

Carol Tice:

Hi, everybody. It's Carol Tice, the Den Mother. Welcome to our weekly Den Meeting. We've just come out of doing a four-week Boot Camp, so in January we were all kind of in one themed topic all month. This month we're back to our regular Den Meetings, and having a variety of interesting guests and tackling different topics that might help you earn more money as a freelance writer. My guest today is somebody who I have kind of been hanging around in social media with for a while.

I feel like our paths just kept crossing, and then Greg and I got into this conversation about how he had repositioned himself to earn more money as a freelance writer. I wanted him to come on to talk about that. He has a few different gigs going on. He is a content strategist at Help Scout, which is an e-mail software company. His blog is Sparring Mind, and I'll let him tell you more about what he does. To just start it off, Greg, talk a little bit about the world of content marketing and what that phrase even means.

Greg Ciotti:

Definitely. So content marketing in a nutshell is essentially using your blog to bring traffic in. You kind of act like a very small publication, and instead of relying on advertising or things like that you sell your own product. For instance, at Help Scout we run the Customer Loyalty Blog, as we call it. We talk about customer support.

I write articles on customer retention and things like that. It draws people in who are interested in customer loyalty and customer service, and then they also see that we offer customer support software. We get a lot of clients that way. So essentially it's creating great articles that draw people in, and when they're on your site they see your software or services, and they pay for them.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, that is my understanding, as well. We write useful stuff that tends to point people in the direction of, oh, this company has useful stuff I might need, better stuff that I might need to pay for, besides this one free tip they gave me. Yeah. I gather you were and still are freelance writing on the side, besides your Help Scout blog. Talk about how your thinking changed about how to present yourself and position yourself.

Greg Ciotti:

Definitely. Unfortunately for me I had to learn this lesson twice over my lifetime. The first time, back in high school actually, my very first job was working after school. I wanted to get into tutoring, and I found that it was really kind of a hassle. I was only trying to charge 15 dollars, and it just wasn't really working out. People were haggling at that low price, right? And so I'd been referred to a client. They were two downtown lawyers, a couple. Needless to say, they had plenty of money to spend on this kind of thing, right? I ended up working with them, and at the end of my first night working with them I did something smart, but it was totally by accident.

I kind of put the ball in their court for pricing. They ended up paying me 60 dollars an hour instead of the 25 or something I would've asked. I found that with these high paying clients not only was I making more money but there was no haggling, there was no really hassles or headaches that come with the low paying clients. So, like I said, I ran into this problem again later on, and fortunately I learned my lesson. I tried being a freelance writer, and it just really wasn't working. I was getting a lot of blog-related clients, and they wanted to pay me next to nothing, and then they also wanted to have all these demands after we had already sealed the deal.

I ended up repositioning myself. I said, well, what kind of people out there have money to really pay for great writers? The answer kind of came to me through working with the guys at the Buffer app, which is another startup I really love. They kind of let me know that, hey, everybody in the startup world, especially in the software startup world, we are begging for writers. We are desperate for writers. And yet they have a hard time finding these people because they're looking for quote, unquote, "content strategists."

They're not looking for freelance writers. And yet content strategy is...as we went over in the beginning there...the focal point is really great writing, right? So I started working with these software startups. Nowadays I'm fortunate enough that if I'm going to work with someone besides Help Scout on the side, I won't even open up any e-mails unless we're talking about \$100 an hour per article. It was a monumental increase from what I was doing in the past, and it all came about from this position change and going after the clients that had money.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, it's a big mind shift. And that's funny you say that because a hundred bucks a post was kind of the minimum I came up with myself when I got into paid blogging, too. I just felt like below there it doesn't make sense. It's not going to pencil out.

Greg Ciotti:

Right. The crazy thing is, like I said, you have all these writers out here looking for work, and yet you also have all these startups looking for writers. And I said, the divide is so strange, because it's really about the language that people use. So if I look in my inbox right now...our startup is in this thing called TechStars, which is kind of like a startup incubator. That means there's a lot of startups involved with us, and I'm very well networked with all of these software startups and stuff like that.

I talk to these people on a daily basis and right now in my inbox, literally right now, there's five people asking me, "Do you know any great content strategists that you could refer me to?" And I'm, "Well, I know a lot of great writers, but unfortunately they're not positioning themselves as content strategists," right? And one of the e-mails actually legitimately says at the end of the e-mail, "I would like to write someone that you know fat checks." And I'm, if only I could refer you to somebody.

Carol Tice:

Wow. That's mind-blowing. They have a disconnect there between the markets that have money and the writers that need to get gigs.

Greg Ciotti:

Right. So I'll quickly explain...I don't want to get into too much about startup stuff. I know that's not what people are interested in. But startup people get funding. When they have a good business idea they get funded. A lot of the startups...over at TechStars alone, they start with a million dollar funding round. These people have money to pay you to write, and they're all very desperate for content creators. Actually, one company that I really respect, VelocityPartners, puts out this piece called The Content Marketing Deluge. It's essentially that there's a huge skill gap in finding good content creators, right?

And what people are trying to do nowadays is, they're trying to force these SEO guys...you know the ones I'm talking about...and community managers, they're trying to force them to become the content people. I read this and I was, well, there's the problem right there. Really good content people start off as writers. So really to approach these type of companies that are willing to pay you need to position yourself as a content strategist, and you also need to learn the minimal other skills to bring in, and take your writing from freelance writing to content strategist writing.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. The way I define that divide is, SEO writers are writing for robots to read and writers are writing for people to read.

A lot of people who are stuck in low paid online writing don't understand. They're, "No matter how fast I dance I'm just making this crummy, crummy pay. Everyone offers crummy pay."

It's because you're writing for robots, and it doesn't have to be very good. It just has to have keywords at x density. Anybody can do it. Monkeys can do it. And that's why it'll never pay well.

