

August 2014 AOG  
Debra Gordon

MLT: Well, welcome and thank you all for joining us today. This is Marcia Layton Turner. I'm the founder and executive director of the Association of Ghostwriters and this is our call for August 2014. When the AOG was founded several years ago, the primary goal was helping ghostwriters find more work and make more money. This month we're talking with Debra Gordon of Gordon Squared about how she's built a six-figure writing business and what we can do to reach that level of earning, or try to reach that level of earning, as well.

Ghostwriting is a part of Deb's repertoire so she's familiar with some of our challenges. Debra is an award-winning medical writer with more than 25 years of experience, and this past spring she taught an online course titled, The Business of Freelancing: Getting to Six Figures. It was a webinar, so I guess I should call it that, but I think of it as a course because it was several weeks long. I took the course and there were a few fellow AOG'ers who also signed up. I took it because I knew that Deb would have tips and tricks to help me make more during the same 24 hours that we all have.

I actually became a student of hers or maybe an admirer, unbeknownst to her, several years ago at an ASJA conference. She was on the six-figure freelancing panel and she proved to me there that with the right mindset and business practices you can pretty much make as much as you want, or at least come close to that. That's why she's here today - because she's a rock star. Thanks so much for agreeing to speak with everyone today and to share some best practices that you found to help you make more money.

DG: Wow, if you keep giving me introductions like that, I'll speak every month.

MLT: How long ago was that ASJA conference?

DG: You know, that was probably the first ASJA conference I went to and I think that was the first panel I ever spoke on. Since then I went on to speak at other ASJA meetings but got very involved with the American Medical Writers Association. Pretty much every meeting for the past seven years I have given several workshops and spoken on panels.

MLT: That was impressive. So seven years ago when Deb presented, that started me thinking about how to make more money and really just stood out on the panel as somebody who had it figured out, so we're all very lucky to be hearing from her today. I gave just a little sort of brief overview. You're a medical writer, award winning, pulled together, but why don't you tell us in your own words about your writing career and how you got to be an established medical writer?

DG: Sure, so my background is in newspapers. I went to the University of Virginia, majored in English but really majored in working on the daily student paper there and went straight from college to my first newspaper job in Connecticut. From there I did a variety of things. Soon after that one, well not soon after, but I went from there to working at the *Virginian Pilot* in Norfolk, my home town. When my first son was born about, which is 27 years ago now, I had my first stint freelancing. At the time, newspapers and all sorts of organizations were really getting into health issues, so I just started writing about it and I've been writing in that space ever since.

I worked as a newspaper reporter for the *Orange County Register* in California as well. My last actual job was working for Rodale Books in Pennsylvania, writing health books - writing and editing health books. From there I went out on my own because it was just a little boring to me

to be only working on one thing at a time, like one book. Here's your book, go in your office, come out nine months later with a book, so I started freelancing. It's been, September will be 15 years.

MLT: Good for you. So it sounds like you have a variety of clients and types of projects that you're working on at any one time, right?

DG: Yes, and I think that's the big reason for success, for my success and for anyone's success.

MLT: Good to know. How many clients do you estimate that you work with on a regular basis?

DG: Let's see. Let's look at what I'm working on right now. Let me kind of get my project list up. I'm working on two white papers for a nonprofit cancer organization. I have another white paper due for a company that makes technology to reduce hospital re-admissions. My agent just called and she's going to tell me when I call her back, she's in negotiations for a new book project. I have a weekly story, kind of like a blog, that I do for a website. And I probably have five other things I could tell you about. So probably at any one time, I have five projects going on that are due within about a two-week period.

MLT: What you just listed was more like 10.

DG: I didn't really list 10.

MLT: You said three white papers, a new book that's coming up, a weekly blog, and then five other things.

DG: Oh, did I really?

MLT: So that sounds like more, so is that just spread out over a longer period of time, maybe five every week?

DG: Well, I'm actually calling up my project list so I can be specific. I was on vacation until the fourth and so, when I got back, I will say I've probably over-booked myself just a little bit for August. But I'm just looking at my first week back, I worked, I was working on a revision on a paper I'm doing and an article I'm doing, two stories for a newsletter I do, and then a case study on obesity and the white papers. So the white papers I'm still working on. This week my goal is to, I'm almost finished with one. I have to write the other one and I also have to write the re-admissions white paper which is due next week.

The following week I have two other white papers for two different clients and then the end of the month I have another white paper. White papers, this seems to be the white paper month. I have no idea why, and then I have a couple of smaller stories. These blog stories that I do I have three this month, so I do three a month for this client and then I have no intention of taking anything on in August. I am completely done until probably through early September.

MLT: When you book clients, do you estimate how long each project is going to take and then determine whether you have the time available? How do you...

