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FREELANCE FOCUS

Nourish Your Niche: The Rewards and Risks of Specialized Medical Writing

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What is a niche? What are the rewards and risks of nourishing a niche? How do you find a niche? As freelance medical writers, or writers considering freelance work as an option, we have to ask ourselves what kind of medical writing we are going to do. Are we going to offer a broad mix of services or tap a specialty niche? This article will help you weigh the pros and cons of whether to specialize as a freelance medical writer and how you can get started.

FROM GENERALIST ROOTS TO SPECIALIST BRANCHES

At the beginning of a freelance medical writing journey, it's common for writers to take on different types of work and to work for different types of clients. I did this too. In the early years of my freelance medical writing journey, I edited, wrote, researched, and synthesized information for a range of deliverables, including white papers, reports, needs assessments, slide decks, monographs, manuscripts, book chapters, and more. My clients included nonprofit organizations in public health, startups in biotech, providers in continuing medical education/continuing education for health professionals (CME/CE), academics, and individuals who contracted me via guru.com.

Taking on a broad spectrum of work in the early days of freelancing often stems from uncertainty about how and where to start. So we start anywhere. This is no bad thing in my book. By casting your net widely, you'll find what fits your interests and your preferred style of writing. You'll learn which clients and medical writing sectors align with your values and the life you want to lead. You will develop a broad knowledge and skill base as well as flexibility to respond to different situations.

Yet there's a tradeoff in confidence and competence from being a generalist. Each fresh project or new client can unleash a cascade of anxieties about whether we're up to the task and potentially leads us down seemingly endless research and pre-writing rabbit holes. At some point, we begin to harbor a sneaking suspicion that we have spread ourselves thinly across therapeutic areas, specialties, and project types. To switch metaphors here, we can end up feeling less like fisherfolk (casting the net, remember?) and more like goldfish, darting around trying to find bites here and there for our business. Frustration, overwhelm, inconsistent revenue, and cognitive overload ensue.

NICHE BENEFITS

In contrast, nourishing a niche (or two) is a way to funnel your energy and target your resources to ensure sustainable revenue for your business. A niche is simply a specialized segment or service offering within the broader field of medical writing. A niche can be directed toward serving particular client or project types, therapeutic areas, disease states, and more. Niches are not carved in stone and evolve over time. Over the last 2 decades I have personally cultivated niches in developing white papers and education outcomes manuscripts (project-based), working with medical specialty societies (client-based), and conducting qualitative evaluations of CME/CE programs (skill-based). Here are some specific advantages of nourishing a niche.

Crack the Client Mindset Code

Clients often say they prefer to work with specialists. They believe that writers with a greater understanding of a disease state, therapeutic area, or deliverable type means they will already know what to focus on for a given project. In my generalist phase of freelance writing, prospects that did not convert to clients often told me that they needed writers with deep knowledge of a subspecialty area. Similarly, clients who contact me now for CME/CE specialist writer recommendations tell me they prefer to work with writers who can use their deep knowledge to quickly distill what is important in a new clinical study, provide appropriate context, and succinctly summarize a topic in bullets for a slide deck or in concise sentences for a narrative. Client mindset about the value of specialists versus generalists can be a redoubtable rockface to scale. Nourishing a specialist niche is an efficient way to climb with ease.

Streamline Your Client Acquisition

A well-nourished niche provides a solid platform to help you nurture repeat business. When you establish clients that already know, like, and trust you and your work, they are more likely to offer not only repeat work but also pull you into projects that stretch you. A 2019 American Medical

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Writers Association (AMWA) survey showed that 60% of freelance writers (105 of 175) reported that repeat business accounted for more than 75% of their work.[1] This has been my experience too. For instance, I started writing education content for a national membership organization in oncology in 2015 and knew they were developing quality improvement initiatives with a qualitative outcomes component. Qualitative research and analysis is a skill-based niche for me, and so I gently pitched my services in this area. The client hired me 2 years later to run focus groups and conduct member interviews for end-of-year reports and other deliverables. Same client, different service, no hustle.

Build Your Authority

When you develop a niche, you will also deepen your knowledge and skills. Your subject matter expertise and familiarity with terminology, audience, or deliverables will make it easier to establish credibility with prospects and clients and enhance demand for you as the "go-to" writer in your selected niche. Word of mouth will work in your favor, and your reputation will lead you to better clients, more substantial projects, and repeat business.

Generate Higher Revenue

Your specialized skills and niche concentration increase your ability to generate more revenue for your business. Specialists generally command higher compensation than generalists. This point can be tricky to substantiate because of limited data. However, anecdotal commentary suggests that when generalist medical writers niche down, their revenue grows considerably.[2] The 2019 AMWA Medical Communication Compensation survey also suggests that the greatest percentage of income for freelance writers comes from working in some type of niche (eg, regulatory, continuing education).[3] As a niche specialist, you will also indirectly generate higher revenue. You will spend less time on research and pre-work for any given project, and it will also be easier for you to stay updated in your specific niche.

Optimize Your Marketing

Nourishing a niche is the secret sauce that helps you market your services. When you know your niche, you are better equipped to identify and target prospects in language and contexts that resonate with their needs. As marketers say, when you talk to everybody, you talk to nobody. So when you are clear about your niche, your marketing will be crystalline and more consistent.

Selectivity

Nourishing a niche means building awareness about what matters to you in your work and life so that you can be selective about client, projects, and experiences. When we are not selective, we are reactive and not fully present in our business and work. When you are selective, you can give more of yourself to each moment, conserve your cognitive energy, and show up for the people and projects that bring you joy, satisfaction, and revenue.

THE FLIP SIDE OF NOURISHING A NICHE

Generalist medical writers often say they thrive on client, project, and deliverable diversity and assume that a niche will narrow their client pool, potential for professional growth, and content scope. It is true that when you nourish a niche, you are definitely saying no to a broad, undefined pool of potential clients. You will always see appealing opportunities that make you feel as though you are missing out. Nourishing a niche can lead to content repetition or to projects that lack variety and bore you. If your niche is well established, over time, you could hit a rate ceiling. Your skills could stagnate, and it could prove challenging to move out of your niche. Your niche will also be subject to the vagaries of market demand and could even become obsolete.

However, when you say yes to every project under the sun and you follow your interest to take on projects that whet your appetite or tickle your fancy, in the short term your appetite will be whet and your fancy will be tickled. In the longer term, you'll end up feeling scattered, frazzled, unanchored, and exhausted. My guess is that you'll also be undercharging and your bank account will suffer.

HOW TO FIND A NOURISHING NICHE

You do not have to scramble to find a niche that works for you. Rather, niches are refined out of your existing skills, talents, and interests. Chances are you are already working in a specialized area, like consumer health or patient education. Perhaps particular deliverables form a core component of your revenue. So start from where you are, what you enjoy, and what generates revenue for your business. Remember that success doesn't come from pursuing every opportunity. It comes from intentional focus on opportunities that align with your skills, energy, and values. In the end, a niche does not have to be narrow. It just has to be focused.

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