



Business Matters

Are you self-employed? Would you like to be? This column explores the joys and challenges of managing your own business in technical communication. Please share your experience and ideas. Contact Bette Frick at efrick@textdoctor.com.

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From Cold Feet to Cold Calls

BY ELIZABETH G. (BETTE) FRICK, *Senior Member*

This year, my condominium homeowners' association created an organic community garden for association members. I thought, "What the heck ... it's been twenty years since I had a vegetable garden; I'll give it a try."

For some reason, though, I avoided planting anything in the forty square feet that was my allotted portion of dirt. I stewed and fretted and obsessed about selecting vegetable seeds, planting them, and fertilizing them. Finally, my daughter handed me Mel Bartholomew's *All New Square Foot Gardening: Grow More in Less Space*. Bartholomew argues that dividing a garden into squares instead of rows helps gardeners reap more produce with less maintenance and waste. Well, I thought, what have I to lose? One summer's crop was my only risk.

So I mapped out forty squares and tentatively planted as Bartholomew directed. Still, it was difficult to believe that the seeds would grow into plants, let alone produce vegetables for my table.

Dealing with Fear

I started my garden not long after I moved to Boulder, Colorado, to be near my grandson, Axel. I continued to maintain my clients in Minnesota, and, in spite of commuting costs, was still making a profit. Then a few clients fell on hard times and temporarily cancelled upcoming work. So here I was, with a shrinking client list, mounting bills, and an empty garden. The universe was telling me it was time to start marketing my

services in Colorado.

I did the usual: I updated my brochure and went to networking meetings of professional organizations. Nothing much came from these few seeds I cast out, which is normal for early marketing. In a response to an online survey that I conducted, another independent discussed the same difficulties I was facing and suggested a solution: "I'm just getting started as a freelancer and I do not yet have enough clients to survive financially. I have created profiles on Web sites of professional organizations... Still, my prospects are not calling me, so I'm calling them."

That was it! Cold calls! I would simply lay out a system and start calling target companies in this market. (I define a "cold" call as any experience calling a complete stranger to pitch your services. A "warm" call, in contrast, is one where you have a referral or at least someone's name to use to warm up the prospect.)

Suddenly, paralysis set in. It didn't matter that I had made cold calls in the past, with good results. It didn't help that I understood the process and believed in it. Total, utter fear kept me from picking up the phone to call my first prospect.

What caused my fear? I talked it over with a colleague and started journaling. It wasn't long before I found the roots of my fear, buried deep in my family of origin. I meditated on what I had learned from my family and lovingly let it go.

And I remembered my favorite quote from Eleanor Roosevelt: "You gain

strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do." Eleanor also said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." That was part of the problem: I was projecting rejection, and it was not productive.

Into Action: My Steps Out of Fear

I needed support, obviously, but I was new in town and didn't have a very large network. I turned to the mailing list of STC's consulting and independent contracting special interest group and asked for volunteers to form a marketing support group on Yahoo! Our group has grown to forty-two and I've learned so much from every member (everyone is welcome to join us—just send me an e-mail).

I thought I had let go of the fear, but it resurfaced when I went to make my first call. Refusing to be sabotaged, I posted a message that morning asking for members to practice cold calling with me. It was great to bounce my script off fellow independents and to hear their scripts. I was back on track.

Then one of my practice buddies suggested getting an "accountability partner"—someone to whom I express my goals and report my progress, and vice versa. What a great concept! So I joined her in accounting for my efforts weekly.

Another practice buddy recommended two invaluable books by Peter Bowerman—*The Well-Fed Writer* and

The Well-Fed Writer: Back for Seconds. The first introduces cold calls as a part of marketing, and the second offers even more: scripts, sample letters, e-mails, and other support materials. These books are so useful that I urge you to read them both. The first is great if you are new to being independent. *Back for Seconds* is for more seasoned veterans, but everyone should read the chapter on cold calls. Bowerman assures us that B2B (business-to-business) calls are not covered under the recent telemarketing laws, and he also helps dispel any correlation between professional cold calls and telemarketing services.

