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What To Charge: Web Production

A diverse skill set is key for a lucrative media career

By Laura Palotie – November 18, 2008



Despite the ubiquitousness of Web-based media, its short legacy and still-ongoing growth spurt in our culture have also blurred the presumed roles of its content creators. Increased software usability and the do-it-yourself nature of the Web have caused the job descriptions of designer, developer and publisher to overlap. Consequently, the requirements attached to a Web producer's job title can also range from JavaScript and HTML proficiency to design expertise and even copy editing skills.

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For determining a range of fees for online production projects, Web professionals are encouraged to balance industry standards and their own level of expertise with the needs and budgets of their particular niche markets. The more comprehensive a Web producer's list of technical skills is, the more valuable -- and marketable -- his or her services become. Whether one's background is in copyediting, information systems or design, a skill set that reaches across multiple platforms helps increase a Web producer's professional demand.

"To this day, what fuels my cash flow is the ability to drop out of the sky into any production environment and be useful," says Michelle Margetts, an Oakland, Calif.-based writer, editor and Web producer who began supplementing her copy editing skills with technical knowledge more than 20 years ago. While working as an intern for *The Wall Street Journal* in the mid-1980s, Margetts witnessed the early transition of newsrooms from manual to computer-based production.

"They were in the midst of transferring from old-school, dead tree paper production to computers and satellites -- a brand new world as they say," Margetts says. "At 21 years old, I had to realize that everything was going to be different now, and that immersion just influenced everything I did from that point forward."

After her stint at the *Journal*, Margetts moved on to a freelance career, doing contract-based editing work for trade magazines, contributing articles to music publications like *Windplayer*, and taking advantage of new technologies as early as possible. She began working on her roommate's Macintosh computer in the late 1980s and sending her work via a modem as soon as her editors adopted the technology. Later on, she made it a point to become adept in programs like Quark. From the mid-1990s until 2001, she ran a multimedia firm that specialized in Web-based branding.

"I couldn't go to the same copy desk in the same corporate place for the same days, cranking out the same stories, when there was this whole different world happening," she says. By always providing a combination of copy editing and Web production help, Margetts could also maintain a competitive rate: While simple copy editing at trade publications would bring in between \$100-\$150 a day, editing services combined with an ability to paginate on Quark made her services worth \$40 an hour. These days, she earns between \$50-100 an hour for combined editing and Web production services for corporate, nonprofit and small-business clients.

A varied skill set is likely to increase the bankability of freelancers who are hired for purely technical tasks. David Denton, director of product management at online media firm AtomicOnline, says he is most impressed by freelancers who can juggle Web design and development; expertise in JavaScript, for example, can set a candidate apart.

"Sometimes you can find someone who can spread across both of those, the integration person who takes a designer's vision and turns it into a functioning template," Denton says. Because broad expertise like this is still somewhat exceptional, however, he is likely to scout these individuals for full-time positions. AtomicOnline pays in the \$50-an-hour range for high-end Web development projects on its various domains, although compensation varies largely based on the demands of the project.

"Your hourly rate is what you are worth and what you need to project to people. It's your time, and you should charge accordingly."

Denton encourages aspiring Web producers to maintain their own sites, both to have an easily accessible work sample and to master the ins and outs of running a content management system.

"I couldn't care less about what that content is, but I want to see that they've gotten passionate about something, and have been responsible, from start to finish, for setting up a site and attracting and retaining an audience," he says "There are things like SEO and link building -- growing your site by tapping into complementary sites."

"You have to give it away for free at first. If you're not a writer, find a friend who is, and support their site," he continues.

While unpaid projects can help Web developers and designers increase their exposure and earn professional contacts, some warn against giving away services for free; after all, an hourly fee is the most concrete reflection of one's professional value.

"Don't work for free," says David Nemes, who runs Pine Lake Designs, a Michigan-based, three-person Web development firm. "You'll cheapen yourself, and if people see you as a free way to get stuff done, then they will use you and keep asking for more work. Your hourly rate is what you are worth and what you need to project to people. It's your time, and you should charge accordingly."

Ultimately, however, a young Web developer should exercise common sense when pursuing or turning down an unpaid project; if the experience will set him or her up with mentors or provide invaluable job connections, working for free may be the best way to get one's foot in the door. Furthermore, if a Web producer is hoping to cater his or her services to brand-new Web publications or small businesses, lower rates may result in a larger client base early on.

"There's lots of women out there sitting in their kitchens and creating their businesses, so they aren't going to spend as much as a big firm," says Crissy Herron Gipson, self-taught Web developer and creator of IndieBizChicks.com, a Web-based marketing and publicity firm for women business owners. "You need to look at whom you'll be targeting. And when you start a Web design business, you should have a market in mind."

"You can't be everything to everyone," she adds.

Key tips to finding Web production work:

- 1. The more programs you know, the better.** Many Web production projects require knowledge in SQL, HTML, JavaScript, Flash, CSS, Adobe Photoshop, Quark, InDesign or Dreamweaver -- the ability to master all of the above will only help you. If taking a college course isn't financially feasible, search for [online tutorials](#) or browse IT volumes at your local bookstore.
- 2. Maintain a site of your own.** Even if your background is in writing, the more you are able to personalize a Web site, the more you'll impress future clients or employers. David Denton of AtomicOnline, for example, recommends aspiring producers to download different content management systems to help understand their inner workings. "Go set the system up, break it, and put it back together," he says.
- 3. Consider taking a course in HTML, PHP, Photoshop or Dreamweaver,** even if you have a strictly writing or editing background. "I can tell you there are not nearly enough gifted, well-trained writer/editor heads who have these additional multimedia chops," says Michelle Margetts.
- 4. When searching for gigs, make sure to browse multiple job sites.** Because of the varying nature of Web production projects, they can be found anywhere from [mediabistro.com](#) to Craigslist.com, Elance.com and Guru.com.

The breakdown:

Assignment: Everything from building and managing a site to overseeing the day-to day functions of a content management system.

Rate -- the low end: \$0-13 an hour

Rate -- the high end: \$50-100 an hour

The bare bones: After building a memorable online portfolio and earning a diverse skill set, a freelancer is hired to either produce a Web site or oversee the operations of an existing site on a short-term basis.

You deserve more if: You're hired as a copy editor or designer, but are asked to either turn a design into a functioning template, or handle HTML or search engine optimization beyond the basics.

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