fax, web-cam, stereo and a lot of table surface.

It has turned out that, except for their design, I was rather disappointed with MACs, especially concerning their price performance ratio. The thesis that a "MAC is quicker than PC" is an eternal myth, smartly created by Apple.

I buy a new PC every 2-3 years. For somebody, planning to invest in hardware I would advise them to spend as much as they can on a good monitor.

If you could recommend 3 books a person starting out in freelance web design what 3 books should they buy first:

It is helpful to get books with samples of standard documents and agreements. Much of the rest,

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mostly quite expensive design literature must not be owned and can be rent in the library.

What general advice would you give someone who is thinking about going freelance either full time or part time?

This decision often comes rather occasionally. If you are just planning with an idea of becoming a freelancer, ask yourself, where you get your first client. If you have no idea, think it over again – perhaps you need to get some experience as an employee first.

Kirill Brusilovsky works in the field of design since 1994. He studied advertising in West-deutsche Akademie für Kommunikation (WAK) in Cologne and at the same time did practical trainings at an advertising agency and a software company.

Afterwards, he was employed as a designer at Concept! GmbH in Wiesbaden (later Concept! AG) where he worked on various print, internet, CD-ROM and terminal projects. After more than one year, he left the company to study design in Essen University and worked as a freelance designer up to the foundation of crossmind communications in 2000.

Kirill is a co-founder and chief editor of the internationally recognized design portal www.crossmind.net. He lives and works in Germany.

www.crossmind.de – Agency and Portfolio
www.crossmind.net – International Design Portal

Jason Arber - Pixel Surgeon.com

How long have you been doing freelance web design?

I have a full-time job, so only freelance very occasionally. I've been doing web design for around seven years; I worked in print before that, so when I was freelancing full-time, it was usually for print.

How did you get into doing freelance web design?

It was a progression from doing print design and an interest in emerging technology.

What is your education?

I have an honours degree in Photography, Film and Video from the University of Westminster. When I was there, around 18 years ago, the university had some really early Macs and I became hooked and decided I wanted to be a designer.

What software do you use on a daily basis?

I use Adobe CS almost exclusively: Photoshop and Illustrator to design, and on the rare occasion I actually build something, I use GoLive, together with a big chunk of hand-coding.

How do you keep track of your finances for your freelance? Excel? Book keeper? Simply Accounting?

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Because I do so few freelance jobs, they're easy to keep track of and my mom does my book-keeping!

When you engage a client is there a process you follow. (i.e. Have them follow a client questionnaire, sign a contract, pay 30% up front)

Most jobs I get the client to pay 50% up front and 50% on delivery.

Do you charge hourly or on a fixed price?

It's usually easier to agree on a fixed price, but that has stung me in the ass a couple of times.

What do you charge an hour?

I vary my hourly rate on what I think the client can pay. But hourly rates are very rare for me, as I normally agree a fixed price.

What is your worst experience working with a freelance client? What would you do different now if you could go back in time?

I had a client who equated freelance with working from home, which meant, in his mind, he could call me up or even call round the house at 10pm on a Sunday to talk about the job...!

Have you ever have a client not pay you?

Only once. They disappeared off the face of the Earth. It wasn't for a huge amount so I wrote it off. It was from that point onwards I started charging 50% up-front.

How do you find work? Word of mouth? Past clients from full-time work? Networking?

Word of mouth.

Do you have secrets or tips for people looking to wrestle up new work? I.e. Tips for finding new clients. (I.e. Cold emailing secrets? Or anything else?)

I'm sure this is pure luck in my case, but I've never had to look for work, it's always come to me. I've never advertised or even asked about a job. The fact that I don't do much freelance these days is probably a huge factor, and when I was freelancing full time, there were fewer designers around!

How do you "keep" clients coming back for more? And any advice for the newbie...

Do a good job, build up a good relationship, charge a reasonable amount, do things on time, let the client know in advance if there are any delays or unexpected costs related to the job.

