

Why Detail-Oriented Writers Succeed

By Steve Roller

Steve Roller here again with day two of *The Writer's Life*.

This week, I'm bringing you strategies and systems that I borrowed from my previous corporate life to help out on the "business" side of freelancing.

They've helped me get off to a solid start as a copywriter and overcome some of the challenges new writers face.

Today's suggestion is simple. If you implement just this one thing in 2012, I guarantee you'll make more money.

This year, **get fanatical about tracking your numbers**, or as I call it, "keeping score."

I'm not talking about setting goals. That's important and the first step.

Beyond setting goals, however, **keeping score on seven key factors** will help you:

- Diagnose exactly where you need to improve
- Track improvement from month to month and year to year
- Take control of your business instead of waiting for things to happen
- Make more money

I spent 15 years in direct sales, and I credit a lot of my success to using this strategy. In 1999, I set a benchmark of \$351,500 in sales (not income) that I needed to achieve for the year. The big payoff, above my normal commissions and bonuses, was an all-expense-paid, seven-day trip for two to Hawaii.

That year, I was like a baseball statistician keeping track of my numbers. On any given day, I could tell you how many people I had talked to that month, how many sales I had made, how many people on my prospect list I hadn't contacted yet, what my average client size was, and what my total sales to date were.

On my very last day working in 1999, I landed one more client, which put my total number for the year at \$352,200. I was within .2% of my goal! It was thanks to my "keeping score" all year long and being able to target one specific area as needed to bring up my numbers.

Here are the **seven key factors** you should keep detailed track of in your freelance business and why ...

1. Your prospect list. I'd recommend making a big list – 100 or more. The more names you have, the more opportunity you'll feel you have. WhosMailingWhat.com is a great resource for finding companies who use direct mail (the small investment is worthwhile). Or do a search in your niche. For example, Google "fitness marketing companies" or "fitness information marketers." LinkedIn is another great tool for building connections and finding groups associated with your niche.

2. "Touches." How many names on your prospect list have you actually contacted either by direct mail, email, phone, or in person? This number really tells you how motivated you are. It also shows the importance of having a big prospect list.

3. Conversations. Now we're getting to the real action. Keeping track of conversations will tell you how effective those touches are. "Conversations" only refers to seriously talking to a prospect about a project. Casual inquiries don't count. I even include email conversations since I've had some clients I never spoke to.

4. Proposals. Why keep score on this? Formal proposals are your chance to show your prospect what you can do for them. You need to know the number of proposals you give so you can find your "batting average" after tracking the next key factor ...

5. Projects. Your number of projects landed divided by the number of proposals given will give you your conversion rate. Make no mistake: we don't just sell with the copy we write for clients. We are in the business of selling ourselves, and keeping score of the number of projects you get will tell you exactly how well you're selling yourself.

6. Working hours. Some writers would debate the idea of recording how many hours you work. Even though we often work by the project, tracking hours shows how efficiently we're using our time. It can also help you determine rates (even though you wouldn't tell a client how long a project takes you).

7. Income. Obviously, the most important one, right? If you're just starting out, keep track of your income and all seven key factors for six months. Then you'll be able to set an income goal and estimate how many projects, proposals, conversations, contacts, and prospects that might require.

For example, let's say in your first six months as a copywriter you made \$9,000, which required 30 projects, 60 proposals, and so on. Your next six months, you may want to double that income to \$18,000. Since you made \$300 per project initially, a realistic goal might be to increase that to \$450 per project, which will require 40 projects.

Want to constantly improve in all key areas? I'd recommend keeping score of all seven factors monthly, quarterly, and yearly. In addition, track projects, working hours, and income weekly.

I can hear the objections now: "This will stifle my creativity," "Too time-consuming and tedious," "I'm just not a numbers person," and from new copywriters, "I don't have any numbers to track yet!"

Here's the thing. Most successful businesses track their key numbers. Treat your freelance business like a business, and you'll increase your chances of success.

The more you do it, the more fun it becomes. Seriously. And it shouldn't take more than about 15 minutes a week. (If it takes longer, it's because you're making a lot of money, and you won't mind!)

The bottom line is this: when you know your important statistics, including these seven key factors, you can determine exactly what areas you need to work on. Put the emphasis on increasing your activity in that area, and the results will come.

