

15 tips from a veteran of independence

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"Son," my dad always said, "I can't tell you in a few minutes what it's taken me years to learn." Dad never met the editor of PR Tactics. So with 28 years in our business, the last 10 in independent practice, here's the pithy list of tips for independents for which he asked. My unique credentials? I've made every mistake.

Incorporate. It says you're serious, insulates your personal finances from your company's and provides tax and other financial advantages you'd be foolish to miss.

Specialize. The world does not need another generalist publicity/special events/newsletter company. If this is what you plan to offer, you're not ready to go solo.

Don't downplay your competitive advantage. My average hourly rate is still 22 percent lower than it was in 1990 when I was a senior vice president for a large agency. Potential clients are savvy enough to recognize the economic and other advantages of hiring a pro like you without the associated "big agency" overhead. Capitalize on it.

Outsource. You tell clients that dealing with a specialist like you matters. Take your own advice: Get an attorney and an accountant. Use specialists to do what you couldn't possibly do well, such as setting up your corporation and books, managing your investments and maintaining your own media database.

Play by the rules. Keep proper records (see Outsource), pay your taxes on time and don't test the limits of the IRS. My accountant says, "hogs get slaughtered."

Create a supportive work environment for yourself. You're serious, right? Then what are you doing in your pajamas in the spare bedroom with an old door on sawhorses? Get dressed and create a professional, supportive space in which to do your work.

Do business with people you trust and respect. Corollary: Do not do business with people you don't trust and respect.
Go to work. Do it every business day and do it all day long. If you're working at home (as I do) the dishes/laundry/cleaning/errands/yard work must wait until 6 p.m. I promise, they won't go away.

Just say no to crummy request for proposals. If the prospect needs to hire

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kind of input you need to respond intelligently? If the RFP is full of “objectives” like “generate enthusiasm,” “position the company as the leading provider of end-to-end solutions,” “educate the public” and “get our message out there,” don’t bother.

Don’t give away the store. You sell time and expertise for a living. If you must give away free samples, make them small. If the prospect asks for a proposal after your complimentary one-hour consultation, sell him or her a plan. Isn’t that a critical part of what you do for a living?

Know your (copy)rights. You own the work you produce until you sell it, give it away or license it. Your client does not. Don’t give up the future commercial use of your work products. Start with a prominent copyright on the plans you sell to prospects — even though it’s unnecessary. If you didn’t know that, reread *Outsource*.

Never (ever) lower your price. It says you don’t value your service. When the client wants a lower price ask, “Which part of my service do you want to eliminate?”

Use the technology. Buy and use the critical hardware and software tools of your profession and learn how to use them fully and properly. This is a key competitive advantage.

Have a Web site. It’s your ticket of admission for most prospects. Make sure it is as well-designed as the service you deliver.

Never deliver a work product of lesser quality than a client can produce in-house. Why would clients keep you around to deliver inferior work? (See *Use the technology*.)

My dad often quoted a Pittsburgh Pirates player who said that “Experience is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, the lesson afterwards.” If you’re planning to go solo, plan to learn every day.

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