

Too Many Hats

Specialization has always been anathema to me. It seems the surest path to a lifetime of airless, niched-in drudge work and self-limiting opportunities. From the moment I resigned my first job in a direct-mail ad agency — the owner had declared all other forms of copywriting heretical and punishable by auto-da-fé — I have resisted the dual enchantments of comfort and predictability that conspired (or so I thought)

to lure me into a pigeonhole from which I might not escape. “Not so for me,” I vowed on my magic sword of youth and inexperience. I would be King of the Freelancers and as many different kinds of writer as I dared.

Alas, reality and I have a long history of bitter disagreements, which I lose with depressing regularity. And early on I discovered the paradoxical truth that hemming yourself *out* can be as dodgy a strategy as hemming yourself *in*.

My philosophy was simple ... and dumb: Never turn down work just because you don't know how to do it. Fortunately, what should have been a recipe for humiliation and battered street cred actually panned out. Luck played a role, certainly. But

the key was putting in five times as much work on every project, reading the experts, playing with new formats and structures, throwing out 90 percent of what I did as apprentice work, and billing the client only for what was usable.

I learned as I went, graduating rapidly from direct mail to print ads, publications, technical writing, speech writing, video, multimedia, comedy, and even broadcast entertainment.

As long as misguided clients were willing to ask, “Can you do this?” I was happy to



with Kevin Hyde



For IPs with more than one skill to sell, versatility can be a blessing or a curse. It all depends on how you play it ... and whom you're playing to.

answer, “Yes, I can.” And as I became comfortable with each new specialty, I dutifully added it to my CV, which, like Marley’s ghostly chain of clanking lockboxes, had reached ponderous length by the time I was 30.

Then, one day, the hammer dropped. A client who contracted all of his depart-



ment’s print collateral through me introduced me to a scriptwriter he had hired to draft the company’s flagship image video. Outside, I was Mr. Congeniality; inside, I felt like a snubbed prom date.

Later, in private, I asked the client why I hadn’t been considered for the project. After all, I knew the business intimately, and I had written and produced scores of video projects for other and larger businesses. His answer hit me like a sucker punch. “Well,” he squirmed, “it’s just that he only does video, and the committee members felt you were more of a utility player. They didn’t want to risk their budget on a dabbler.”

Ouch. Somewhere along the line, unbeknownst to me, *cross-media consultant* had

been downgraded to *utility player*, and a once-proud *generalist* had been replaced by a disreputable *dabbler*. In a stroke, all of my value-added had become liabilities. Was my brain mutating from sitting too close to my computer monitor? Or worse, had I been kidnapped by aliens and zapped into a parallel universe? I couldn’t tell. Suddenly, even my judgment was suspect, my fast-held assumptions in doubt.

For a while, things only got worse — or perhaps I was simply more attuned to the subtler nuances of the problem. After some serious mulling, I realized that companies that hired me as a video scriptwriter rarely used me as a producer or director, and even less as a print copywriter. Similarly, clients for whom I wrote TV spots didn’t consider me for long-form videos, and vice versa. And customers who had contracted me initially for light or humorous material didn’t feel I could handle more-serious promotions. Whether I liked it or not, I was being classified, numbered, and filed.

Then came the coup de grâce. A wave of mailings to ad agencies — in which I represented myself as a Swiss Army knife of written communications — had resulted in eerie silence. Mystified, I decided to poll the recipients by phone. In each case, the response was the same: The agency’s needs were narrow and well defined; my capabilities, too broad and unfocused. The Law of Periodicity ruled. The agency wanted a PR writer. *Period*. Or a B2B print copywriter.

Period. Or a consumer direct-mail pro. *Period.* Yes, I could be one or another, but not two or — heaven forbid — all three. Diversification was perceived as dilution; a generalist, as a journeyman, nothing more.

The truth revealed itself: Instead of wowing my clients with options, I was short-circuiting their innate need to label me.

