



web designer's **Success Guide:** < how to profit from freelance web design />

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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
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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.



**WEB DESIGNER'S
SURVIVAL GUIDE**



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CHAPTER ONE

starting up

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 were no job opportunities in my area. For fear of losing 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

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

SUCCESS TIP

Danger, Will Robinson, danger!

Being a creative person does not always mix well with starting your own business, and running your own freelance Web design business can be big business, even if it is just little old you! Securing a line of credit can be the best way to ensure security for some bumps in the road as you start out. However, individuals with loads of debt may think twice before taking on more credit. It is better to pay off or down the debt you have first before attempting to go freelance full-time.



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



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.