

FREELANCE

FINDING YOUR FOCUS

You've heard the advice: Choose a target market for your design business. But it's a scary prospect to commit to one line of work. Here's how to find the right fit for you.

As a freelancer wearing all the hats in your business, you can't afford to waste a second or a penny. That's why it's important to streamline your marketing efforts—which means you need to focus, focus, focus.

Focus requires discipline, which doesn't come naturally to most of us. Focus means committing and then recommitting every day. But focus doesn't mean rigidity; in fact, it requires flexibility so that as business conditions change—and they're changing constantly and quickly—your focus can shift naturally.

Focus on what? On what you're trying to achieve (your goals), on how you're going to get there (your marketing tools) and on who's going to help you (your target markets).

So what does it mean to focus on a market? Here's what it isn't: declaring your target market today and revamping everything overnight. I've seen more than one designer choose a target market, spend time and money (lots of both) redesigning their website, creating a brochure, doing everything to get ready to present themselves to the target market—everything except the most important thing: assessing whether that market is viable. As a result, they abandon everything and revamp again in six months when they discover the market isn't able to sustain their business.

Finding your focus can (and should) take months, even years. And it doesn't happen in a vacuum. Think of it as an evolution. You begin to explore a few industries and start to understand the challenges and the struggles of the people who work in those markets. You take a step in their direction. You listen for what they need and offer up resources to help. You assess the responsiveness of the people, slowly turning more and more attention to the most positive responses. And you don't give up quickly or easily when you encounter quiet or even silence.

Paradoxically, focusing doesn't necessarily limit you to that one area. It's like juggling. You get one ball in the air by starting to focus on one market, then add more later. In fact, the ideal situation is to develop

two or three areas of focus in case one becomes the epicenter of an economic downturn. That way, you have the flexibility and the agility to shift gears without starting from scratch.

HOW TO CHOOSE A MARKET

First, look at the markets you're currently serving or those you'd like to. A successful business is centered around the needs of a market, not around the business owner's wishes and desires. Don't start with "Who do I want to work with?" Instead, ask, "What does the market need and how can I satisfy that need while doing something I love?" Ideally, what you want will overlap with the needs of the market.

How do you find out what the market needs? Follow business trends in the news and watch where investors and the government are putting their money.

Second, look at what you know. Whenever possible, don't start from scratch. The foundation of your business should be rooted strongly in a subject you know well and in which you already have some experience and connections. Even if you're just starting out, you'll get farther faster by building on past employment, a recent pro-bono or freelance project, even a hobby. Clients don't want to be your guinea pigs. If you can confidently say, "I understand your business and can help you," your prospects will respond more positively than if you say, "Well, I don't know too much about this market, but I really like the things you make."

For example, Denver-based freelancer Lauren Hybinette started her business in 2010 with a focus on her personal passion—the outdoor industry. And it's working. "My clients know that I know their market because I'm intertwined with every aspect of it. This provides a win-win for both sides," Hybinette says.

Third, look at the industries you've served in the past. Unlike a major design firm, you don't have excess resources and a vast experience base. 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. For example, many companies in the health care market are currently hiring contract workers—and they're focusing their spending on technology (like administrative and record-keeping systems). If you have a background working with health care clients, consider also reaching out to the tech companies serving that market.

Fourth, look for markets that are growing. Don't focus on a niche that's on the decline, no matter how much you love it. Keep an eye out for growth, whether it's happening in the markets you know or in related areas. For example, if the publishing world is in flux, consider the way it's changing and find the growth areas. (Hint: Think e-books and interactive publishing.) Or what about higher education? State universities may be taking a funding hit, but private schools and for-profit online schools are expanding.

Finally, look for markets with money to spend. Unless you have a trust fund, seek prospective clients with budgets and a demonstrated willingness to spend them on design. Can they pay you what you need to earn? If not, don't even put a niche on your short list. How do you know? Research an industry segment; if every company you run across has a poorly constructed website and horrible business cards, you can sniff out a lack of emphasis on effective design.

START BROAD, THEN EVOLVE

As you go through this process, assess the temperature of the markets and the responsiveness of the people by looking for answers to these questions:

1. How many prospects are there (locally, nationally, globally)?
2. What's the average project or purchase size?
3. How often would they need your services?

For example, if there are thousands of prospects nationwide, the average project carries a healthy budget and prospects have a need every quarter (like a regular publication), it could be a very promising market. On the other hand, if there are 15 major companies in the market, they would only need your services once a year at most and have no history of investing money in design, steer clear.

After you've done this initial research, select one market to focus on first. Then, strategically choose the most effective marketing tools for that segment and carefully craft a targeted message that speaks directly to the needs of those prospects. Blanket that communication across multiple media so you connect with potential clients wherever they routinely turn for information: social networks, e-mail, direct mail, industry blogs or publications, trade shows. Through repetition, your message will have a much stronger impact and this group of prospects will start to trust you, without even knowing you yet.

Spend the first six months assessing response to see what's working. Is your e-mail list growing? Are your posts on industry blogs prompting traffic back to your website? Have prospects heard of you when you make that initial sales contact? Use this information to hone your promotional efforts. And as your mar-

FREELANCE SPOTLIGHT

Diane Stewart, Stewart Studio, Denver; www.stewartstudio.biz

I didn't think it would be so challenging to decide on a target market. I started with my existing clients: health care, financial services and high-tech organizations. These industries are solid in the marketplace, and I've made a good living with them over the past several years. But something was missing: passion. I have a passion for animals and love working with animal shelters, but there isn't much money in that market, and I'm used to large corporate fees.

Then, someone commented to me on the fact that I love to do event and trade show work, which brought me to trade associations as a target market. Here's an industry that needs help getting their messages out to their members, creating awareness and raising funds. This was really starting to make sense to me. I started researching trade associations to see if this would be a viable market.

While all this was going on, I mentioned to one my financial services clients that I was looking to build my business in a specific target market. She invited me to attend their largest financial event of the year to network and explore the possibility of financial services becoming my target market. I already had them as a client and I loved what I did for them (designing trade show booths and supporting marcom materials), so I thought, "This is great, I'll have two target markets: financial services and trade associations."

After spending a day in the expo hall talking with vendors and financial experts, I learned that there are mounds of national and state regulations that a designer needs to know and follow. It was suggested I'd need an attorney to decipher all the legalese because of the ever-changing laws. It was clear to me that this wasn't an avenue I wanted to explore. The more I thought about my financial services client, the more I realized that even though they are in the financial industry, they're really a trade association. Score! They are, in fact, my target market.

I've settled on my new target market with trade associations and nonprofits. Yes, it is a big jump from finance, high-tech and health care. But I'm very excited and passionate about my new direction.

keting machine starts to generate results, take stock of whether your target category will keep you busy enough, or whether you're ready to investigate another related niche. All of this takes time. Be patient. **HOW**

Ilise Benun, founder of Marketing Mentor and co-producer of the Creative Freelancer Conference (www.creativefreelancerconference.com), helps creative freelancers build their businesses. www.marketing-mentortips.com.

LAUREN HYBINETTE DENVER www.laurenhybinette.com

» WEB EXTRA

Download a free "Define Your Market" worksheet. HOWdesign.com/definemarketworksheet