



INTERNATIONAL FREELANCERS ACADEMY

Training that transforms your solo business

What to Do When Asked for References by Ed Gandia

Ed Gandia: Hey, everyone it's Ed Gandia. You know, common challenge for freelancers and consultants and other solo professionals is dealing with request for client references from potential clients. Tell me if this scenario sounds familiar. You've reached out to a prospect and made contact with the decision-maker. The initial conversation went really well. In fact, you've had a second meeting or call; you met her boss and some of the other team members and you've even offered some great ideas during these calls.

So they ask you to quote a project. Everything's looking great. You think it's pretty much a done deal but when you call your prospect to follow up, you find out it's not going to be quite that easy. She now wants you to supply her with three client references, specifically three current or previous client she can call regarding you and your services. At this point, you're not sure what to think. Is this a delaying tactic? Is she getting cold feet? Is she worried about your fit for the project? What's going on?

There are two issues here, each of which you must address effectively in order to minimize these types of request in the future. Your first challenge, the first issue is to prevent these request from happening in the first place. Now I'm not suggesting that all request for references are bogus or that you'll be able to eliminate them at all. But as a solo professional, you need to minimize the time you spend jumping through hoops. That's the only way you're going to be able to earn the income you need to live well and to enjoy a more fulfilling and balanced life.

So here are four strategies, four ideas on how you can minimize reference request. Number one is to increase the percentage of prospects who come to you versus those you have to chase. Outbound prospecting strategies and by outbound I mean direct mail, email prospecting, cold calling. All those things can work very, very well when you do them right. They're also a very nice way to keep a steady flow of new prospects coming in to your business. But outbound strategies also tend to create these sort of request. After all, you contacted them, not the other way around.





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So in the long run, work to have some of your prospects coming to you via referrals, word of mouth, social media and networking. This really helps balance out the dynamic of your prospect interactions and it will drastically reduce request for references.

Number two, post client testimonials on your website. I've found that honest, sincere and detailed testimonials really alleviate a great deal of prospect concerns right off the bat. And that keeps them from asking for more validation in the way of client references. Now if you don't have many testimonials to show, make it a goal to get at least three or four testimonials quickly. From there, get into the habit of asking for a testimonial every time you get a compliment from a client.

Number three; position yourself as the expert in your niche. You're not currently doing this; try to position yourself as the go-to professional in your business. It doesn't matter if your niche is industry-specific, for example banking, health care, technology, etcetera or if it's project type-specific such as white papers, web design, corporate events, so forth. Just focus on communicating the fact that you are the obvious choice for prospects who need a specific expertise. This alone will squelch most reference request.

Number four; demonstrate your track record. What do you bring to the table? What have you accomplished for other clients? Where have you worked in the past? What awards, recognition or certifications have you received? Make sure all those comes through credibly and clearly on your website and in all your marketing materials.

Now these four strategies will go a long way toward minimizing reference request but they certainly won't eliminate them altogether. So what do you do when you're asked for them anyway? Well first, make sure you have a qualified prospect and by qualified, I mean make sure that you first understand what they need, when they need it, whether or not it can possibly help them, whether they can afford or are willing to pay your fees, who will be involved in making a decision if it's not them, the person you're talking with, and of course their decision-making criteria.





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You really want to know how they're going to arrive at a service provider. Now if you don't have good answers to most or all of these questions, you probably don't have a prospect worth spending a lot of time with. So before you start giving out references, you really need to know more from them. Once you have a qualified prospect and she ask for references, you need to ask for something in return. And by that, I mean you need to make sure you know exactly what's going to happen if and when you provide her with that information.

Now here's the exact question I recommend you ask. "Sure Denise, I'd be happy to provide you with some preferences. Before I do that, I want to make sure I know where I stand. So if I give you two or three references and they check out, are you ready to move forward with me on this project?" This question is extremely effective. First, it demonstrates that you have standards that you're a true professional. You're not willing to agree to everything the prospect asked of you just because.

Second, this question helps you place some of the burden on the prospect. That way so she think of some more obstacles to place on your path, you can call her on it. You're trying to get agreement on some ground rules and once she agrees, it's going to be difficult to change them. Of course, eliminating a 100 percent of these requests is not always a realistic expectation. Your job, however, is to try to minimize them and to ensure that the ones you do get are valid and are actually going to get you somewhere.

So here's your assignment; it's very simple. Write out the question I just gave you on an index card and post it to your bulletin board or keep it close to the phone. Say this question over and over again and adjust it slightly until it feels and sounds natural to you. That way when you have to ask a prospect this question, you can say it confidently and without waffling. The Boy Scout motto is "Be prepared" and that's exactly what you want to be next time you're asked for a reference.

This has been Ed Gandia. Have an awesome day.

