

53 Freelancing Mistakes That Are Costing You Clients, Cash, and Credibility

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5/7/2014



I don't know about you, but when I started [freelancing as a writer](#), I made a ton of mistakes.

And by "a ton," I mean everything I did was pretty much a disaster.

Thankfully, you can fix mistakes. And contrary to popular belief, making mistakes is a good thing — provided you learn from them.

But if you're thinking, "Great! As long as I learn from my mistakes, it's all good," I have to tell you something ... and you won't like it.

You may not even know you're making a mistake.

And that part can hurt your freelance business.

You were too busy to notice (now you're not)

There you are, happily working your behind off, when suddenly you lose a client.

They don't give a reason so you shrug it off.

Then you lose another client just as abruptly, and then another client tells you they won't be renewing your contract.

Um, what's going on?

You quickly realize you haven't received a referral from a client in a while. No one has heaped praises on you either. Hell, you've even been having trouble [convincing prospective clients to hire you!](#)

You were just too busy to notice. And now you're not.

Even a rookie mistake can lose you clients, ruin your reputation, and cost you your livelihood if you don't fix it in time.

It can destroy everything you've worked so hard to achieve.

Want to avoid the destruction of your business? Use the freelancing mistakes listed below to discover if you're making any of them.

(The mistakes have been organized under different aspects of a freelance business — mainly rates, clients, deadlines, business, communication, work, management, and marketing. Feel free to jump to the ones that interest you most.)

Rates

1. You're not charging enough

Freelance rates are [subjective](#). What's a low rate for me could be high for you.

But here's the thing: if you're not attracting the types of clients you want to work with, you're probably not charging enough.

One quick way to find out whether you're undercharging or not is to look at your calendar. Do you have room for new clients? Do you have room for your own life? Do *all* of the clients you have today treat you well? Can you meet all of your current deadlines comfortably? And are you paying your bills?

If the answer to one or more of these questions is No, you might not be not charging enough. If the answer to *all* of them is No, you're definitely not charging enough.

2. You let your clients dictate your rates

Your clients don't know how much work goes into doing what you do. And they don't know how long it took you to become a capable writer who can create that work.

Frankly, they don't care. All they care about is getting the job done as economically as possible.

It's *your* job to charge a fair price that reflects the work you put into it.

If you don't set your rates, clients will do it for you by telling you how much they can pay. And that's never a number to get excited about.

Don't ask for the client's budget. Instead, quote an amount to your client. You can only do that when you've figured out your rates.

3. You haven't figured out your lowest acceptable rate — or you don't even know what that is

You know what's worse than undercharging or letting clients set your rates? Not having your lowest acceptable rate figured out. This is the amount below which you absolutely will not work. *Ever*.

Having this figured out will help you make the right decisions when work is slow and you're tempted to take on anything that comes along.

4. You think charging by the hour is smart

According to the logic behind charging per hour, you get billed for the time you spend working on a project. And

that's fine as long as the project is taking a set number of hours.

But what happens when you get so good at your work that you complete it in half the time?

Congratulations, you just slashed your earning in half. This isn't up for debate. [Charge per project](#). End of story.

5. You can't remember the last time you raised your rates

When was the last time you raised your rates? Six months ago? Last year? Maybe two years ago?

If no one has questioned your rates in a while, it's time to [raise them](#).

Clients

6. You have trouble saying "No"

Many freelancers choke when trying to say no. We simply can't do it. Not without feeling like the world's biggest heel.

Our inability to say no translates into accepting every request a client has — and that's just bad business.

The next time your gut tells you to say no — [just say it](#).

Yes, you're saying no to money you need, but your time would be better spent finding interesting work that pays better rather than slogging for hours over a project you don't want to touch with a ten-foot pole.

7. You forget to screen clients

Every freelancer should have a screening process for clients — a few warning signs they look for when discussing a project with a prospective client.

Failing to screen clients before working with them leads to a lot of problems, and not being paid is the least of them.

Figure out your deal breakers and use them to screen clients. It's the first step in working with the kind of clients you desire.

8. You don't know how to handle (legitimately) unhappy clients

When I say unhappy, I don't mean unrealistic clients. I mean the client who comes back to you and politely says you didn't deliver what he was expecting.

Yes, you need to deal with your unrealistic clients too, because they'll be the loudest voices when dissing your work and work ethic.

But you also need to learn how to [handle criticism](#). Do everything in your power to satisfy an unhappy client. It might mean losing a pay check or working extra hours, but if the end result is a happy client and an intact reputation, the investment is worthwhile.

9. You think "the client is always right" is a good policy

Did you know that doing everything your client wants — especially things you know are wrong — hurts *you* more than it hurts them?

