

# THE RISE AND RISE OF THE FREELANCER

Self-employed ad creatives are becoming an increasingly important part of agency life, freelancer Adam Tucker explains

There was a time when saying you'd "gone freelance" was tantamount to admitting you'd just been handed a freshly printed P45. It was a filler. A well-paid temp job. Something to pay the bills before something "proper" turned up.

They would be employed in the Siberian hinterlands of the agency. Nameless drones, churning out the hardworking ads the old-school executive creative directors wanted to keep well away from their precious award-winning creatives.

Nowadays, I'm happy to say, things are very different. Chances are, the agency you're sitting in now has a freelancer or two dotted around. You may actually have heard of them. Some might even be "permalancers" (a rather medical word for anything lasting longer than three months). They'll also be working on the very best briefs. More often than not, they'll actually come in specifically to work on them.

## A GAP IN THE MARKET

So why the change? Well, there are a number of reasons. The economic downturn has certainly swelled the ranks of this mobile workforce. Pressures from holding companies and ever-decreasing client budgets have seen agency staff numbers reduced by up to 40 per cent. And, these days, there are new departments to build and ever-new technologies to invest in.

When the big squeeze comes, the pen through the list of names tends to hover over the creative department. After all, they usually work in teams, so it's two salaries saved. And if they're mid-level weights, they can easily be replaced by two cheaper junior teams, right?

Wrong. The junior teams, often placements, are taken on quickly to fill the gaps and, if they're lucky, the offices of the recently departed. The trouble is, they're inexperienced and, in the newly nifty agencies of today, too slow at coming up with big ideas. Even if

they do manage to hit the jackpot, they'll need a lot of help in bringing their ideas to life. With departments over-stretched at best, there's unlikely to be any pastoral care going spare.

So the circle completes itself. The newly slimmed-down agencies get in some people who can actually do the work their clients need. I'm not, of course, suggesting they get back the very people they just let go (though it does happen surprisingly often). They hire in some tried-and-trusted freelancers who they know will deliver.

The situation is fuelled by hiring embargos. Several agency groups have simply put a hold on permanent recruitment. Again, a freelance Elastoplast is simple and painless.

Another reason for the increase in freelance assignments is that there are simply more places to work. Agencies such as 18 Feet & Rising operate on a smaller, more responsive scale. When the workload increases, they need people to cope with it. Freelancers fit the bill as they are self-starters and won't put a huge dent in agency overheads. What makes these agencies attractive to clients is their familial feel. There is a delicate balance of building a culture and a secure, successful business.

Jonathan Trimble, 18 Feet & Rising's managing partner, says: "Like all talent, you have to dig out the really good ones, but the freelance market has offered good pickings of late across all



Tucker...worked at many top agencies

kinds of creative output. One eye has to be kept on building the culture of the agency, finding a gang of people who get it and contribute to how you work."

Throwing money at big salaries makes less sense than buying in the talent you need, when you need it most.

## QUALITY IN QUANTITY

In the past, freelancers tended to be rather a motley crowd. I'm happy to say that from a ragtag bunch of P45-carriers, the freelancers of today are multi-awarded creatives. Clive Pickering, Sean Doyle, Ben Kay, Steve Paskin, to name but a few. That's about a dozen D&AD Pencils right there.

Put simply, we know what we're doing. You can get us to write work, shoot work, run pitches, liaise between departments, put us in front of clients, directors, you name it. I always think it's wise to get experienced freelancers involved from strategy to execution.

Keri Steele, a partner at the headhunter Indigo Mile, says: "Long-term contracts are becoming more commonplace as opposed to going in for a couple of days to help with the workload. Freelancers get to see projects through from start to finish and agencies are able to pull in top-quality resource without having to commit to a full-time contract."

Why be a freelancer, then? Why not take the permanent road again? I think it's because most creatives prefer doing the work. And freelancing allows you to do what you like doing best. And, arguably, what you're best at. No politics. No "taking one for the team". No ass-kissing required. Just the best ideas you can do. And though you may not make a lot of the ideas you generate, you do make some. And let's face it, 99 per cent of permanent creatives make about 2 per cent of the work they write in a year.

Freelancing offers a chance to use all your experience to produce ideas and channel all your energies into that



**Smaller agencies and start-ups are using freelancers a lot – some base their business model around having a pool of talent they tap into when needed**

Keri Steele, Indigo Mile

alone. That's not to say I wouldn't take the right full-time job if it came along. It would just have to beat freelancing, which would be difficult.

I've been lucky enough to work at some fantastic agencies: Wieden & Kennedy, Mother, Saatchi & Saatchi, M&C Saatchi and Fallon, to name but a few. The projects have ranged from Honda to the Diesel pitch.

Freelancing works when everyone knows what is expected – from the ECD to the planner. It's not the same as being staff. You don't have time to learn that the creative director "doesn't really do" the mornings". Or that the brief is "a work in progress". And if we're being given something that has been killed seven times already, tell us and show us the corpses. Otherwise, the chances are you'll get something that may be similar. It's basic stuff, but often gets overlooked.