You have to jump the fence to the world where it matters what you say. It has to be really, really well done, it has to address a really specific audience, which is often an arcane kind of audience...contractors who need to buy surety bonds. It's something where you have to actually have some knowledge and be able to write something compelling about a topic that's not easy to be interesting about. It takes some skill.

Greg Ciotti:

Very true. One of the funny things, as I was actually going over with you...Tom Ewer, who's a freelance writer...although maybe after the talk that we had today he'll change his title. He was talking with some of his better clients, which are almost all software companies. I mean, I don't want to corner people into going out and only writing for software companies, but those are the people that have money nowadays, especially online. He's noticed a lot of his clients were asking him to assume the role of content

strategist. They were kind of pushing towards him to do that, even though he currently defines himself as a freelance writer.

Carol Tice:

I think of Tom as a freelance blogger. He's been doing all blogging. Yeah, that's a good point. I wanted to circle back and just say, I've written for startups, and well-funded, venture capital funded startups...when people tell me, oh, it's a startup, blah, blah...I say, "Unless they have venture capital funding, you want to run, because it's usually not...they're very flaky, and they don't have a lot of money, and there's a lot of problems."

But if they have the venture capital funding, I find that they spend like the Fortune 500.

They spend big. It's not their money. It's like mad money, and they spend, spend, spend. And also, the other factor is that they have huge pressure on them to produce. That money has to be put to work quickly to bring in more customers, and drive sales, and show these investors that this was a good company to get involved in, and that we're ramping, and you're going to get your money back. They're under incredible pressure to build the business very quickly, and that's why they often turn to freelancers.

Because they don't even have the time to interview people, hire a staffer. They don't have the bandwidth to even think about doing that process and taking months finding just the right writer. They need to just roll. So if you can position yourself as the kind of person they can plug and play, who knows how to crank out blog posts that get traffic... And if you understand strategy, you understand how to get traffic to blog posts through social media, they are dying to meet you, and they will give you tons of work.

Just to give you one quick example, I worked for avvo.com, which is a big legal portal, right when they were first ramping. I think I did like six grand of content for them in a really short period of time. Dozens and dozens of hundred-word top level pages and then 500-word sub pages. They needed to build a whole infrastructure where every basic legal topic, they had a page on that would get people onto the site to use the service. So that's how it works. Then one day they run out of money and the gig is over, is the down side.

Greg Ciotti:

I was just going to add when you were talking about what kind of startup to go after, that is 100 percent true. One of the things that I highly advise, and you'll notice if you kind of look through where you see me pop up, I almost always exclusively write for B-to-B, business to business software companies.

The reason is that a lot of companies try to do the whole Pinterest thing where it's business to consumer and it's more of a fun app, and it doesn't take off. Those companies are one in a million. They almost never work out. Business to business stuff

is usually far more boring to write about. It's not exactly the sexiest thing ever to write about customer service advice and customer support advice, but those companies...

Carol Tice:

Software that helps restaurants automate their cash registers. Yeah, but that's why it pays more, is because they can't get anybody on earth to do that. It takes somebody who's really got some skill.

Greg Ciotti:

Right. So there's a tradeoff, essentially, from being a strictly freelance writer to content strategy. I'll kind of discuss real quickly what I saw the differences were. With the clients that I have now I check in to them almost not at all. With Reuben, for example, from Bidsketch, which is a company I write for. I don't tell him what my post idea's going to be for the week, I don't update him on the draft, or...nothing. I essentially write a post for the week, I put it in the Bidsketch blog, I save it as a draft, and I let him know. And I send him a bill afterwards. So you have this freedom as a content strategist.

But there's a flipside to that, right? With the freedom comes a lot of responsibility. You're not going to have people checking in with you a lot of times. You definitely have companies that are more communicative with you in terms of what they want you to do. But a lot of times content strategy relies on your own creativity and being able to handle things yourself. So with Reuben's stuff, as an example of the things I write on Bidsketch, and especially with the things that I write on Help Scout...I'm going to go over a quick example. I wrote a post called 15 Customer Loyalty Strategies that Work, right?

So it was my job to come up, and complete that, and send it in. But at the end I wanted to pick out a good keyword. We were just talking about SEO. I wanted to pick out a good keyword for this post because I knew I wasn't going to rank for customer loyalty. So I had to spend 20 minutes of my time researching one solid keyword for that post. I ended up finding customer retention strategies. When I sent the post in I said, "Hey, before you publish make sure the SEO title tag is 'customer retention strategies' and not customer loyalty strategies."

That's that one quick change that divides a freelance writer from a content strategist. Whereas the freelance writer's just going to send it in, the content strategist is going to after the article's written...for people, not robots...they are going to keep in mind search engine and things like that. You have a lot more responsibility, but you also have a lot more freedom to kind of just do the work.

Another company I work with is Unbounce. They also want about two posts a month. And there's absolutely no checking in on me. Essentially I send in the post and they publish, and there's never been any kind of accountability and things like that. So you have a lot of freedom, but like I said, with the freedom comes responsibility, and it's a big difference between the two job positions.

Carol Tice:

I just want to call out a couple of, I think, critical points that you went through there. The first is, when you get these kind of jobs, the reason they are hiring a freelancer very often is because they could not come up with eight topics a month that would get good traffic for them on how restaurant software is helping restaurant owners if they had to, to save their lives.

That's why they're hiring you, is for the idea development and the ability to execute on that, and to take it totally off their plate.

They don't want to be involved in it. They don't want to have to check it. And if you are that person where they don't have to worry about it...they see, oh, your posting, it's got amazing headlines...that was a great headline that you mentioned. Who doesn't want to read that? Oh, Customer Strategies that Work. We all need to know that, and every business owner wants to read that. They don't know how to write headlines for the Internet.

They don't know how to come up with these tangential topics that sort of touch on what they do without being overtly pluggy and salesy. If you can do that all for them, yeah. Most of the clients that I had, I was posting directly onto their dashboard, scheduling them up, and maybe somebody glanced at it. They don't care. They want you to handle it. But that means, yeah, you need to know about story development.

