How to Get on Retainer with Copywriting Clients

By Steve Slaunwhite



One of the downsides of freelancing is the uncertainty when it comes to cash flow. As a freelancer, you're typically stringing together a series of paid projects in the hopes of creating a steady cash flow.

But often there's a gap.

Sometimes you have a lot of work one week. And then the next week, things are a little bit light and you start getting nervous about income. And then the next week, things get busier again.

One terrific method of reducing this financial uncertainty is to get a client to put you on retainer.

Let me give you an example …

Many years ago, one of my biggest clients was UPS. I was doing a lot of work for UPS — content, direct mail, ads, case studies, and brochures — a whole range of marketing communications.

They were a good, steady client. But some months with them were busier than others.

Then one day, the marketing director contacted me and pitched the idea of putting me on retainer.

She said, "You know, we're using your services a lot, but every time we need something written, we have to contact you and get a quotation from you.

"Then we have to get that quotation approved and a purchase order issued and then sent back to you. It's a bureaucratic process.

"We want to make it very easy. We want to be able to pick up the phone and talk to you about a project and get you going on it right away.

"If we put you on a monthly retainer for a fixed amount, then we could eliminate those purchase orders and the process of hiring you as the vendor.

"And you could just go ahead and do the project. It's so much easier for us. Would you be interested in doing that?"

So we worked out the details and I was on retainer with them for many years.

That's a very comfortable position to be in when you're a freelance copywriter. Having a guaranteed monthly amount coming in every single month helps you sleep better.

Let's explore how retainers work …

What's a retainer agreement?

A retainer agreement is simply a fixed fee that the client pays you each month for an anticipated volume of work.

And although the work may fluctuate each month, with more work one month and less work the next month, overall, it evens out. You bill your client that fixed fee every single month.

There are many advantages for the client and for you with that kind of arrangement.

What makes a client a good candidate for a retainer agreement?

Not every client you work with will be a good fit for a retainer. In my opinion, there are three criteria a client should meet.

#1. Ongoing need for your services

For example, consider a mid-sized sales training company that has several sales trainers in the field. They're constantly developing new programs so they need white papers and e-books.

They have a blog they update on a weekly basis. They're very active in social media. They have a biweekly e-newsletter. They're sending out emails and sales letters. They're creating brochures and one-sheets for their programs.

They're doing a lot of marketing every single month. And they need marketing materials written by a professional. A company like that may be open to a retainer because they have an ongoing need for copywriting help every month.

#2. You're dealing with the decision-maker

A lot of companies aren't used to putting a copywriter on retainer. So you need to be dealing with a decision-maker such as the business owner or senior marketing director.

You need to be working with someone who has the authority to say, "Yes, that's a good idea. Let's do that."

If you're dealing with a mid-level marketing coordinator at a large corporation — someone who is simply coordinating with the vendors — it will never happen.

In order for them to get approval for a big decision like putting you on retainer, they would have to create an internal proposal and get it approved upstairs. It's just too difficult.

#3. You have a good relationship with the client

The best candidates for a retainer are clients you've done some business with already. They like your work. You trust each other. This is important because retainer agreements require trust.

You need to be able to have a candid conversation with that client if the retainer isn't working out or if it needs to be adjusted.

Getting on retainer with a client is not a good idea if it's a first-time client and you know nothing about them.

How to talk to clients about retainers

One of the best methods I know is to develop a retainer program or a retainer methodology.

This can't be something you put together as needed. It needs to be something you've already mapped out so you can talk about it intelligently with a client.

This puts you in control. You don't want the client dictating to you how the retainer program works. That puts you at a disadvantage.

Plus, having a retainer program in place makes it much easier to talk to a client about going on retainer.

Let's say you're having a conversation on the phone with a client and you mention that it might be a good idea to set up a retainer arrangement.

And the client asks, "Okay. How would that work?"

You need to be able to answer that confidently.

So, how would you answer that question?

A model retainer program

Let me answer that by telling you how I discuss retainer programs with clients.

Step 1: I have a discussion with the client about the copywriting help that they'll need over the next three to six months — the type of projects and the level of work. We usually do that over the phone.

Step 2: I tell the client I'll determine a monthly flat fee that covers the anticipated work I'll do each month.

Step 3: I explain the advantages of a retainer program. I tell the client that they'll get a discount. I also tell them they'll save time and trouble because they won't have to get quotes and we'll eliminate the ongoing invoices.

Step 4: Then I explain that once we agree on a retainer, I'll submit an invoice each month for that fixed amount even if the workload goes up or down each month.

Step 5: Every three months, I send the client a report in Excel format of the work that has been completed. And if there are any adjustments that need to be made to the retainer, because I'm doing more work or less work than we anticipated, then we'll have a discussion at that time and we'll make those adjustments.

So that's how I explain my retainer agreement to a client. Sometimes I'll remind the client of the benefits of having me on retainer:

- They save time because they don't have to get quotes
- They save on paperwork because there won't be an invoice for every single project
- They save money because I'm giving them a discount

- I'll be available for their projects month in and month out

I usually don't sell the retainer agreement too hard. I want the client to already be presold on the idea.

If I float the idea of a retainer and the client says, "Yes, that's a good idea. How would that work?" then I'll go ahead and explain how the retainer works.

But if the client says, "Um, well, I don't know. What are the benefits of that, Steve? I don't know if that would be a good idea. Maybe I'll talk to my partner about it."

If I get that kind of wishy-washy response, I usually don't pursue it at all because I want the client to want me on retainer. That's the only way it really works.

If you are on retainer, they should get a bit of a discount.

When I'm thinking about the type of projects a client will need from month to month, and how much I would normally bill for those projects, I usually adjust it about 10%. I don't tell the client it's 10% and I never give them a number. I simply tell the client it's a discount.

How to keep retainer agreements fair for both

What do you do if your client takes advantage of the retainer and the fixed fee and they send you twice as much work as you anticipated?

That's the reason I have that three-month escape clause in my retainer agreements. Every three months, I submit a report of the work I completed. And if there are any adjustments that need to be made to the retainer, we'll make those at that time.

So if you end up being taken advantage of, it's only for three months.

Keep in mind my criteria for choosing a client for a retainer agreement … The third criteria is that you already have a good relationship with that client.

So you're only approaching clients you already trust and that you know are not likely to take advantage of you.

Advantages for copywriters

Retainer agreements are a great way to build a solid foundation for your B2B copywriting business. If you have one or two or three retainer agreements, you'll have steady income coming in each month.

You'll feel better and more secure. It gives you a nice steady month-to-month cash flow.

Another key benefit of having a client on retainer is that it deepens your relationship with that client. You're no longer just a freelancer doing project work with that client.

You become a valued member of their team, and they're not going to be looking at other writers. You're a partner. And that's a nice feeling.

In fact, clients that I've had on retainer and continue to have on retainer are some of my longer-term clients. I've been working with these clients for years and years.

So consider getting clients on retainer. There are many advantages for you and your clients.

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