



# THE DESIGNER'S GUIDE TO MARKETING AND PRICING

how to win clients and what to charge them

**Ilise Benun and Peleg Top**  
founders of [Marketing-Mentor.com](http://Marketing-Mentor.com)

**HOW  
BOOKS**  
Cincinnati, Ohio  
[www.howdesign.com](http://www.howdesign.com)

PART ONE

---

# MARKETING



## CHAPTER 1

# WHO IS MY MARKET?

The beauty of being a designer is that almost every company, organization—even every person—could potentially use your services, because they all need to market themselves one way or another. Sometimes, all you have to do is tell people what you do and they say, “I know someone who needs a brochure or a web site or (fill in the blank).” In fact, once you open your eyes to all the sources of work, your biggest challenge will be deciding where to focus. But decide you must, because if you don’t, you’ll be all over the place in terms of your own marketing efforts and the client’s perception of you will be muddy instead of clear.

That’s why “everything must flow from the market.” In other words, when you think about your business, don’t start with “Who do I want to work with?” Instead, the question should be, “What does the market need and how can I satisfy that need while doing something I love?”

The specialty or niche you choose should be located at the intersection of two things: the needs of the marketplace and your services, skills and talents—in that order. You must align your

specialty in response to the needs you perceive in the marketplace. And don’t specialize in something for which the need is on the wane. For example, it doesn’t matter how much you know about widgets because their popularity is sinking fast, so you won’t get any work. However, doohickeys are on the rise and might be worth promoting as one of your specialties.

The point is that a successful business is centered around a market and that market’s needs. It’s not centered around your wishes and desires. Ideally, what you want will overlap with what they need, but what you want should not be the source.

Likewise, don’t rack your brain trying to come up with a company name or tagline. Instead, let that come from the market, too. Listen in such a way that you hear people’s needs in everything they say. Then take the words they use to describe their problems or challenges and use the same words to describe how your services solve those problems. It’s the difference between saying “I’m a web designer” and “I design clean and simple web sites for companies who want their visitors to stay on their site.”

So how do you choose a market?

### **BUILD ON THE FOUNDATION OF YOUR EXPERTISE**

The foundation of your business should be rooted strongly in something you know well and in which you already have some expertise. Whenever possible, don’t start from scratch. Even if you’re just starting out, it helps to build your business on something that already exists, such as past employment experience, a recent pro bono or side project, even a hobby. All of these can be used as springboards.

---

If you're making the transition from corporate work, even if you're sick of the field you are coming from, it's important to build on that investment, not just throw it away because of how you feel about it right now. You'll have a much easier time leveraging the relationships that you have already established and using the knowledge that you've acquired. Once you have a business under way, you can move toward new markets. But starting a business and approaching a new market simultaneously is double the work.

If you're leaving an industry precisely because there's absolutely no work there, then look for something peripherally related, something that will allow you to say honestly, "I'm familiar with this market." For example, if you worked for American Express, your potential markets might include the travel industry or financial services.

You must choose a focus, whether it's a horizontal focus ("I can design web sites for any company across the board") or a vertical focus ("I can design everything a real estate developer needs").

Sometimes this happens organically. Someone asks for your help, you do the project, you enjoy it, you do a good job, the client is satisfied, and you start wondering how you can use that experience to generate more like it.

Other times, you will have no choice but to start from scratch. You might say to yourself, "I want to work in the entertainment industry. It looks like a lot of fun and I think I would enjoy it," even if you have no experience, no contacts, nothing to build on. It's not impossible to build a business this way, but it does take longer. That you should know.

---

## SPECIALIZING LETS YOU DOMINATE THE MARKET

Many designers believe that marketing the widest range of services to the largest possible group is the path to success. You'd rather be a generalist because you think you'll get more business. And on one level, it makes sense: The more opportunities you have to make a sale, the more sales you are likely to make. But in reality, it doesn't work that way. In fact, success comes to those who focus on the smallest number of activities most likely to yield the quickest and largest return.

It is tempting to position yourself broadly, thinking that a narrow focus will reduce the universe of available opportunities. But if you want to be credible, you must limit your offerings. Without some specialization, you would not be able to provide a coherent message to the marketplace, nor would you be able to qualify potential clients quickly, which leads to wasted time and effort.

