Free Pint Report

Marketing for the Info-Entrepreneur: Top Techniques to Build Your Business

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Biographical Note

Mary Ellen Bates is the owner of Bates Information Services Inc., providing business research to business professionals and consulting services to the information industry. She founded her business in 1991, after having worked in specialised libraries and research centres for over a decade. Her clients range from one-person businesses to *Fortune* 100 companies.

Mary Ellen is the 2004-2005 President of the Association of Independent Information Professionals (**www.aiip.org**). Note that this report does not necessarily represent the views or opinions of AIIP. She received the first Sue Rugge Memorial Award from AIIP for significantly helping other AIIP members through mentoring. She also received the 2002 Professional Award from the Special Libraries Association for her significant contributions to the association and the information profession as an innovator, contributor and teacher throughout her career.

She has written six books on the information industry: *Building and Running a Successful Research Business: a guide for the independent information professional* (2003); *Super Searchers Cover the World: the online secrets of international business researchers* (2001); *Mining For Gold on the Internet: how to find investment and financial information on the Internet* (2000); *Researching Online For Dummies*, 2nd edition, co-author, with Reva Basch (2000); *Super Searchers Do Business: the online secrets of top business researchers* (1999); and *The Online Deskbook: ONLINE Magazine's essential desk reference for online and Internet searchers* (1996). She is also a columnist for *ONLINE and EContent* magazines and the contributing editor of *The Information Advisor* newsletter.

She is a frequent keynote speaker on the information industry and profession, and has given workshops and presentations in the UK, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Czech Republic, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico and the US.

Mary Ellen writes two free email newsletters, *Search Tip of the Month* and *Info-Entrepreneur Tip of the Month*. To subscribe to either newsletter, go to **www.BatesInfo.com/subscribe.html**.

Introduction to Info-Entrepreneurship

Welcome to the wonderful world of info-entrepreneurship. We are people who run our own (often one-person) information businesses. As a profession, we provide a wide range of services to our clients – looking for information on the web and in fee-based online services, searching public records, conducting interviews, providing information management services, giving workshops on advanced web search techniques, among other things. (see “What is an Independent Information Professional?” at **www.aiip.org/Resources/IIPWhitePaper.html**, a white paper of the Association of Independent Information Professionals, for more discussion of the types of services info-entrepreneurs provide.)

Even if you are reading this while still enjoying the tedium of a regular pay check, every two weeks (where’s your spirit of adventure, of risk?), the tips in this white paper probably apply to you, too. Most information professionals within organisations are, in essence, running a small research business within a larger organisation. You, too, have to market your services, analyse your competition, and develop products or services tailored to each of your client bases.

We all battle IAOTWFF – It’s All On The Web For Free. In fact, I think it is more of a threat to libraries, information centres and research departments within organisations than it is for us info-entrepreneurs. We can always find another client who values our expertise; if the library gets closed because of IAOTWFF, that has a much greater impact on the info pros involved. By promoting the analysis and synthesis that you provide, using the techniques described here, you can ensure that your internal client base understands the value that you bring to your organisation.

I have been an independent info pro for close to 15 years. And one thing I frequently hear from both new and experienced info-entrepreneurs is that marketing is by far the most difficult aspect of running a business. It is hard to promote yourself – it feels like bragging (even though you probably *are* a great researcher, and have reason to brag), and many of us find it difficult to respond to the occasional exclamation of “You’re charging £100 an hour?!?”

I still wince when a prospect asks me “so, why should I use your services?”, but I have developed a few techniques for dealing with my reluctance to self-promote. The most important tool I use is to realise that I am marketing a business, not just myself. Sure, I am a one-person business, but I tackle the job of marketing by focusing on promoting my company rather than just myself, which helps to depersonalise the effort.

Use the dozen techniques I describe here to build the profile your information services within your client base, whether you are a new info-entrepreneur, someone who has been in business for several years, or even someone who is working within an information centre and needs to promote your services within your organisation.

Techniques for Building Your Information Business

1. Sell Benefits, Not Features

There are two primary ways to describe what you do to a prospective client. You could say “I have access to hundreds of online sources not available on the web, and my staff have an average of 15 years experience as researchers.” Or you could say “I help my clients make better business decisions by providing them with the information they need, quickly and cost-effectively.” Which of those is the more compelling marketing statement?