And the other big thing you brought up is that, we talked about SEO articles for robots. But when you write content marketing articles for people to read, you do still have to know about SEO. So just to elaborate, it sounds like you went on and did some keyword research until you found a phrase that wasn't quite as popular but still had a decent number of results. It wasn't as crazy as customer loyalty where it would be harder to rank.

Greg Ciotti:

And look at the difference between the two. Look at the difference between those articles or those, I guess, positions and how I would rank that article. The focus was on creating a great article, at the end of the day, right? The only difference between freelance writer Greg and content strategist Greg is that the content strategist is going to go back and say, hey, is there a term that I could rank this for? Because I know that software startups and just startups in general, businesses in general, are going to care about that.

When you're a freelance writer that's off of your plate, but that's why the content strategist demands such a higher rate. But really, it's not rocket sciences, right? I mean, everyone can learn how to operate Google's keyword tool and find something like customer retention strategies. It didn't take me years of training. You don't have to be an SEO guy to turn into a content strategist. It's very, very simple to make the leap, in my opinion.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. It's more like just knowing that needs doing, and that you need to identify a phrase to work with.

Gred Ciotti:

Definitely. And it's funny that you mentioned that with these people. Writers often sell themselves short, I find. It really only dawned on me when I was meeting a lot of these entrepreneurs and founders. Reuben is an example. He's an extremely smart guy, a super-smart guy. I tried to get him to write it a little bit more on his personal blog, and he goes, you don't understand. Writing for me is torture. I can't do it. I get so frustrated with coming up with ideas. I can't express my ideas as clearly.

I feel like writers a lot of times have that kind of effect where they know it so well that they think that everybody else can do it the same. You know what I mean? But writing is definitely a skill that not many people have, and if you are able to come up with great topics, great articles, and then you do a little bit of extra...maybe a keyword research, or maybe you've practiced writing headlines that are kind of like the Huffington Post style headlines. You make the shift from just another writer to a content strategist that startups are willing to pay big money for.

Carol Tice:

It's also very true. I feel like you're giving me some thoughts, because I'm doing all those things. I'm doing all the things you say. I'm writing headlines, I'm coming up with all the topics, I'm talking about keywords with them, I'm talking about socialization strategy. So I am one of those people who should be saying that, because I am doing all those things.

Greg Ciotti:

Right. Tom was telling me that, Tom Ewer. He was saying, "They're trying to shift me into a content strategist, but nothing of what I'm going to do is really going to change. I mean, I was already doing a lot of these things as a freelance writer. But now all of a sudden I'm a content strategist and I'm managing their 'content strategy,' quote, unquote, rather than just being a guy that writes blog posts." You know what I mean? It's a contextual shift but it's an important one.

Carol Tice:

And the thing is, it can be a lot more satisfying to be at that strategist level anyway, because I'm going to bet...and you guys can type in Q&A if you've had this experience...that you've had small business clients where there kind of was no strategy, and you couldn't get any input about what the strategy should be, and you were just kind of fumbling around in the dark.

I'm thinking of two clients of mine, including Lending Tree, which did an infamous project where they developed \$1 million of content without any strategy, and then shut it all off. They freaked out and killed the whole thing.

But they were paying a hundred bucks a post. I did probably several thousand dollars of work for them. But I couldn't get any answers.

I was, okay, you have me in the insurance vertical. Am I writing for an audience of brokers or consumers? They couldn't tell me. I'm writing in a college niche. Is it for students or parents? Couldn't tell me. You start to lose your mind, because you can't really do your job.

So in a way it can be a real relief to be handed the positioning part of it so you can say, "Okay, this is what we're trying to do, these are the kind of people we're trying to reach. And so this is the kind of headlines I'm developing, and it all makes sense." You have a chance to really have a better success for them. And that's the big thing I learned doing a lot of small business blogging, that I wanted to be associated with successful projects.

You don't want these ones where they're, write a blog post for me, or they have no commitment to doing it long term and they're all vague, they don't know what they want. Then it's not successful. They don't get traffic, and you don't get a win for your portfolio. So I started requiring people to do a minimum of two months, at least one post a week, because it was going to take that long to get traction.

I really took a lot of time to define, what are we trying to do here? A lot of people just sort of are, blogging, I've heard that's really good. Can you blog for me and then I'll get lots of traffic, okay? Awesome. Bye. And you're, what just happened there? Now you have a client, but you don't really have enough direction to execute. That's your opportunity to pitch the content strategy if you're, you guys seem kind of vague. I'm not sure what you want to do here.

Greg Ciotti:

Oh, absolutely. And like I said, that's where it's important to really listen to the language of your clients. What language do they use? So like I said, in my inbox right now there's a lot of these startups and entrepreneurs asking for a content creator. They specifically ask for a content strategist, that's number one. We've already kind of gone over that. I've never once had someone ask me, "Do you know a freelance writer?" yet essentially what they want is someone who writes and does all that stuff.

Number two, what they ask is, it's exactly what you've gone over, exactly what you've gone over. They ask me, "How do we get started with our strategy?" They don't ask me, "What do I do with content marketing?" because they already know that content marketing works, because they see all these other people doing it. All their friends are doing it, essentially, to turn a phrase there. But they know that it works.

They kind of know that content marketing is all about, like you say, creating content. But they don't know where to get started. So if you come in as that person who is...like with my relationship with Bidsketch, we have such a great, kind of like almost nonexistent back and forth. Not that I don't like talking to Reuben, but I'm saying, we don't need to go back and forth because he knows I already know what to do, right?

Carol Tice:

Right.

Greg Ciotti:

So when you approach these sort of people it's more important to not come in and say, "I'm such a great writer, " blah, blah, blah. It's more about taking the pain away that they have by kind of using the language that they use. "I will help you get started with your content strategy. I will help you figure out how to create content that actually gets people to buy your stuff. I'm not just going to write random generic posts about whatever your software is.