We live in the era of the specialist. In fact, the larger your target market, the more you need to specialize. Being a generalist, trying to be all things to all people, doesn't sustain long-term business growth because you never create an identity and you never focus on a market that identifies you as their expert. Instead, you're a blur in the mind of your market.

Unlike a major design firm, you do not have limitless resources and a huge experience base in every facet of business. Specializing allows you to show the marketplace that you have a set of competencies that are focused enough to be done by a sole proprietor or small firm with a limited number of associates. Besides, your clients need to know that you not only understand the specific challenges that they face, but also that you have explicit experience that will help them. They don't want to be your guinea pigs.

---

In order to rise above the information overload that bombards your clients, you must distinguish yourself from all the other designers clamoring at your clients' doors. The only way to make a strong enough impact in the minds of your prospects so they choose you is to be clear about what you stand for: your focus or area of expertise.

And although corporations everywhere attempt to grow by expanding their offerings with spin-offs and line extensions, the majority of successful businesses—large corporations as well as small ones—succeed by sticking with a very narrow focus: on a market, on a product or service, on a benefit to the customer, on a single need of the customer, on a geographical location, on a category within a category, as well as on the marketing tools used to reach those customers.

If you still resist specializing, what you fail to understand is that your clients need you to specialize in exactly the service they need. They need to know they are dealing with an expert who serves their particular needs. That's what will make them feel more comfortable choosing you. That's what will help them sell you to their managers. So in reality, and in the long run, specializing gets you more business.

But focus doesn't come naturally. In fact, lack of focus does. Focus requires ongoing attention and discipline, which is why many people don't do it. It's not something you do once and then it's done. Focusing means committing, and then recommitting, to your plan every day, refocusing your attention and reevaluating your choices on a regular basis. That's the way to dominate the marketplace.

Here's what else you get when you specialize:

- **Fame:** You'll become known as an expert in your area of focus.

- 
- **Fortune:** You'll command higher fees for your expertise.
  - **Choice:** You'll get the work you want instead of taking whatever comes along.
  - **Success:** You'll achieve your personal and business goals.

## FOUR STRATEGIES FOR SPECIALIZING

### 1. Start out broad and evolve your specialty.

If you are a new designer, you may be a generalist simply because you don't yet know what to specialize in. That's fine, but as you begin to work with your clients, be attentive to what they are asking for and what they seem to need without knowing it. Then start giving it to them. Ask yourself questions like: "Of all the services I offer, which one is being requested most often? What do people seem to be the most perplexed about? What new technology do people need to understand?"

Anticipate the needs of your clients, and evolve your business to satisfy those needs. Start focusing your services and proclaiming your specialty as soon as you can. It will snowball. The more you talk about it, the better the response, which gives you more opportunities to learn more about and reinforce your specialty.

### 2. Focus on an industry and offer it multiple services.

Focusing on a vertical industry allows you to market yourself the most efficiently. You will get to know the industry and the people in the industry, who will talk to each other and spread the word about you. You can join the main trade organizations and use the member directories, which means that your list of prospects can be found all in one place. You can speak at conferences sponsored

---

by the industry to increase your visibility and credibility. You can get your articles printed in online and offline trade publications for maximum exposure.

In addition, you'll be able to make the most powerful statement to your clients: "I really know your business." Nothing has a stronger impact. You will become an expert not only in your business, but also in their business, which becomes one of your most important benefits to your clients. As you get to know them, as you watch their industry grow and change, you also evolve your services to change with the industry, adding and subtracting services as needed. By letting the growth flow from the needs of your clients, you grow your business organically, which makes less work for you.

### **3. Focus on a special skill or talent you have that fits a very specific need.**

You also can approach your specialty from the opposite perspective: identify your skills and talents, and then approach the prospects who may need them. This is much less efficient because it means you have to repeat the same message, or a slightly revised version of the same message, to different industries over and over again. It's hard to build momentum when you're spinning many different plates, so this is not the ideal strategy. But if you are expert in your particular skill—for example, web design or annual report design—and you are willing to do extra marketing of your own services, then take that as your specialty.