As harsh as it sounds, many purchasing decisions are made on the basis of “what’s in it for me?” You are offering the solution to a client’s information problem; you are filling a knowledge gap; you are expanding a client’s information horizon. These make compelling arguments for why a client should use your services, whereas the number of years you have been in business or the number of online services you search does not.

Of course, this technique can be taken to extremes. Companies advertise that they offer “an enterprise planning solution” or “enhanced access solutions,” or that they are a “storage solution provider.” By describing themselves in ways that obscure both the features and benefits they are offering, it can become almost impossible to discern what, exactly, the company is selling to its customers. When you market yourself and your company, make sure that the “solution” you are providing is clearly spelled out. Simply calling yourself a solution does not make you one.

One way of articulating benefits rather than features is to use the following formula:

> You know how [describe typical clients’ information problem]? Well, I [solve problem] by [doing this].

For example, “You know how frustrating it is when you spend an hour looking for market research on the Web and never do find what you’re really looking for? Well, my company helps you solve business problems by finding in-depth information that doesn’t even appear on the Web.” Or, “You know how hard it is to find ‘soft’ information about your industry or your competitors? Well, as a telephone researcher, I can gather the insights of the industry leaders for my clients, and since my clients' names are never associated with the research, I can put my finger on information they couldn't have obtained themselves."

This formula forces you to focus on the benefits you provide to your clients, rather than simply describing what you do, and it keeps the entire description to ten or fifteen seconds. It also avoids industry jargon, is short and to the point, and can be tailored to the interest and needs of your prospective client.

An interesting side-benefit of this marketing technique is that you may find that your conduct better information needs interviews with your client at the beginning of a research project. For example, imagine that a client calls you and asks you to find trends in the commercial refrigeration industry. If you are busy thinking about the sources you are going to use, the geographic scope of the project, and the turnaround time and budget, you may forget to ask questions about *why* the client needs this information – that is, what information need you are solving. Say, instead, that you started the conversation by asking the client what type of information would best meet his need (a chart showing market share? an overview of the industry showing past trends? a list of the top players?). This line of questions might surface the fact that the client is actually interested in acquiring a company in the commercial refrigeration industry, which dramatically alters the type of research you will be conducting.

2. Build a Niche

There is a hardware store in my town that has a reputation for carrying everything you would ever want. A replacement burner for a 1940s stove? They've got it. Electronic soil tester? Yep. Drywall trowel? Of course. Replacement drawer slide? Naturally. Their prices are on the high end, but I know that I can go to the paint department and get expert advice on how to cover that mildew stain. I shop there because they have obscure tools, and people who know how to use them.

Similarly, when I am looking for someone to subcontract work to, I consult the directory of the Association of Independent Information Professionals (**www.aiip.org**) to identify someone with subject expertise in that industry. I bypass the info-entrepreneurs who say that they provide "any research service in all subject areas." Why? I know that a one-person business simply cannot be expert in providing all types of research in all subject areas, and I do not want to spend my client's budget finding out that, as a matter of fact, this subcontractor cannot provide high-quality research in *every* subject area.

New info-entrepreneurs often assume that they will gain more clients by offering to do anything for anyone. Ironically, this makes them less memorable to their prospects, hence diminishing their chances for gaining new clients. Most prospective clients will file that contact away as "um, someone who is kind of like a library, or like the web, I guess" and will not have a grasp of when to call the info-entrepreneur. On the other hand, if the prospect met someone who specialises in providing telephone research for competitive intelligence professionals, he will remember the contact and is far more likely to both call when he needs phone research and to refer colleagues to that phone researcher.

In a sense, having a memorable niche turns everyone you meet into part of your sales force. For example, a colleague of mine specialises in the aviation industry. I do not get many calls for this type of research, but when I do, I refer the callers on to Tom. And since he is the only AIIP member with both this specialisation and close to 20 years of experience in the aviation industry, he receives referrals from many fellow AIIP members. He has a sales force 700-people strong; not bad for a one-person business.

Of course, you do not have to limit yourself strictly to your area of specialisation. When I began my business, I had just come from seven years running the library at a telecoms company. Since this was back in the days when telecoms was a hot industry, I marketed myself as someone who provided business intelligence for the communications industry. I won several clients early on because of this niche and, while they initially used me because of my focus on telecoms, the projects soon expanded to other aspects of business research. Having a niche does not preclude you from doing work outside that specialty; it simply enables you to get your first job with a client, and to make yourself memorable to everyone you meet.