DG: Yes, yes, that's exactly what I do, so I'm sitting here looking at my magic spreadsheet. Basically it's an Excel spreadsheet and it's divided by month, each tab at the bottom is a month and then, within the month, I block it off by weeks. Then I try to define a week as five days, not seven days which I used to do. So I generally know about how long something will take me. I'm not always right. Like these two big white papers I'm doing for the cancer organization are taking me a little longer because they're longer. Generally a white paper I'll block off three days and then that time now belongs to that client and I don't take anything else on.

MLT: It sounds like you have existing clients, ongoing clients, that are providing you with a steady stream of work. What's the breakdown between existing and new?

DG: You know, I think it really varies between the months. If I look at what I have right now, I can tell you that, 1-2-3-4-5 of my projects, so really most of them for this month are first-time projects for clients.

MLT: Wow.

DG: And now several of those, some of those are referrals so they're people who know me, my work. Oftentimes other writers will refer me to their clients if they don't have the time or if they don't have the expertise to do a project.

MLT: Very nice. This sort of segues into, at what point did you become a six-figure earner and is the pace at which you work, is that a major contributor? I'm guessing it probably is.

DG: It's interesting. When I was doing my course I tried to go back and asked my husband to go back and try to find our tax returns from when I first started freelancing. I guess we haven't kept them because you only have to keep seven years, but I'm pretty sure that my first full year of freelancing, if not the first and the second, I hit six figures. So if I started in September and let's just take that first few months as not counting but, if you go from January to January, I am pretty sure it was that first year, first full year. What was the second part of your question?

MLT: I'm just thinking that having a steady stream of clients has really helped to maintain that.

DG: Yes, I would say, right now or for the past few years, most of my marketing is what I call passive marketing so the clients come to me. Now, of course, that took years to get to that point. Keep in mind 15 years is a long time. It took years to get to that point where the clients come to me and I don't have to go to the clients. That's probably the best thing that I have right now. Then

you asked about the amount of time I work and how much that figures into it. Yes, that definitely figures into it. This isn't a part-time job for me. It's full-time and then there are weeks like a couple weeks this month, I know it will be more than full-time. But I took two weeks off, almost 2-1/2 weeks off in July so it really balances out.

I think one of the biggest advantages that helps me move things along as quickly as I do is my newspaper background. My very first job out of college I worked for a newspaper. I had to cover a suburban town. It was a zoned addition which meant I had to submit an average of two stories a day and still be working on weekenders. You learn to work really fast. It's rare that I'm over-researching or getting bogged down in something. It sometimes feels like an assembly line which isn't ideal, but that's how I have to look at it. I have to, what's my next story? Okay. Go. What's my next project? Go. Finish it. Mark it off. Send it in. Move on to the next one.

MLT: Thinking back to the fact that you got to \$100,000 or more in the first year of being a freelancer is impressive. What do you think made the difference? What did you do differently that got you to such a high revenue level so quickly?

DG: I wish I could tell you the secret but there is no secret. I just worked really hard. I marketed myself. I mean, the very first thing I did when I went freelance, first off, I had already lined up work before I quit. Second off, when I went in to quit, they asked me would I continue doing the job I had been doing. I was editing a series of women's health books. Would I continue doing that until the series was done? So I was really lucky in that. That gave me a big chunk of my income. I also, early on, took a, I wouldn't call it part-time, but I took an ongoing job with a website. That was probably, I think I committed to 20 hours a week so that helped me feel less

frantic about the money and it just helped me get my feet under me while I still had a certain amount coming in every month.

I always tell people who are going freelance, your first client should be your current employer. Then it was just about hitting the ground running. Before I quit, I already had reserved my domain, my web domain, and keep in mind this was 15 years ago. It was pretty new for people to have websites. I didn't actually get my website up until later that first year, but at least I had the domain reserved. I had everything ready to go. I had a list of everyone I knew that I immediately let know I was freelancing.

Because I had been in journalism and working for Rodale, which is a great networking opportunity, there were a lot of people out there who were now in other positions where they could assign work. I took everything that came my way. I mean, sometimes to my detriment, but I took everything that came my way because initially you just never know who's going to turn into an ongoing client, what's going to turn into a lot more work. I had some bad experiences with that but I think in the long run it paid off.

MLT: Once in a while I hear from members, and even just friends, talking about balancing the work and trying to figure out how much is too much. I think sometimes writers get so worried about having too much on their plate that they scale back their marketing or they slow down. They're so afraid they're just going to be inundated and yet that doesn't often happen.