### **4. Focus on companies of a certain size.**

A company's challenges often are a function of its size. Small-business owners face different challenges than Fortune 500 com-

---

panies. They have different budgets, different processes and more (or fewer) layers of bureaucracy. You can market to a variety of industries if you specialize in the challenges faced by companies of a particular size.

### **IT HELPS TO HAVE MORE THAN ONE AREA OF EXPERTISE**

Specializing doesn't have to limit you to that one area. In fact, the ideal situation is to have two areas of specialty. Then, if your particular niche becomes the epicenter of an economic downturn, you have the flexibility and the agility to shift gears and pursue another avenue.

You also will probably be called upon by prospects to provide services that fall outside your skill set or your industry expertise. Then it's your choice, on a case-by-case basis, whether to take the work. This decision often will depend on how hungry you are, what's currently on your plate, what projects are pending and which prospects you are pursuing. The important thing is to be honest with your prospects about your skills in terms of their needs. They may have heard such good things about you that they want you anyway. Or maybe they are in a time crunch and are willing to take the chance. But put the ball in their court and let them decide whether to hire you.

Working outside your area of expertise, however, will take more time and effort on your part. You may not have the time or the desire to educate clients so their expectations are in order, or to learn enough about their industry to speak knowledgeably.

So now that you know why it's so important to choose a market, it's time to do so.

## DEFINE YOUR MARKET

The goal of this exercise is to end up with three niche markets to explore. From there, you will whittle them down to one or two, based on the results of your initial marketing efforts. But you have to start with at least ten market ideas to get down to the final one or two.

With all of that in mind, list (in the table below) up to ten markets or groups of people who could use your services. Start with markets you know best, and then move on to markets you've dreamed about. Be as specific as possible, focusing on groups and subgroups of prospects.

For each market, indicate (in just a few words) why you think it's a good market for you. Then mark if you have, or could easily create, samples or something to present to this market to demonstrate that you know what they need.

MARKET	WHY	SAMPLES?
<b>EXAMPLES</b>		
Small service businesses	They need promo materials	<b>X</b>
Hairdressers	My cousin was one	
Software developers	I'm married to one	<b>X</b>
1.		
2.		

MARKET	WHY	SAMPLES?
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

Now, whittle the list of ten down to three of the best, most feasible markets for you.

1.
2.
3.

For each of these three, do some research (on the Internet, asking people you know, etc.) to find out all you can about how viable it is as a market for you.

**TARGET MARKET #1:**

a. How many prospects are there (locally, nationally, globally)?

b. What is the average project or purchase size or value?

c. How often would they need your services per year?

**TARGET MARKET #2:**

a. How many prospects are there (locally, nationally, globally)?

b. What is the average project or purchase size or value?

c. How often would they need your services per year?

**TARGET MARKET #3:**

a. How many prospects are there (locally, nationally, globally)?

b. What is the average project or purchase size or value?

c. How often would they need your services per year?

**IS THIS MARKET READY FOR YOU?**

Now, of those three, choose one market to go after first. You may have trouble deciding on just one, but you must. You'll be happy you did, because you'll begin to see the results of your targeted efforts.

What is the market you've chosen?

Before you go looking for clients, get an overview of the state of this market. A little more research is in order:

- What is the current state of this market? Is it in a growth mode? If so, it may be a good time to enter. If not, you might be better off waiting and watching until things turn around.
- What size and what types of projects are available through this market? Are they the kind of projects that you enjoy and

---

are capable of doing? Or do the projects conflict with the kind of work you normally do?

- Do the people in this market know they need your services? You may perceive a need or see a group as a perfect market for your services, but if the market itself doesn't perceive that need, it isn't worth your time trying to convince them.
- Are there other service providers like you already serving this market? If not, there may be a good reason. Maybe there's no need. Or maybe this market doesn't want to pay for services like yours. This is a very important piece of information that can save you a lot of time, so find out as much as you can. It may require attending an event or two and asking questions, or calling a couple people you find online.
- Do you like the people? Underneath it all, business is about people. If you don't get along with the people that make up the industry you've decided to target, you won't have it easy. For example, if you are a people person and you want to approach the software industry, which (we could generalize) is populated by computer programmers, many of whom are uncomfortable around people, then this might not be the market for you. But that is something you should decide once you've met a few of them first.