3. Think "Value-Adding": When Great Research Isn't Enough

A "value-adding" info-entrepreneur is someone who provides answers, not just information. The more you can make your deliverables plug-and-play for your customers, the more obvious, quantifiable value you provide, and the easier it is for you to address the issue of IAOTWFF (It's All On The Web For Free).

What is often challenging is that info-entrepreneurs are immersed in information -- we are accustomed to swimming in oceans of data, so we do not think twice about going through 50 or 100 pages of material, particularly if we know it is high-quality information. Our clients, on the other hand, could sometimes be described as "data-intolerant"; unlike us, they don't spend all day looking for information, and they usually do not appreciate getting a data dump, when most of the other information they receive is in distilled format.

I remember the first time a client asked me to deliver the results of my extensive research as a PowerPoint presentation, of no more than six slides, and no more than four bullet points per slide. Initially, I thought this was an unreasonable request. "You want me to reduce all this tremendously valuable information into a mere six slides?," I fumed to myself. "Don't you care about all the in-depth information I have for you?" Then, of course, I realised that what my client was asking me to do was to insert my deliverable frictionlessly into the information flow that he had become accustomed to. Everyone else delivers information to him in PowerPoint slides, so I could too. Yes, it was hard to extract the 24 data points to fit on those six slides, but he valued this report far more than a 45-page collection of articles and reports.

Consider offering to produce an "information topography" report in addition to other analysis. What is that, you ask? Think about the process you go through while doing research. As you are searching a professional online service, you realize that -- contrary to your client's expectations -- there has been very little written about this research topic in the consumer publications. Or you find that the only web sites that address this topic are based in Asia; this is a concern in the Pac Rim area but not in Europe or North America. Or you notice that most of the discussions of the topic are from a couple of years ago, and the issue seems to have died out completely in the last six months. None of these discoveries are evident in the material you send to your client; this is information *about* information -- meta-data, as it were, what you found on your way to the results you are sending your client. This meta-information is both tremendously useful and something that only an experienced information professional can discern and surface. When is the last time you saw a search engine provide this kind of information along with search results?

Consider providing a visual display of the information, as well. It may be as simple as generating a bar chart from the statistics you retrieved, or it may involve some analysis of your research results. Anything that helps the client absorb and digest the information will be viewed as added value, and that is what enables you to always out-Google Google.

A research consultant once surveyed his executive-level clients and asked them what information sources they used when they were making critical business decisions about acquiring a company. They answered: company forms and related legal documents. “And what about market research reports, articles from the business press and trade publications, and so on?,” the consultant asked. The executives told him that they only rely on that type of material when they are just beginning to explore a new industry or product.

What struck me as revealing about this were the following lessons.

- Executives value information delivered in a format to which they are accustomed. They frequently scan annual reports, so this is content they can use without further distillation.
- Executives see collections of articles and other material as low-value, not necessarily because it *is* of less value but because it offers no added value. They have to read through the material, extract the important information, and then compare it to what they already know.

As Anne Caputo, Director of Info Pro and Academic Programs at Factiva, often reminds us, perception is reality. If there is no added value, there is often little perceived value.

4. Build New Information Services

Long-time librarians and researchers, when they've had a few pints, sometimes wax nostalgic for the old days of "rip-and-ship." If that phrase does not mean anything to you, then you were not around in the days of continual-feed paper and thermal printers. We would conduct a search in one of those new-fangled online databases – Dialog, DataStar, and so on – on something similar to a teletype machine. When we were ready to print out the citations and abstracts (this was way before the days of full-text articles), we would roll the paper up to a page, hit the [start] button, and out would scroll 50 or 100 records. We ripped the paper out of the machine and shipped it to the client, who was amazed that we could create a personalized bibliography for him.

Now, of course, it takes a lot more to amaze a client. Full text of articles or reports? Ho hum. A nicely-formatted table of contents? Who cares? We have to provide something that directly addresses their individual information needs. One such example is the Executive Information Service developed by Kim Dority of G.K. Dority & Associates (Castle Rock, CO, USA, kimdority@gkdassociates.com). She positions this service as the equivalent of a clairvoyant personal librarian – someone who learns what her client would want to know about and then provides that material in a way that the client can easily absorb. This is not just a current awareness or alerting service; it is a clipping service on steroids.