DG: No, and I mean, certainly there have been times when I was overwhelmed but those were my fault. It doesn't matter how much work is coming your way. What matters is how much work

you accept. And if you tell a client I would love to do that, however right now I'm completely booked and I know I just wouldn't be able to do as good a job on it as I know it needs. So then you say something like, "Is your deadline fixed in stone? Is there any opportunity for flexibility," and you'd be amazed how often there is. Then sometimes I simply have to say I'm really disappointed that we can't work together, and I've learned to do that over the years. It used to be I never did that. Then I got better at saying no but I wasn't good enough. Now, and you took my seminar so you know what happened, I sort of had a meltdown and now I try to be much better about saying no and sticking to my spreadsheet.

MLT: What I hope everybody is hearing as Deb's talking is she's very methodical. She has systems. She has tools. She monitors her clients, her workload, her hours, she really looks at the numbers and I think, I know just for me, I don't do enough of that. That's why she's able to take on so much because she has a really good sense of how much time each task is going to take.

DG: Right, like right now, if this book I mentioned comes through, I've already told the agent that I can't even begin to think about starting until mid-September. And then I told my agent to make sure she gets me as long a time to write as possible, not because I need six months to write a book, which I don't, but because I have no intention of that being my only client for six months. If I did that, what happens to my business when that book is over? I think especially when you're doing books you have to be careful about that. I wouldn't say every year, but I would say almost every year I've freelanced, I've had at least one book, sometimes two. I call it ongoing in the background. So I have this huge project but then I still have all my small stuff.

The challenge though is not to book yourself as if you didn't have a book, which I did once before where I had a book to do, but I kept booking work as if the book didn't exist. Then I was

working seven days a week. You break the book down. In my mind a book is just a series of projects and each project is the chapter so it's not like I'm working on my book. It's like oh, my deadline for this chapter which is 3,000 words is this date and I have to make sure it's done. It goes on the spreadsheet.

MLT: That's a really smart way to do it because it's so overwhelming when you think of it as a book but it's much more manageable when it's 15 chapters or 15 articles of 3,000 words each.

DG: Yes, and if you think about it, that's what a book is.

MLT: Very true. I want to talk a little bit about your course. You recently taught the course that I took for writers interested in increasing their revenue; for some a little, for some substantially. If you had to choose three things that six-figure earners do that other writers don't, what do you think they would be?

DG: Market, market, market, market. That's three right there but treat their business as a business. Underneath that would be things like setting goals, and marketing. So I would say market, treat your business as a business, and market. Because under those two things, and it's really two, is everything else, and those are the biggest problems I see. Maybe I'd add one more and that is believe in yourself. That is, you don't hope that you make six figures. You assume you're going to make six figures. You know that you're worth it and so that enables you to turn down work that isn't worth your time. You say no, that's not worth my time.

I have turned down work because they wouldn't meet my price. I've had clients come back to me and say, "Oh, remember when we talked to you before? Well, we hired this other writer and can you fix it." But it's believing in yourself. You're not going to have that when you start

freelancing in the first week but, over time, you should be able to have that. It amazes me how many freelancers I do meet who have been doing this for years who are still telling me that they can barely make a living. If you've been doing this for years and you're barely making a living, then there's one of two things wrong – you're not running it like a business which includes you're not marketing, or you're simply just not very good at what you're doing and you really should find something else. I just can't imagine if you're working full time doing this kind of work, not making at least \$100,000 a year.

MLT: I think, if we talk in more detail about these four, starting with the last one, believing in yourself, I think for some people it's deciding that they're going to work hard enough to earn that because it does take work.

DG: Yes, and I heard that again and again in the seminar from people. There were a couple of people who'd been doing it a long time who had put down some comments along the lines of, and I don't know who they were, "But I've been doing this a long time. I'm doing everything you say and I'm not making six figures. I thought I would find out something new." I wish these people had contacted, it was just one or two, I wish they had contacted me directly because I would have said, well if you're doing all this and it's not working for you, you're not doing it. There's something missing.

But what's interesting too is that there were several people, also like you who had been doing it a long time, who took the course and who said, you know, initially in the first one or two sessions where we really dealt with some of the basic underlying "how do you set up your business" things, I was like, okay yeah, I know this, I know this. But then you said something in the third one and it just clicked, and now I completely have shifted something that I was doing

before and I plan to go back to everyone at six months and see how people are doing. I'm already hearing from some that they've implemented some things and it is making a difference, but I think it's a question of being tough on yourself and looking at what you're doing that's working and not working and really making a decision to change, if a financial goal is your goal. And I assume that everyone who took the course wanted to make six figures or they wouldn't have.

MLT: Yes, I think that's true. I think setting business goals - did you do a survey to ask what percentage of the attendees set business goals?

DG: I'm sorry, set business goals? Probably, yes. I think that was one of the questions in one of the surveys and it was really tiny.

MLT: That's what I thought. I think that's a really good point, again, going back to believing in yourself and deciding that this is what you want. If your focus is to make more money, whether it's \$100,000 or \$50,000 or \$250,000, deciding that that's what you're going to do this year, I think that's really important. Treating your business as a business. What are some things that are different between the people who have a business versus a hobby?

