

Focusing Your Business:

Support for the Independent Consultant or Contractor



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Is it better to be a generalist or a specialist? That's a perennial question among technical communicators—and plenty of other professions, too. And while it makes a fascinating topic for debate, it's far too big a question for one column. So, here's a variation on the theme: *If you're an incurable*



This column explores the joys and challenges of managing your own technical communication business. Please share your experience and ideas. Contact Bette Frick at efrick@textdoctor.com.

generalist, can you still enjoy some of the advantages enjoyed by specialists? The answer is yes.

Both of us consider ourselves generalists, and we're betting that a sizable percentage of the STC membership does, too. How do we define generalist? Let's

just say that we love variety, we love to learn, and we love to think (we both have “Learner” and “Intellection” as Signature Strengths). We both like to write *and* edit, and Bette likes to teach writing and editing. Finally, we find the notion of limiting ourselves to a narrow subject area or discipline dreary and uninspiring.

But for independents, being a generalist has potential drawbacks, one of the biggest being lack of focus. What, exactly, do you want to do, and for whom? If you're unable to answer these basic questions, you may have trouble attracting business. As Lucy Parker puts it in *How to Start a Home-Based Writing Business*, “An unfocused person is hard to remember and does not inspire confidence.”

In *The Wealthy Freelancer*, the authors devote a full chapter to focusing your business, including determining your strengths, defining a market for your services, and positioning yourself within that market. The authors also recommend that freelancers create a list of standards that includes the kinds

of projects they'll do and clients they'll work for. Such standards “help you focus on the kind of work you ultimately want to do and give you the motivation to keep seeking out the high-quality clients who will send this work your way.”

And speaking of high-quality clients, finding and retaining clients who treat you well and whose values and working style mesh well with yours is also critical—and another way of focusing your business. In *Attracting Perfect Customers: The Power of Strategic Synchronicity*, the authors invite us to define who is, or would be, a perfect customer for us and to tailor our offerings to meet their needs.

Our Own Paths Toward Greater Focus

Bette is a good example of a generalist who has “specialized” successfully. When she first started her business, she offered writing, editing, and training services. Once she discovered that she loved training and that it paid well, she focused her business in that area. Later, when the economy soured and training budgets were slashed, she added medical editing to her offerings, a decision made easier when one of her key training clients asked her to edit as well. She loves the new mix and the fact that she's learning something new every day.

Liz offers writing, editing, and proofreading services to a variety of clients. Although her work has been well received, she's concerned that her business lacks focus. Luckily, positive experiences on some recent Web projects, including one that involves writing and editing career- and job-search-related content, have suggested that a closer focus on Web content might be a logical next step. Among her goals: update her website to reflect her increasing interest in Web-based projects, continue to improve her copywriting skills, and explore books and possibly a course on taxonomy, a discipline that would satisfy her generalist sensibilities while offering another possible area of focus.

Six Tips for Focusing Your Business

While there are no strict rules for focusing your business, there are some basic guidelines you can follow. Whether you've been in business for a while or are just starting out, we hope you'll benefit from some of these tips:

- 1. Figure out what you love to do and what you do well.** Invest in whatever tools you need to help you figure this out. We both like *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, which gives you great insight into your motivated skills. Many books for freelancers and small-business owners offer excellent advice on self-assessment and defining your business (see our Suggested Reading list).
- 2. Once you know what want to do, commit to it.** Don't just think about it, take action. For example, when Bette decided to focus on training, she joined ASTD (the American Society for Training and Development), created professional training materials, and promoted this service line through networking and marketing. She's making similar efforts to market her medical editing services to prospective clients.
- 3. Identify your ideal client.** "Specialize" in clients that offer the work you want, respect you as a professional, and pay you well.

While this seems self-evident, both of us have worked in situations where that wasn't the case. Yes, you will often need to take assignments just to pay the bills, but striving to find clients that are a good fit should be a top goal.

- 4. Educate yourself continuously.** Continuing education is not only critical for establishing credibility, it also helps you further define what you want to do. As Bette pursues training and certification through the American Medical Writers Association and the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences, she is constantly gaining insights on her skills and abilities. Stay tuned for more certification possibilities through STC this year, too.
- 5. Offer closely related services.** Offering related services allows you to achieve variety but still have control over your marketing and educational efforts. It's also a way to leverage your investments. For example, the work Bette is doing to educate herself for medical editing is helping her further refine her training services for her med-tech clients.
- 6. Be open to new experiences.** Opportunities will arise that you didn't necessarily plan for, but being open to change is critical to success. When one of her med-tech

training clients asked Bette to edit some medical materials, she accepted the offer. Editing is now one of her key services and one that she enjoys immensely.

When it comes to focusing your business, the tips above just barely scratch the surface. And, as we mentioned earlier, the specialist-vs.-generalist debate is a complex topic that we didn't have room for here. For more on the debate and how generalists can thrive in a specialist world, check out *Freelance Folder*, an online community for independents. In a discussion titled "Do You Need to Specialize to Succeed?" participants tackle the issue head-on and also discuss frequent stereotypes and misconceptions.

We believe that to succeed as a generalist and an independent, you don't need to change who you are (nor should you try), but you *do* need to find ways to define your business. Some of that will come through self-assessment, some through training and education, and some through serendipity and openness to new opportunities.

Of course, figuring all this out takes time; it won't happen overnight. Expect plenty of trial and error as you strive to discover the ideal combination of services and clients. The main thing, as Parker tells us, is to just get started: "Stake out a claim and start working on it. If you don't find gold, try another claim." **i**

SUGGESTED READING

HALL, STACEY, AND JAN BROGNEZ. *Attracting Perfect Customers: The Power of Strategic Synchronicity*. San Francisco: Berrett Koehler, 2001. Offers a "Strategic Attraction Planning Process" to help you identify and retain clients that are the best fit for your business.

PARKER, LUCY V AND KAREN IVORY. *How to Start a Home-Based Writing Business (5th Edition)*. Guilford, Connecticut: Globe Pequot Press, 2008. Provides in-depth guidance on defining and planning your business, including identifying the assignments you're best suited for.

RATH, TOM. *StrengthsFinder 2.0*. New York: Gallup Press, 2007. Offers a way of identifying the five "Signature Strengths" that, when put to use, produce consistent excellence and satisfaction in one's work. Based on Gallup studies of successful managers.

SLAUNWHITE, STEVE, PETE SAVAGE, AND ED GANDIA. *The Wealthy Freelancer*. Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2010. Offers 10 strategies for thriving as a freelancer. Includes chapters on getting clients, focusing and marketing your business, achieving work-life balance, and more.

SPENCER, LAURA. "Do You Need to Specialize to Succeed?" *Freelance Folder* (<http://freelancefolder.com/freelance-specialist-vs-generalist/>), 2 December 2009. Presents a discussion of misconceptions about specialists and generalists. Includes more than 40 comments from participants.

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