She begins by interviewing her client to find out

- what her client reads
- what he does not have time to read but wishes he did
- what industry issues, competitors, and people he wants monitored
- whether he wants to stay updated on current business books or any upcoming conferences
- whether there are any non-business-oriented interests that he wants monitored

Then Kim finds out whether her client wants the results in an outline format, as a customised web page with links to the pertinent information, as a graphic map, as a PowerPoint presentation or as bullet points in a memo. Once she understands what her client wants and how and when he wants it delivered, Kim becomes the eyes and ears of her client. By providing analysis and distillation of the results, she ensures that she is competition-proof; no search engine or electronic clipping service can provide the tangible added value Kim offers.

Kim created this service by listening to her clients as they describe their information “pain points” – that is, the times and situations when they get frustrated at what they cannot find. You can do the same, by catching your clients when they are thinking about the information searching process. This does not happen by sending your clients an email saying “so, where do you hurt?” This is not a doctor’s exam where you can point to your sore knee and get a recommendation for physical therapy. Rather, similar to good teachers who watch for those magical “learning opportunities” when their students are particularly receptive to a new lesson, you need to engage your client in a conversation at the right moment.

I find that some of the best opportunities come during what we librarians call the reference interview, when the client calls and describes what she is looking for and we negotiate scope, budget and deadline. I often ask my client what avenues she has already pursued, what resources she has already checked. That often triggers a discussion of her information frustrations and, if I keep my mouth shut and just listen, I can learn a tremendous amount about her information-seeking patterns and needs.

For example, I may learn that she knows several months in advance that she will be working on a particular project, but she cannot focus on it until the last minute. So I can suggest that she send me an alert, not to begin any in-depth research but just to keep my eyes open for relevant trend articles on the topic. Or she may comment on her frustration that she never hears about professional conferences in her field until it is too late. I can offer to set up a monitoring service that lets her know of relevant trade shows and conferences six months ahead of time.

The secret is to listen to your client, and to think creatively about how you can provide a solution to his information needs in ways he would never anticipate.

5. Address the IAOTWFF Factor

IAOTWFF probably is not as familiar an acronym as ASAP or IMO, but it should be. It stands for It's All On The Web For Free, and all info-entrepreneurs – as well as most librarians and info pros – have to battle this misperception daily. I was heartened to read the article in the February 5, 2004 *New York Times*, titled "When a Search Engine Isn't Enough, Call a Librarian." My favourite quote was from Joe Janes, an associate professor at the University of Washington Information School, in which he said "When Google doesn't work, most people don't have a plan B. Librarians have lots of plan B's."

(Of course, the battle isn't over. The day after that *Times* article appeared, the cartoon strip Get Fuzzy featured a religious proselytiser coming to the door and asking the dog "Do you believe in an infallible power?" to which the dog replies "You mean like Google?")

There are a number of approaches for handling the IAOTWFF objection. Some of the issues that you can mention to your IAOTWFF clients include:

- the problem of the invisible web – the content that search engines cannot or will not crawl (See **www.SearchEngineWatch.com/Searchday** for regular discussions of the invisible web problems.)
- timeliness of search engine indexes – anything added to the web within the last month probably is not searchable yet
- depth – the Web does not have much of a memory, and something from six months ago, while still tremendously valuable to your client, may have been removed without a trace
- quality – unlike published content, which has been vetted by an editor, anyone can post anything on the web, regardless of truthfulness or accuracy (For an excellent review of this problem, see *Web of Deception* by Anne Mintz, CyberAge Books, 2002, ISBN 0910965609)
- time vs. money – often, it is far more cost-effective to pay an info-entrepreneur to conduct research, on both the web and the value-added online services, than for the client to conduct the research herself

In fact, there are times when it may make sense to use the marketing technique of selling FUD – Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt. When faced with IAOTWFF, one response can be “as a researcher, how do you know you are basing your decisions on the *best* information? Your competitor probably has access to information resources beyond the open web. Do you? Are you sure that the information you found from that search engine is really the most accurate, most current, and most complete?”