Sure, on the surface it looks like it's none of your concern. After all, the client wants what he wants. Your job is to deliver.

But don't forget that you're their freelancer. When things go wrong (and they will), the blame will land squarely on your shoulders.

Take the time to explain why you think something won't work. Offer an alternative solution instead. And when that solution works, accept the eternal gratitude of your client.

And maybe even raise your rates. Just saying ...

10. You haven't stayed in touch with your former clients

When was the last time you sent a former client an email? Just a short email to catch up and say hi — and casually mention you're taking on more work these days.

You never know when a client might send work your way simply because you popped up on their radar at the right time.

11. You're a little too available for your clients

This is one mistake you won't realize you're making until you answer a client call during dinner or find yourself on a conference call on Sunday morning.

Set some ground rules from the start. Make exceptions for emergencies of course, but you need to respect your own boundaries before you can expect your clients to do the same.

12. You remember the client ... but not the person you worked with

Even if you've concluded your business with a client, don't forget about the person who was your point of contact. Employees leave companies and move on to bigger and better things all the time.

Save their contact information and stay in touch. You never know when you might move to a new client with them.

13. You don't educate your clients

Remember, clients don't really understand what goes into a strong piece of writing.

All the client sees is a 1500-word blog post ... not the strategy, research, drafting, editing, and fact-checking that go into it.

If you want the client to appreciate your work and give it due importance, educate them about it. The more they understand, especially about content strategy, the better clients they'll be.

Deadlines

14. You're not religious about deadlines

A deadline is not a tentative date. When you commit to a deadline, you must deliver on it.

Leave room for life to happen when setting a deadline. You never know when you'll catch a cold, have your computer crash on you, or get your pitch for a [guest post](#) on Copyblogger accepted.

This way, even if you're running behind, you'll have enough time to meet your deadline or at the very least, let your client know about the delay.

Bottom line: If you're committing to a deadline, stick to it *no matter what*. Your clients will stick to you in return.

15. You don't have a deadline calendar

Freelance work is based on deadlines. The more work or clients you have, the more deadlines you'll have. If you're not giving enough time between each deadline to get work done, you'll eventually miss one.

Have a deadline schedule. Don't just think you'll be done in a week and pledge a date. For all you know, you

could have two more deadlines the same week.

Set up a deadline calendar to determine which dates work best for you.

Business

16. You've never invested in your business

That sounds like such a *successful* freelancer problem right? Who has money to invest back in the business when you're barely making ends meet?

But if you don't invest in your business, you won't have a business to invest in a couple of years down the road.

You don't necessarily need to put thousands of dollars into getting the training you need. Start with a library of good copywriting books (both traditional and ebooks). And don't forget to take advantage of high-quality free resources like the [MyCopyblogger ebook library](#).

17. You're a wimp about contracts

I get it. Contracts are scary. But they're not as scary as not receiving a payment you were counting on to pay the bills.

You may think contracts need to be drawn up in technical legal language (or legalese as I like to call it) to be valid, but that's not necessarily the case.

An email summarizing the terms and conditions you've worked out with a client is a form of a contract. It won't be as airtight as something your attorney drafts for you, but it often doesn't need to be. If you want to make it formal, put your agreement into a document, sign it, send it to your client, and ask her to sign it.

Still confused?

The following is an example you can use:

"This is a contract for [whatever service you're providing] between John Smith (the awesome client) and Jane Doe (the equally awesome freelancer).

Below are the terms of this contract:"

Easy peasy.

18. You don't have a payment schedule

This is such a rookie mistake — one I recently made because, hey, the amount was small and the client seemed legit. I've now put in the hours and sent in the work, but the payment is still stuck because the work wasn't what the client was expecting, and instead of sending me the details of what was wrong, he's now AWOL.

Sound familiar?

Everyone needs a payment schedule. Make yours, "Half now, half on delivery (no matter what)," and you'll never go wrong.

19. You don't have working terms and conditions

Just as clients have terms and conditions, so do freelancers. Maybe you only accept payment through bank transfers, or don't accept rush work. Whatever conditions you have, spell them out for your client so she knows what to expect when hiring you.

If you don't, you'll either run into problems with your client or find yourself making undesirable compromises.

Run a search for “freelance contract clauses” and you’ll find the most important clauses you need to work out.

20. You don’t learn from your mistakes

We all make mistakes. It’s what we do with them that sets us apart.

When something backfires, do everything you can to fix it and figure out what you can do to make it work next time.

21. You spend everything you earn

Ever notice how your expenses have a big number attached to them and your savings the most minuscule?