What type of computer equipment do you use? What does your home office look like? / Configuration? Do you have a fax machine? Extra phone line?? Mac, PC (specs please)

I've not used a fax machine in years! It's so... last century! My home office set-up is G3 iBook, G4 Desktop machine that my wife uses (she's a designer, too) and a G5 which is my main machine. We have an Epson Perfection 3200 Photo scanner, which is the best scanner I've ever owned, and a cheap Epson ink jet printer that will be getting replaced soon. We used to have a black and white laser printer, but that died a year or so back and we're considering getting a new cheap laser printer for letters and so on. The whole set-up is networked together, with external hard disk back ups of all our work, graphics and fonts. We also have an 8MB ADSL

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internet connection.

What general advice would you give someone who is thinking about going freelance either full time or part time?

Because there are so many people freelancing now, you have to go the extra mile to impress potential clients. Part of that process is education: Just because your cousin's kid has a copy of FrontPage and a cracked copy of Photoshop, that does not make him a web designer, any more than owning a set of cutlery makes you a surgeon. Design is a skill that is a combination of innate ability and learned processes that are honed and refined over time. If your potential client goes with his cousin's kid and pays \$50 for a site, he's going to get a \$50 site. It's like using a brick to tackle that toothache. It might work, but it ain't pretty.

Jason Arber

<http://www.pixelsurgeon.com>

Loves chili con carné, hates fish.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Teach your clients to make bread



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Make Bread

In this chapter I will cover one of the issues that challenges many freelancers, content management systems. No matter what types of freelance projects you take on same day some how a client will ask you this question:

"I want to edit my site, I bought a copy of FrontPage and I just need the login and password so I can start editing the site myself."

It's a very wise idea to avoid this type of situation at all costs. Nine times out of ten my clients who attempt this end up bloating the HTML code and in the end I have to fix "the changes" they have made. This always causes a lot of pain and anguish on both sides of the table. My clients don't like paying to fix their mistakes, and I don't like wasting my time with 15 minutes updates to sites when I could be hunting for bigger projects. The solution to this problem it to avoid this situation at all costs. A good way to avoid this situation is to ask a lot of questions up front before you begin a project. I have a formal document with a list of project questions I ask before I begin work. One of the questions I ask in this "Project Exploration Document" is about how the website will be updated. This enables me to discover if the site will need a content management system, or if it will be a static site that doesn't change often.

Here are the questions I ask my client before I begin a project:

Goals and Requirements:

List sites that represent the strongest competition in your field?

List some web sites that you like?

- ⌚ What do you like:
- ⌚ The navigation?
- ⌚ The Color?
- ⌚ Animation?
- ⌚ Style?
- ⌚ Design?

List some sites you hate, and why?

Current Site

- ⌚ Do you feel your current site promotes a favorable user experience?
- ⌚ What specific areas of your current site do you feel are successful? Why are they successful?
- ⌚ What shortcomings exist with the current site and what three things would you change on the site today, if you could?
- ⌚ How important is your current branding to the user experience on your current site?
- ⌚ Is it a complete overhaul of the existing site, or an expansion?
- ⌚ Do you have an existing sitemap for the new structure?
- ⌚ How will the content of this site, along with functionality and navigation, expand or differ from your current site?
- ⌚ Do you already have a database in place? Please describe in detail, including specific information about programs and software you are using

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What are the primary goals of the site?

- ⌚ To sell?
- ⌚ Inform?
- ⌚ Engage?
- ⌚ Inquire?

Who are the primary and secondary audiences?

- ⌚ What are the interests of the target audience?
- ⌚ What would be new to the target audience in regards to your content?
- ⌚ What do they find appealing?
- ⌚ How long have they been on the net?
- ⌚ How often do they use a computer each day?
- ⌚ What is their average age?
- ⌚ What is their average income level?
- ⌚ What topic on your site do you expect to be the most popular with your target audience?

Web Site Purpose:

- ⌚ What objectives do you have for the site?
- ⌚ What is the life span of your site?
- ⌚ What existing strategy (both online and offline) is in place in order to meet the new business objectives?
- ⌚ What are your primary online business objectives? What are your secondary objectives? (Increased sales, marketing/branding awareness, launching a company, etc.)

