Chapter 13

Afterword: The Business of the Web

This afterword will look at a few different areas on how to best conduct business as it relates to the Web. We’ve known brilliant designers who weren’t very adept at billing. We’ve known excellent developers who have had trouble getting paid because they didn’t work out the terms of an agreement before starting work. Freelancing is a very popular option among people working on the Web. We don’t know whether it’s the nature of the industry or just the personality type of the people who work online, but based on conversations we’ve had at conferences with others working in the field, there seems to be a really high occurrence of people doing side work for themselves among those employed at larger organizations. It’s not uncommon to find individuals who work in completely different fields such as print design or photography (we’ve even met a couple of licensed electricians!) to occasionally work in web development.

This afterword will most apply to freelancers, or people in business for themselves. If you’re working for a company, you will likely have other people who will handle things such as invoicing, setting your rates, and collecting payment (consider yourself lucky there). From time to time, everyone will have to find a little help though, so the section on hiring is fairly universal.

Basic needs of the freelance web professional

You have skills and a love for what you do. In order to turn that into a business, however, you’re going to need a little bit more. If all you want is to build websites for the love of creating something, best wishes to you, and feel free to skip this chapter. If, on the other hand, you want to make a living at what you’re doing, you will need to handle the business side of things too. The good news is that, as far as businesses go,
web design/development is one of the easier ones to be in. You don’t have to worry about inventory, shipping, or accepting returns; and you can outsource things like web hosting to any number of commercial web hosts. The risk factors are really limited because all you need in terms of equipment is a computer, and most folks have one of those already.

If this is going to be a viable business though, you’ll need to have a way to find clients, convince them that they should have you do the work for them, and then ensure that you get paid for the work you do. It’s only intimidating when you put it in terms like “accounts receivable,” “nondisclosure agreement,” and “payment schedule.” These terms all translate to plain English just as HTML, CSS, and JavaScript do for you now.

We think that the biggest shift you need to make is to get into the mind-set that you’re running a business. Even if your livelihood doesn’t depend on the income you’re getting from contract work, pretend that it does (it’s not as easy as it sounds). Your attitude and approach toward watching your finances and interacting with clients/prospective clients will completely change. While it’s great that you love what you do professionally, given the option, would you rather spent that chunk of time developing a web site or enjoying the outdoors with family and friends?

Being legally well informed

We’ll preface this section with the common Internet disclaimer of “we are not lawyers.” Even if we were, it would be impossible for us to write legal advice that would be common across all countries, states, provinces, or even cities. If you’re in doubt about anything, we encourage you to seek competent legal advice. With that in mind, there are some basics that we can talk about, such as types of businesses, and we will describe some of the current best practices in the industry.

Freelancing on the side

We can’t think of a single designer or developer we know employed full-time who doesn’t freelance. Most employers are completely fine with it, as long as it isn’t done on company time or using company resources (equipment, bandwidth, server space, and so on). Freelancing on the side is a great way to get started if you’re eventually planning on going solo; it allows you to build a client base while still having the security of a salary and medical benefits.

The flip side is that if you become successful, you could find yourself with very little free time. It’s pretty difficult to find motivation to work on client projects after having spent eight hours at the office, especially if your full-time job is working with the Web, too. When we were working in this situation, we would always be up-front with new clients about the lay of the land. We wouldn’t try to pretend that we were working full-time on their project; we told them that it was a side business. If your client really wants to work with you, and they’re somewhat flexible, things will be fine.

So how do you find the motivation? Love for what you’re doing is a big part of it. Only accept projects that interest you and that you know you’ll be successful at. Also, set reasonable expectations for yourself; you won’t be able to put in four hours every day after work, and then spend 10 hours each day of the weekend working on projects. Allow yourself some leisure time, or you’re sure to burn out.

Making the transition

One of the most common questions is, “How do I know when to quit my full-time job and freelance full-time?”—assuming that’s your ultimate goal. There is no hard-and-fast rule on when you’re safe to leave a regular paycheck, but you definitely need to start thinking about some savings if that’s the direction you’re headed.