

The Tenured Entrepreneur: Marketing Yourself Is a Drag. Do It Anyway.

chroniclevitae.com/news/2267-the-tenured-entrepreneur-marketing-yourself-is-a-drag-do-it-anyway



Getty Images

By Sam Johnson

For most faculty members, the hardest thing about entrepreneurship is the marketing — figuring out how to "monetize" your academic skills and services.

It's a tedious and time-consuming process that depends largely on trial and error. It also involves a fair amount of self-promotion, something that is anathema in faculty culture. Words like marketing and monetize tend to make academics very uncomfortable. And yet, without marketing, you're just a person sitting around waiting for the phone to ring.

That's the conclusion I came to several years ago, when, as a tenured professor, I decided to test the entrepreneurial waters by offering up my academic skills on the open market — skills like public speaking, writing, editing, coaching, and consulting. I first wrote about my decision to become a "tenured entrepreneur" in 2015, and then shared more advice in 2017 on how to make money from speaking engagements. (I used a pseudonym both times, and again here, because tenure doesn't protect you from the occasional overzealous administrator and/or jealous colleague.)

By 2015, I had reached the point in my career where my salary was pretty much maxed out, aside from small (and rare) cost-of-living raises. If I was going to significantly improve my family's financial situation, I decided, I was going to have to do it myself. And I did — and still do. For the past seven years, a third of my annual income has come from my "side hustle" — it consistently brings in an amount equal to about half of my teaching salary.

Obviously, that's a pretty good outcome, but it didn't happen on its own. It's the result of a lot of hard work.

And the hardest part has been the marketing — promoting myself and my skills to paying "clients." The work itself I (mostly) enjoy and am comfortable doing, but neither of those things is true of marketing. It's hard to figure out how to do it: how to reach, appeal to, and persuade various audiences. It's hard to push through my natural introvert's reluctance to "toot my own horn." It's hard to find time for marketing, especially when I'm busy with the paying projects.

But if I don't spend some of my time on marketing, I will eventually run out of paying projects. It turns out that's the first rule of entrepreneurship. (The second rule is that, even if I'm constantly marketing, I may still run out of paying projects. But that's just a risk we entrepreneurs take.)

For those faculty members whose salaries have stagnated, the good news is that you probably can make extra money using your academic skills. The bad news is that you're going to have to do that thing you hate: Market yourself. While there may not be a magic formula, there are some reasonably effective strategies for putting yourself out there.

Network, network, network. The first thing you should be doing — constantly — is networking at conferences and other professional gatherings where you can meet people who might be able to hire you or at least steer business your way.

I don't mean that in a completely utilitarian, self-serving way. This is not about using people. The best networking involves building relationships based on *mutual* interests and respect, such that other professionals in your field (or related fields) know you, appreciate your expertise, and want to work with you. But you can't do that if you don't get out and meet them.

You can also "exploit" your existing relationships — in the least exploitative way possible. I'm not talking about haranguing friends and colleagues. I'm talking about maintaining contact with people you already know who are familiar with your (no doubt stellar) reputation, share your interests, and might someday either hire you or recommend that you be hired.

Don't expect to be offered much paid work via social media. Advocates of social media like to claim that, so long as you are sufficiently active on Twitter and various other platforms,

the marketing will take care of itself and bring you paying clients.

I haven't found that to be true (and most academics will never have the sort of large following that might make that true). I have a website, and I maintain professional accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. I have several thousand "followers" (people and organizations), many of whom I approached because they have some sort of connection to what I do. But over the years, I've actually gotten very few paying jobs via social media. (For the most part, sites like LinkedIn seem to consist mostly of professional marketers all trying to market to one another.)

That said, it's important to have a web presence so that people who are interested in bringing you in as a speaker, commissioning you to write something, or hiring you as a consultant can find information easily about your expertise and experience.

The best way to use social media is to establish yourself as a "thought leader" in your field, which could pay long-term, if not immediate, dividends. You can find lots of good advice online about how to build your social-media presence. Perhaps most important: Post regularly. Try to do something on social media — post a link, comment on or share a post, like someone else's comment — every day so that you maintain an active presence.