DG: Okay, first off, you set up your business as a business and that means you don't just simply, and I did this so I can tell you things I did wrong and this is one, I just hung out my shingle. I didn't set myself up as an LLC which I would tell everyone to do. It's very simple to protect my personal assets so I wasn't viewing it as a business. Today I'm a corporation which is at a different level but, again, that comes with a certain income. They don't keep their personal money and their business money separate. So they use their home credit card for business expenses. They don't have a separate checking account. Checking accounts are free. It's not that hard to set up your

own checking account. They don't consider the tax ramifications of what they're doing so they aren't putting money aside with every check they get to pay for quarterly taxes.

I remember being on lists when it would be quarterly tax time and freelancers just about crying because they didn't have the money and they were going to put it on their credit card. I was just thinking to myself, I don't understand that. When you get paid from your employer and if your average is supposed to be \$10,000 a month, you don't get a check for \$10,000. You get a check with all of your Social Security and Medicare and federal and state taxes taken out. Why wouldn't you do the same thing with every check you get from your clients?

From the very first day, 50% of every check went into a money market account so I could pay my quarterly taxes and, at the end of the year, I could fully fund a Sep IRA. I have a retirement now that I never would have even had, I don't think, had I stayed in an employer job because that was another thing I was adamant about doing. Those are some of the things about treating your business like a business. Setting goals; tracking your expenses and your revenues. So on my spreadsheet for instance there's a column with what the fee is and I can see at a glance how much I've booked for the month. I can say am I on goal to meet my annual goal or do I need to do a little more marketing out there? Do I need to find one more project for August? Or have I exceeded my goal and can I turn down a few things in September and take it easy since I'm working so hard this month?

These are some of the things that I think are important. Then being professional. Being professional, just because you work at home doesn't mean you can be a shlump. You can be a shlump in what you're wearing when people can't see you, but you need to project yourself professionally on the phone. You need to project yourself professionally online. That means with everything that you write publicly like in LinkedIn and everything down to every single email you write, your email signature, and obviously your website.

MLT: Let's talk for a minute about marketing since that was the first four of your top three – Marketing, marketing, marketing, marketing. What are some of the key ways that writers and ghostwriters should be marketing themselves? Are there some must-do's in terms of marketing?

DG: Well, there are your basics. You know, you have to have your online presence so people can find you and that would be your website. It would be a good LinkedIn profile. It would be joining every organization, you know, like yours, like ASJA, like if you're a specialist in health, in medicine, AMWA, joining every organization you can within your specialty area, making sure that you're listed in their freelance directories and that people can find you there. Over the years I have gotten a tremendous amount of work from being in those directories, particularly AMWA. So that's sort of the first step.

The second step, I was just coaching someone who is getting ready to go out on his own as a freelancer and I said have you made your list yet? And the list is every single person that you have ever known professionally and personally. This should form the core of what will become your client database which is a list of everyone you've ever worked for or whoever contacted you for work that you began contacting. Then you, and if you're just going freelance, you send out a big email or a newsletter saying hey, I'm here. Then if you've been freelance for a while

and you need work, you go look at this list and you say who haven't I worked with for a while and you reach out? So you're always reaching out. At some point you hopefully will get to the point that I and other freelancers who've been doing this a long time are where they come to you but, for the first few years, you have to be reaching out.

The other thing I'll tell you I did was I just went out and surfed the web and identified companies and organizations that needed people to write for them about medicine and health care and then I approached them. I call it cold emailing. You know, you don't have to cold call now which is nice, but then I would just start emailing them and I would keep at it. It's a numbers game. Eventually you're going to hit someone. You're going to get a hit. And I even had people that would contact me a year later. Initially it's just you've got to set aside the time, at least an hour a day, to just be getting out there and pounding the pavement so to speak.

MLT: That's a good way to look at it; one hour a day devoted to getting your name out there and reconnecting with people who may have work.

DG: Right, and looking ahead. You know, I am always booked a month ahead. Now, I'm looking at September. What do I see in September? So, in September, actually right now I don't have a lot booked. But, you know what, that's not bothering me because I may get this book. I have three or four different other projects that right now we're discussing and, to be honest, if I had a light month it wouldn't be a problem for me.

MLT: Especially when the weather is still nice.

DG: Yes, but if it was a problem, if I hadn't been meeting my goals all year financially, then I would have earlier this month been out there beating the bushes. I would have sent out emails. There are a lot of things I could have done.

MLT: When you send out an email – I don't want to spend a lot of time on this--but what exactly are you saying? You're not saying, hey, I'm in need of work.