Sucks, huh?

But you know what sucks even more? Not having any savings on a rainy day.

Sooner or later we all have them. It could be because work’s slowed down, or maybe you had a big expense come up. Either way, if you don’t have a little something saved up for emergencies, you are screwed.

How to do it? Spend a little less, and/or raise your rates (see point 1 above).

22. You think your freelancing is a hobby

Freelancing isn’t something you do because you’re bored at home or because you have nothing better to do.

Freelancing is a business. The fact that you work your tail off day after day, night after night is proof of it.

You don’t burn the midnight oil for a hobby. Or if you do, you sleep till 3:00 p.m. the next day ... not wake up early and get back to work again.

Do yourself a favor and [stop treating your freelancing like a hobby](#). Freelancing is a business. Think it. Say it. Tell it to anyone who asks — maybe even those who don’t.

Keep at it until you start treating it like one.

23. You don’t show clients the value of your work

We often expect our clients to know the value of our work.

We tell them how much something will cost and how long it’ll take. Then we get the, “That sounds like a lot of money for such a small job” email. And you’re left scratching your head wondering how sending a sales newsletter to a 10k+ subscriber list is a small job.

The value isn’t in the number of words written. The value is in the opening rate of the email, in the click rate of the sales link, and in the actual sales made. Don’t take the value you provide for granted. If you do, your clients will too.

Always focus on the benefit your client will get from the writing, not the number of words you put on the screen.

24. You don’t pay attention to the business side of freelancing

Freelancing isn’t just about the work you do. It’s also about marketing, invoicing, prospecting, accounting, and so much more.

As much as it pains me to say it, all these things are as important as your work. Ignore it and you could find yourself missing meetings, deadlines, and even invoices.

25. You don’t have big plans for your business

As clichéd as these questions might sound ...

- Where do you see yourself six months from now?
- What needs to change in your current situation for you to feel like your business is moving forward?

If you don't have a ready answer, you're not planning ahead.

Settling for the status quo is not planning.

Chalk out clear goals for yourself and make them as specific as you can. Make them time-sensitive and quantitative.

Something like: I should have a guest post published on Copyblogger in 2014 (*ahem*). Or, I need to find two new clients by the end of the quarter.

26. You don't measure success financially

Making a "success" of your freelance business is a good goal to have. It's also the world's vaguest goal ever.

What is success to you? What must you achieve to declare your business a "success?" How much do you need to earn in order to do so?

The easiest way to measure success is financially. And so many freelancers fail at this.

Finding clients is not a good financial goal. Finding clients *who pay you more than what you're being paid now* is.

What financial goals do you have for your business?

Communication

27. You think typos in your emails are okay

Nothing spells *unprofessional* and even *irresponsible* better than a poorly written email.

We all make mistakes, but if your communication is riddled with more than the very occasional typo, you're sending the wrong message.

Take an extra 30 seconds and read your emails before hitting send ... and save yourself some time and embarrassment.

Trust me: catching a missing "o" in *word count* is worth the hassle. 😊

28. You think following up is pushy

Freelancers are notoriously bad at following up. It feels like such a pushy thing to do.

Find a happy medium.

Come up with a not-so-pushy follow-up email. A simple "*Hey, I know you're busy. Just wanted to follow up ...*" or "*Hey I was wondering if you've come to a decision?*" works pretty well.

29. You're an over-sharer

If you're mentioning your kids, unhealthy working habits, your penchant for trashy lit, etc. ... you're an over-sharer.

Keep it simple, direct, and friendly when communicating with clients. And yes, you can be all that without sharing your life's story.

Take your clues from the client and *always* err on the side of discretion.

30. You think “negotiation” is a bad word

For some reason, negotiations have a negative connotation attached to them. In reality, they’re anything but.

Negotiations don’t always mean you lower your rates or give in to the clients’ demands. Whether it’s a question of deadlines, money, or the value provided, it’s all open for negotiation.

Use [smart negotiation tactics](#) to get what you want.

If the client says your rates are too high, tell them what work you *can* do within their budget. Offer to tailor a service package that gives value to them without compromising on your rates.

31. You let the client talk you into things you don’t want to do

If you’re letting the client talk you into doing something you don’t agree with, it’s time to get assertive.

Tell your client why you think their idea won’t work and what should be done instead. Let them know you’re uncomfortable doing something because it wastes time and money — not to mention it puts both of your reputations at stake.

32. You don’t tell clients you’ll pick their brains

Clients aren’t mind readers. To them, having some work done is simple. They pay you upfront and expect the finished product to be on their virtual desk on the deadline.