"I'm going to write the kind of stuff that really connects with people and makes them thing, 'Hey, I could use this software, because this article showed me that...' blah, blah, blah." When you approach people like that they'll be begging to hire you, instead of coming in and saying, "I'm a great writer. Look at all of my great writing," because they don't care about that. That's not the language that they use with me. They're always asking, we need someone with the flexibility, we need someone who can help us get started, and we need someone who can essentially take this all on their shoulders and handle it.

And like I said, although that's intimidating to many freelance writers, a lot of the extra stuff that you do is not rocket sciences. It's not rocket science to find keywords, it's not rocket science to practice your headlines, to write the kind of headlines that aren't boring like you see on many corporate blogs, right? We all know how to do that. So yeah, it's a very minimal leap, but as long as you are approaching the pain points with these people, as you said, you pretty much will have them at your beck and call instead of the other way around.

Carol Tice:

You know what? My sales line, when I work with my business blogging clients, is I usually say something along the lines of, "The goal of this project is to position you as an authority in your niche, differentiate you from competitors, and build that trust so that people online trust you and want to buy your stuff," and they just line up. "That's it. That's what I want. Eureka! That's what I was looking for." That is what they need.

The Internet is an impersonal, anonymous place, and there's a lot of scams. This is why content marketing is so huge, is that it's a chance to open a conversation, and be real and authentic, and provide useful information to people, and build that trust and that authority. That's to me the point of what I'm doing. I mean, there's some blogs...I don't know, do the people you work for put a sales thing on the bottom of their blog posts, or is it more soft sell where it's just authority building?

Greg Ciotti:

It depends. It definitely depends. Some of the ones that I write for will do that and some don't. But the funny thing is, is that no matter what they do on that end, when you write

for these successful places you get to double down. I wrote a guest post one time for this company. I don't work with them any more, not that I have a problem with them, but I'm not going to say their name. But they paid \$1200 for a single article. It was mind-blowing, right? As a beginning freelance writer, that's insane. So not only did they do that, they tweeted it out to their like 50,000 Twitter followers multiple times.

When you write for these huge like startup blogs not only do they pay you great money, they push you out. On Unbounce they're constantly promoting Greg Ciotti, not just my content. The founders and the people who manage the Unbounce Twitter are constantly tweeting out just my username. They're following for conversion advice, or content strategy, or whatever. So you not only get to work with these people that will pay you well, they'll do the promotion for you, right? Because like you said, they have things to do.

They have money to spend, but they also have a ton of things to do, so they're just going to go with it. They're not going to really harass you. On the flipside, they're really actually going to do a lot of your promotion for you. I have to say I agree 100 percent with your take on working for winning companies. There's nothing better for your portfolio, for your authority in general, than to work with winners. Yeah, I just got to say I definitely agree with that. It's one of the things that I've found, is it's an extra bonus, really, working for these kind of groups of people.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. I had one small business client that I finally dropped her, just because it was too sad to me. I knew it was going nowhere. She had her blog on a different site than her company site. It was just like off in this cave by itself. A lot of companies make this mistake. She really had no idea what she wanted to say on it or what she was trying to accomplish by doing it. It just drove me crazy, and it wasn't ever going to be successful, so I had to split. Yeah, you need winning projects.

But the other thing I was going to say...and your \$1200 article kind of points this up...is my experience is that blogging for a company is like the gateway drug to writing more lucrative other projects for them. Yeah, I'll be business blogging for someone for a while, then I'll say, "You know, the thing that would really kill here is if you had an amazing special report for your subscribers so you could really start building your e-mail list more effectively with prospects."

And then we did a \$1500 special report of The 16 Ways to Get Funding for Your Small Business, that he started giving out. I'm sure that just made it totally skyrocket for him. So once you showed him you know how to get engagement with the hundred dollar blog posts, then you say, "You need to up your game, because everybody's got a blog. But you need a quarterly series of white papers," at \$2500 each. Or, "Now that your blog's really awesome, your static Web content is sort of...I don't know. We should give it a revamp, shouldn't we?" for a thousand dollars.

Greg Ciotti:

Right. So true. And they will handle the other stuff too...I didn't mean to interrupt...but they'll come to you. Like I said, they'll come to you with all of the resources that you could possibly need. They'll come to you with the designer. So you'll send them in a manuscript with just the writing, and then they'll have a designer cook up something amazing.

I've done exactly what you've described, where I've written white papers, and reports, and guides, and e-books, and all that other stuff. You're getting paid these amazing rates, and you get an amazing finished product that you get to put on your portfolio, and yet all you had to do was write. Essentially you're still just a writer, but you've come into this whole other company that treats things far differently than the bottom dollar blog post people.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, absolutely. And God, that made me want to say one other thing, and then we're going to get to questions. If you guys have questions start throwing them into the Q&A box there. God, now I'm going to hate myself. Don't you hate that?

Greg Ciotti:

Just lost a good question?

Carol Tice:

Yeah. Oh, what I was going to say is, the hourly rate is always amazing on these upsold products, because *you already know all about their business*.

There's no knowledge ramp. While you've been blogging you've been learning all about their business and you already know everything, so there's so little like interview time, research time that you need to do. Often it's just kind of all sitting there, and you're really just organizing it into a more sophisticated product. So yeah, it's the way to live...

Greg Ciotti:

Yeah, absolutely. It's kind of like once they've gotten comfortable with you...like you said, we've gone over this multiple times, but just the key takeaway is that you're working with people for whom *the pain is more important than the price*. Once you've kind of had the trust build with them and they're, yeah, this person creates great content that converts for us, when it comes to an e-book they're just going to be, write it and send us the bill. I'm not going to do that.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. Yeah, they're, oh yeah, 20 pages about this. We should totally have that. Just, yeah, make it happen.