Another aspect of the response to IAOTWFF is to focus on providing value to your search results beyond simply delivering the information you find, which I discussed in Technique 4 above. Keep in mind that you need to *offer* these value-added services whenever you talk with clients. They may not realize all the summarisation, distillation and analysis of information that you can provide until you market those services. In fact, I have gotten into the habit of building at least some time for distillation into every project estimate; I want to make sure that I am providing not only the best information that I can but also making it as accessible to my clients as possible, and that requires some after-search massaging of the results.

The major professional online services all provide white papers and studies that support the efforts of information professionals in explaining the benefits of research beyond the web. These materials are available to anyone – you need not be a subscriber.

For example, Dialog has developed a fairly extensive program for info pros, called Quantum^2 [**quantum.dialog.com**]. The White Papers, Case Studies, and Marketing Tools are the most relevant resources for info-entrepreneurs.

Similar to Quantum^2, Factiva’s info pro program [**www.factiva.com/infopro**] also has white papers, case studies and presentations that can be powerful tools for addressing the IAOTWFF issue. See, for example, the *Free, Fee and Value-Added Information Services* white paper that I helped write, that looks at the relative value of various types of information sources.

While most of LexisNexis' info pro material is geared to law librarians, there is a useful workbook titled *Marketing Tips For Information Professionals* with strategies that info-entrepreneurs can use as well, at **www.lexisnexis.com/infopro/reference/pdf/MarketingTips.pdf**.

6. Move Beyond Your Comfort Zone

This is, I believe, the most difficult aspect of running an info-entrepreneurship business. We are usually one-person businesses, which means that we cannot delegate the difficult tasks to someone else. Yes, we can outsource some responsibilities, such as accounting, collections or administrative tasks, but marketing really needs to stay in-house. But what do you do when the people you feel most comfortable talking with are not necessarily your best clients? How do you market when your stomach is in knots?

First, you take a deep breath. Then, sit down and think about what types of people meet the following criteria:

- They are willing to pay for high-value information
- They do not already have access to research services through their organisation or a professional association
- They offer at least the chance of repeat business and/or referrals

Add to that mix a list of the job titles and functions that represent likely prospects, such as:

- Marketing director
- Analyst
- Strategic planner
- Corporate development director
- Market researcher
- Consultant
- Speechwriter
- Research and development director
- Advertising professional
- Public relations officer
- Competitive intelligence director
- Product development manager

You may not personally know any strategic planners or corporate development directors. In fact, you may be thinking, “Oh, I would have no idea how to speak their language; I don’t know their jargon. I’d just sound foolish.” But there are many ways of marketing to these groups of prospects besides talking with them one on one. Focus on the marketing techniques that allow you to do your homework ahead of time, find out what their key concerns and information pain points are, and then present your solution to those problems.

For example, if you decide to target public relations professionals, explore the web site of the Public Relations Consultants Association (**www.prca.org.uk**). Read through their Case Studies to get a sense of what PR consultants do for their clients, and then think creatively about how you could have helped in each of those examples. Then consider how you could reach these PR consultants in a way that allows you to surface the benefits you offer to them. Contact the programme planner for their Annual Conference and find out how to send in a proposal for a presentation. Offer to present a lunch forum or evening seminar on advanced web research to a local group. Enquire about electronic publications they send out to members; would they be interested in an article on how to identify thought leaders in an industry?

If you run out of ideas on what to offer, contact a few members and offer to take them to lunch in exchange for conducting an informational interview – *not* a sales pitch – to learn about information flow within their consultancies and how an info-entrepreneur could help. Present this conversation as an informal focus group or brain trust. You are not trying to sell yourself to your luncheon guests; you are simply trying to tap into the expertise of a few people who know the industry and who might be able to help you brainstorm how best to provide high-value research services to people within their profession.

Focus on marketing techniques such as industry conference presentations and articles in industry publications, that allow you to spread your message beyond your local area. These one-to-many communication techniques let you work more efficiently, since you do not spend time talking individually to one prospect after another. They also enable you to communicate with people with whom you may not feel comfortable interacting in person. An added benefit is that you gain immediate credibility simply by virtue of being behind a podium or authoring an article.

7. Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

One of the rules of thumb in the advertising business is that people have to see or hear your message at least three to five times before they recall it. While you will probably not be running your advertisement on television or in the *Financial Times*, this rule is still relevant to your marketing strategy. Assume that you will need to “touch” your prospect at least five times before he gets to the point where he thinks of you when he needs research services.

This is one reason why, when you give a presentation or attend a meeting, it is far more important for you to collect business cards from others than for you to hand out your business card. Giving out your card is a one-off contact. The prospect has it and is as likely to toss it in the trash as he is to file it away – and neither of these actions will help him remember to call you later. Hand him your brochure, and you still have no assurance that he will keep it. You have, in essence, lost contact with him if you walk away without *his* business card.

If, on the other hand, you collect his business card, you can send him a follow-up letter or email, thanking him for attending your presentation (or saying how much you enjoyed talking with him). Then, a couple of weeks later, you email him and ask if he would like to be added to the distribution list of your free email newsletter. A month after that, you mail him a postcard, briefly describing a few of the most interesting projects you have worked on recently (appropriately anonymised, of course), and reminding him of your free-phone number. All these contacts because you asked for his business card rather than just handing him yours.

The following are some of the “touch tools” that are effective for info-entrepreneurs.

- If you give a presentation, offer a free prize draw with a prize such as a book that pertains to the focus of your talk. Collect attendees’ business cards and do the drawing at the end of your presentation. When you get back in the office, send emails (or, better yet, hard copy letters) thanking each person for attending, and perhaps enclosing a few additional titbits of information, based on questions you received at the end of your presentation.

- If you cannot offer a free prize draw during your presentation, ask the organiser of the event if you may have a list of attendees. If you get turned down, tell the attendees that you would be happy to email a copy of your PowerPoint presentation to anyone who would like it, and then collect business cards for sending out the file. Again, this is far a more effective technique for maintaining contact with your prospective clients than simply displaying the URL for where a copy of your presentation is posted on your web site.

- Develop a short fortnightly or monthly email newsletter that would be of value to your clients and prospects. Include news on their industry, or web research tips, or any other topic you think would keep them interested. Offer a free subscription to all your prospects; mention it in your presentations; offer it at the end of articles you write. This need not be time-consuming; I write several monthly newsletters, tailored to different client groups, and each takes no more than an hour a month and is an effective tool for staying in touch with my clients.

- Mail a postcard every two or three months, reminding your clients and prospects about how you have helped other clients solve their information needs. The text of this postcard could be something like this:

  Recently, we have

  - Helped a company evaluate the market for disposable eyeglasses
  - Identified key competitors in the private jet industry
  - Found the key decision factors for home sellers selecting a real estate agent

  How can we help you?

  [insert your contact information and free phone number here]

The paper stock for these customised postcards can be purchased through companies that design paper stock with colourful designs, with perforations, that can be run through a laser printer. PaperDirect.com and PaperAccess.com are two companies that provide these printed paper stock.

8. Make Marketing a Part of Your Life

Whether you are promoting your services at an exhibit stand, attending a local professional association meeting, or just chatting with someone at a conference, learn about the other person before you start describing your own business. Ask problem-seeking questions – “What do you use the Internet for at your job?” “What frustrates you most about your work?” “What do you do when you can’t find the information you need?” Display a genuine interest in the other person’s work and profession. Doubtless, you’ll learn something interesting about her line of work. You will also find out specifically how you can help her, and can fine-tune your introduction to address her particular information problems.

Many people are shy by nature and find it hard to make conversation with strangers. I had one of those “ah-ha” moments when I realized that most other people are equally concerned, and are delighted when they find someone willing to listen to what they have to say. I repeat the following reminders to myself before I walk into a room full of strangers.

- Pay attention. Focus on the person you are talking with, and listen to what he is saying.
- Be enthusiastic. Use your face and body to show emotion and to indicate that you’re interested in the conversation. Show that you are passionate about what you do and that you love working for your clients. (And if that is not the case, think about refocusing your business on a client base and type of work that you do love.)
- Perception is reality. Act self-confident, even if you do not feel self-confident, and eventually you will start feeling as confident as you act.