So I started making calls, and each call was easier than the last. Here are some tricks I learned and some that have been suggested by other independents:

Identify targets. In addition to asking my network for names of prospects, I used databases to build my prospect calling lists. *The Well-Fed Writer: Back for Seconds* offers database sources on page 86. My local library had a useful free database, *Reference USA*, which any library patron can access from home, and my local chamber of commerce offered a very helpful seminar on searching this and other databases. The seminar taught me to data-mine by company size, industry, location, and other parameters. Many records included a human resources (HR) contact, my usual point of entry.

I also asked my network for names of prospects. Another independent suggests that you research a company before you call to find out what it does and how. You can then ask intelligent questions when talking to a prospect.

Create a system to track prospects and your interactions. You'll probably use spreadsheets or databases for this. Listing all my prospects on one sheet, mocking me every day, was overwhelming and intimidating. So I devised a low-tech, intimate little box of 3x5 cards. And I went one step further: I took pictures of what I wanted to use my business profits for and glued them onto the box that held my 3x5 cards. (I have pictures of Axel, representing the time I want to take off to spend with him; a picture of the San

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Diego Zoo, where our upcoming family reunion will be held and where we will celebrate my 60th birthday; and that GPS I want to buy so I won't keep getting lost in Colorado.) Call me corny, but the pictures helped me visualize my harvest.

Write a script and practice, practice, practice. I wrote several scripts: One for when I reach a prospect, one for when I get voicemail, and one for when I don't have a name and need to ask the receptionist. I'd be happy to share my scripts with you; you'll also find great sample scripts in *The Well-Fed Writer: Back for Seconds*, pp. 90–92. I printed the scripts on green paper (a symbol for money—call me corny again). I used a large font so I could follow the text easily when I was talking on the phone. Practicing the script ensures that it will sound more conversational than canned.

Develop tricks and bribes to help you stick with your plan. Here are mine, and you can call me corny a third time:

- I dress up and put makeup on before I place my calls. This helps me feel more professional than when I'm in my standard shorts and t-shirt. As soon as I'm done, I get comfortable again.
- Every day, I prescribe a different treat for when I'm done with my calls: a short hike, a visit to my favorite consignment shop, an ice cream cone. Sometimes I go out to water my garden and breathe in the fertility.

Decide on your timing. Bowerman believes

you should call around 8 in the morning and after 4 in the afternoon. I find I don't reach many prospects then, so I try to call from 9 to 11 AM or from 1 to 3 PM. This schedule allows me to reach more prospects directly and leaves enough time to mail any materials to them before the post office closes. Having your materials ready to go helps a lot. Then all you have to do is type a letter and address the envelope.

One of my support group members, Carol Elkins, suggests making several very brief hits on a prospect's time rather than trying to schedule a long interview: "Send them a brochure, follow up with a call. If they sound interested, request a five-minute interview. From that call, learn what they need. Follow up with a letter addressing those specific needs. Send lots of thank-you notes, both snail-mail and e-mail."

Offer something of value. Elkins also points out that "time is money for employers. They are spending money simply by talking to you. Make it worth their while. Either give them something valued-added (such as a white paper or a quick evaluation/edit of one of their documents) or help them see that their decision to hire you will be profitable for them." My support group has had a few discussions online about offering free samples; some feel this is unprofessional. I do offer a free one-hour training, which has netted me five appointments from about thirty calls.

Consider cold calls at various times in your career. Cold calls work great for start-up independents and for those who have been in business for a while. Gail Hynes Shea, another support group member, writes: "I've had (mostly) the same clients for many years. The rest of my work comes by referral. Generally, I have work booked three or more months forward. However, right now, I don't. I have a couple of very live possibilities, but no work from them yet. This state of affairs usually doesn't bother me, and I take the hiatus to catch up on everything else in my life. But with one son in college and two more on their way, I'm

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Cold Calls

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thinking, ‘Earn, baby, earn!’ Right now, I don’t think I can afford the luxury of waiting for work to come to me. Cold calls might broaden my client base. Maybe I could even charge a bit more if I concentrated on private companies and took on fewer nonprofits.”