DG: Oh, no. Gosh. I mean if it were someone I've worked with before I would just say, "Hey, I'm planning the next quarter and wanted to see if you had any projects coming up that we could discuss." If it were a new client, I would say I've been looking at your website, learning about your company, I see you have a lot of content that you provide, I see some opportunities for new content, here are my skills, maybe we should talk – something like that.

MLT: And what percent of the emails that you send out do you get a response to?

DG: Well, it's been a long time since I did that so it would be hard for me to say. I don't know what they say the typical response is from direct mail marketing, which is kind of what you're doing.

MLT: 1 to 2 percent.

DG: Okay, so 1 to 2 percent. Put that as your bottom line and if you do better, then pat yourself on the back. That means that if you want one response you have to send out 100, you're going to have to send out 100 emails. Am I doing the math right?

MLT: Yes.

DG: Now that may sound daunting but it's not so daunting if you say I'm going to send out 20 emails a day. Then in a week, you've done it and if you get one client from that then great.

MLT: But also since you can essentially copy and paste or...

DG: Right, you're copying. The most time consuming part of that is identifying the client and the right person within the company.

MLT: We've talked about the things that the writers who are earning a fair amount of money are doing. Let's talk about some bad habits. What are some of the bad habits that writers often exhibit that interfere with their earning potential?

DG: Not booking the right kind of work. Once you've sort of gotten established, taking any kind of work that comes your way. Because you're afraid that you're not going to have any work, you wind up doing low paying work that takes just as much time as if you were doing high paying work. I always say you need to consider the loss, the cost of, the opportunity cost. If you turn down something, a project that's going to pay you \$.15 a word even though you don't have any other work booked, you can use that time to market yourself to get projects that will pay you \$1.00 a word. In the long run it will be worth it because you will have this ongoing, hopefully ongoing, work at a higher rate.

Once you take something at a low rate, the client is going to expect to be able to pay you that rate all along. I think taking on low paying work is probably one of the biggest bad habits.

Procrastinating – not working at a pace that enables you to take on the number and type of assignments you need to earn this amount of money. If I procrastinate and I wind up only actually working three or four hours a day, it's probably not going to get me where I want to get financially and not having good work habits.

People are always saying, when they find out you work at home, oh, how do you stay focused? I don't know if I'm unique but, most of the women I know who do this, most of the people I know who do this, I mean we do well because we stay focused. My breakfast dishes are still sitting down in the sink. They're not going to get done until I have another call at 5:30, at 5:00. They're not going to get done until after that call. It's just staying very focused, very organized. I think those are a couple of the big things. And then it gets back to what makes you successful, treating your business like a business.

What gets in the way of you being successful? Not doing that. So missing deadlines, not doing client management, not appearing professional, not doing enough work that you enjoy so you don't really like what you're doing.

MLT: What are some of your favorite tools or resources that you use on a regular basis that you've found helpful?

DG: You mean in terms of writing?

MLT: I'm thinking in terms of business management.

DG: Well, my spreadsheet. I use Quickbooks to track all of my expenses and revenue and send out invoices and receive payments. I do have a support network in terms of I have an accountant and a bookkeeper who very much help with a lot of that. I have a support network of several other freelance friends online that is invaluable. When one of us gets frustrated or we can't concentrate or we have a question about what we should charge for something, we can go to each other and I think that has, and not only that but we refer work to each other, so I think that's very much helped me become more successful.

I think in terms of marketing and social media, people always want to talk about that. There's a lot, and when I gave the social media section of the webinar, there's a lot that you can do and there's a lot that I could be doing if I needed to that I'm not. Right now I'd say the most successful things for me are my website and LinkedIn. I think LinkedIn is an amazing tool. We didn't have it when I first started so I wish I did. I think a lot of freelancers don't even begin to use that to their full advantage. I know I'm not even using it to my full advantage.

What other tools do I really like? Oh, a time clock. So, I have a little program on my computer. It's called Office Time and so I track how long it takes me to do each project. I clock in and clock out as I'm working on it. Then that helps me know for sure, okay, you did this 3,000 word white paper. It took you 10 hours which really would be three days by the time you get finished doing all these other things so, yes, this is consistently taking you three days. That's good. You're right in blocking that amount of time. Those are just some of the tools.

MLT: You mentioned that LinkedIn has been really valuable for your business. Are there any other sources of work that you have found to be especially useful?

DG: The organizations I belong to. So ASJA, American Medical Writers Association, Association of Healthcare Journalists. I just got a job, I just got a potential client contact me from them. I have done a lot of continuing medical education work and so for years I was involved with the national association in that area and I would go to their meetings and do networking. I think that's a really important area for marketing that a lot of people ignore.

MLT: What percent of the networking you do is in person versus online?