Marketing/Updating

- ⌚ How will you drive traffic to the site?
- ⌚ How do most people find out about your current web site? What methods of distributing the URL already exist within your company?
- ⌚ Do you have an existing or planned marketing strategy in mind to promote this site re-launch or launch? If so, please describe.
- ⌚ How do you intend to handle continuing maintenance and updates to the site? Do you have a human resource to put towards the maintenance or would you prefer that we recommend maintenance solutions and pricing to you? Do you require a set of web-based tools in order to update/maintain content on your site?
- ⌚ Will you need specialized Web Marketing services? (Search engine placement, meta tag creation, keyword development, etc.)
- ⌚ How often and how extensively will this information change?
- ⌚ Will graphics change or just text? Or both?

Audience capabilities

- ⌚ Browser type (4.0, 5.0)
- ⌚ Connection speed (DSL, 56k?)
- ⌚ Speed of computer; I.E. Pentium II, 256 Ram etc.
- ⌚ Multimedia Plug-ins? (Flash Version, QuickTime?)

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Describe your company's brand?

- ☞ Does your company have logo laws?
- ☞ What is the official color scheme for your company?
- ☞ What colors would you like to see used on the site?
- ☞ Please provide us with past marketing material to help us understand your brand?
- ☞ What logo needs to be used on the site?

Updating is evil

I typically don't get involved in content updates to web sites because the long term profit is very small, and I find clients quickly get annoyed when you charge them an hour rate for 15 minute changes. (I charge a flat fee of my hour rate regardless if it took my 15 minutes or 44 minutes, this way clients don't call and ask for 5 minute changes every other day. This also encourages clients to compile all of their changes in one email, and thus I do all the changes at one time.)

I don't however get into this situation because I always empower my clients to update the sites them selves. Some of my clients require large database driven sites with power content management system on the back end. For these clients I will always hire external contractors to do the backend development. For most of my clients (the medium to small clients) I do a lot of work with Macromedia Contribute and Dreamweaver. Think of Contribute as Dreamweaver for you Aunt Betty. Macromedia Contribute at first glance looks a lot like a web browser to the average user. It has back and forward buttons, and behaves a lot like Internet Explorer but with one big difference: The lovely "Edit" button in the top left hand corner. Users simply navigate to the page they want to edit, edit the page then hit "publish" and the page goes live. The FTP of files, login, file management is all masked to the end user. I have clients ranging from plumbers, nuns, and corporate marketing managers using Macromedia Contribute with a great deal of success.

Macromedia Contribute: CMS cheap and easy!

I use Macromedia Contribute with many of my clients both big and small for the following reasons:

- ☞ It costs under \$200 dollars so even my small clients can afford it.
- ☞ It requires no server side install, so my clients that have bureaucratic IT departments can skip the corporate night-mare of getting something installed on a server

Build your Dreamweaver/Contribute CMS Solution Tutorial

In this tutorial I will demonstrate tricks and tips I have discovered using Dreamweaver and Contribute working with my various clients. Before you begin developing sites using Dreamweaver and Contribute there are a few things you should consider before deploy a CMS using Contribute.

When NOT to use Contribute

- ☞ Contribute is an excellent tool, but your clients with older computers without a lot of RAM may consider and upgrade before they attempt to use it.
- ☞ If the CMS system you are building requires RSS feeds, search functionality and other goodies don't look to Contribute. Contribute at its heart is just a supped up WYSIWYG HTML editor.
- ☞ You need to discuss with your client their plans for the future. If they start talking about thousands of pages, you will want to look elsewhere for a CMS system. There would be nothing worse than having a client produce a 1000+ static pages of content and outgrowing a CMS that has its content trapped in flat HTML. (this would mean manual entry of all content into the new database, somewhere no one wants to go)
- ☞ Contribute is great for smaller sites, but when a site starts to become complex both in terms of its content size and navigation Contribute isn't the best idea. For large sites with a lot of content its best to keep content and design separate using a database.
- ☞ If your client plans to add sections, and subsections to the site regularly using Contribute can become very tedious. Using a server side CMS system that dynamically builds menu systems based on content would be a better solution. A low cost example of such a tool would be Interactive Tools (<http://www.interactivetools.com>) "Article Manager"
- ☞ Finally, if you plan to produce a CSS, XHTML standards compliant site in Dreamweaver you will find the pages do not render properly in Contribute which causes a lot of problems for some clients.

