



Ten questions for ...

John Carpenter

by John Carpenter

In 100 words, what is your background and how did you become a freelancer?

As an impoverished pharmacology undergraduate in London in the 1960s, I helped pay my way through university by writing abstracts for Derwent's MedDoc system. Then came a PhD in Canada, and a Lectureship in Pharmacology at Manchester University. In response to an advertisement I started medical writing in my 'spare' time, before joining Gardiner-Caldwell Communications as Senior Medical Writer in 1992, then to Medical Action Communications as head of a medical writing team (1999). When they made most of the writers (including me) redundant and after a short spell with another agency in London, I set up as a freelancer writer in 2001.

What is your most important piece of advice for people setting up a new business?

Be an expert in the services you offer.

What do you like about being a freelancer?

The freedom to work at the pace I want, at the time I want, and to be able to manage my work so that I can go out and play whenever I want (usually!).

What do you dislike about being a freelancer?

Nothing really, except for clients who don't pay their invoices on time.

What are your main sources of work?

Medical communications agencies.

What are the most rewarding projects to work on?

The projects I enjoy most are being asked to advise on communications strategies, facilitating and chairing meetings (e.g. Advisory Boards), and teaching workshops for the pharmaceutical industry. These are also the most financially rewarding types of projects as clients are prepared to pay well for my knowledge and experience.

What are the least rewarding projects to work on?

Copy editing, and rewriting papers written by other writers for resubmission to journals after rejection.

Do you have a preferred type of client? If yes, why?

Without a doubt the best clients are those who discuss everything before you accept the project, provide good unambiguous briefs and have efficient review processes. And who pay invoices on time!

What is the best way to say 'No' to clients?

When I set out as a freelancer, I set myself one golden rule—never refuse work from a new client (unless it was outside my area of expertise). This has worked well and has given me a reasonably broad client base. Most of the 'new' clients I have worked for have become 'established' clients; I feel quite comfortable telling an established client that I don't have the capacity to take on their projects, knowing that they have been satisfied with my work in the past and will probably come back to me in the future. Occasionally, though, I have made the mistake of taking on work when I didn't really have the capacity, as a result of which quality has slipped, and I have consequently disappointed a few clients.

Would you ever consider working for a company (again) as a fulltime employee? If yes, why?

I am quite content to be winding down in order to enjoy my retirement, but yes, I would accept a position working for a company as a fulltime employee. The job would need to be a particularly challenging one, such as setting up a medical writing department or changing the internal culture of a medical writing department—something that would stretch my knowledge, experience and skills to their limits. However, the offer would have to be very special with an enormous salary.

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