Celebrate your successes. Many independents say they don’t make calls because of their fear of rejection. Early in my process, I had two rejections, but they were so polite and respectful that I didn’t wither. And to balance those two rejections, I had two huge successes: HR managers who said, “You know, we’ve been talking about writing training for a long time. Why don’t you come in and show us your stuff?”

Opening the Floodgates

Whatever your comfort level with cold calls, there is no doubt that this tactic can be productive. Elkins said she obtained her biggest and oldest client via a cold call. Bowerman swears by cold calls: “Cold calling does work. It may not be working for you, but you simply cannot even come to that flawed conclusion until you’ve done a TON of it . . . stick with it a little longer, the floodgates [will] open” (*Seconds*, p. 87). I believe cold calls are the fastest way to obtain work, certainly faster than networking and other passive forms of marketing. Bowerman stresses that cold calls aren’t absolutely necessary—you can build your business more slowly—but they can be an immense help.

Whether or not you receive a flood of business from your cold calls, you’ll

definitely learn more about your market, your product (service), and yourself. Once I overcame my fear, started applying discipline and organization to the process, and asked for help, I started to see my marketing seeds sprout and grow.

And my garden? I have so many tomatoes and zucchini, neighbors avert their eyes when I walk toward them with a bowl of harvest in my hands. ❶

SUGGESTED READINGS

Bowerman, Peter. *The Well-Fed Writer*. Atlanta: Fanove, 2000.

———. *The Well-Fed Writer: Back for Seconds*. Atlanta: Fanove, 2005.

Strange Rules

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The subjunctive uses a slightly different tense structure from the indicative (principally *were* instead of *was*) and applies to statements that are wishes, or that are doubtful or contrary to fact, as in, “I wish he were here.”

Imagined Errors

Williams reserves a special section for what he calls “The Bêtes Noires,” or rules that he says are “largely capricious, with no foundation in logic, history, etymology, or linguistic efficiency.”

He heads the list of supposed errors with the use of *like* instead of *as*, as in “Write like you talk.” Right behind that is *different than* rather than *different from*, as in, “These numbers are different than the others.” Very few of us today take the trouble to use *different from*.

Williams’ third bête noire is the familiar *hopefully*, as in, “Hopefully, the matter will be resolved soon.” The claim that “the matter does not hope” is not valid. Therefore, *hopefully* can definitely be used attributively, like other introductory words, such as *candidly*, *seriously*, *frankly*, *honestly*, *sadly*, or *happily*.

Williams readily allows the use of *fi-*

nalize, although I’m sure he doesn’t like it to be overused, as it is in many technical papers.

He also thinks that we have gotten a bit oversensitive to prohibiting “absolute” words like *perfect*, *unique*, *complete*, or *final* to be modified by *quite*, *more*, or *very*. Even the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution talks about “a more perfect” union.

Authors’ Choice

It’s quite clear that authors have a wide choice when it comes to grammar, not just a single set of “correct” rules. And this choice is not rigid. It follows the way educated people speak when they are trying to influence people. The key word is choice.

Thus, Williams is not saying that rules do not matter. They do. But they vary with different authorities, and over the years they change.

Certainly, it’s well for authors to know a wide range of rules. But the chief discipline is not grammar, but rather idiom—the way educated people speak and write. This is what we need to learn to communicate effectively. ❶

Minneapolis

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Downtown Stillwater offers antiques galore, an antiquarian book lover’s paradise, and diverse gift stores.

This small town hosts a logging and railroad museum, and many unique Victorian bed and breakfast inns. Ride the Minnesota Zephyr dinner train, board an old-fashioned paddlewheel boat for a river boat tour, or take the city trolley tour to learn about local outlaws, logging tycoons, and the beautiful architecture of the town. To plan your day or make reservations, visit www.stillwatertraveler.com and www.ilovestillwater.com.

The city of Rochester is probably most famous as the home of the world-renowned Mayo Clinic. It is seventy-six miles southeast of the Twin Cities. Take a tour of the Mayo Clinic, visit the restored and refurbished William Dee Log Cabin (dating back to 1862) and the traditional one-room Hadley Valley School House, and walk around the George Stoppel Farm. For more information about the area, visit www.rochestercub.org and www.rochestermn.com, or for information on the Mayo Clinic, try www.mayoclinic.org. ❶