

Breaking into freelancing

by *Jenny Hirschhorn*



On a chilly morning in March 1998, I dropped a letter (remember those?) into a post box and promptly forgot about it. It was addressed by name to the editor of the business and jobs supplement of The Daily Telegraph, but I had every expectation that it would be filed in the waste paper basket, along with the other 2999 cold pitches that the paper reputedly received every week.

Imagine my surprise, then, when my phone rang a few days later and that same editor asked me to develop the idea for publication. My excitement that day was only superseded by the thrill of seeing my name in big bold letters in a newspaper of such renown just a few days later.

So why was my pitch the one-in-3,000 that hit the spot? Well, it may sound obvious but there are a lot of basic rules that would-be freelancers need to observe but which are so often ignored.

First of all, make absolutely sure that the piece you are pitching is right for the slot you have identified. I had been working in executive search for five years and I could see that this particular supplement was the perfect outlet for what was on my mind.

Newspapers and magazines, have different editors for each small section of the publication and you need to home in on the bullseye with a single bullet, rather than taking a scatter-gun approach by emailing "the editor" and hoping you reach the right person. In fact, such a vague pitch will only show your lack of professionalism.



My advice is to get hold of, or access on line, at least half-a-dozen copies of the title you are targeting and work out exactly what appears where. Does a particular theme appear just once a week, for example? Ask yourself what has been published recently and, although you will take that as a guide to the sort of piece that's likely to succeed, it will also help you avoid pitching something that is a repeat of a similar article that has already appeared.

Work out the preferred length of articles in the section you are targeting and ask yourself if that is right for your piece. Can you get everything you want to say into a short article, or, if the pieces are much longer, can you fill 2,000 words or more without sending your readers to sleep?

Next, make sure you find out the name of the editor responsible and address them in person. Go straight in with what your article will be about, followed by the first few lines, and then a clear account of how you would develop the idea. Who would you contact? What is your personal knowledge of the subject? Why would you be the best person to write this piece? Are you sure you can deliver what you promise?



I clearly had specialist knowledge of the industry I was intending to write about and contacts I felt confident would be happy to share their views on the topic I wanted to air.

Finally, once you get your first success, capitalise on it. Make sure that every time you pitch in future you finish off with a reference to where you have previously had work published.

Although today's methods of communication have changed - always use email and don't pester busy editors with phone calls - the principles remain the same. Be focused, identify your target editor and set out a clear case for how and why you are the best person for the job.



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