DG: Probably less than 10%. I go to two or three, about two conferences a year. This year I would normally be going to AMWA next month but I'm not because I have another trip to Hawaii and I'm doing that one. Normally I would go to AMWA in October and I've been going to the Association of Healthcare Journalists in April. Or if I wasn't doing that one, I would probably do ASJA in April. For several years I was doing the CME conference in January. If I needed more work, there are a slew of meetings in my specialty areas that I would go to and do marketing. But I'm always marketing. You know, when my husband has his meeting in Hawaii, I've actually got an assignment to cover the meeting and so I'll be going on to the vendor floor where everybody is displaying and passing out my card everywhere. You should always be marketing even if you have more than enough work.

MLT: Right, because next month could be different.

DG: Exactly.

MLT: Excellent advice. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to mention or suggest to ghostwriters who are trying to figure out how to make more money?

DG: I think when we talk about ghostwriting, I would also encourage people to think beyond books. A lot of the work I do is ghostwriting but it's not all books. Every white paper I do is ghostwritten because it goes out over somebody else's name. A lot of articles will be done that are over somebody else's name. I think you have to expand what you mean when you say ghostwriting. I think too often people think it's only books.

MLT: I think you're right.

DG: And then even if you are doing books, you cannot sit here and take on a book and go into your office for six months or three months and only focus on that book because when you lift your head up at the end you're going to have no other work.

MLT: Very true.

DG: Even if you need to devote, even if you need to focus only on that book, you still need to be setting aside a certain amount of time each day for marketing so that you have projects lined up when the book finishes. And I would still recommend that you get as long a lead time on the book as possible, longer than you need so that you can be taking on other projects.

MLT: And not be working.

DG: Right.

MLT: This is great. We have a few minute so do you mind answering a few questions?

DG: I'd be happy to.

MLT: That would be great. Okay so the first one – these are in no particular order – the first one is from Cathie Gandel and she is a little bit discouraged. She's done some book ghostwriting. I'm just going to read her question. She says, I'm so discouraged about breaking into ghostwriting despite one good book credential. Maybe I've already seen this covered but a) is it a good idea to build up an area of expertise as a freelance journalist so to have credentials when the book projects come along and b) are there fewer ghostwriting gigs? I would like to address that with anything that can be ghostwriting.

DG: Well, yes and I think that's what we just talked about. Anything can be ghostwriting. So it's not just books. You do want to think outside the box there but, yes, I do think it's good to have a specialty area. Mine is obviously health and medicine and so that's all I do. That's important for

two reasons because, not only does it give me credibility and expertise, but the more I know a topic the faster I am at writing about it. I just did a case study on obesity and that was so easy for me to write because I've written so much about obesity over the past 10 years. I had a huge database of sources. I knew where to find the statistics. I had studies, I knew what studies to go to, whereas, if I had done that case on an area I wasn't as familiar with, it would have taken me twice as long because there's always a learning curve.

We didn't talk about this but I think, let's talk about this after this question, and that is how you charge. But let me go back to her question. So yes, I think you should have a specialty area. I don't think it has to be really, really narrow so, for instance, one thing I see with medical writers is that they may do only continuing medical education and I say, now you're putting all your eggs in one basket. What happens if something happens to that industry? What happens if those clients that you, you know, you have three or four major clients, one of them goes under or your contact leaves? There goes 25% of your income.

For instance, for me I can write for consumers. I can write for physicians. I write for businesses. I write about medicine so that would be your hard core, let's talk about cancer. Then I also write on the business side and the policy side. Within my specialty area of health and medicine, I have a variety of skills I can bring to my clients. That's what she needs to be focused on. People come to me to write health books because I write health books.

MLT: But they also come to you for white papers and case studies and other types of ghostwriting assignments because of that expertise.

DG: Exactly, because I do it. They come to me to write a white paper on re-admissions because I can show them that I've written about re-admissions. I know the field. I know what's happening. I understand their challenges. I have to become an expert in the areas that my clients are in so I can come to them with more than just, even more than just good writing skills. I can say, yes, I know the stresses you're facing. I know the changes that are occurring in your space. I know the kind of messaging that you want to get out there.

Let me go back to what I was talking about. I should have mentioned this earlier. You asked what is one of the best things you can do to get to six figures or what is the biggest thing that keeps you from getting to six figures and I think one of the biggest things that I forgot to mention is how you bill and how you charge, and I am a big believer that you never, ever, ever charge on an hourly basis. And I don't. I mean never. I come up with a project rate for every project I do and I have clients who will say well, what's your hourly rate and I say it really doesn't matter because I don't bill on an hourly rate. And if I told them my hourly rate, they would freak.

MLT: What happens though, and I don't want to get too off topic because we have five more great questions, what happens when you estimate, like I was just doing an advertorial. This advertorial is going to take me six hours and I charge \$100 an hour so that's \$600 and maybe I'll add in an extra, make it \$750 for the additional time. What happens if it ends up taking 12 hours because they had so many other additions or changes?

