

Thrive in the Brand-New World

By Steve Roller

I spent almost four hours yesterday at Yola's Cafe in Madison, Wisconsin, and it was one of the best days I've had in months.

I wasn't relaxing with my latte and scone and surfing the Internet. Not at all.

I was there to follow up with a client, the owner of the coffee shop. I had done a small project for him: a full-length mission statement and a shortened version that could also serve as a tagline.

What I thought would be a brief meeting soon blossomed into much more.

First, he asked my opinion on a number of business expansion ideas he was considering. Then I shared some ideas for helping his business grow, including email marketing and renting out space in a "business cafe" during downtimes and off-hours.

I also proposed that he write a book aimed at small businesses since he's had great success in a location where two similar businesses previously failed. This guy knows social media and networking, and he's built a solid business in large part because of those two elements.

I mention these things because my main purpose in meeting with the owner was to help him move his business forward. I wasn't even concerned about getting any more business.

We ended up talking blogging, online video marketing, and QR, or quick response codes, those barcode-like black-and-white squares that you can read with your smartphone.

Then he turned things around and asked how he could help *me*. He gave me names and descriptions of four prospects in my main niche, fitness, and even arranged a meeting with one of them for the following week. He also suggested a few local networking meetings coming up, including details on the people in charge.

All in all, a very productive time at the coffee shop!

The new business model

But here's the interesting thing. The whole time, I was observing the hustle and bustle of this corner cafe. Business people had short meetings over coffee. Sales people met clients. Other freelancers were getting work done, like an account rep for Clear Channel Radio and the founder of a company specializing in helping companies optimize for mobile search, social, and QR performance. (I know, because I got introduced to each of them. Bam! Two more leads.)

On a Wednesday afternoon, this place was Grand Central Station for business people. It suddenly hit me: this is the new

normal! This is the way business is getting done nowadays.

The safe, secure corporate-life path is no longer a sure thing. And what used to be perceived as very unpredictable – the independent freelance lifestyle – is becoming more widely accepted. And it's often a quicker path to prosperity, not to mention you gain control of your own life.

Here's my point: you can either embrace this new model ahead of the curve or try to catch up down the road when the crowds have passed you by. Your choice.

You wouldn't be reading this if you weren't interested in taking charge of your future, right? Let me offer some tips for really thriving at the freelance lifestyle once you make that decision:

1. First, completely wrap yourself in the idea of being a freelancer. If you're new, this can be a major change, and it's not always easy.

One of the biggest challenges is the feeling that you're out there on your own without support. Easy solution: join groups of fellow writers or other freelancers for encouragement. I'd recommend both virtual and "live" groups.

Online, you can jump on forums and engage in conversations. If you want to connect in person, most communities have groups of professionals that meet informally for support and professional growth.

I Googled "freelance writer groups Madison" and found a few options. I also meet at least once a week (at a coffee shop, of course) with various freelancers I know locally to compare notes and help each other.

Want the best of both worlds?

If you want to take your business to the next level, check out AWAI's *Circle of Success*. It's a community of fellow writers that offers mentor-level training, access to every resource in the AWAI catalog, and encouragement and support. I got small-group coaching from A-level copywriters, and after the training, some members and I stayed connected in an informal peer review group. Both things accelerated my skills.

2. Develop expertise in a niche. Ask yourself, "What do I have to offer that people would be willing to pay me for?" Become well versed in just one thing in the beginning. Specialize in a narrow niche. I've had a few different niches, but lately one of my niches is working with small fitness studios (not large chains) who don't have a huge budget for an ad agency and don't have in-house expertise.

Another idea is to focus on a particular type of copywriting and work across various niches. You could specialize in landing pages, email copy, or online video script writing, and become known as a "go-to" person in that area.

The third option is to pattern your style after a master copywriter you admire. Subscribe to well-known copywriters' newsletters, and study and analyze the marketing materials they send you. Bob Bly, John Forde, Dan Kennedy, and Gary Bencivenga are a few top copywriters I've followed and tried to emulate.

