Don't Just Say "No"

by Ben Young

When a project manager is spreading work around to staffers, agencies and freelancers, the first concerns are usually capacity and expertise. The project manager depends on reliable assessments of these points to make decisions on which components go where. Wouldn't you? Internal employees may be able to drop what they are doing to sign on to a new project, given adequate pressure and support from within the hierarchy. Agencies that are large enough may start preparing a bid on the spot, sight unseen, confident they can shuffle around current resources or even hire new writers to cover the fresh workload. But a different kind of flexibility is required in the freelancer or small company.

As independents, we can move quickly and with virtually no bureaucratic constraints into a variety of situations. We're wonderful that way. Unfortunately, given the limitations in quantum physics and cloning techniques, we can only be in one place at any one time. This applies especially to Shining Armour Projects (SAPs) where a well-clad physical presence or exclusivity is required. These simply cannot be double booked, and if a client calls with a project that coincides with an SAP, it is in everyone's interest to be honest and state your availability with calendar in hand. There might be some hesitation on the part of a freelancer to point out a conflict of schedules—be it fear of alienation, sheer embarrassment, or beginner's hubris—but nobody is going to be interested in your motives when the deadline arrives with no document.

The good news is that there are so many projects that can be done strictly by mail, phone and fax. Moreover, most clients will respect the fact that you are working for more than one company, and that you must either honour existing obligations or die and be gone forever. This is where net and gross times come in. When preparing for a straightforward study report or publication, for example, one usually has to name the net time for the work that will be the basis of the bid. But one can also be clear that the gross time will be two or three times that of the net. This is usually acceptable but, if not, there are usually projects that can be shifted or shared.

With regard to expertise, most writers I know seem to be able to move into new pharmaceutical areas without too much trouble. If clients are well informed in advance that you have limited expertise in a subject, and they are willing to share a risk with you, it can be remarkable what a simple "yes" can do. It's a win-win situation. In our case, some clients have sent amazingly useful literature, while others have been content to let us go after it on our own. I'm here to tell you it works either way.

It can be a different matter altogether with the types of documentation out there. Most of us have our strong points such as individual reports, papers and so on. But when there's a tight schedule involving a document type one is less comfortable with, then it may be better to recommend someone else, or at least offer to ask around. In other words, don't just say no.

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