DG: You have to address that in your contract. So mine always says I'll give you two revisions for that price or if it's a smaller project, it would be one and it spells out what a revision is and isn't. If things change and we go beyond the scope then I'm going to come back to you with, we're

going to have to renegotiate the fee. The other thing I'd say is you said you have an hourly rate of \$100. Well, why is your hourly rate \$100 when no one needs to know your hourly rate? Why isn't your hourly rate \$200 and you have a 700-word advertorial so you estimate it six hours so you tell them it's going to be \$2,300.

You have to look at what the market will bear. Generally for that kind of work you're going to get, you're lucky if you can get \$1.00 a word and that is another way that I price things but you have to know that the amount you're getting is still going to be worth your time. For me, I know how I work and if it's a 700-word advertorial and I bill them, say, \$800, I know I can still knock that thing out in probably two hours if that. Now my hourly rate is \$400, but the client doesn't need to know that. They're perfectly fine paying \$800.

MLT: I like that. I'm boosting my hourly rate. Okay, well here's a question, a nice segue here. Douglas asks, well, just a little background. He says he has a healthy list of happy clients but they don't provide regular referrals, mainly because he thinks, you know, they don't want to admit that they had help. So his question is, how do ghostwriters come out of the shadows so they can ask for higher fees and grow a mid- five-figure business into a thriving six-figure enterprise?

DG: Well, first of all I would ask Douglas has he gone to his clients and asked them specifically, would you refer me to someone and find out if they would or wouldn't. Or if they haven't, maybe they don't have anyone to refer you to. I don't know if he's talking about agents or whatever, but I would go to them and ask.

Then the second thing is, every new project you get, every new client you get, you have the opportunity to increase your rate. So, my rate for a white paper used to be \$3,000 or \$3,500. My rate is now, when new people come to me, \$5,500. They don't know what my old rate was. It's all about, again, this gets into being confident in how much you're worth. If he's got several successful book projects, he should definitely be making more than five figures. And that means walking away from someone who says I want you to write this book for \$15,000 and say no, I'm sorry. My rate is \$30K or \$40K and sticking to it. If you don't get the gig, then go out there and send 100 emails to 100 agents to try to get a gig that will pay you that \$40,000.

MLT: I think that's the key piece. If you're turning down lower paying work, which I think we all should be doing, then you have to replace it with marketing to higher paying clients.

DG: And there are exceptions. I took a book once that was not very much money but I did it because it was an area in which I wanted to establish my expertise and it wasn't ghostwriting. I got my name on it. There are always going to be exceptions but, if you make an exception to the money rule, at least be able to clarify why you took less money for that.

MLT: Here's a question from Jeff, Jeff Wuorio. He'd like some help on billing. He says, "I need to implement some sort of new system to improve my cash flow and to protect me from clients who flake out." We talked a little bit about billing because I said well, here's how I do it. You know, I get money down and then I try to break it up into lots of different milestones. I never had a lot of money out there at risk.

He says he does that but a lot of times the clients will get midway through a project and realize wow, this is a lot of work and they'll turn their attention to something else. So he has this project that's half finished and then he has not yet, he hasn't been paid for the other half

because it's not done. He's wondering if there's any way to adjust how he's billing to incentivize the client to keep going so he can make the rest of the project.

DG: I, whenever I have large projects, I do what you do. I get a certain percentage up front and then set milestones. I'll say when I turn in the first five chapters I'm going to invoice you again, and then when I finish the book I'm going to invoice you again, and then when I finish the revisions I'll invoice you again, or I'll invoice you within 45 days of the last invoice so it's probably easier to explain this with just a smaller project.

So, I have a white paper. I say, all right, I'm going to bill you a third before we start. I'm going to bill you a third when I turn it in and I'm going to bill you a third after the first round of revisions. However, that last third is going to be billed within 45 days of the last invoice, (it really should be 30), no matter when I get your revisions back because I'm not going to sit around and wait six months for you to have time to review it, and I have had clients do that. Then the other thing is, if you haven't been paid, obviously you stop work and you go find other work. Now the client has this half-finished project that is going to be absolutely no good and he's already paid for it. Well, that makes no sense.

MLT: So it sounds like maybe billing ahead is what's needed perhaps to keep them going?

DG: Yes, certainly bill up front and, depending on your comfort level with the client, I know some freelancers refuse to even start until they have that check in hand so start with that. Then you turn in the first part and you bill it. And you can, again depending on your comfort level with the client, you can wait until you get paid before you start again. I wouldn't, I don't do that but then I don't take on a client that sets off alarm bells.

MLT: I'm just thinking, in his case, if he can get the client, if he can bill in advance of work and the client says no, then he hasn't invested any time. He's not waiting to be paid and yet, if the client has paid ahead then they're incentivized to keep going because they've already paid.