The point is that you are in the driver's seat here. It's your business, so why not choose a market that you want to work with and people you get along with?

---

## GETTING WORK FROM YOUR FORMER EMPLOYER

If you've gone out on your own because you've been laid off or left your job for some other reason, it's likely that the company you worked for needs your services. Your inside intelligence, coupled with your existing network of contacts at the company, will help you land those first contracts that are so important to your early success. Here are some dos and don'ts on how to get work from your former employer:

- Do capitalize on your network. Maintain contacts in various departments and organizations. Don't let those relationships falter just because you're not on-site with them anymore. Call and e-mail regularly to let them know what you're doing and to find out how they're doing. Probe, in particular, for needs that you can help satisfy. Also, follow your contacts wherever they go. They may move on to other employers, so keeping in touch gives you a foot in the door with a brand new prospect.
- Do maximize your knowledge of the company's needs. Don't forget that you have a leg up because you know this company—its strengths and weaknesses, its motivations, its needs and its goals. Most important, you know how best to fulfill these needs.
- Don't wait for your former employer to come up with projects for you. Take a proactive approach by pitching ideas based on what you know and what you learn as you keep in touch.
- Don't sell yourself short. Former employers may expect your hourly rate simply to be your former hourly rate. They may not realize that you are now paying your own benefits, taxes and overhead.

---

## INTRODUCING YOURSELF TO A BRAND NEW MARKET

Growing your design business is a lot like spinning plates. You should have one or two smoothly spinning in the air before turning your attention to a new one. You can't forget any of them, or they'll come crashing down when you're not paying attention. And it may take some time to get a new one spinning as smoothly as the first couple, so you have to give it a little spin on a regular basis.

Once you've got things under way in a sector you are familiar with and are on your way to establishing a solid reputation, you will want to expand into other markets in order to grow your business and provide new challenges for yourself. Or maybe you feel stuck in a rut in a specific industry, or that you've exhausted your options within a particular market, so it's time to introduce yourself to a new one.

Either way, know in advance that introducing yourself to a brand new market takes time and effort. Although it is something you may be forced to do because you're just starting out, it is best done parallel to marketing efforts already in progress in the market (or markets) where you have a foothold.

So where do you start?

### Step 1: Do your research.

Find the major players in your industry of choice. Read industry publications. Make phone calls. Attend industry events to see if what you believe about that industry is, in fact, true. (Often, it isn't.) Search out other designers who are already working in the industry and find out what the environment is like for them. Don't approach them from a competitive point of view. Instead, approach with questions, from a research point of view as if (and this may be

true) you are considering entering the market but are not sure yet whether you should. Approach them for help and ask what their business is like. Is there room for more? Is the industry expanding or diminishing? Is this a good time to enter that particular industry? Some may not be willing to share information with you, but you will certainly find someone who is, so keep looking.

### Step 2: Attend a few events.

Continue doing your research and interviewing people you meet to find out what the industry is like, whether this industry works with outside designers, whether it's a close-knit industry and therefore difficult to break into or whether they are open to new resources. These are questions you can't answer by surfing a web site or reading a newsletter. That's why making contact with actual members of the market is essential. It will provide you with information and valuable insights you wouldn't even know to look for otherwise.

### Step 3: Join the trade group.

Once you have done your research and decided this is the industry for you, find the market's trade organization and join it. If there are several groups to choose from, find out which is most active, has the best reputation and draws the specific people you need to meet. For example, in the cable industry, there are several groups (such as Women in Cable & Telecommunications, National Association of Broadcasters and National Association of Minorities in Communications), but only one that brings together marketing people in the cable industry—Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing. That's obviously the one to join if you are looking for the marketing people.

---

Likewise, the software industry boasts many different trade groups catering to the industry, but a designer would be best served by joining the one that addresses software marketing issues rather than a general software group. Or look for the special interest group (SIG) within an organization that focuses on your interest.