I know that sounds like a long list of reason why you shouldn't use Contribute, but there are far more reasons why you should with the right projects. And below is my list of reasons when to use Contribute:

Why use Contribute

- ☞ The client can't afford a backend CMS.
- ☞ Due to corporate red tape you can't install a CMS system.
- ☞ Your client has a team of individuals who need to edit the site at the same time and they need a way to ensure they don't over-write each other's changes. (Contribute can check files and in and out of a server to avoid this problem)
- ☞ Your client needs to update graphics on the site on a regular basis and they do not have any type of experience preparing graphics for the web. (Contribute can do client side image processing to ensure 300 DPI, 4 meg graphics don't end up on the website)
- ☞ Non-technical clients can use a software environment that works a lot like Microsoft Word
- ☞ You can control what parts of a site a client can or can not edit
- ☞ Clients who do not have Adobe Acrobat can produce PDF documents for their website using FlashPaper (which is included with Contribute)
- ☞ You can email website "keys" to clients and enable them to edit a site without configuring the software onsite. I use this with many of my clients who I never physically meet with.
- ☞ Contribute and Dreamweaver work extremely well together. If you are a long time Dreamweaver user Contribute will be easy as pie for you.
- ☞ Contribute does not require you to hire an expensive programmer to install or write a com-

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plex CMS system. Contribute is a robust CMS system for the rest of us!.

Step 1: Build your site using Macromedia Dreamweaver

Build your site out using Dreamweaver. I recommend using Dreamweaver templates to build your site. This way you can lock out Contribute users from editing the navigation and main structure of the site. (It is beyond the scope of this book to give a tutorial on building a site in Dreamweaver, there are many good books available on this topic). Note you can download a 30 day free trial of Macromedia Contribute from Macromedia.com. I recommend you try the software out before you start using it with clients.

Step 2: Upload your site to your FTP server

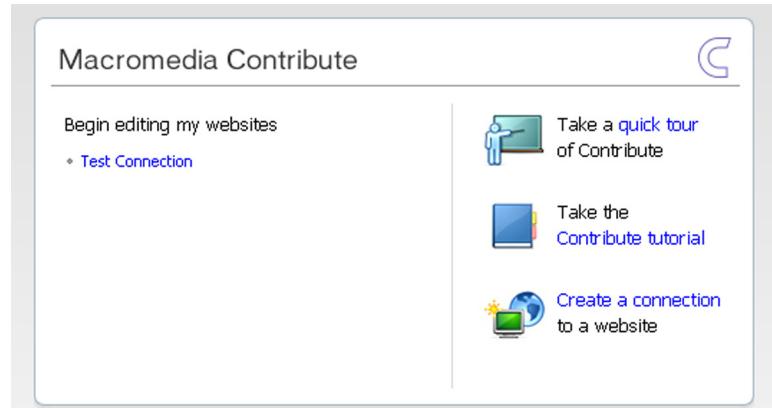


Figure 7.1

Step 3: Launch Contribute and setup site

You could use the "Administer site in Contribute" function from within Dreamweaver MX 2004 but I advise against this as it is very buggy. Instead launch Contribute and from the splash start screen select "Create a connection" (Fig. 7.1)

Step 4: Follow the "Connection Wizard"

Skip this screen, you do not have a key yet. (Fig. 7.2)

Step 5: Enter the URL.

Enter the full url to your web site. (Fig. 7.3)

Step 6: Enter your FTP Information

Enter all your FTP information for the server. You should have to worry about the "advanced settings" but if you have trouble connecting to the server contact your host toe see if you need to use secure FTP or passive FTP. (Fig 7.4)

Step 7: Searching....

