8 Unexpected Ways to Get Freelance Work

The life of a freelance designer is a great one in many respects. But it can sometimes be tough to find a steady and reliable flow of work, like at the beginning of your career. Or in the middle of a global pandemic.

At Shillington, we know all about preparing designers for the rough and tumble of the freelance world. To help, we've collected together a series of tips to help you find new work and new clients when you need to.

1. Ask for testimonials for your freelance work

When you're short of freelance work, you often feel pulled in two directions. On the one hand you want to take advantage of the free time to work on your portfolio. But on the other, you feel like every waking moment should be devoted to finding new clients and new commissions.

However, as designer and photographer Mark Leary recently found, the two aren't mutually exclusive. He recently spent some downtime improving his website and portfolio. Part of this involved asking for new testimonials from past clients. "As well as the testimonials I'd asked for, I also got a new set of recommendations and introductions in the process," he says. "If you've been good to clients, they often go out of their way to help you back, especially in hard times."

2. Work on speculative briefs

Not getting paid work? Then think about the kind of work you'd ideally like, then just work on an imaginary brief in that area, and share it online, suggests illustrator Ollie Hirst. "I often work speculatively, using real-world stories to show art directors I can do it," he says. "It's a way to keep my mind, and my folio, active in this downtime. It's recently led to illustrating a coronavirus story for Politico Europe, and other work."

That said, any kind of side project you have passion for can potentially help you generate commissions. "I've found that exploring my most personal abstract ideas have led to some of the most fun commissioned work," says visual artist Murugiah. "Often an area or specific detail in a personal piece is exactly what a commissioning client was looking for."

3. Be direct

If people don’t know about you, they’re not going to hire you, so it pays to be direct. “As I’ve got older I’ve got braver and cheekier, I’ll often just contact people and companies that I’d like to work for,” says graphic designer and illustrator Jen Lewis. “Sometimes you don’t hear anything, but sometimes people are so amazingly positive about my work and say yes!”

You shouldn’t see this as a chore but enjoy it, adds typographer and designer Shrenik Ganatra. “For me, the most fun, challenging and satisfying opportunities have come via networking and being direct about your goals and intentions. Always be inclined to reach out to someone you see as a potential collaborator or client. Shoot them an email, send them DMs, follow-up and follow-through.”

4. Wear your freelance work

Always be thinking of new and creative ways to advertise your work, and make people aware of it. “I had a top made with my own printed fabric design.” recalls print and pattern designer Rachel Taylor. “A TV presenter spotted it, and then I was hired for two TV design jobs—one on camera—as a direct result.”

5. Make badges

“I’ve found making things like badges has led to me getting some work,” says James Ashe, a visual artist based in Belfast. “When I made badges and sold them at markets, they tended to get passed about, and people asked who did them. I usually get asked: ‘Aren’t you the guy who makes badges?’ I have a couple of these on display in the Ulster Museum. Exhibitions and having postcards of your art are other good ways to get contacts and commissions.”

6. Curate your Instagram feed

Many people drop images onto Instagram on a purely random basis. This means their feed can come across as somewhat messy and disorganised: not a great look. “I use Instagram a lot and decided very early on that I would curate my work purely as a visual mood board, while still showing snippets of my personal life, travel and calligraphy.” says Cathy Sison, a designer, art director and teacher at Shillington New York. And taking the time to think about her feed paid off in a most unexpected way.

“I had no idea the creative director of Lululemon was a follower and had been a fan of my calligraphy work from afar,” Cathy explains. “She reached on my DMs, which at first I thought it was a joke. And then she quickly followed up with an email requesting that we meet for coffee. From there, I got to work on a few campaigns and ran workshops at their head office.”

And Cathy’s experience is by no means unique. “I got a new project recently thanks to posting personal work regularly on several social media channels for the past year.” says graphic designer and illustrator Iancu. “It might feel like nobody cares, but you have to keep at it. People appreciate good work even if they don’t always say it, and at some point, they’ll get in touch.”

7. Chat with your friends

Too busy looking for work to chat with your friends? You might be missing a trick. “The most unexpected opportunities for work I’ve found have come from seemingly random conversations with friends, mentioning what exactly my job is and that I’m taking on new work,” says graphic designer and illustrator Sarah Fisher. “Often, they just happen to know someone looking for my particular skillset!”

Maddy Ritchie, a teacher at Shillington's Sydney campus, discovered this when she first posted on Instagram and Facebook that she was going freelance. "I had so many random people contact me from it," she recalls. "Even friends of friends had some really great gigs for me. One girl who I'd lived with at university was a marketing manager at a huge shopping centre, and asked if I'd be interested in doing some murals there. I'd only ever done chalkboard murals before, so these were my first, massive, painted murals. And it actually had a huge ripple effect for my freelance career."

8. Join Facebook groups

Another way to make contacts that can lead to freelance work can be getting involved in a Facebook group that reflects your passion. That's what Maddy found when she joined one called 'Like-minded bitches drinking wine' for entrepreneurial women.

"I posted my website link in the group, and wasn't really expecting much." she recalls. "But a woman messaged me, said she loved my work, and asked if I'd be interested in doing some events with them. Since then, I've done a few live lettering and live illustration events with them, and done custom illustrations on Kate Spade products."

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Artwork by Shillington New York Teacher Nikita Prokhorov.

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