



ARE YOU EXCITED?

Freelancing means occasionally taking on work that isn't particularly exciting. Three freelance pros tell why you shouldn't turn down those boring projects.

One of the delicious freedoms of freelancing is being able to choose the clients you work with. And certainly you aspire to take on projects that are interesting or exciting to you personally, and with organizations or causes you care about. Perhaps that's exactly why you became a freelancer.

But that doesn't mean you should decline uninteresting work, or more important, fail to pursue (or even to follow up on) perfectly acceptable work because you don't feel passionate about it or because—heaven forbid—it's boring.

That freedom is reserved for those who have a steady flow of work coming in and a full pipeline to back it up, which takes a consistent marketing campaign focused on a clear target market. Without that, you probably can't yet afford to be too picky.

WHAT IS EXCITING?

It's not just the material you work on that may be exciting. In fact, the real freedom of freelancing is this: You are free to find excitement in any (and every) aspect of your work, from having complete creative control no matter what the subject matter, to the thrill of depositing the biggest check of your career.

An online discussion among members of the Creative Freelancer Conference LinkedIn group revealed varying definitions for what makes work exciting. "What's exciting may not be immediately obvious," writes Lynne Venart of Washington, DC-based The Art Monkey. "Maybe it's simply the availability of steady work, or the fact that the clients tend to be easy to work with or are hands-off. Or maybe the industry isn't typically exciting, like show business, but it's one you

can feel good about because it does important research or supports learning. I can usually find something about an industry that's appealing; I just have to look."

Gerry Suchy, of GMS Designs in Arlington, VA, agrees: "As a freelancer, it's tempting to delude yourself into thinking that you'll only do work that's exciting and interesting. I haven't found that to be true." Suchy says he believes creative professionals can learn to compartmentalize their personal feelings and focus on the technical aspects of the work, which in itself can be rewarding. "Plus, working for not-so-exciting clients is an exercise in self-discipline. Life before freelancing required it, or you would have been out of a job."

VIABILITY IS EXCITING

Frankly, viability is more important than excitement. In fact, a viable market can be very exciting, no matter the topic. Is the market growing? Do they need you and your services—and do they know it? Do they have the money to pay you, and pay you well? There are plenty of so-called boring markets that fit that description and many creative professionals doing very well serving them.

Kathryn Grill Hoepfel, owner of Silver Spring, MD-based Kathryn Grill Graphic Design, is one of them. She chose the federal government as her target market because it's huge, it has lots of needs, and it's right in her backyard. "Because the government is such a major player in my local area, I'd be remiss as a growing business not to look at it," she says.

Hoepfel acknowledges the projects won't win any design awards. Plus, getting the work in itself takes effort, not to mention the paperwork required to be eligible for government projects. However, she finds plenty to be excited about, including:

Bigger projects = bigger budgets. Many freelancers complain that all they can find are small projects for small businesses. Hoepfel has seized the opportunity to pursue bigger fish, and she's putting the pieces in place to handle the work. "I'm excited about the growth prospects, the bigger projects with bigger budgets," she says.

Loyal customers. Many freelancers spend a lot of time courting a new client, only to find all they need is a one-off project, not ongoing work. That's not the case with the federal government. "They don't fix what isn't broken," Hoepfel says. "If you can prove that you'll do what's necessary to find them a solution, they'll stay loyal. I'm excited about becoming a resource for federal agencies, because once you build those relationships, they are strong."

Limited competition. Many freelancers struggle because they're essentially competing against anyone who hangs out a shingle. Not so when you focus on a specialized aspect of government work. "I'm excited about being able to expand into a niche sector that wasn't available to me a year and a half ago, because it limits my competition pool," Hoepfel says.

Most important, however, Hoepfel is excited about the growth potential of her business. "This forces me to take a 'grown-up pill' and get serious," she notes. "Being able to vie for this type of business has enabled

FREELANCE SPOTLIGHT

Pam Saxon, Saxon Design

Nashville, TN; www.saxondesign.com

What's exciting to Pam Saxon of Nashville, TN-based Saxon Design, is results. When she analyzed her firm's financials at the beginning of the fourth quarter of 2010, she discovered that her business had increased by an amazing 240% over 2009. "In four months, I got seven new clients and 11 new projects in the pipeline," Saxon says.

How does she account for this dramatic increase, especially when the economy is not exactly on solid footing? "It has nothing to do with the economy," Saxon says. "Last year, I wasn't looking. I was just waiting for people to knock on my door because I didn't have the confidence to pick up the phone. Now, I am out there looking."

She also attributes her recent growth to her decision to focus on a target market. She chose the arts and entertainment industry, not because it's glamorous or exciting, but because she spent 20+ years as a performer and knows the field from an inside perspective. "Deciding who my target market is has been the most important thing that I've done," Saxon says. "I feel like I know these people very well, so I'm confident talking to them about what they need."

me not to just wish and hope for growth but to make it a reality. I'm applying for financing so I can bid on bigger contracts. I'm planning to move into a brick-and-mortar office to better separate my work from the rest of my life. These benefits are more exciting to my company overall than the actual work it will produce. This is a valuable stepping stone toward getting to the work that will be award-winning."

If you've chosen a target market but can't bring yourself to do the outreach necessary to get the work because you're just not excited about it, then it's a target market in name only. There's a wide world of work out there, and if all you go after is what interests you, the field narrows considerably—and with it your prospects for growth. **HOW**

Ilise Benun, founder of Marketing Mentor and co-producer of the Creative Freelancer Conference (www.creativefreelancerconference.com), works with creative freelancers who are serious about building healthy businesses. Sign up for her Quick Tips at www.marketing-mentortips.com.

KATHRYN GRILL HOEPEL SILVER SPRING, MD

www.grillgraphicdesign.com

GERRY SUCHY ARLINGTON, VA www.gmsuchy.com

LYNNE VENART WASHINGTON, DC www.theartmonkey.com

» WEB EXTRA

Listen to Ilise Benun interviewing Kathryn Grill Hoepfel about how she targeted her freelance business toward the federal government. HOWdesign.com/IliseInterview