Some of them get antsy when you bug them with things like questions, or requests for additional material.

To avoid having an annoyed client on your hands, take the time to explain your work process to them. Let them know beforehand [you might have more questions](#).

33. You keep your cards close to your chest

A thin line exists between being professional and acting too cool. Nobody likes to work with the freelancer who doesn’t give a straight answer.

Don’t try to second guess your client’s responses. Lay your cards on the table, have your say, and then wait for your client to respond.

From the client’s point of view, an uncommunicative freelancer is a headache she doesn’t need.

34. You think replying to emails quickly makes you look desperate

If you’re not replying to emails from prospective clients as soon as possible, you’re losing business.

Forget being better, or more affordable, or appearing busier than the competition. [Be faster than them instead](#).

Work

35. You take on too much work

In a perfect world, you’d take on every interesting project that comes your way. Too bad it doesn’t work that way in the real world.

Delegate or outsource your work, because if you don’t, the quality of your work will suffer — and your clients will be the first to notice.

And remember, it’s okay to tell clients that you’re just too busy to take their project right now. In fact, practically

nothing will make you more desirable to them. And it's a way to introduce the option of a retainer agreement, where you'll carve out time for them on a regular basis. It's good for clients and it's good for your cash flow.

36. You over-promise

Over-promising happens when you have too much work.

Don't promise results you can't guarantee. Instead, always understate a little, because wowing a client is always better than giving your client an anti-climax.

37. You regularly fall victim to scope creep

This creepy bugger is the bane of countless freelancers.

They get introduced innocently enough: The clients ask if you could add something else into the project, and you — being the nice, accommodating freelancer that you are — agree. After all, it won't take much time.

And so starts your slide down the slippery slope of an ever-expanding project scope.

The easiest way to ward off scope creep is to have a clause for it in your contract, reading: "should the scope of the project expand, so will the deadline and the rates.

This way, when the client comes to you with new suggestions, you get to say, "Sure, I'd be happy to do it. The new deadline will be 'such and such' and it'll cost you an extra X bucks."

38. You suffer from "freelancing god complex"

Freelancers usually work alone. We're mostly loners who are also control freaks. We want to do everything ourselves. I call it our freelancing god complex.

Nobody can handle a growing business on their own — nobody human at least.

Do yourself a favor and [outsource some tasks](#), whether they're administrative tasks or your own work.

Make time for work you love doing by delegating work you don't.

39. You don't have any personal projects

Every time I hear someone say, "I started freelancing because I wanted to be my own boss," I always say, "Great!" Then I ask, "What are you working on?"

The answer is almost always, "Oh y'know, client work."

Somebody please enlighten me how this qualifies as *working for yourself*? You've traded one boss for a few others — also known as your clients.

Real freedom comes from working on *your own* projects — something that gives you a reason to get your client work done because you can't wait to get back to it.

40. You're a jack-of-all-trades but master of none

The specialist versus generalist debate has been going on for a long time among freelancers. You'll find successful freelancers in both camps.

But if you haven't mastered a skill — something you're known as the expert on — making a name for yourself will be difficult.

For example, when someone wants a website designed, they no longer look for a WordPress designer. They look for a [WordPress designer with experience in Genesis](#).

41. You're too busy to learn new skills

Just because you're great at what you do doesn't mean you'll stay that way unless you stay abreast of new developments in your niche.

So no matter how busy you are right now, take the time to learn new skills. Otherwise, you'll soon be passed over for more inexperienced freelancers simply because they're willing to learn.

Management

42. You think time management is for sissies

Freelancers and web workers are some of the biggest procrastinators online. And that's great when you don't have work. But when you have back-to-back deadlines, procrastination is death.

If you're waiting for crunch time to get started with work, you're in trouble.

Work out [productivity strategies](#) that accommodate your procrastinating, adrenaline-loving self.

Do your research and create outlines well before the day you actually sit down to work.

I won't tell you to set a deadline two days before the actual one because it has never worked for me. I always remember I have two more days.

What *has* worked is setting a 30-minute timer on my phone. Or have an accountability partner — do anything that gets work done in time.

It's your reputation, money, and credibility on the line after all.

43. You put all your eggs in one basket

Never depend on any one client for more than 25 percent of your income. (That's my own number — some argue that it's still too high).

Sounds simple and sensible right?

Freelancers are often lured by the idea of getting a hefty paycheck without working for a bunch of people. But then one day the client emails saying, *"Hey, this project is coming to an end (is being cancelled), and we won't need your services anymore."*

Cue: panic attack.

Suddenly you're scrambling to fill this huge, gaping income void that's suddenly opened up.

Moral of this mistake: [diversify your income streams](#).