Are you willing to give it a shot? Have you had success as a freelancer or in another business by keeping detailed statistics? Let me know if you're on board for 2012 with a quick note in the comment section.

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14 Responses to "Why Detail-Oriented Writers Succeed"

Good points, Steve. As an internet development entrepreneur, I've found that keeping detailed records is the only way to realistically set, meet, and exceed business goals. This is especially true if there are employees or subcontractors.

Otherwise, it's hard to know when to raise rates, what specific types of projects and clients to pursue, and when it makes sense to expand the business.

Tracking also shows ROI for time invested, leading to smarter time management decisions.

Steve Hill – over a year ago

I appreciate the comments, Steve. Thanks. Good point about how keeping tight records helps you see when to raise rates, expand, etc. I think keeping track of the details allows the creative side to flourish, too.

Steve Roller – over a year ago

GOOD advise. I've been treating my freelancing like a job, not a business. But I'm ready to change that now. Have favorite software or do you use Excell/database?

Guest (Tim) – over a year ago

I am so on board for this, Steve. It's the only way you can tell yourself the truth and do something about it. Tx!

Guest (BARBARA SNOW) – over a year ago

I was also in direct sales for a while and I was a numbers junkie! I knew my closing rate and average order like it was nothing. I knew how many calls I would need to make in order to hit a certain goal.

My problem, however, was execution of the plan. I wouldn't put in the necessary effort to hit those goals.

So my tip to overcome that is to set small goals that are along the path of the bigger goals and reward yourself when you hit those small goals.

Any other tips?

Rod Waynick – over a year ago

Thanks for this, Steve. I keep some of the stats you suggest, but they are not all organized in the same place. My question is: do you have a favourite method of recording your numbers? Do you use Excel, or a simple table? Or I suppose one could even even use pencil and paper.

My word for the year is 'FOCUS' - and I am using it in as many aspects of my work as possible - from my goals to my actual day to day work. Your suggestions fit right in - I'll get on it right away!

Best for 2012!

Ann Jordan-Mills – over a year ago

@Tim - I'm not using any particular software for this, although I'd like to hear if anyone has a good suggestion. Mostly Excel so far. Hope your transition goes well. It really does become fun when, especially when you see the numbers improving!

Steve Roller – over a year ago

@Barbara - You're welcome. Go for it!

@Rod - Great ideas! I'm big on small rewards, too, even daily ones, like if I write for x hours I'll unwind for an hour at my favorite coffee shop, or if I hit my weekly goal I'll take my wife out to dinner (double bonus there). The other thing is making sure that the goal numbers are really yours, not just a number you think you should put down (like "make six figures"). And make sure you have a strong emotional attachment to that goal, which requires some serious reflection. Best wishes to you, Rod, and let me know how it goes.

Steve Roller – over a year ago

@Ann - I only use Excel, nothing fancy. And for income (the main number I like to track!), I'm actually writing it weekly on the COS calendar we got from AWAI, along with a running monthly and yearly total as we go on. It's a constant reminder of where I am, and has given me a sense of urgency.

For everyone, I'd recommend keeping it positive. For example, if you're just starting out and the income isn't there yet, don't write "\$0.00" on a weekly calendar. Keep track of some other factor that you are cranking on, like # of hours writing.

With your "FOCUS", Ann, I'm sure you'll hit your 2012 goals! (My word is "breakthrough", and it's starting to happen.)

Steve Roller – over a year ago

Great article Steve. I believe you have to know your numbers; You gotta map it out. If you don't know where you are, it's hard to reach your intended destination. Thanks for the tips. This is something I can implement immediately.

Tanya MarCia – over a year ago

Thanks, Tanya. From what I hear you have things rolling already in 2012! Keep it up, and keep me posted.

Steve Roller – over a year ago

@Ann , Thanks for ur Post, U clarify one Psychic Point in my mind

Adnan zia – over a year ago

Thanks for sharing, Steve. I read 6 of your articles. I am a detail-oriented person, so your comments give me the details to focus on. I'm working on Copywriting 2.0 at this time. Thanks again pete

Pete OBrien – over a year ago

Glad it helped, Pete. Best wishes.

Steve Roller – over a year ago

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