It may help you to compare your need to find prospective clients to the need (or at least, desire) of a single person to find a prospective mate. When you think about it, there are some similarities between info-entrepreneurs and someone looking for a mate. They are both looking for contacts; they both need to present their best attributes to the "market"; and they both need to use a number of approaches to identify and connect with prospective contacts. Both want a long-term relationship, although the info-entrepreneur is not asking for monogamy; she plans to cultivate a number of devoted clients rather than One Perfect Love.

So, what approaches should info-entrepreneurs take in their search for the ideal client(s), similar to the tactics of the singles searching for love?

- Go where the boys (or girls) are. If you are looking for a man who enjoys the outdoors, attend a fly-fishing class. If you are looking for clients who will value you for your ability to find information on their market and industry, go to meetings and conferences where these information-hungry prospects will congregate.
- Hang out in the online discussion forums and email lists where your mate is likely to be. Do you have a passion for 1970s sit-coms? Do you know every back road in Tuscany and travel there every summer? Or, as an info-entrepreneur, do you want to find competitive intelligence managers who will need someone with your expertise to track down elusive information? In either case, meet fellow aficionados by finding an email list (check out **groups.yahoo.com**, **Tile.net/lists**, L-Soft's database of public LISTSERV discussion lists, and **Topica.com** for pointers), a Usenet newsgroup (see **groups.google.com**) or a discussion forum (try searching the Open Directory Project – **dmoz.org** -- using the word "forum" to identify discussion forums).
- Get listed in a source that is most likely to be read by your prospects. For singles, that might be placing a personals ad in the local monthly magazine for upmarket professionals. Info-entrepreneurs should consider listings in specialised directories likely to be consulted by their clients. Be sure that your listing includes enough information to compel someone to call, and that focuses on benefits, not features. In other words, design a listing that demonstrates the benefits of calling you, rather than one that just lists your availability and vital measurements. "Single female, in search of warm-hearted individual for fun" is not going to garner you many high-quality dates; "We'll research anything" is not much more compelling.
- Work on building your network. Most people find romantic interests through friends and colleagues (and no, I am not thinking of those Blind Dates From Hell that everyone has gone on at least once). Make sure that all your friends know that you are single, available, charming, wonderful and well-behaved. Likewise,

remind your existing clients that you welcome referrals of colleagues who might be interested in your services, and who would like to receive your newsletter or other promotional material.

- Do not leave the house in an old shirt and oil-stained jeans (unless that is the type of person you want to attract). Always be ready to meet Prince(ss) Charming, wherever he or she finds you. By the same token, present a professional "face" whenever you are out - either physically or virtually. Answer your phone with a businesslike greeting; if you use voice mail, make sure it accurately informs callers when you will be able to call them back. When you are at a meeting or conference, always dress professionally. You do not want to stand out by being the one person in shorts and a t-shirt when everyone else is in professional dress.
- Do not rule out a potential date based on his or her appearance alone. She might not be your ideal body type, but she may turn out to be the CEO of a company, with a quick wit and a warm heart. And that client who looks like he would never be big enough to need your services? He may be a great referral source, and he might land a big contract and suddenly become Mr. Desirable.
- While you may be tempted to limit your dating pool to people who live in your town, do not rule out a long-distance or online romance. Who knows what may develop? Likewise, just because a prospect is not in your local area does not mean you cannot do business. Make it easy for clients to contact you. Offer them your free-phone number (it costs less than you might think), respond to their email quickly, and accommodate their schedule -- and time zone -- when arranging a call back. There are plenty of phone plans that make calling, even around the world, relatively inexpensive. Sure, you may have to call your client when you are still in your bathrobe and have just had your first cup of coffee, but think of how much fun a cross-border romance can be.
- Identify volunteer opportunities where it is likely that you will find single people of similar interests. Do you have good organisational skills? There is probably a local non-profit organisation that would love to see you bring order to the chaos of their files. Can you write? Do you like animals? Offer to help with the newsletter of the local animal shelter. Do you have only a little time to commit? Volunteer to help staff the next foot race that benefits a charity you support. And even if you are not looking for a like-minded single person, you can still apply

your skills in a volunteer capacity, and surface your info-entrepreneur skills to the people you contact there. The other volunteers and the people who work at the organisation will have an opportunity to get to know you, learn about what services you offer, and be smitten by your charm. And you also can feel good about giving back to the community.

