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JENNIFER NEAL

FREELANCE

WORKING COLLABORATIVELY

If you freelance, you may be well-suited to working on your own. But there are some good reasons—and smart ways—to collaborate with other creative professionals.

As the economy has shifted, one segment of the market has grown enormously: According to Freelancers Union (www.freelancersunion.org), “a third of the U.S. workforce does some form of freelancing work.” And it’s likely this freelance workstyle is here to stay.

You probably already know this if you’re one of these freelancers, whether you’re moonlighting or working full-time. And you’ve probably discovered how much work it takes to wear all the proverbial hats. You’re responsible for everything: getting the work, doing the work and handling the pesky administrative tasks that go along with both.

But just because you work alone doesn’t mean you have to do everything. There’s a lot of help out there, and many ways to collaborate with and delegate to others. Lots of people attempt to get help, but which tactics really work? Here are a few of the most effective ways you can benefit from reaching out to others.

START OR JOIN A GROUP

There are groups of creatives popping up all over. Some are called “tribes” or “meet ups,” others simply “networking groups.” Some meet in person, some on the phone, some are strictly virtual. The groups usually kick off with a lot of enthusiasm, but many peter out quickly, either for lack of leadership or lack of structure—or just plain busy-ness.

So what does it take to make this kind of collaboration work long-term? “It’s hard to work in a basement with no windows. That’s what self-employment can be like,” says Jennifer Neal of K9 Design Co. in Toronto.

“You don’t have a board of directors, weekly management meeting or any regular structure. I needed a place to bounce ideas off people, so I created an environment to do that.”

In the fall of 2008, Neal organized a group of like-minded women business owners, and they called themselves the Toronto Women’s Network. She invited 15 women to the first meeting, but the group quickly distilled down to six members who still attend regularly to talk about real issues they struggle with: client management, finances and work/life balance. “The group includes a retailer, a woman in real estate, a marketing communications specialist and me, the designer,” Neal says. “We call it The Vault, because there is true confidentiality. We can talk about anything, and we get input and insight that we can use to make important decisions.”

If you want to start your own group, Neal has these suggestions:

Stay away from clones of yourself. Vary the businesses and invite people you respect and admire, and who complement your strengths.

Look for people who are successful. It’s best to brainstorm with successful business owners who have something your business doesn’t.

Invite only responsible and committed people. “We started with 15, and it dwindled for good reasons,” Neal confides.

Appoint an organizer. This isn’t necessarily a “leader,” but rather someone to keep track of the schedule, send out e-mail reminders and keep everyone in the loop.

Be consistent yet flexible. Hold meetings regularly, such as every third Monday of each month, so everyone puts it in their schedule and reserves the time.

Beyond small groups, there are co-working spaces popping up for those who don't like laboring alone. An example is Converge, a 5,000-square-foot co-working space in Union, NJ. Steve Guberman and his solo design practice, Fifth Room Creative, led Converge's development. Looking for a space near you? Search "coworking" on Twitter or Google to find communal offices, whether they're design-specific or not.

LOOK FOR RESOURCES ONLINE AND OFF

What about finding help to get things done? It may often feel easier to do everything yourself than to figure out what kind of help you need and then find it. But if your intention is to grow, you'll need more hands to tackle your design work well before you're ready to hire an employee.

Technology has made it easier than ever to collaborate with other freelancers. And don't worry about competition. Even if other freelancers you know offer services similar to yours, you each have different strengths, focus on different target markets, even live in different parts of the country. How could you possibly be competing?

"Networking with other designers, whom you would think are your competition, is one of the smartest ways to grow your business," says Brad Weaver, who started as a freelancer in 2008 and in two years has grown his Atlanta-based Suckerpunch Studios to a staff of four. "I can trace \$16,000 of work in 2009 directly back to collaborations with freelancers I met at the first Creative Freelancer Conference." (See "Freelance Spotlight.")

Amy Weiher of San Jose, CA-based Weiher Creative had a similar experience. At CFC in 2009, she spoke on the Freelance Success Panel about being swamped but unable to find the right help. Luckily, Melissa Balkon, who specializes in off-loading work from other freelancers, was in the audience. She approached Weiher right away and offered her business card. The two have been working together to lighten Weiher's workload ever since.

When you're in your moment of need, social (i.e. online) networking is great for finding help. For example, LinkedIn facilitates that type of connecting through its "groups" function. Just make sure the groups you join have active members.

The most effective online groups also have an offline component where members can meet in person, put faces to names and solidify relationships. One of the longest-running is the Los Angeles-based Kernspiracy. Created for designers in 2005 by Spencer Cross, Kernspiracy.com offers social and educational events (offline) and discussion forums (online).

Biznik.com, another community of entrepreneurs and small businesses dedicated to helping each other succeed, also operates both online and face-to-face. As the website notes, "Social networks are great. But nothing beats the power of a face-to-face meeting to build real, lasting business relationships."

FREELANCE SPOTLIGHT

BRAD WEAVER, Suckerpunch Studios, Atlanta

I started my freelancing career just over three years ago, full-time for the past two years. From web to print to photography, I did it all on my own because of the need to keep costs down and a lack of trust for subcontractors I found online. Needless to say, the "do it all yourself" approach doesn't work for long. You soon fail if you don't reach out and find others to help you where you lack knowledge or time.

I was on the verge of being a statistic: a failed business within the first year. I decided to go to the first Creative Freelancer Conference in Chicago to either address my growth issues or make an informed decision to quit and go back to working in-house. I learned a tremendous amount about running the business that helped me survive and eventually thrive. But more importantly, I developed strong collaboration relationships. People I met worked with me directly or lead me to work with others who made my freelance business run like an agency. Within a matter of months we were teaming up to work with \$100M+ companies, and our designs were popping up in design galleries and competitions.

Two years later, my freelance business has become a full-fledged design agency with a staff of four. Instead of filling positions for every facet of the business, I only filled those posts that were critical to our core. I still work with freelancers throughout the country when demands arise. We save our clients thousands of dollars by keeping the "bloat" down while also working with the best designers and developers around. Also, my staff and I stay fresh in our approach because we're constantly being challenged by outside ideas. Creative collaboration is key to making a freelance business viable long-term, regardless of your goals. You can't do it on your own—and who would want to when there are so many great collaborative minds out there?

Whether your goal is to stay small and nimble or to grow into a full-fledged agency, it may be time to stop doing everything yourself. It's really just a shift in perspective, and it's much healthier for you and for your business. So next time you're waiting for your computer to reboot or your WiFi to kick in, take a few minutes to reflect on what kind of help you need, then look around to see how you can find it. **HOW**

Ilise Benun, founder of Marketing Mentor and co-producer of the Creative Freelancer Conference (June 5–6, Denver; www.creativefreelancerconference.com), is writing this new column for creative freelancers. Submit questions/topics you'd like to see covered to: ilise@marketing-mentor.com.

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