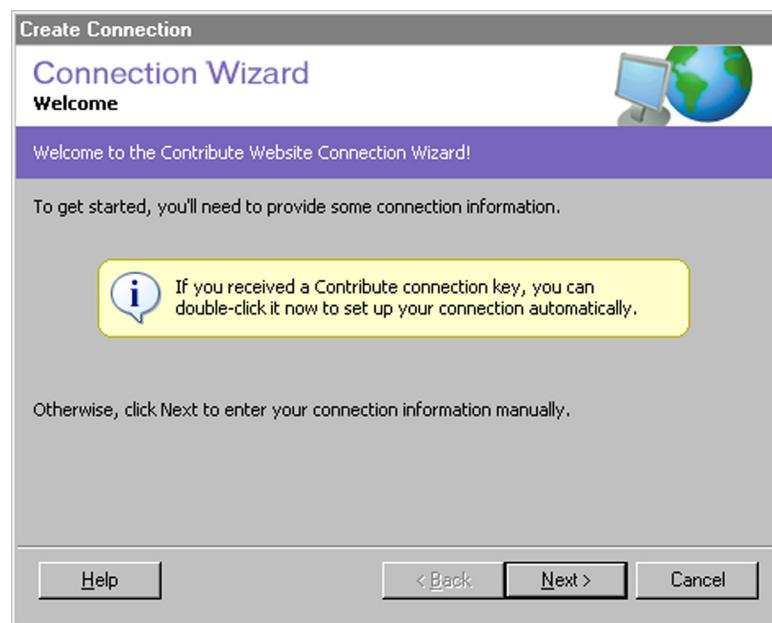


Figure 7.2



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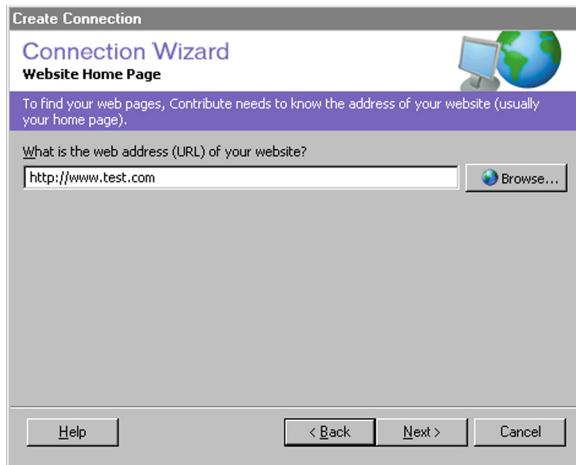