Greg Ciotti:

Right. And it's a done deal.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. And I did want to say, when you started talking about how other people hate writing so much, I think writers do really lose track of that, that everyone doesn't consider this fun and giggles, to sit here typing away all day, moving words around. Yeah, some people would just rather be shot. And what we do really does bring terrific value to the vast majority of people who either radically dislike writing or do not have the time because they are trying to build a company, and they can't be their own marketing writer. They just need to offload stuff. They need to offload that.

Anyway, while questions are starting to come in first I want to say, before we get to questions, that Greg has a couple of discounts for Den members that we will talk about at the end of this call, so stay tuned for those, on a few little useful tools you might want to use to help build your business. But in the meanwhile, I had a few questions come in, in the Den, and I always start with those. One was to talk about where building an e-mail list kind of plays into this. I'm assuming, obviously, we're doing this to build e-mail lists for our clients, but what about if you like have a blog of your own and you're doing this? Are you using it to build a client list or not?

Greg Ciotti:

Yeah, so essentially for my blog I've gotten to the point where I don't even really need my blog any more for clients, because I'm just very deeply saturated in the kind of people that want the work that I do. You know what I mean, it's more just people e-mailing me nowadays. I've actually just written yesterday, I believe, a post that went live on Bidsketch which everybody can check out by going to the Bidsketch blog, if you want to read about it.

It's all about freelance marketing, and one of the big things that I say is that a content newsletter essentially, when you update people with your new content and building your own freelance blog in general...not about freelancing but about the work that you do in particular, so freelance writing maybe...it is a great way to draw in clients, for sure.

I would say that it's not that you necessarily have to have clients on your newsletter. I've had plenty of clients reach out to me that don't actively subscribe to my personal newsletter, but they almost always find me through my site, right? So that's the real winner, is that they end up finding me through my site and then contact.

Carol Tice:

Do they not find you through your guest posts on bigger blogs? I find that most of the paid blogging people I know, it's that Copyblogger post, or Problogger post, or whatever...Lifehack, Dumb Little Man, the huge blogs that you guested on...and then they go back and check out your blog from there, and then they hire you.

Greg Ciotti:

Right. My freelance strategy for the byline, it's so simple yet I find it so effective. In your byline, if anyone has ever written a guest post...I'm sure many of you have...but in your byline I always link to what I call the branding link, which is just a direct link to my home page. Or if you want to get creative, maybe your portfolio. That's the link for people to, if

they want to hire you, that's where I've had them go. The other link that I always include in my byline is what I call the money page, which is essentially a landing page for them to sign up to your newsletter, for some reason or other.

Maybe a download, maybe just a signup. You don't necessarily have to have a freebie. So those two links and your byline essentially give people access to whatever they need. If they want to hire you they can go right to that kind of like branding link. If they prefer to sign up to your content newsletter you're going to lead them with something like that, too. I cringe sometimes when I go on these posts and I see people...maybe they have a single link to their website and then the other two or three links are all like social media stuff, and I'm just, why? Why, why, why would you do that, right?

Carol Tice:

And the blog link is just to the homepage. It's really something about guest blogging that a lot of people don't know. But I'm about to do a bunch of Write to Done guest posts as part of my Top 10 Blogs for Writers Win, and I'm actually creating a custom landing page for everyone. This is something a lot of the really pro marketers do.

So if they click on my Make a Living Writing, on my tagline, it's going to go to a page that says, "Hi, Write to Done readers. Thanks for coming over here. I know you're all about the craft of writing, so here's a few posts that I think you might want to read."

So I've called out a few of my writing posts that are about the craft of writing rather than the marketing side. Then, yeah, it's got a squeeze page on it, that you might want to subscribe. So yeah, I think a lot of people don't maximize the use of that guest post. But if you have that orientation link them to the right place, where maybe if you're the kind of blog that's got a hire me page, link them straight to the hire me page.

Greg Ciotti:

Exactly. Exactly. My whole thing is, you do all this work, you're writing a post for someone else, and then...there are no links to anything other than my stuff. I mean, I can understand people who want to build their social media followings. I get that. But I'm never going to do that. I always link to stuff that's going to get me paid, on my own site. You know what I mean?

Carol Tice:

I've never put a social media link in a tagline.

Greg Ciotti:

That's awesome. We're on the same page there.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. The question you have to ask is, which would you rather do? Would you like someone to follow you on Twitter – or would you like them to hire you right now and pay you thousands of dollars? It's just not a big mind shift to figure out which you want to do.

Greg Ciotti:

I'm still waiting for the Twitter payment for a \$1000 blog post. I haven't gotten one yet.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. So great question that came in. Okay, we've got existing clients. Have you had any luck repositioning yourself and earning more with an existing client, or is it all about finding new clients with a new attitude?

Greg Ciotti:

It definitely depends on what your clients have you doing now. I wish I could give a more specific answer, but I actually don't know what this person's clients are at the moment. I would say that it definitely works the best when you're kind of starting...I don't want to say a clean slate, but when you're definitely kind of pursuing these people as a content strategist and really repositioned as one, rather than trying to do an upsell with an existing client.

Personally my only experience with this has been going directly to these startup people and pitching myself as a content strategist. I've never really had another writing client where I turned from a "freelance writer," quote, unquote, to a content strategist, like I told you, like Tom's going through right now. I imagine that if you take on more responsibility you should definitely be getting paid more.

So yeah, I feel like that's definitely possible if you make the pitch very relevant to, what pains are they having. For instance, you could, "I'm writing blog posts for you now, but I can definitely handle all these other outside things that involve content strategy. And for me to do this, all you have to do is...my rate's going to increase like this. But I feel like we've already had so much success so far that it's going to be worthwhile for you."

Carol Tice:

Or, the common situation is, scope creep occurs, and you find yourself slowly doing more and more of this. And that's when you could sit down and renegotiate, and say, "Hey, when I started I was just writing blog posts, the end. And now I'm doing your idea development, keyword research, I'm socializing your posts, I'm doing eight different things. I'm coming up with all the topic development. So really I'm not a freelance writer any more. "The reality is, I'm a content strategist for you. It's a more sophisticated role with more moving parts, and my pay for that is this."