DG: Right. Right. So bill before you start. Bill after you turn in a certain percentage. Get in writing from the client that, yes, they want you to proceed because you're not going to get paid immediately, but make sure it's in writing and then continue. And if they don't pay you and they refuse to pay you, get a lawyer. I've had to do that twice in 15 years, have an attorney contact the client and both times I got paid.

MLT: Excellent. Okay Art Lizza has a question. He says I'd be curious to know if Debra achieves a six-figure income by going after big tickets, but likely one-shot, projects such as ghostwriting full-length books, or through ongoing smaller format work with a select list of regular clients.

DG: I would say it's more ongoing work with the occasional big-hitting project. So, you may get a book that's \$70,000 or \$80,000 and that's great, but the bulk of my income comes from just those everyday projects. Now, I have a minimum. I won't take on a project that's less than \$1,500 or \$2,000 unless it's ongoing, like doing a blog every week. I learned that even though it could turn into \$500 an hour it's not worth my time because you still have the transitioning from project to project. You have to do the invoicing. You have to do client management. So, I decided a couple years ago to limit myself and not take on a lot of really small projects.

MLT: Mike Wicks asks, "I'd like to know how she markets herself and to whom." I think we've covered a lot, through organizations, to past clients, anybody you've ever worked with, through writers.

DG: Yes, I think we've discussed that. Again, that's just getting yourself out there. It's getting your name known. Every year at AMWA, I spoke on four, three or four panels and did two breakfast

round tables. No one paid me for that. I didn't even get a reduction on my registration, but I did it because it got my name out there and I enjoy it.

MLT: Those are good reasons. Ally Machate had a few questions here. Let's see if we can get through, she had four. One of them was your favorite, most effective ways to market yourself which I think we've already covered so we don't have to worry about that one. She also had some questions about books. She says, "Do you ever have clauses in your agreements that ensure you're kept on at favorable terms for future books in a successful series?" She gave an example of the Seven Habits series.

DG: You know, I've never written anything in a series so I really can't answer that.

MLT: I think that's got to be in the contract, Ally.

DG: Yes, and I'm not the right person to talk to about that.

MLT: Well, in most publishing contracts, the publisher takes the right to your next book.

DG: Right, if it's your book, that would be fine but, if you're the ghostwriter, I'm not sure how you could...

MLT: The ghostwriter could put that into their contract saying if this concept continues that the ghostwriter will be kept on to write subsequent books.

DG: Yes, but it's really going to depend--how do you even know the relationship's going to work out?

MLT: Well maybe the option. I don't know. How about, do you have experience with royalties?

DG: Only in one case have I gotten royalties. I think there were two books I did that had royalty contracts. One I didn't expect royalties, but the other I didn't expect royalties but I still get a small royalty. Most of my books have been work-for-hire and, to be honest, I kind of prefer that

because I just, I don't like risk which you might not believe since I have my own business, but I don't like risk and so I prefer to just get my money up front.

MLT: Her last question I think is a really good one that we all should be thinking more about. She says any tips on helping would-be authors understand the value of what you bring to the table as an experienced ghost?

DG: Well, that gets into the believing in yourself. Look back at what you've done and how successful you've been. People always want to know how many books, how many copies did the book sell, and I don't think that's a fair question for us because we're not in charge of marketing and books don't sell because we wrote great content. Books sell because someone's out there marketing it and selling it. And that's not our job, unfortunately. I mean, fortunately or unfortunately. So I focus in on how well the experience went with the author, how happy the author was, how we met all of our deadlines, how smooth it was, how my role is to handle the heavy lifting. I don't want my author to have to miss work or obsess over anything or even have to spend more than a couple of hours a week on this. That's my job. So, you stress what you bring and how you're going to make their lives easier.

MLT: She said that sticker shock is sometimes a problem. I might suggest also focusing on what the book is going to do for your client, which I'm sure you already do, Ally, but just focusing. If it's a marketing tool, what kind of work may they qualify for now that they have a book, what kind of PR opportunities are they now going to be qualified for with that book?

MLT: Well, thank you so much for being with us today. We really appreciate all the help, Deb.

DG: And can I do just a little bit of shameless self-promotion? I'm going to be offering the workshop again sometime this fall. I don't have the dates down yet but anyone is certainly welcome to

email me at [Debra@Debragordon.com](mailto:Debra@Debragordon.com) and, hopefully, Marcia, you'll help me promote it when I get all that organized.

MLT: I will. [Debra@Debragordon.com](mailto:Debra@Debragordon.com). The website Debragordon.com for more information on that course?

DG: Yes, yes, it will be there.

MLT: Thank you so much for your time.

DG: Thank you. I enjoyed it.