Figure 7.3



Figure 7.4

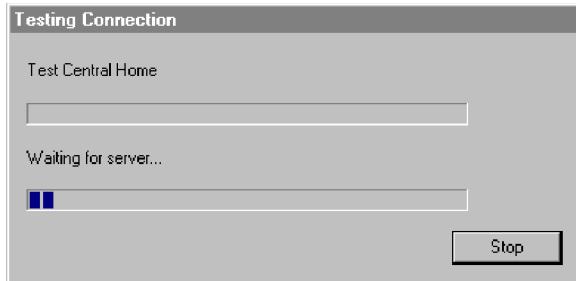


Figure 7.5



Figure 7.6

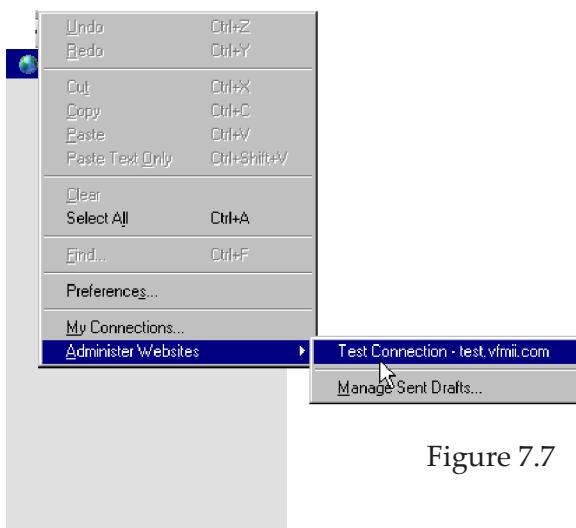


Figure 7.7

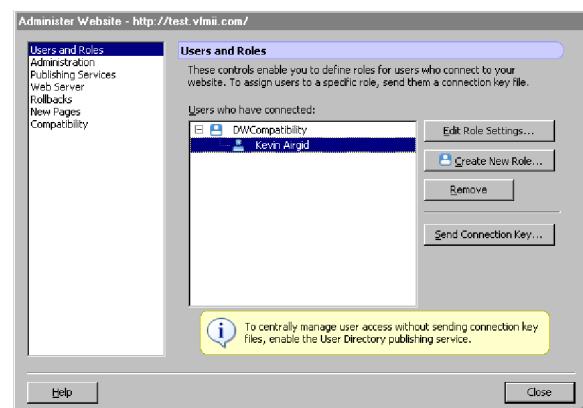


Figure 7.8

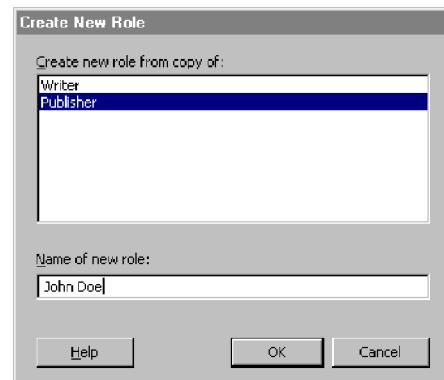


Figure 7.9

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Now Contribute will try to connect to your server using the settings you gave it. If all goes well you should see your home page appear in the main Contribute window after this screen disappears. (Fig. 7.5)

Step 8: Your home page will appear with this message at the top

Now your home page will appear with this message layered over your web site. (Fig. 7.6)

Step 9: Creating the Key for your Client.

Now you will want to create a connection key for your client. This connection key will shield your client from all of the FTP mombo-jombo that confuses them. Simply create a connection key and email it to them. They double click on the key and enter a password and voila! They are editing the site. Here is how to create the connection key: (Fig 7.7)

From the “Edit” menu select “Administer Websites” and select your site.

Step 9: Configure your settings

Now select “Create New Role” and select “Publisher”. (Fig 7.8) I typically give my clients “publisher” access because if you give them “writer” access they will need to have a publisher approve all articles before they go live. This system works well if you have an IT manager that needs to approve all web content before it goes live. But in most cases giving the client direct access to publish content with no middle man is the best way to go.

Name the “new role” the clients name (Fig. 7.9). For instance mine is named “John Doe”

Step 10: Controlling what your client edits.

Now that you have created this new role. Click “Edit Role” (Fig 7.10) and adjust the things you client can do with the site. I won’t go into every setting for this dialog box, everything is straight forward here. A tip I always use for this area is better safe than sorry. I lock it all down so the client can’t edit much.

I always setup the “New Images” (Fig. 7.11) screen so users can’t upload 300 dpi CMYK pictures to the site. This is a handy feature in Contribute 3.0

Step 11: Send the Connection Key

Now that you have the roles defined you can send a connection key to your client. Select “Send Connection Key” and select “Include my FTP username and password” (Fig. 7.12)

Step 12: Select the Role

Select the role you want your customer to have. (Fig. 7.13)

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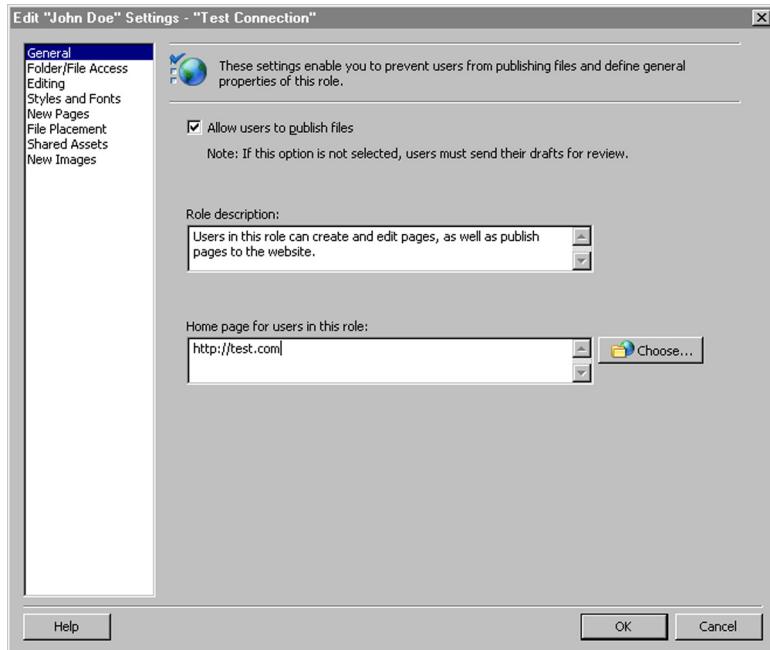


