

Find Your Easy-start Niche and Launch Your Professional Practice

With a Bang

By Marcia Yudkin

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In the last four years, I've helped close to two dozen people become consultants and launch their practice. After helping so many people figure out their easiest, most promising way to start earning money with a new skill and build a clientele, I should probably patent the method! Here are the steps, though, which I believe will work for just about anyone who's already had some professional or personal experience as an adult.

First, ask yourself what groups of people you have contacts with or you have a special affinity with because of your professional or life experience. One protégé had been an executive recruiter two careers previously, and though he didn't have any current contacts in the industry, knew he could come across with uncommon credibility with recruiters since he had "been there." Another decided to target gay and lesbian business owners in her city, since she belonged in that category and knew several professional groups where she could network and contribute to their newsletter.

Second, catalogue your preferences. Do you enjoy working with the folks in the groups that came up in answer to question #1? I strongly believe that if you don't respect and like your clients, it comes across and your business will never catch fire and glow healthily. One of my trainees decided not to pursue ad agencies as clients because she'd met too many "phonies" at such organizations.

Third, research whether a certain niche is reachable and large enough to sustain a practice. A protégé who wanted to do copywriting with software companies in her geographical area between \$10 and \$50 million in annual sales was able to identify more than a hundred of them within a two-hour drive of her house. That meant a green light for her launch. If there were only four or five such companies, I'd have encouraged her to find a

different niche to start with, or to target other groups at the same time from the start.

Fourth, do a reality check: Does this group have the money and willingness to pay for your services? Some professions and demographic groups are accustomed to paying for professional services, while others aren't used to doing so and balk at even reasonable fees. For instance, as a former college professor I should have been able to rack up tens of thousands of dollars from other professors wanting to be published. However, in 20 years I've encountered very few professors open to the idea of paying for help on their writing, and I discourage others from choosing this as a niche. Likewise, I don't believe it would be wise to target 20-somethings as clients, since their own earnings are low and they've probably never hired any kind of consultant before.

Fifth, decide on one or more marketing vehicles that you feel comfortable with and fashion a pitch for your services using them. One former sales executive excelled at calling up strangers and marketing to them by phone, while practically everyone else I've worked with chose some combination of direct mail, networking and a Web site to get their business off the ground.

I should add that when launching your professional practice, it's smart to do a few jobs free to collect a portfolio of samples and/or testimonials.

After you milk your chosen niche and have a solid financial foundation, you can certainly change your target, adding new groups and abandoning populations that don't fulfill your expectations. You might end up offering your services to anyone and everyone, but that's not the shrewdest starting point. Even with my easy-start formula you'll need some patience, but it maximizes the odds that business will start and continue coming in at a rate that encourages you to stick with it until your practice is unquestionably off the ground.

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