Pick just one of those three things to start with – focusing either on a niche, a type of copywriting, or a style – and just get

started. You can worry about developing the others later.

3. Put yourself out there. Here's what I mean: I had this delusional idea that all I had to do was finish the [Accelerated Program](#), put my feet up on my desk, and wait for the phone to start ringing from companies who had heard about my copywriting prowess. Don't laugh! I really thought it would be pretty easy.

I quickly learned that you have to actually *do something* to get noticed and earn clients' trust.

When I started three years ago, before I established a name for myself or developed a portfolio, I did one thing right. I connected with what I call "movers and shakers." I don't mean CEOs or big-name people. Just everyday people who were ambitious like me: the owner of a small printing and copy shop, an acquaintance who was starting a new career as a social media expert, and a friend who was developing a sales training business.

Chances are, you know people like this, too. Why struggle on your own when you can get other people to help you in your goals?

Find someone who already knows and trusts you, and offer to do a small project for them (even at a reduced or no cost if you have to). In return, if they like the work you do, ask them for a testimonial. Try to get some referrals or introductions to other people who might benefit from your services.

4. Leverage your expertise into new opportunities. I started off using the strategy outlined above. That quickly expanded into working with clients all over the country online, most of whom I never met face to face.

Now I'm back to networking locally because of some projects I've recently done with small business owners in my hometown. I'm finding these clients are "connectors" introducing me to other local business people. And I'm referring business to them in return.

Are you ready to thrive in this brave new world of freelancing? Remember ...

- Don't be afraid to start small. Produce good work on every project, and it will grow. Big projects with national clients pay more, but you can get your business started and be a hero helping small local clients.
- Start becoming an expert at something now. There's no reason you have to struggle for years until you get good at everything. Get good at one thing now.
- Give before you get. In other words, give free advice and make it your main goal to help people. You'll get paid well for what you deliver.

One of the side benefits of *the writer's life* is that once you've laid a solid foundation, it gets easier. Instead of chasing clients and taking whatever projects you can get, you'll attract clients based on your reputation and word of mouth. People will seek out your advice. Your expertise will open interesting doors of opportunity for you.

When you get to that point, you can parlay a leisurely afternoon at the coffee shop into a very productive day.

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4 Responses to "Thrive in the Brand-New World"

Nice, compelling and useful letter, Steve. Thanks!

My earlier online salary research turned up this....

"If becoming a copywriter is one of your career options, knowledge of a copywriter salary could help you make a decision. And, lastly, if you are just plain curious, settle your curiosity: the figure is \$60,269. This is the nation's average and differs from state to state and city to city. For instance, in Georgia, the average salary copywriters make is \$47,771 and in New York it stands at \$73,612." (article date: November 5, 2010)

Question: If this is true, why is there so much variation by location?

I guess six-figure copywriters are at least twice as good as the average copywriter?

Steve,

You have a great writing style and sure know how to convey a story.

You can capture the essence and tell it like it is using simple language.

You have described a paradigm shift in how people are conducting business these days.

The Corporate Man is withering on the vine and is being slowly but surely replaced by the free agents or freelancers: they are cut from a different cloth, to be sure.

Your article will surely inspire a lot of wannabe writers out there. Wish you joy and success.

Archan Mehta – May 15, 2012 at 7:41 pm

@Allen - Thanks for your comments. I do think those numbers are accurate, probably due to two factors. One, even though your clients can be anywhere in the country, or in the world, many copywriters probably do some work locally, and their pay will reflect the local economy (NY clients willing to pay more than GA clients.) Second, when your cost of living is higher, you're more motivated (in general) to make more money. I'm only concerned about what this copywriter in Madison, WI, makes!

Steve Roller – May 16, 2012 at 10:06 am

@Archan - Thanks for your comments. I like your line "...withering on the vine" - very true. I believe that in 20 years there will be very few employees, and employer-paid benefits, 401k plans, etc. will be a thing of the past. Things will be leaner, streamlined, and more performance-based in all sectors.

Steve Roller – May 16, 2012 at 10:10 am

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