Figure 7.10

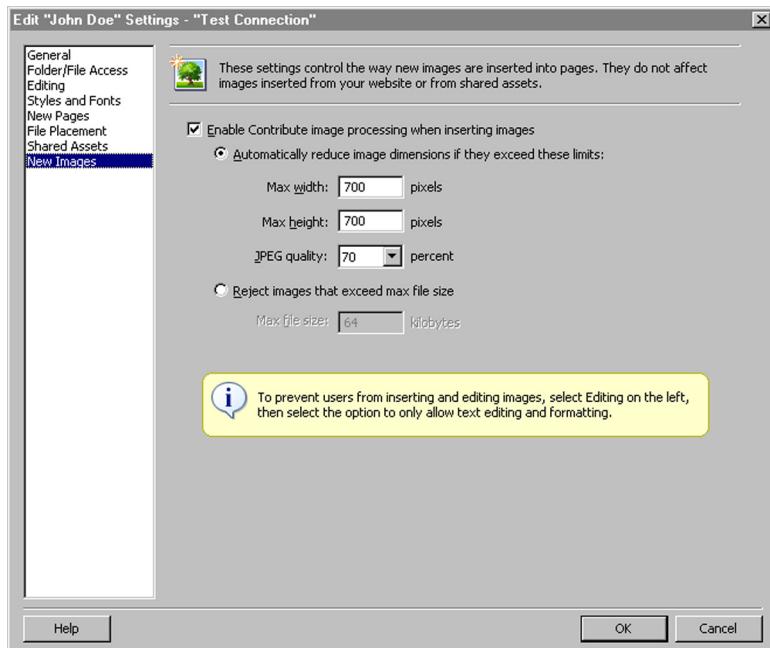


Figure 7.11

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Figure 7.12

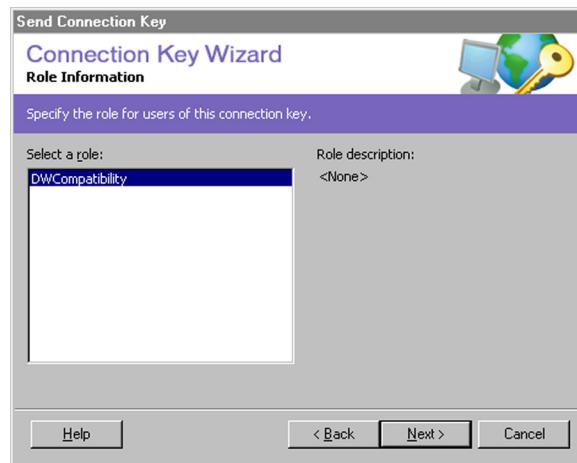


Figure 7.13



Figure 7.14

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Step 13: Save the key to your local machine

Select save the key to your local machine and choose a password for the key. Now click “next” And Contribute will give you a confirmation screen. Click “done” and “Save” the connection key to your desktop. (Fig. 7.14)

Step 14: Email the connection key to your client.