The bottom line: You probably won't be offered many paying gigs from strangers via social media. But people who've met you or heard about you surely will look you up online before seriously considering hiring you. Make sure that what they find helps your case.

Reach out first, and often. If social media isn't the best way for academics to market themselves, what is? I've had the most success with personal outreach — usually via email but whenever possible, face-to-face.

Email marketing is both time-consuming and professionally fraught. The time-consuming part mostly involves data-mining — figuring out whom to contact in the first place. If you're actively networking, you already have some contacts, but probably not enough of them to sustain a freelance business. You're going to have to approach people you don't know, and that means figuring out who they are — the decision-makers in a given organization — and then finding their contact information online. That can take hours.

Before I go on, let me expand a bit on the term, "decision-makers." You have little to gain by reaching out to people who don't have the authority (or the budget) to hire you. Your network may include colleagues or acquaintances who, while not in charge, are willing to advocate for you with their bosses. I've certainly gotten jobs that way, and it's one of the main reasons you should network. But for the most part, when approaching people cold, focus on those who hold the purse strings.

The fraught part is writing the emails. First, your subject line requires significant thought — it has to be something that inspires people to open the email, rather than delete it without

reading. The email itself must walk a very fine line between collegial offer and sales letter. It should focus on what you can do, rather than on what you want, while still making it clear that you do this for a living. Striking the right tone can be tricky.

Recently, I've started making more face-to-face visits. Whenever I travel, I try to identify someone in the area who might be interested in my services (there's that data mining, again). Then I email them to ask if I can stop by to introduce myself. And then I do just that: I go by and introduce myself. I don't try to sell anything. I don't even mention working for them unless they bring it up (and they often do). But these one-on-one contacts, I've found, are priceless.

I've gotten more work from these introductory, face-to-face meetings than from any other strategy I've used.

Don't rely on word of mouth. When I first hung out my shingle as a "tenured entrepreneur," I figured I would only have to actively promote my skills for a few years. I assumed that, if I just did enough good work, people would start coming to me and I wouldn't have to market myself anymore.

That, too, turned out to be false. "Word of mouth" might work for auto mechanics or cabinet makers, but apparently not for speakers, writers, and editors.

I frequently have people come up to me after a speaking engagement to say how much they enjoyed it. Others send me nice emails. Anytime I'm evaluated, I get high marks. But no one ever seems to tell their friends or colleagues to hire me — even when I specifically ask them to and they commit.

So don't sit around waiting for clients to come to you as your fame spreads. For whatever reason, among highly educated professionals, word of mouth just doesn't seem to be a thing. Like it or not, you're going to have to put yourself out there.

Follow campus policies on outside income. Your goal in marketing yourself — namely, making a significant supplemental income — may not always align perfectly with your institution's priorities. Each college or university has its own policies governing "outside employment," with attendant warnings about "conflicts of interest."

Read campus policies and follow them. The last thing you want to do is lose two-thirds of your income in pursuit of another third.

What I recommend: Keep your side hustle completely separate from your faculty office. Conduct your outside business on your own computer and on your own time. Never engage in marketing activities for your outside business on the campus.

When you attend or present at a conference on the institution's dime, don't use the meeting to directly promote your freelance work. Of course it's fine to network during and after conference hours, and you should always try to present yourself in the best possible light. If people come up to you afterward and say they want to bring you to their campus as a paid speaker, so much the better. But don't approach them to initiate a transaction that will only benefit you financially while your institution is paying your travel expenses.

Most of all, don't brag about your side hustle on campus, or even talk about it, except perhaps with a few trusted friends. Campus policy may require you to report your activities to a supervisor, but that doesn't mean you have to blab about it to everyone. Best to keep your freelancing low profile. Those colleagues prone to resenting other people's success can't be jealous of something they don't know about.

And if your outside speaking and writing brings you some measure of fame? Well, that's a kind of protection in itself. At any self-respecting institution, a nationally recognized faculty member is someone to celebrate, not punish. And who knows? At some point, the institution might even start to do some of your marketing for you. But don't count on it.

Sam Johnson is the pseudonym of a tenured professor in the humanities at a regional university in the South