

Chapter 2:

Building your brand ... and your network

In this chapter ...

- How to create and refine your online persona
- How to build your freelance network
- Informational interviews: how to request them and what to ask during them

Pretend you're an editor at a glossy, well-established magazine (let's dream big for a moment, shall we?). You've just read an email with a fantastic pitch—it's clear, focused, concise, and a great fit for your publication (don't worry, we're getting to how to do that in the next chapter).

Looking at the signature, the name of the journalist is unfamiliar to you. What would you do next? Probably do an online search, right? That's why it's so important as a freelancer to have a strong online presence that makes a great case for you and your work as a journalist. While it might feel a bit that you're putting the cart before the horse by focusing on your branding and promotion, you need a professional online presence to sell yourself as a journalist. Plus, taking the time to assess your work, determine your brand, and hone in on your future goals will help you see yourself as a professional and lay the groundwork for when you start to pitch producers and editors.

Your online persona

At a minimum, you'll want to have a simple website, a professional email address (don't worry, your `NewDirection4eva@yahoo.com`

account can still be for personal use!) and a LinkedIn account. But, depending on where you want to specialize as a freelancer, you may want to consider Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Medium, or others from the vast landscape of social media and publishing platforms. However, being on all social media platforms and not keeping them curated or updated is worse than being on a few and doing them well—so resist the urge to do it all at once and instead pick the options where you can see a direct benefit. You can always add accounts later if needed.

Website: a website is a necessity as it's your chance to showcase your work beyond the limited scope of a pitch. Your site doesn't have to be complicated—it can be as simple as having a photo, a short bio, and links to your work. It can also be a great place to house other creative content that can set you apart from the rest—like that great blog you write about where to find the best tacos in your hometown. Wherever you host your site, a short and simple URL or domain name adds a professional touch.

Email: a place where you can be contacted with a username that doesn't tip off your future employer to your favorite sport or band from high school. On that note, you may want to consider updating your voicemail message if you plan on using your personal phone for freelance work. Depending on where you host your website, you may also get free email accounts that you can set up.

LinkedIn: while certain fields of work use LinkedIn more than others, it's a simple way to create a mini-resume and professional-looking page that will rank high in online searches. Worth your time and the occasional update!

Nine tips to consider as you build your online presence:

1. Make sure your photo is recent, professional, and reflects the type of work you'd like to do. A picture

of you sitting in a Lamborghini makes sense if you want to write luxury car reviews, but less so if you're looking to do investigative or political reporting.

2. Whatever title you choose to give yourself, keep it consistent across platforms. You want people to find you easily and know it's you, whether they're on your website or LinkedIn.
3. You are selling yourself as a communicator—make sure your writing reflects that. Write in your voice and the best version of it—aim to be clear, concise, and error-free.
4. The goal of your website is for people to be able to reach you—so share a way to get in touch that isn't just a form submission. While it's understandable to not want to give out your cell number, it's helpful to at least include an email or social media account you check regularly.
5. Showcase only your best work, ideally pieces that relate to the work you're hoping to get as a freelancer. Update your portfolio as you get new jobs and opportunities, and don't feel obligated to keep old work on your website or portfolio as you create new and better pieces. Your work will change and grow from the portfolio you developed in school, and that's a good thing!
6. You may choose to create social media accounts specifically for work, but keep in mind that it becomes more accounts for you to manage and update. You may prefer to link your personal accounts instead—though remember that they will end up on your professional pages, so you may want to curate your personal updates appropriately.
7. Just because your online persona is professional doesn't mean it can't be fun! Your interests, quirks,

and hobbies are what make you unique and set you apart from other journalists—so don't shy away from sharing some of your personality. Editors are people, too, and they want to work with people who engage in the world around them and share similar values. You never know when your love of scuba might help clinch a writing job with an editor who's a fellow master diver.

