

Freelancing in Three Acts by Peter Economy

Many people know me as a columnist, a book author, or a small-business owner—but they've all got the wrong idea. I mean, I am all the above, but most of the time, I'm an actor. (All serious freelancers are actors.) When I work with clients, I play more roles than Eddie Murphy did in "The Nutty Professor": one day I'm a Web-smart entrepreneur, next day I'm a management consultant, day after that I'm a mediator. I'm a one-man improvisational troupe, and every job's a chance to add new characters to my repertoire. In fact, when my agent called last week to ask me whether I'd like a dramatic new gig—let's call the client Mr. X—I said, "Lights! Camera! Action!"

First Act: Audition

"The gatekeepers understand their job to be this: to supply the appropriate, predictable actor for the part. They base their choice on the actor's appearance, credits, and quote—as if they were hiring a plumber."
— David Mamet, "Auditions"

Your first role in any client-relations scenario is salesperson. Many business owners find this an unpleasant part to play; they see the salesperson as some kind of sleazy huckster. This is too bad: playing the salesperson is an essential part of client relations. It's a poor freelancer—literally—who can't sell him- or herself.

How does a salesperson act? Simple: you need to figure out what a client wants and then present yourself as the best person for the project. (In fact, a good salesperson sounds less like a con artist and more like a capable and enthusiastic problem solver.)

How can you prepare for this role? Rehearsal, of course. Give yourself the sales speech. Try it out on your spouse. You might even videotape it, just to see if it looks and sounds convincing to you. (If you don't believe that you're the best person for the job, neither will the client.)

Anyway, it didn't take long to see how to play my audition with Mr. X. I've built my reputation by writing business books—if someone needs an expert on consulting, home-based businesses, or leadership, I'm the man.

But my client-to-be is one of the nation's foremost exercise wizards, a guy who gets paid something like \$350 for an hour of his time. And while I'm no exercise expert (it's been far too long since my abs and gluts have seen the inside of a gym), I can build a solid, well-formed book proposal. Which is exactly what my client had in mind—I was to write a proposal for an exercise book that would put this guy on the bestseller list. Take a look at my pitch:

Mr. X: (Looking over the top of his glasses) So, Peter, what makes you think that you're the right guy for the job?

Peter: (Leaning towards Mr. X, and speaking in a confident, conspiratorial tone) You might think that I only write business books—and if you look me up on Amazon.com, that's what you'll find—but that's not really the whole story. I've also worked on a lot of other books, and one in particular—a book on how to eat right—has sold hundreds of thousands of copies as a direct result of my deft touch with a keyboard. I could do the same for you.

Mr. X: (Raising his eyebrows) Really?

Peter: You bet—piece of cake. When do you want me to start?

Mr. X: (Reaching for his checkbook) How about right now?

Okay, so the conversation didn't go exactly like that, and it took far more than a snappy line or two to convince my client that I could handle the project, but you get the idea. As an actor, it was my job to persuade my client-to-be that I was an expert in my field, and convince him to write a check that would get the project started. In this case, I played both roles to perfection—and so should you if you want to succeed.

Second Act: Collaboration

Next thing I knew, we were working together. And I had been recast—as a collaborator.

It's not always easy to collaborate, especially for someone who wants to have George Lucas-like control of a

project. Truth is, most clients want a say in their projects—and who can blame them? They are, after all, paying for the work. It's a green, or really egocentric, business owner who thinks he can get through a gig without being a collaborator.

In this case, collaboration was essential: although I was a human biology major in college, I'm not what you'd call an expert in human anatomy. Problem was, I had to write as though I knew about this stuff. So, to make sure we were both on the same page, my client spent an entire morning walking me through the basics of exercise physiology. I may not be a trainer, but now I can certainly sound like one. (Take it from me, it's far more complicated than saying, "Pump you up.")

There were other opportunities to collaborate as well. When Mr. X handed me a draft of his manuscript, it was clear that he didn't know how to approach the editors he was pitching to. The manuscript was peppered with the kind of talk that you'd hear from guys who spend most of their lives in a gym. He didn't see any problem, but I did, and we worked together to create a product that would be acceptable to his target audience.

The lesson? You need to listen to your client. Remember, too, to be humble. Avoid jargon that the client wouldn't understand, and make sure the client is comfortable asking any questions. A big part of successful collaboration is making the client feel like your partner—even if you think some of his ideas are as dumb as a stick of gum.

Third Act: Improvisation

What sort of roles will I have to assume as the relationship between me and my spanking-new client develops? I just don't know. I can't. A typical job will often involve a series of quick changes, and it can be dangerous to imagine a static or predictable role for yourself. Of course, this uncertainty isn't exactly comforting. The best way to deal with it is to remain loose and not commit yourself to just one starring role (say, photographer, illustrator, or IT specialist).

Knowing which role to play and when to play it comes mostly from experience, the kind of experience you gain from working with a lot of clients. But it also comes from being sensitive to your clients' needs and watching for cues. When your clients want you to play a specific role, they'll give you a signal. For example, if a client says, "Tell me more about your experience in our industry," it's time to step into the role of expert. Or if another client says, "Here's what we've tried in the past, can you think of a better approach?" you should don your problem-solving chapeau.

Above all, your act must remain flexible. Be willing to change according to the audience's needs. If you pick up the appropriate cues and act on them, you'll have a happy client, one who'll sing your praises and eagerly look forward to your next command performance.

Article by Peter Economy (www.petereconomy.com). Peter is Associate Editor for the award-winning magazine "Leader to Leader," and coauthor of "Why Aren't You Your Own Boss?," "Leadership Ensemble: Lessons in Collaborative Management from the World's Only Conductorless Orchestra," "Strategic Tools for Social Entrepreneurs: Enhancing the Performance of Your Enterprising Nonprofit," "Managing For Dummies," and many others. Call Peter at 619-218-7665, fax him at 858-454-7974, or drop him a line at peter@petereconomy.com.

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