



JOHNSON PRESS OF AMERICA • volume 5 • issue 2 • march 2011

Top 10 tips for working with freelancers

Consider this thought for a moment: Where would you be without your freelancers?

That's what we thought. It's safe to say that most magazines rely heavily on freelance writers, and therefore it makes sense to examine this relationship a bit more closely.

"It's a relationship like any other," says Sara Stephens, president of Perry Stephens Inc., a Houston-based writing and editing firm. "It's so symbiotic; one can't exist without the other. Without the editors, there would be no assignments, and without the writers, there would be no words to be printed on the page and no publication to publish."

Given the importance of this relationship, we decided to interview a few industry veterans and offer 10 tips on how to maintain smooth sailing with your freelancers. So let's get started.

1. **Communication is key.** "When you're giving assignments, you need to give complete directions on what you want," said Don Heimburger, editor and publisher of Forest Park, Ill.-based Heimburger House Publishing. "It takes more time, but if you're very specific then your writers will feel much more confident about writing for you."

Flori Meeks, a Houston-based freelance writer and editor, agrees wholeheartedly. "It really helps me if the editor lets me know he wants me to approach a piece from a certain angle or incorporate certain points."

2. **Respond promptly.** If your writer is working on an article and contacts you with a question, get back to him expeditiously. "If he has a question, be quick with your responses," Heimburger says. "It's hard because we're always on deadline and we're in touch with so many writers, but this is very, very, very important. It indicates that you appreciate them as writers."
3. **Establish decent deadlines.** Give your writers a sufficient amount of time to



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Rates vary greatly

Most editors are very curious about what other publications are paying their freelance writers. Unfortunately, there is no standard rate; rates are in fact all over the map.

Quite a few association publications rely on industry experts to write articles, and in these situations, the writers are not paid. They write because they enjoy it and because it gives them notoriety within the industry, which certainly helps with career advancement. It also provides good exposure for the companies they work for.

In terms of hobby magazines, again, experts within the industry will often write for free just because they love it or for the exposure. Sometimes a small fee is offered for a certain column, and the rate ends up at around 10 to 25 cents per word.

The higher per-word rates usually apply when you have freelancers working for trade magazines. During recessionary times, freelancers typically earn 50 to 75 cents per word. During better economic times, many magazines will pay \$1 per word. There are higher end magazines that pay several dollars per word, but those are few and far between.

put together a quality article. No one wants to work under enormous pressure, and we all know the final product suffers when produced under duress. "I definitely prefer to work with a normal deadline as opposed to last-minute assignments," Meeks said.

4. **Edit gently.** Resist the urge to edit articles so they all reflect your voice. Your magazine will be much more

diverse and interesting if different styles are represented. "When I edit, I try not to approach copy with a sledgehammer," Meeks said. "I have a great respect for my writers and their particular styles."

5. **Give feedback.** Even if you don't have follow-up questions, let the writer know you are happy with the piece. "I always let them know that I'm pleased with their work and specifically which part I'm pleased with," Meeks says. "They appreciate that."
6. **Work with them.** When an article isn't up to your standards, you might be tempted to let the writer go. However, if you spend some time working with him in a constructive manner, you might end up with a fantastic writer who would be very loyal to you. "If I felt like I needed to make major changes in their work, I would talk to them about it and explain how they could do things differently in the future," Meeks said.

7. **Pay on time.** Meeks says she has worked with editors who have dragged their feet on submitting invoices, and it's uncomfortable to have to put on a collectors' hat. "There is nothing worse than not paying on time," Heimburger says. "It's an appreciation factor. If you pay on time, it shows you appreciate their work and it shows respect for them."
8. **Be understanding.** Freelance writers have multiple clients, and you should trust their judgment if they turn down a job for you because their schedule is full. If they're overloaded, they won't produce their best work anyway.
9. **Value their opinion.** "I think it's important to call and ask their opinion from time to time," Heimburger says. "It creates a bond with them, and they often have very good answers, because they have knowledge of your audience too."
10. **Make them feel like they're part of the team.** "I keep all my writers informed about deadlines, features we're working on, and special magazine themes," Heimburger says. "It brings them into the loop, and if you're proactive it helps cement the relationship."

Freelancers appreciate efforts like these very much. "I want to write for somebody who acts like they're happy that I'm writing for them and they want me to continue working for them," Stephens said.

Meeks would agree. "It makes a big difference for me when I feel like what I'm doing is making a difference for the editors I work for and their readers," she said. "Anybody would want that in a job." 



One on one

JPA profile: Ann Foley, accounting/HR manager

Number of years with JPA: 16

Why she loves JPA: "I had been in retail, and when I was first hired, I was just happy to have regular hours. However, this job has been so much more than that. JPA puts value in its employees, and the company has given me opportunities to do things that I didn't even know I could do. JPA had great faith in me and has given me opportunities to advance, and as a result I have learned so much. In addition, it's really a family environment here. People genuinely care about each other."



Joe, Ann and Kristi at Kauffman Stadium (Kansas City, Mo.) in the summer of 2010

Family life: Ann and Joe Foley have been married for 29 years. Their son Don passed away in an auto accident in 2003 when he was 21 years old. Ann has a garden on the side of her house that is a memorial to Don. Their daughter, Kristi, is 24 and has a BA in computer science and an MBA as well.

Hobbies: Joe has been a huge Chicago White Sox fan his whole life, and his passion has certainly influenced the rest of his family. Kristi and Ann have been big fans for a while now as well. They watch most of the games on TV, but have a tradition of visiting ballparks, too. The family has traveled to Kansas City, Mo., St. Petersburg, Fla., Minneapolis and St. Louis to watch games. Ann loves going to ballparks, and her favorite park food is hot dogs. "There's just something about a hot dog at a ballpark," she said.

Cool fact: Country music is Ann's favorite genre, and Joe is actually in a band called Hindsight. The group plays classic rock and some country. Joe has been singing his whole life, and Kristi inherited her dad's talent and sang in school choirs. Joe emceed a karaoke show for many years, and Ann admits she's been dragged to the stage a few times. Her preference, though, is to watch Joe sing. "It melts my heart to listen to him," she said. 



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RECIPE

Corn Pudding

- 1 can whole kernel corn (with juice)
- 1 can cream style corn
- 1/2 stick melted margarine
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 tsp. sour cream
- 1 package Jiffy corn muffin mix

Stir the cans of corn together. Then add the margarine, eggs, sour cream and corn muffin mix. Pour the mixture into an 8x8 baking dish or a small casserole dish. Bake at 325 degrees for 1 hour. You could double this recipe and use a 9x13 pan.

— *Courtesy of Ann Foley*

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