8. Unless you're looking to sell web-design skills, keeping your site simple and easy to update means you are far more likely to actually update it. By adding embedded widgets or sections that pull from your latest Twitter or Instagram accounts, your website can feel fresh and regularly updated even if you haven't touched it in a while.
9. Have a few friends or people you trust take a look at your site and accounts to point out any issues with functionality, layout, typos, etc. Better for them to find than a future employer!

Once you have your online persona built, it's time to start ...

Building your network

Of course, before you can pitch somewhere, you need to know where to pitch. You need to begin developing your freelance network. This is probably the most intimidating part of freelancing—finding who to reach out to and how. But, with a bit of practice, it will become second nature. Don't believe me? Think about how you felt before your first cold-call, your first interview, your first story—all things that you are now likely quite comfortable doing. Building your network uses all of the same skills, but this time with editors and other journalists instead of sources.

To find out who to pitch to, you'll need to pull out your journalist research skills and do a bit of digging.

Questions to ask as you begin to look for places to pitch

1. What types of work do you want to do?
2. What publications or outlets publish the work you want to do?
3. Which of these places accept freelance pitches?
4. Who is the main contact for freelance pitches?

The first question involves looking inward. Do you want to write features? Make radio documentaries? Create videos for social media? Are there certain beats or topics you'd like to focus on—like parenting, or politics, or the environment? You might have lots of interests that seem at odds with each other—that's OK! Write down the formats and the topics and ideas that spark your interest. Being able to pitch broadly is a good thing as a freelancer, and you can always narrow things down later if you feel you've cast your net too wide.

Now that you have a list of the types of freelance work you'd like to pitch—it's time to find places that publish the work you want to make. Start by listing the publications, shows, networks, websites that you admire that fit the bill, and then start the search for others that you haven't yet discovered. There are lots of online communities, podcasts, and social media accounts for freelancers full of great tips and tricks about outlets accepting freelance work, some of which you will find in chapter 3.

Online is a great place to start, but don't discount your real-life network: talk to friends, family, your professors, and other journalists and freelancers. Ask them about the best freelancing options they know about in your city, region, province, and beyond ... you may be surprised at what they come up with! Keep an eye out for places that are identified as freelancer-friendly: ones that pay well, pay on time, and treat their writers well. Take note of publications that don't pay or are known for not paying on time; you'll want to avoid those ones.

Once you have your list of places to pitch, you'll want to find out if they accept freelance pitches. Many websites will share this information, as well as a contact person (often in the "about" and "contact" sections at the bottom of the page). If it's unclear, you can always reach out to the organization, even just by calling the general number, to find out if they accept pitches and where to send them. When you can, avoid sending emails to general mailboxes, like `info@magazine.com`—try to get the names of editors and specific email accounts so you can reach someone directly.

By this point, you should be gathering a good-sized list of places to pitch and people to contact. I recommend gathering it all in one place, ideally in a spreadsheet, so it's easy to reference and update as you go.

Now that you have a list of places that accept the type of work you want to pitch, pick three that you would like to learn more about. Maybe you'll choose one big national outlet—something you'd like to work toward pitching to—as well as a couple of local publications that you know you have a better chance of working for. Maybe you'll pick three different types of companies, like a magazine, a website, and a radio station. Maybe you'll pick three at random. Your choice!

These will be your first informational interviews.

Informational interviews: The key to your next gig

You've probably done all sorts of interviews throughout your journalism degree, but the informational interview might be new to you—and it's a great tool as you begin to navigate the world of freelancing. Simply put, an informational interview is meeting up with someone (usually a potential employer) for an informal chat about who they are, the work they do, and any other questions you might have about work opportunities. Just because the meeting is often informal, don't confuse it with being unimportant. This is the opportunity

to sell yourself and your ideas, and make a great impression before even sending in your first pitch—you will want to prepare and make it count.