Now attach the connection key to an email and send it to your client. Call your client and provide the connection key over the phone for added security. (it is always unwise to email FTP connection keys with passwords that are not encrypted, after all email is not a very secure form of communication)

Now once your client receives the connection key tell them to detach it from their email and save it to their desktop. Now have them double click the key and Macromedia Contribute should launch and ask them for the access password. Once they enter the password all the correct FTP information will be installed in their computer. They simply navigate to the page on the site they want to edit and away they go. Macromedia Contribute has an excellent built in help system that appears in a floating tab to the left of the window. If you clients have any questions just direct them to the help. I often include 2 hours of training in my fixed web site project price. This makes for a great way to gain more trust from you client, and ensures less frustration on their end as they edit web pages for the first time.

How I saved clients money:

The reason that clients come to you for work is because they can't do a project them selves (lack of resources), or they don't know how to do it. Clients respect freelancers who offer alternative paths to success. Clients can request some pretty crazy things, if you want to keep your client its better to say “No” now than pay for it later. Your client will respect you more for offering alternative strategies. Below are three short case studies of large clients where I saved them countless hours and thousands of dollars by offering alternative solutions.

Case Study 01: Buick National Dealer Site

I was engaged by agency of record for Buick to help them create a non-public extranet site for Buick dealers across America. The site had a tight deadline, and the interactive company initially engaged me to create just the design for the site. I had several meetings with the client and soon discovered that they need to launch a functional “flat” site before the launch of the database driven site. I offered to help them implement a temporary solution that would help the company get the site up but still enable content management. Using Macromedia Dreamweaver and Contribute I helped the company launch the site in under 2 weeks. Using a \$150 dollar program I saved the company thousands of dollars and time. The client's internal team of writers was able to post content without the complex database system that would be build in phase two of the project. So the writers could concentrate on posting content and programmers and web designers where free to work on the more important and long term phase two site. The client

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was thrilled with the professional short-term solution, and my “design project” turned into the build out of a large national level site that solved a lot of problems for the client.

Case Study 02: Hotel Industry Client

A client who builds interactive media for the hotel industry engaged me to spend a day training employees on how to use PhotoShop and Flash together. During training I learned that one of the process's they used to build the interactive media could be completed using Photoshop droplets. Using a droplet I helped the client reduced work by 70% and decrease the file size of the production file by 600%. Needless to say the client was thrilled to have me onsite and helping train their employee's. Not only did the employee's learn new techniques but I helped build a process for the company that streamlined its work flow for projects. This company has been one of my best clients, they reward my alternative strategies to save them money with more and more projects.

Case Study 03: CBC News

After the devastating Tsunami hit parts of India and Thailand, CBC News engaged me to build an interactive map of the region. The map featured Flash video and interactive slide shows feature images and sounds from the region. The interactive map was such a success that CBC News engaged me to build a template system they could use over and over without the need to do much editing in Flash. Using XML and Macromedia Flash I produced a Flash template system that required little editing in Flash to produce new interactive maps. The client just changes the map JPEG in the Flash movie, and edits external XML files in text editor and they can create new maps in a matter of minutes. These template systems have saved CBC News thousands of dollars because they do not need to engage a Flash programmer each time they want to deploy a new map. The template system also saves them precious production time, which is very valuable in the world of time sensitive news coverage. The client rewards me for this by continually bringing me new projects.

By saving my clients money they respect my opinion and come to rely on my advice for future projects. This results in securing my future for more projects.

Parting Advice

I hope you enjoyed this book and found a lot of it useful. In writing this book I have come to realize how much I have learned size I set out to do my freelance thing many moons ago. And I wish I had this book when I started out, I would have saved my self a lot of pain and suffering! I wish you the best of luck in your freelance work. And the only advice I can give you is to be patient with your self, after all Rome was not built in a day.

Kevin Airgid
www.airgid.com

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RESOURCES

Things you can use



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Recommend Books & Things...

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Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach To The Web

<http://www.sensible.com/buythebook.html>

by Steven Krug

The Cluetrain Manifesto

An older book, but an excellent read about marketing. You can now read the whole book online for free here: <http://www.cluetrain.com/book/index.html>

by Levine, Locke, Searls & Weinberger.

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Flash 99% Good

A Flash usability portal I run. I try to update it regularly with loads of links and articles on how to make Flash more usable.

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Ever need a utility to rename one thousand files, but don't want to pay? Nonags is the place to look for freeware first!

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