I would think the ideal strategy would be go out, find some new clients in content strategy, and then come back to the original client and say, "Hey, you know, what I'm really doing now is this, and I could do it for you, or not. I can move on." And you end up sort of dropping and swapping out those older clients.

Greg Ciotti:

Kind of like a slow transition rather than trying to dive in headfirst. I definitely agree with that. It's something that I advise people who are...I know a lot of your readers are interested in blogging, too. I've always advised blogging as your slow play, essentially.

Try to build an audience of your own for sure, it's fine, it's a great thing to do, but it's definitely a slower process. It takes a lot of time and it's kind of like the background operation. So yeah, the shift from freelance writer to content strategist can be a little bit slower. I'm not telling you to drop all your clients right now, pick up the phone and just, "I'm out."

Carol Tice:

Start over.

Greg Ciotti:

But I definitely recommend kind of this transition into a Web writer that has all the skills rather than just being a writer. Because unfortunately...and I really do mean this...unfortunately people don't hold the standard freelance writer in as high a regard any more.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, I agree with that. You need specialization. It's always true. And speaking of that, I have a question from inside the Den, and then we're going to hit some really tasty questions that are coming in on this call. I have a writer in the Den who is well-known as a resume writer, which is kind of a low paying niche, and she's trying to transition into writing business plans and doing more sophisticated types of writing. She was just wondering if you had some tips on making that switch, which is kind of what we were just talking about.

Greg Ciotti:

Yeah. So, I mean, so she's transitioning from resumes to business plans, is that the idea?

Carol Tice:

Right.

Greg Ciotti:

Okay. We don't really need to do the freelance writer to content strategist. But when you're repositioning yourself, like I said, the important thing is context and pain. So I feel like that's a pretty good change, because I feel like resume writing is oftentimes going to come from individual people, right, and they're not going to be really willing to pay. One of the other kind of examples that...a friend of mine was a photographer, and then they switched over to only like infant photography, for more upscale kinds of stuff. And business for her was a dramatic change overnight.

So you can see how this kind of repositioning doesn't necessarily have to do with even writing. It's all about kind of turning yourself from a me-too person. I feel like a resume writer, unfortunately, although that's a very useful skill, it's kind of like a me-too job that people aren't going to be willing to pay a lot of money for. So yeah, I feel like that's a great transition. As far as tips, I mean, I wish I...I'm not very experienced with writing

business proposals or writing business plans. But I would say the important thing to keep in mind is...and feel free to ask your clients about this kind of stuff.

What's the biggest problem with what they have with business plans right now? What's really holding them back, and what kind of stuff is absolutely necessary? And when you pitch your services, and you're using the exact terms that they use for that kind of stuff, it's almost like, go read your proposal, and they'll think, this person's reading my mind. That's the best overall advice I can have for someone who's looking to transition to a new angle with their business.

It's all about connecting with client pains, and really try to get detail. What kind of words are my clients going to describe, as what popped in their head? You know what I mean? And then you kind of position yourself as the go-to person, especially if you can get specific. If you could be a business plan writer...I'm going to use my example from B to B startups or something like that, or business plan writer for restaurants, or something like that...you can command yourself a higher rate just because you're now specialized instead of being generic.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. It's all so true. So many people, including Theresa and Sherry and Sue, all have the same question, which is, how do you find these clients? I have some techniques. What are yours?

Greg Ciotti:

Definitely. A lot of times, since they're just desperate to have people, a single outreach e-mail can make things happen.

Carol Tice:

But how do you identify who to e-mail? How do you know who needs help?

Greg Ciotti:

Sure. So first you have to identify, what are your strong writing points? Like I said, customer support stuff is kind of boring, but I'm actually good at writing that kind of stuff. You can start with a Google search, you can start with places like CrunchBase, is where I used to go. CrunchBase is a TechCrunch site where they list all different kinds of startups, all different kind of tech startups. So if that's your particular interest, I would start with something like that. And once you get your foot in the door with e-mailing these people always be on the lookout for referrals and things like that.

But the best way is, honestly...I wish I had better strategy for this...the best way is to really just keep your eyes peeled with tech publications and startup publications. If they just raised a big round of funding you know you're good to go for an e-mail, right? If they've been around for a while and you notice that they're kind of struggling with their content, their blog is vacant and it's kind of flimsy over there, then you want to approach them. You'll go to maybe Aweber's blog, is the company I use, and you'll notice their blog is thriving.

They have tons of writers. Probably not worth your time because they already have a lot of people that they need. So it's really key to identify these people for what they're lacking, and you go to their company blog and you see it's kind of invisible. But the best way to find these people, honestly...like I said, I wish I had a more specific way to do this...but check publications and places like CrunchBase, where they kind of profile all these tech startups.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. I actually used CrunchBase a ton on the book I did last year, *How They Started*, where I needed to read when companies got funding rounds and stuff. It's a really useful database. I'll tell you the couple of things that I'm big on. There is a venture capital database called vcaonline.com, and it has a search engine.

You could put in like your city or a type of business like restaurant or software or something, and you can just get lists and lists and lists of news of funding, and just zoom right in on who is getting the money.

The other thing...and I don't just say this because I wrote for a business journal full time for seven years...but the Business Journal in your town will cover every single, even a half a million dollars of funding that comes in, it will be in there. Barring that, the business pages of your local paper. And aside from that, the big strategy that most of the freelance bloggers I know, is inbound marketing. If you're writing your blog, you're guesting on other big blogs, prospects are seeing you on those big blogs and calling you up.

Greg Ciotti:

And they see that you know how to do it. They see that you know how to draw an audience to your site and they're, well, we want a piece of that action.