Why are informational interviews important? Think back to being an editor at that glossy magazine earlier in the chapter and getting that great email pitch. Imagine, this time, that when you saw the name, you recognized it—because you had had a quick coffee and chat with the journalist last month. You're more likely to consider the pitch now, aren't you?

Informational interviews are a great way to get your foot in the door, show what you can do—and make sure that your name is familiar when your pitch lands in an editor's inbox. It's also a chance for you to suss out a publication and see if it's a place you actually want to pitch to or work for.

How to request an informational interview

You might be thinking, “There's no way a busy editor will make time for coffee/a phone chat with me!” But, from my experience, editors are willing, more likely than not, to make the time. Here's why:

1. Very few people actually reach out for informational interviews.
2. Any outlet that relies on freelancers needs to keep a number of great journalists in their arsenal, which means always keeping an eye out for new talent.

A quick phone call or email is all it takes to request an informational interview, and you might be surprised at how many people you hear back from. You now have a spreadsheet full of contacts—time to start reaching out!

As with any email correspondence, you want to keep things clear, concise, and professional. An email could be as simple as:

To: majoreditor@dreampublication.com

From: youremail@yourwebsite.com

Subject: Informational interview re: freelancing with your magazine

A Dear Ms. Major Editor,

Hello! **B** I'm a freelance journalist and recent grad from Mount Royal University's journalism program. My work has appeared in the Calgary Journal, and **C** you can find my portfolio at mywebsite.com.

D I'm a big fan of your album reviews and have some ideas for bands that would be a great fit for the section. **E** I was wondering if you might have a bit of time to chat next week about freelance opportunities with your publication?

F Thanks, and I look forward to hearing from you,
Future Freelancer

G Cell: 403-123-4567

Yourwebsite.com

Any other social media accounts

A Whenever you can, send emails directly to specific individuals, not generic email accounts, and be sure to address your email to their proper name so they know it's meant for them.

B A brief line or two explaining who you are and some of the work you've done helps show the editor you have experience and are worth talking to. Even if it's your student publication, include it!

C Don't bog down an email with attachments or long resumes—a web address will point them in the right direction if they need more information.

- D** Explain what interests you about the publication, without getting too long-winded. It helps the editor see that you know and care about the work they do.
- E** Make a clear ask for a time to meet. Options are coffee, phone, video chat ... or you can leave it more general and see what the editor suggests in their reply.
- F** It never hurts to be friendly and polite!
- G** Be sure that your email signature includes clearly marked ways of getting in touch with you, particularly by phone.

The best emails are short, but it's good to infuse a bit of personality—after all, this is an editor's first encounter with you and your writing. If you have any additional relevant information—like connections with the publication or one of its employees—be sure to include it (without making it too long!). A possible example:

To: majoreditor@dreampublication.com

From: youremail@yourwebsite.com

Subject: Informational interview re: freelancing with your magazine

A Dear Ms. Major Editor,

Hello! **B** I'm a freelance journalist and recent grad from Mount Royal University's journalism program. My work has appeared in the Calgary Journal, the Calgary Herald, and BeatRoute Magazine—you can find my portfolio at mywebsite.com.

C Jana Journalist, a colleague and classmate of mine, said that you may be looking to bring some new freelancers into the fold.

D I was wondering if you might have a bit of time to chat next week about freelance opportunities with your publication?

E Thanks, and I look forward to hearing from you. If you're not the best person to chat with, please feel free to forward this along to whoever is!

Best,

Future Freelancer

F Cell: 403-123-4567

Yourwebsite.com

Any other social media accounts

A Again, whenever you can, send emails that clearly state the recipient's name directly to specific individuals, not to generic email accounts.

B A brief line or two explaining who you are and some of the work you've done helps show the editor you have experience and are worth talking to. Your best publications should be listed here.

C If someone referred you to the job—especially someone who may already be freelancing with the publication or knows the editors—be sure to include it. Referral and word of mouth is a valuable currency in the world of freelance.