For several weeks, I sulked. I read Hesse's *Beneath the Wheel*, practiced astral projection, and drew up plans for a small agrarian utopia in New England. Finally, though, the problem-solving mechanism that drove me to become a consultant in the first place kicked in. The answer was simple: Packaging. I didn't have to shed any of my profitable skills; all I had to do was package them more selectively.

My new strategy was based on a single counterintuitive observation: *One talent is a gift; two are versatility; three are suspicious.*

Where once I had yearned to be all things to all people, I decided it made more sense to be the *right* thing to the *right* people. To that end, I made the following changes to my product package at virtually no cost other than time (of which, careful readers may have divined, I suddenly had plenty to spare):

- **Targeting:** I created multiple versions of my profile, cover letter, and first-contact promotions so that I could lead with a specialty tailored to each client segment. I built separate packages for print, Web content, TV spots, corporate video, multimedia, and speech writing. Notice that I treated print and Web content as separate specialties, even though the two, for all intents and pur-

poses, are identical. Distinctions are in the eye of the customer, not the vendor.

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- **Bundling:** With existing clients, I make it a point to promote those skills most closely related to the ones they already are buying. If I'm already handling print ads

and promotional literature, I push for editorial and PR work. If I'm writing video scripts, I angle for the producer or director job. If I'm drafting a marketing strategy, I ask for the opportunity to submit a creative plan and sample copy. Often I do the work on spec — a painful and risky courtesy — just to make my point.

- **Show and tell:** For clients who have me pegged, I schedule opportunities to show them projects I've developed for other clients, in other media — usually under the pretext of asking them to assess the program's effectiveness or of showing off some new electronic effect. Most days, you're lucky to get a "That's nice" or a half-hearted "Cool." But occasionally, a client floors you by asking if you can make one "just like it" for her company. In either event, you've planted the seed that this is a capability that this company hasn't tapped, and you've done it in a casual, nonselling situation that doesn't require an immediate yes or no. The next time a similar project comes up for discussion, your name is more likely to make the short list of suppliers.

- **The name game:** I admit I've struggled with this one. I'm still not sure whether I'm a writer, a media producer, a marcom consultant, or a communications specialist.

However, if I had to make a choice, I would opt for a designation that's broad enough to legitimize two or three of my related specialties without dissolving into vapor. For example, I think clients are more likely to accept that a marketing consultant or communications specialist is also a writer than they are to assume that a writer understands either marketing or communications. By the same token, vanity titles like "media coordinator" or "corporate creative resource" defy interpretation but speak volumes about the bearer's hyperinflated ego.

In the final analysis, assigning yourself a title is a subjective process that should reflect both the patois of your business segment and a realistic assessment of your personal skill set. My advice: Avoid (1) pigeonholing yourself with a too-restrictive title and (2) overselling yourself with a bombastic title that makes you sound like a festooned admiral in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. Be accurate, but leave some room for interpretation. Consider printing several different versions of your calling card to match your targeted mailings. And remember, all your printed title has to do is get you in the door. What you become after that is a function of how well you meet the client's

baseline expectation and how effectively you can pitch your extra talents — those extra hats.

For me, small tweaks in packaging have made a considerable difference, although they haven't solved all my problems. Without a doubt, I'm leveraging more — and more varied — types of work from my existing client base, and I'm receiving more — and more enthusiastic — responses from targeted first-time contacts.

Even so, rejection remains an inevitable fact of life. Now, even agencies that like my work turn me down because they think I'm too old to be hip. Corporate clients still don't want comedy (they just don't get it). And no matter how many Internet sites and CD-ROM presentations I write, there are still digital chauvinists out there who are convinced that electronic content is something so dauntingly metaphysical that it can only be learned at the feet of Tibetan lamas — and certainly not by an old-style analog consultant like me. Sigh. You can't please everyone.

But, damn it, at least now they're rejecting me for totally irrational reasons over which I have no control. And that, I suppose, is progress. **1099**