If you can't find a trade group for the market you've chosen, you should seriously consider choosing another market. If there is no trade association dedicated to it, it may not be a serious market, and therefore not worth your time. If there's no group that has a line of communication to your prospects—i.e., the people who buy your services—or that organizes events for your prospects through which you can meet them in person, your marketing workload will multiply tremendously.

#### **Step 4: Introduce yourself to the leaders of the group.**

Let them know who you are, what you do and that you want to be involved. Ask what opportunities are available for you to interact with your prospects. Find out whether you can teach a workshop, conduct a teleseminar, submit an article for their online and offline publications or sponsor an event. Don't be shy and secretive about why you are joining the group. There is nothing shameful about wanting to promote your services to them. After all, they just may have a need for them.

#### **Step 5: Get the member directory and use it to make cold calls.**

Many trade groups are turning their offline directories into online-only directories, but no matter the format, be sure to use this list of qualified prospects to make your cold calls. Warm up

---

the call a bit by introducing yourself as a fellow member of the organization; let your prospects know where you got their names, and then tell them why you're calling. People are more responsive when there is a connection between the two of you, and this is your connection.

#### **Step 6: Get involved in the life of the group.**

Don't think that the new clients will pour in simply because you send in your dues and read the monthly e-mail newsletter.

Once you've determined that this is the market for you, you must get involved in the life of that market. Here are some suggestions for how to do so:

- Attend a board meeting to find out what the group is doing.
- Attend an educational event to find out what kinds of people attend the events—even if the meeting topic isn't of particular interest to you. For example, you may join the American Marketing Association (AMA) with the assumption that you'll easily find marketing directors of corporations at their meetings. However, many of the AMA chapter events are attended by consultants and owners of market research firms, most of whom are also looking for prospects. This means you'll have to do a little more digging to find out where and how to meet your actual prospects. Maybe they attend the annual conferences or participate on the listserv operated by the trade group. Or maybe they're listed in the group's directory. This information is not readily available, and you may need to develop a relationship with someone at the organization in order to find it out.

- Volunteer to be on a committee. People get to know each other by working together on projects, which is why trade associations are the perfect vehicle for getting to know new prospects. The structure is already in place for you; all you have to do is make the effort to work within it. It's crucial that your prospects see you work. So find out what needs to be done, especially as it relates to your expertise, and then volunteer to do it. For example, if the group needs someone to design a web site or an invitation for a conference, raise your hand. Choose tasks that will bring you into contact—ideally in person—with other members, members of the press or big-wigs in the industry. This can be an excellent door opener and can put you in the vicinity of people who wouldn't otherwise take your call.

### CREATING SAMPLES FOR A NEW MARKET

If you're just starting out, or if you want to introduce your services to a new market, you need samples to show these new prospects—but you need to have clients in order to create the samples, right?

Well, there are three techniques you can use to get around this catch-22:

- Offer to do work at a reduced rate for friends or networking buddies so that you can build your portfolio.
- Whenever you see design that you think you could do better, simply create that better example on your own dime. Then reach out to the company, tell them what you've done and offer to show it to them. That's something they will probably want to see. They become an automatic prospect for whom

you have customized your portfolio. (By the way, don't confuse this marketing technique with "spec" work, where the client asks you to work for free to test you out.)

- Offer to do a free critique of a prospect's existing materials. That way, you can show what you know in a way that's directly related to your prospect, rather than show what you've done for others.

### FINDING THE IDEAL CLIENT

If you find yourself complaining about your clients because they don't treat you right or don't pay your bills on time, you may need to get some new ones. No problem; if you're marketing yourself regularly, clients are a dime a dozen.

The trick to finding good ones is knowing what you want. So take a moment now to daydream a bit and determine who your ideal client is.

List three types of people or companies that you most effectively help.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List the kinds of problems you help these people solve.

---

Describe your ideal client—in particular, the person’s personality traits that you like. Include how the client treats you.

What is the best thing about your ideal client?

What is the ideal project that your ideal client would bring you?

What does your ideal client understand about the way you work?

What would your ideal client never do?

Now, with this profile in mind, go out looking for your ideal client. You’ll be surprised how many you’ll find.