You are paying good money and should expect the good shit straight away. An office is nice, or at least a desk. Some freelancers choose to work at home. I don't. I like being in a place and getting a sense of what makes it tick. Home is also full of biscuits and dis-

tractions too numerous to name. And if anyone suggests they "work better" from the pub, I'd pass if I were you.

One big thing. Please try to pay us as people, not as companies. This is my livelihood. Sixty days may seem fine when you're dealing with other multinationals, but I am working as hard as anyone else in the building and I want to be paid like they are – at the end of the month. Unsurprisingly, the bigger the organisation, the slower the payment.

Freelancing is a rather solitary occupation. I've been paired up with great people such as Tiger Savage and Chris Groom, and also worked in larger project groups/clusters/creches (whatever name is in vogue at the agency). But, in general, it's down to you. You do the work, do your accounts, chase payments: the stuff your agency usually does on your behalf.

You also have to accept you won't be at the heart of things. The gossip, the Christmas party, the Grand National sweepstake. When I was at DDB London, I loved the culture and camaraderie, but few agencies have that, so it's not something I miss too much.

There has been a lot written about how great ideas can travel. That old borders and old rules no longer apply. If this is indeed the case, then I am delighted. The last year alone has opened up a huge opportunity for freelancers. I've worked for agencies in Paris, Amsterdam, Germany and Shanghai. While my friends have also worked for places in New Zealand, Indonesia, Poland and Mumbai.

## THE GOING RATE

Freelancing pre-recession was certainly more lucrative. Day-rates have come down by about 25 per cent to 50 per cent since 2008. Partly due to lower margins, partly due to the increased competition out there. There is a misconception that freelancers get paid up to twice what "perms" get. Not true. It's three times. Kidding.

What we do get is a lower stress level, lower tax level (limited companies pay nearer 25 per cent than 40 per cent), and a higher quality of life both in and out of work. I can only speak from my own experiences, but I've worked on exciting projects with people who are at the top of their game. You are free

from petty politics and one-upmanship. The creative director/ECD isn't worried you're taking their job or scoring points, so everyone opens up and gets the best out of each other.

When you freelance at an agency, people are nicer. Maybe it's because they are usually meeting you for the first time. Even if they've met you before, you get that reunion buzz going. Maybe it's because there's no axe to grind, no agenda other than trying to get great work approved and made. But the fact is: it's really refreshing to be met with 100 per cent enthusiasm on every project. It's inspiring and motivating. There's no history, but simply the opportunity to do something really, really good.

A few years ago, there were very few headhunters who dealt with the temporary side of the business. Now, there are companies that put it on a par with permanent positions.

Steele says: "We are seeing more and more agencies using freelance as a high-quality, specialist resource rather than just a quick fix. Smaller agencies and start-ups are using freelancers a lot – some base their business model around having a pool of talent they tap into when needed; bringing teams of people together for specific projects."

## THE FUTURE

In the collaborative mash-up of the new world, both agencies and clients are looking at new ways to deliver creative work. Is buying-in talent, as and when it is required, the future?

Agencies such as Big A's Creative Emporium use freelancers to generate all their creative work. Cutting out the middle-men altogether. Clients such as Specsavers and Rowse are making their ads themselves, going in-house for their output. Though this is still fairly unusual in the UK, it is a trend that's likely to grow as businesses seek new ways to cut and control costs.

It seems that the very foundation of our industry, the creative process that sells goods and services, is undergoing fundamental change. Not just in the way work is done, but in the mechanics too.

Everyone's talking about a new kind of agency. There is a restlessness and fluidity in agency set-ups that just hasn't been present before. You can tap into crowdsourcing, directorial collectives and young creative co-ops like never before. MoFilm is an example of a whole new way of accessing creative output.

Rumours abound that the largest agency groups have near-bottomless coffers to back a new, tangible and, of course, profitable agency model.

But for now, the freelance creatives out there with a track record are busier than ever.

Ben Priest, the creative partner of Adam & Eve, says: "The new breed of freelancer seems to get the culture of the agency and fit right in. So it's extra talent but it doesn't feel separate from the agency."

Because the one thing that hasn't changed is that communications will be needed to shift products and services. And, so long as clients and agencies continue to believe that creativity sells, freelancers' phones will keep ringing.

## Freelancing: How to make it work

- Tell us how long the gig will be so we can plan ahead. Even if you don't know exactly, a rough guess is better than: 'I dunno... depends.'
- Two- and three-day 'firefighting' stints don't really benefit anyone.
- It takes a week at least to identify and solve a problem.
- The above doesn't apply if you've identified the problem and totally failed to solve it.
- Get the brief agreed before we start. Not just by the creative director and planner. But by the client and everyone with a vested interest.
- Be clear about what you want to achieve. Agree among yourselves first, then include us. Obvious, but, again, often overlooked.
- Ask how we work. Do you need highly finished Mac stuff? Do we need to be hooked up to your system? Do we need to wear the clients' brands in the office? Do we need a pass key/ID card/printing password/bar tab/layout pad/limo?
- Try to tell us when the late nights, if any, are likely to be. If it's a pitch, you will know.
- Make sure your 'perms' don't feel like we're there because they have somehow failed. Not nice for them or us. Especially if they're big.
- Pay us quickly, please. Slow payers get a bad rep and go to the back of the queue.