44. You don't take breaks

All work and no play *will* make you a burnt-out freelancer.

Take short breaks throughout the year: a weekend here, a day off there, maybe even a half-day off in the middle of the week every couple of weeks.

Both your brain and business will thank you for it.

Marketing

45. You don't ask for referrals

No one's a bigger or better advocate of your work than a satisfied client. If you're not asking them to refer you to more people, you're losing out on some hot leads.

Imagine receiving an email reading, *"Hey, we were looking for a freelancer and you come highly recommended,"* as opposed to you sending an introductory email selling your skills and achievements to prospective clients.

46. You don't ask for testimonials either

[Testimonials](#) are the best social currency out there when trying to convince clients you're the person for the job.

If you're not getting them from every happy client you have, you're setting yourself up for needless questions and failure.

But when do you ask a client for a testimonial?

To be honest, there isn't one perfect, clear cut answer. Go with your gut.

I personally like to ask for a testimonial immediately after a job well done. Clients don't always come back, and if you don't ask for one immediately, they'll forget you and might not be as willing to give you one if you go to them a few months later.

47. You haven't updated your portfolio since you made it

Nobody will want to work with you if they see your portfolio hasn't been updated in the past two years.

Take an hour or two every couple of months to update your portfolio. Then, when you're feeling proud of your work and what you've accomplished, send it to a few prospective clients.

48. You treat your portfolio as an afterthought

So many freelancers treat their portfolios as an afterthought. *Oh hey, I just did some more work. Let's put it in my portfolio.*

Err ... no. That's not how portfolios work.

Portfolios need to have your *best* work in them. Not work you're not embarrassed by, but work you're *damn proud* of.

Don't wait until you've done some work before you add it to your portfolio. Instead, find work that will look good on your portfolio. It should be work you want to do more of, work that attracts the kind of clients you want.

When you've made a name for yourself and are seen as an expert in your niche, you may not need a portfolio. But until then ... well, actually, you need one even then.

49. You don't think having a blog is important

You're not doing your freelance business any favors by not having a blog. They are one of the best ways to [attract clients](#).

Use your blog to do client case studies, show how you do your work, the process involved, how you get results, etc. Give prospective clients a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes.

And let's face it: having a blog is good Google karma too.

50. Your website looks like it's from 1996

Do you have a website that dates back to 1996? Or that looks like it does? Yeah, you won't impress clients any time soon.

Getting a spiffy, up-to-date website is extremely easy. You can get one for [under \\$100](#) for Heaven's sake! What are you waiting for?

51. You only market when business is slow

If you're waiting for business to slow down to market your business, you'll run into problems soon.

Set up a list of 5-10 marketing activities and do any one of them each day. Focus on online marketing if any of the others seem too hard.

- Write a post for your own blog
- Email your personal network
- Update your Facebook page or send out a tweet
- Hold a giveaway
- Run a contest
- Email your old clients
- Upsell or cross-sell to your current clients
- Ask for recommendations
- Email a prospective client
- Write a guest post

That's 10 marketing activities for you *right there*.

Create a pool of marketing activities, then pick one every day and do it. [Don't be afraid to hustle](#).

52. You don't know why you're using social media

I'm going to say something harsh here: If you're not getting work queries through social media, you're doing something wrong.

Take the time [to build a relationship with your social media followers](#). Interact with your followers, engage with the ones you follow, answer questions, share relevant content, help out wherever you can.

Do anything to get noticed and be recognized as the person to go to in times of need.

53. You don't run promotions

Promotions are one of those marketing tactics that help you attract more business and get over slow months.

Smart freelancers anticipate their slow times and plan for them.

Instead of simply accepting the slump you're going through, do something about it.

Run a time-sensitive promotion, bundle your services, add more value to your current services — anything to make it more attractive to your clients.

The thing about making mistakes

I'd love to tell you how having this list of freelancing mistakes guarantees you will never make them, but you already know I can't.

What I *can* tell you is that this list will help you catch your mistakes in time. It will save you from permanently damaging your business and reputation.

Go through it every couple of months. Your chances for success increase every time you fix a mistake you

weren't even aware you were making.

The truth is you can't run a business without making mistakes. [That's how you learn](#). That's also how you succeed.

So don't be the freelancer who waits for his mistakes to hurt his business. Be the freelancer who finds and fixes them before that happens.

Take action today.

You owe it to yourself and the life you dream of living.

Share your thoughts

What do you think?

Which of these 53 mistakes have you caught yourself making in the past and corrected? What was the impact?

Are there any other mistakes you can add to the list?

Join the [discussion over at Google-Plus](#).

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