D Again, make a clear ask for a time to meet, so it's harder to ignore.

E You want to be clear and concise, but it never hurts to be personable! Asking them to forward on an email if they're the wrong person will hopefully mean your message will land on the right desk.

F Again, an email signature should include clearly marked ways of getting in touch with you, particularly by phone.

As you may have guessed, these are emails that will likely take some time to craft to get the voice and length right. Take the time to make a good first impression—and once you have a system that works, it will be simple to adjust depending on who you're reaching out to.

If you choose to call your contact instead, you will want to include the basics in any voicemail as well as a phone number where you can be reached. It also doesn't hurt to send a follow-up email in case it's your editor's preferred method of communication—just mention in your email that it's a follow-up to your voicemail.

What if I don't get a reply?

As you've no doubt learned from your work in journalism, it's OK to follow up! People are busy and email can fall to the wayside. If you haven't heard back in a week, feel free to send an email. You can also try writing to another editor at the same publication and see if you have better luck there. It's important to remember that silence isn't necessarily a rejection—sometimes, editors aren't looking for freelancers. Make a note to follow up again in a month or so—and even monthly, if it's a place you'd really like to work—when timing might be better, or when the editor admires your tenacity and finally writes you back.

What if I do get a reply?

Congratulations! Now that you have a meeting set, it's time to do some preparation. Here are some things to have ready for your informational interview:

1. Read up on the show or publication—know the latest episode or issue and what's in it.
2. Look up any other information about the company, like its owners and relevant sister publications.

3. Read up on the editor you're meeting—what are they responsible for? Is there a biography or information online on their career and experience? Be sure to take note of any highlights or things that interest you that you may want to ask about.
4. Draft up a list of questions to ask.
5. Prepare at least one, ideally a few, solid story pitches aimed at the publication and its audience. Be prepared to think on the fly if an editor has a story idea or two and asks you how you would go about chasing and producing the piece.

The first three steps rely on your research skills as a journalist: learn the product and learn the people in order to ask smart questions at your meeting. If you were an editor meeting with a journalist and they knew very little about your publication, would you want to hire them? Probably not. So be in the know!

In terms of developing questions for the interview, you want to learn both about the publication and how they go about working with their freelancers, which can look different at different outlets. You'll want to prepare questions that address both topics.

Questions to ask at your informational interview

1. What is your organization's pitching process?
2. What kinds of stories do you accept pitches for?
3. Are there certain formats you prefer?
4. What is your freelance rate?
5. How and when do you pay?
6. Are there certain times of the month or the year that are better to pitch?

By the end of your interview, you should know how this publication accepts pitches, what they're looking for, how much you would get paid and when. If you feel uncomfortable asking about

money, practice it ahead of time and get used to talking about it. You're a professional journalist, and just because you're passionate about the work you do doesn't mean your work doesn't deserve to be compensated.... Plus, as we'll discuss in the next chapter, these are questions that editors expect and should be very comfortable discussing.

Aside from these questions, and any others you may have prepared, you will also want to have at least a couple of strong story pitches ready to go. While it might seem a bit like jumping the gun—isn't this just an informational interview?—pitches are the currency of freelancing, and having some good ones at a first meeting will put you on the editor's radar. It's also a chance to get some in-person feedback to find out if your ideas are on the right track, and for the editor to see how you approach storytelling. Plus, if one of your pitches is particularly good, you might even leave your informational interview with an assignment.

And that's it—the start of your freelance network!

For every informational interview you have, be sure to send a quick thank-you email to the editor you spoke with. Keep track in your spreadsheet who you've met, and update their contact information if necessary. Interview by interview, email by email, assignment by assignment, your spreadsheet and your network will slowly and surely start to grow.

Now, you're looking smart and professional online, and you've talked to at least a few places that know your name and might even take a look at your pitches. It's time to craft something great to send them, and that's our next chapter.