Carol Tice:

Exactly. Exactly. Your guest post on the big blog *is* your social proof that you know how it works. You were able to pitch a strong enough headline and concept to big blog that gets hit all the time, and you were able to get on there and get a bunch of comments. And yeah, they just want a piece of it. That's what they want. They're, that's it, someone to do that for me. So quite a lot of it is from inbound marketing, but you can actively prospect by using databases of who's getting money. As they say in investigative reporting, follow the money.

Greg Ciotti:

Definitely. That was kind of like my introduction, for sure, to all this stuff. And like you said, it really avalanches from there. I would recommend that people looking to really dive into this headfirst see if you can land on places like Copyblogger, which you've mentioned, or the KISSmetrics blog, HubSpot, the Unbounce blog, things like that. Because a lot of tech companies are constantly checking those blogs. They're one of the more popular marketing blogs. And you would like to appear on there because if you

know even a little bit about content marketing, and content creation, and writing great articles, then they're definitely interested in you.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, Mashable, HubSpot. You want to be on some of these places that your prospects would be hanging out on to learn what they need to know to run their business.

So Becky says, a lot of startups seem to want the blogger to also be the Web designer and build the site, and how do you handle that? I get a subcontractor to do that stuff, if I'm asked. I'm not asked a lot, though.

Greg Ciotti:

Yeah, I mean, I do consulting in terms of Web design and convergence, but I don't do any design work, and I would never let a client try to force that stuff on me. That's not what I'm here for. Like I say, I will sit down for calls and say, here's what I found. This opt-in form works better here, or this headline, blah, blah, blah. That kind of stuff I will definitely do. And as you become better at this stuff you will kind of understand it, too, what works and what doesn't. By the way, consulting for content strategy and content marketing, also a very lucrative thing to do. But I would never let somebody force me to do Web design work or anything like that.

Carol Tice:

Well, they couldn't force me, because I don't know how! But the thing I tend to say is, you know what, I do the writing piece. I totally know some great webmasters I can hook you up with, and/or I can project manage this for you. You'll never have to deal with him, and I'll get it executed on your vision.

And you get a fee for that, too. So it's another upsell opportunity, if they're, and I also don't know a Web designer. You're, oh yeah, I can handle that for you. And of course you are networking around and knowing some webmasters and designers so that you're ready.

Greg Ciotti:

Which is always good.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, you need to do that.

Elaine says, I've been a medical writer for five years, and I'm frustrated that most lucrative jobs go to MDs. Any advice on getting better paying medical content gigs? I'm betting there are so few MDs who know how to do content marketing. I just think this niche we've been talking about all day here, all hour, is your opportunity.

Greg Ciotti:

I agree with you, and I feel like that specialization there for being a content marketer or content strategist specifically for medical companies would be amazing, because you know those people have money to pay, right?

Carol Tice:

Yeah, they've got money.

Greag Ciotti:

That's exactly why I got even more specific from just being a generic content marketer. I became content strategist for B to B startups. That's B to B software startups, actually, it's really specific. Because within the lucrative industry of content strategy there are better industries where, like you said, the medical industry would be amazing. I might have to jump ship. That would be an awesome kind of angle, to pitch yourself as being very authoritative in kind of content strategy for medical companies. Yes, definitely.

Carol Tice:

And medical companies are always trying to humanize themselves and talk to customers. Yeah. And they have no idea how to do any of this stuff. They're medical people.

Katherine has a great question that I'm so glad you brought up. Do you need any credential to call yourself a content strategist or is your personal blog your credential, being a technical writer, having a bachelor's degree, or do customers care as long as you can do the work?

Greg Ciotti:

That's a very, very good question, actually. I call blogging in general the new picks and shovels of the Internet Goldrush. That's my take on it. And the reason I call it that is that there's a lot of these people out there who, they want to sell you the picks and shovels, yet they don't really know what they're doing, right? But the tradeoff, the kind of like counterbalance to that, is that you can't get a master's degree in blogging, or inbound marketing, or content strategy.

It's really self-taught. Only recently have things like graphic design and stuff like that started to appear in colleges. You're in a very new industry, so that's true. It's really more of your portfolio, and just your work, and the audience that you've built for yourself, and the clients that you work with, that you can really reference as being an authority. So it kind of just takes you getting started and "learning the ropes," quote, unquote, for yourself.

If you're one of those people who's a writer and you're like, I want to step up my game in search engines to pitch myself as a content strategist, you go over to places like SEOMoz and you learn a little bit about search engines, you're not going to really consult a book or go to a PhD in search engine optimization, because those things just don't really exist. I mean, if you have specific technical degrees, I would definitely bring that up. But like I've said, a lot of the people that I've worked with in this industry, they

care more about the fact that they saw me on Copyblogger than they do about my writing degrees or anything like that.

Carol Tice:

Absolutely. I think you build this credential with the following steps. With your own blog, and then the high-powered guest blogs that get the traffic. That is your proof that you understand content strategy. And yeah, customers don't care, if you show that you can do the work. I have no bachelor's degree in anything, so I can tell you that no one has ever even asked me, oh, don't you have a degree?

I've never had the question. No one cares. They go, oh my God, I saw you on Copyblogger getting 100 comments, and I want you to do that for me.

Becky says, when you started did you seek out startups, or did they find you from your own blog and your guest posts?

Greg Ciotti:

I have a person I really need to thank for a lot of this, really, Leo Woodridge, from Bufferapp. That was the first startup that I ever guest posted for, and it's funny that you keep bringing up guest posts, because that's really...I've done so many guest posts. It's been such a huge complement to really my rates and all the work that I've been able to get. But originally I had done the exact strategy that I described to you. I went to Crunchbase, I got on Bufferapp, I saw that they just got a big round of funding, and I was, let me shoot over an e-mail, right? I was the first person to guest post with the Buffer app blog, and from that the connections just sort of piled on.

