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## **When to Work for Nothing**

By [Michelle Goodman](#)

*Many freelancers and consultants wonder whether it is ever a good idea to work for no pay. To answer this question, I invited [Michelle Goodman](#) to do a guest post. Ms. Goodman is a veteran freelancer, the author of the newly released book "[My So-Called Freelance Life](#)" and an advocate for the rights of independent workers. The following is her response. — Marci*

Despite the fact that I've gone from greenhorn to grizzled veteran in my 16 years as a freelancer, I receive calls and e-mails like the following at least once a month:

"We really love your work. And we have a great opportunity for you at our exciting new media venture."

Translation:

"We're launching a new web site/magazine/start-up and we'd love to have you do some consulting work for us. For free."

My hopeful would-be client will then explain that his or her company is poised to be the next Google or that some former "Apprentice" contestant who's long since faded into oblivion is on the advisory board. All this is meant to butter me up for the next line, which happens to be the sentence in the self-employment lexicon that I hate the most:

"It will be great exposure for you."

No one ever filled a gas tank or bought groceries with exposure. The [20.9 million Americans](#) working as consultants, freelancers, small-business owners and independent contractors are not keeping a roof overhead by getting paid in exposure, or "PIE," as I've taken to calling it.

But writers, illustrators and other creative types aren't the only ones who routinely get asked to donate their time and talents to clients devoid of outsourcing budgets. Business consultants, [virtual assistants](#), bookkeepers, programmers, publicists and all other manner of self-employed professionals get offered platefuls of PIE, too.

Sometimes the PIE — with all its promise of fame and fortune at some vague date on the horizon — will sound pretty delicious, especially if the economy's in the gutter like it is now. Sometimes you'll convince yourself that a little sliver of PIE couldn't possibly hurt your bottom line. But usually these gigs are as empty as the calories at your favorite bakery counter.

I've been working for myself long enough that I'm now able to negotiate pay for [those high-profile gigs](#) that come my way. But for those of you who've recently begun freelancing or consulting in the wake of a layoff (or in anticipation of needing some extra holiday cash), here are my rules for helping yourself to a piece of the self-employment PIE.

First, let's consider when giving it up for nothing can work in your favor:

You have no clients or portfolio. If you left your staff position without any customer testimonials or work samples, you may have to do a freebie or three for a worthy small business to prove to paying clients that you've done this before. Pick short-term projects (several days, tops) so you're not stuck working pro bono until the next decade.

Your dream client has shallow pockets. Writers, artists and performers are all too familiar with this phenomenon. Example: The indie magazine that barely pays its freelancers but, thanks to the power of PIE, has landed many of them agents, book deals and art shows. For business consultants, speaking at a highly publicized conference might yield similar results, in the form of new clients and paid speaking gigs. Be sure to build such unpaid work into your [annual promotional plan](#) (which can be all of two paragraphs) so you don't give away too much time each year.

You're donating time to a worthy cause. When donating your services to your favorite nonprofit or charity, my motto is, "Give big." Think high-profile auctions, galas and fund-raising marathons; the more PIE potential, the better. Although you're doing the job gratis, send the client a short, [informal contract](#) clearly stating what you will and won't do, and when.

On the other hand, if you come across any of the following payment schemes, I suggest you run for the nearest exit:

Credit for your work (and nothing more). Perhaps you've seen these anonymous ads on [Craigslist](#): "Promote my fledgling business, write my Web copy or do my market research and you'll get a great portfolio sample." Note: Unless you're doing [work for hire](#) (for which you should be compensated handsomely), you should always receive credit for your work. And anytime you see an ad for unpaid work that doesn't state the company name and Web site, move along.

Job bidding sites. Despite their [supporters](#), I'm not a fan of freelancer job bidding sites, no matter how many bells and whistles they throw at me. Project budgets lean toward the ridiculously low, as do the bids made by competing freelancers. Better to invest your time cultivating relationships the old-fashioned way: by [getting to know](#) other business owners and independent professionals. I'd rather submit a solicited bid to a company I've taken the time to [sniff out](#) than cozy up to one that's [crowdsourcing](#).

Being paid on spec. Completing a work in the hopes that you'll be able to sell it has its place in some creative sectors. Unless you're Diablo Cody, you'll probably write a screenplay on spec before shopping it around Hollywood. But in the business world, it's a bad idea to do work for any client who insists that you do the bulk of the project before they decide whether they like [your work](#) enough to pay you for it. The graphic arts community, in particular, is rife with [design contests](#) and design contest sites that perpetuate spec work. In many instances, the compensation awarded contest "winners" is often well below fair market rates.

Elaborate revenue models that would baffle even your C.P.A. I was recently contacted by a new Web site looking for bloggers they could pay per page view. As the site had no readers yet, I suspected my initial take would be zip. Yet somehow the recruiter tried to convince me that I had the potential to make \$18,000 a month. It was all I could do to not snort my soda out my nose. And while some attorneys, venture capitalists, and [application developers](#) may have the means to work for revenue shares, getting paid if and when a company becomes profitable is not a financial option for most independent professionals.

It doesn't matter if you're a dog walker, a Web designer or a tax preparer. When you agree to work free, you reinforce people's misguided ideas that the self-employed are independently [wealthy hobbyists](#). Don't degrade your profession by letting a cheap client take advantage of you.