You don't have to be a networker with that stereotypical greased hair and business card for everybody's hand, but you do need to not keep conversations just strictly business. Be friendly with the people that you work with, because a lot of these people are very willing to pass you on to other people. So you definitely need to keep conversations going with these sorts of clients, because that unfortunately is the big way in for a lot of the best-paying clients in the tech industry. They always want a referral from somebody else. A guest post is the next best thing.

But the way to really land jobs left and right is to have one good client who has connections. In my instance, Leo is like a super-networker. He essentially knows everybody in like the tech space that I've ever met. And once you get hold of a couple people like that, you just don't even have to work for it. So I would just say, always keep in the back of your mind that being friendly and having conversations with these kind of people, and keeping conversations going even after business is done and taken care of, is very important to kind of succeeding in this particular industry.

Carol Tice:

I did it a different way. I think that's great, that you just prospected and did it. It happened to me sort of by accident, and I was, oh, this blogging thing is quite a niche. I should do more of it. But what happened was, I was writing for Entrepreneur Magazine

and was just schmoozing with my editor, and they said, “We used to have our editor blogging but now he’s been fired.” They decided the new editor is not going to be the blogger, and we want to outsource it now.

And I went, “ Oh, I have a blog.” At that time I’d had a blog for like five minutes, and put up like six posts on it. I barely, barely knew how to do it.

And I was, well, I know how to blog. And they were, oh, well, why don’t you blog for us three times a week? These are the kind of situations you want to get into is, if you can appear regularly on a high traffic blog, it becomes a money machine for you. And that’s what happened to me with Entrepreneur. I just got a steady stream of small business prospects calling me off of that just saying, yeah, do that for my business. That’s why I write regularly now for FreelanceSwitch instead of trying to guest post on sort of a million different places, because I find that the regular repetition is more effective.

Greg Ciotti:

Oh, absolutely. I’ve had the same clients for months and months at a time, and I’ve never switched off. There’s almost no point to me switching off, because a lot of the people that I work for now, like BidSketch, Unbounce.... Not only do I love the company and the people, but they’re also going to pay the great rates that I expect to get, so why should I go chasing around other people when I can just be a regular contributor? It’s such an authority move, too, because they see you on constantly and they’ll go, well, this person must know what they’re doing. So I agree 100 percent with that.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. Same thing with my blog for Forbes. I rather regularly appear there, and now I’ve gotten amazing clients from there, like a mergers and acquisitions expert who wants me to write case studies. And that’s the thrill of doing content marketing, is that your byline and your links are appearing over and over and over on high-traffic blogs. Each of them builds your authority, and each of them is a marketing machine for you. You’re basically getting paid to market your business.

Greg Ciotti:

I can’t tell you how many times...I call this the deja vu effect. So many clients have approached me for the first time. They say, “I had to reach out to you because I’ve seen you on three sites that I regularly visit,” right?

Carol Tice:

Absolutely. Yeah, that’s like a ding, ding, ding, ding, ding! Yeah, that’s when they go, this is the person. Yeah.

Theresa had a quick question about pay. I think we said at the beginning a hundred bucks a post we like to see. I think that most of the business blogging clients I did were \$125, \$500 for four posts. And then I’d start wrapping in an extra hundred bucks to talk to them about strategy and stuff. So I sort of was being a content strategist but I could’ve probably gotten more out of it if I’d known how to position myself.

And then someone wanted to hear that website that I used for researching venture capital funding, which is v as in Victor, c as in Carol, a...vcaonline.com is their site. And yeah, I just find they have a great database. It's stuff you usually have to pay to get through LexisNexis, but you can get on there and it's just funding, so it's really easy to find what you want. I just love that site. Anyway, Greg, tell us about your discount deals you have for Den members.

Greg Ciotti:

Definitely. Actually, Carol, I just sent you the link for the Bidsketch thing, which you can post up. But our buddy Reuben from Bidsketch has a discount for Den members for the Freelance Plan. And if you're unfamiliar with Bidsketch software, it's essentially a proposal creation software, lets you create proposals that really look beautiful. It looks like a designer made it.

I actually was using them long before I worked with Reuben, which speaks to how I...I think they're awesome. But that plan will help you out. It's only nine dollars a month instead of 19 dollars a month that Reuben usually charges. And Bidsketch has universally positive reviews on places like FreshBooks. On FreshBooks you'll see five-star reviews left and right for this proposal software.

Carol Tice:

That's funny. I was just going to say, I use FreshBooks and it makes me look really pro. These tools that make your proposals look really polished, I just find them well worth it often. People are so easily impressed by a little designing up on stuff. Anyway, you were telling me you had another one, as well.

Greg Ciotti:

Oh, definitely. So that one is just simply awesome for freelancers. If you happen to get a lot of e-mail queries, if your business revolves around clients that know you a lot, I think you'll really like the company that I work for, Help Scout. Like I said, it's email management software, but it's for people who don't want the fluff, they don't want the bloat of things like Zendesk and Desk.com, which are really slow and clunky.

So at Help Scale, which is helpscale.net, when you sign up for the 15-day trial, on checkout you can type in Greg30, G-r-e-g30, and that will extend your trial to a full month so you can try it out, and it's the fully-featured trial version. So you can try that out for 30 days instead of 15.

Carol Tice:

Totally tasty. Thanks for sharing that. This has been a fascinating conversation about how the world is doing paid blogging. It's really evolving into something bigger, and lucky for us, better paying. And this has been terrific. It's been great to have a chance to talk with you more, and hear about what you're doing, and how it's working. Just thanks for coming on.

Greg Ciotti:

Oh, my pleasure.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, terrific. And coming up next week for Den members, Timo Kiander of Productive Superdad will be coming to help all of us balance our work life, balance better, and I'm excited about that. So thanks, and as usual if you have more questions on this you can go back to the Den and leave them on the Questions for Den Meetings thread for this event with Greg Ciotti. If I need to alert Greg I will, or I'll take them myself and we'll get your questions answered. Thanks for coming on, everybody.

Greg Ciotti:

Take care.