9. Warm Calls, not Cold Calling

Info-entrepreneurs are selling something that is inherently intangible – our research skills. We usually provide a tangible deliverable in the form of a report, but what we are really offering is our expertise in finding the information, analysing it, distilling it down to the crucial heart, and then summarising it for the client.

Because our “product” is so customised, the way we market it to our clients is going to be very different from how most businesses market. One mistake that many new info-entrepreneurs make is to assume that cold calling is an effective way to promote their businesses to prospective clients. Sure, most business comes from word of mouth, but how better to get the word out there than calling lots of people, you may think.

In fact, one side of your brain may be saying, “Cold calling must work. Why else do stock brokers, insurance agents and aluminium siding contractors insist on calling me, usually right at dinner time?” But if you are like me, the other half of your brain is screaming, “No! I’ll do anything but make cold calls!” Fortunately, you can listen to that screaming half; in my experience and that of the vast majority of other independent info pros, cold calling simply does not work. There are several good reasons why cold calling is a bad idea. First, how many customers do you think would decide to spend hundreds or thousands of pounds, in preparation for making an important business decision, on someone they have never heard of who just happened to call them up? That’s right… very few. Second, in these days of voicemail and effective administrative gatekeepers, you will spend an enormous amount of time just getting a live person on the phone. Third, you will have to get fifteen or twenty people to answer the phone and engage in a conversation before you find one who is vaguely interested. That means that you have spent an entire day (or two), with one prospect to show for your efforts – and that person may never actually get around to using your services. At that rate, you will *never* land a real, live, paying client.

The only exception to the No Cold Calls rule is what some people call “warm calling.” This presumes that you have already made contact with your prospects in some way, so that they will recognize your name when you call. One way to do this is based on an approach described in the book *The Consultant’s Calling: Bringing Who You Are to What*

You Do by Geoffrey M. Bellman (Jossey-Bass, 2001). First you need to identify a specific, high-level position within a group of organisations for which you believe you can provide unique, high-value services. Perhaps your target position is the head of international accounts in the ten largest consumer food companies. Using the companies' web sites or annual reports, identify the person in charge of that function in each corporation. Be sure to call the company to confirm that the information is still current. Then write a letter to each executive, introducing yourself, and offering "name a topic and I'll send you an article a week for six weeks – no charge" -- or a similar offer that highlights the customised research services you provide. Be sure to include your email address and free-phone phone number, if you have one. Follow up a week or so later to ask what topic the executive would like monitored. If you cannot get through to your contact, try his or her assistant, who may be able to help you identify a topic of interest. Then, monitor the leading business and industry publications, major newspapers, and news headline services on the web, and send each executive one or two articles a week, with a brief cover memo. At the end of six weeks, you can place a "warm call" to each executive; if nothing else, they will probably remember who you are.

Another approach is to arrange an introduction before you make a call. We often forget to ask our clients and contacts to recommend others who might use our services. People appreciate the chance to spread the word about someone they enjoy working with, but they often need a reminder. I include one in my newsletter and marketing postcards: "Spread the word! Do you know anyone who might want to hear about Bates Information Services? Send me their email or postal address, and I'll send them a one-time mailing to let them know about my research services." Note that I assure my clients that I am not going to put their colleague or friend on a junk-mail list, nor will I call them with a sales pitch. When I do send out that mailing, I include the name of the client who referred me, which gives me instant credibility by saying, in essence, "This isn't a random sales pitch... Your colleague Robin recommended that I contact you."

10. Your Elevator Speech

While it's important to look beyond your local area for clients, never miss an opportunity to market yourself – subtly -- in person. Perfect your "elevator speech" – a quick two- or three-sentence description of what you do that you can deliver while riding the elevator with someone, or in the grocery store, on a plane, or at a meeting. Here is my "elevator speech" I gave when I was chatting with someone while waiting to board a train.

> *Prospect*: That's an interesting assortment of reading material. What do you do for a living?
>
> *Me*: (spoken with enthusiasm) I have the greatest job in the world! I run my own research company, finding hidden business information for business professionals. My clients use me after they've done research on the web, to find the really critical information.
>
> *Prospect*: Really? I sometimes need information on competitors. Can you do that?
>
> *Me*: I just finished a project analyzing the competitors for a financial services company. Say, why don't you give me your business card, and I'll mail you some information about what I do?

Notice that I did not hand the prospect my business card; it is much more important for me to get hers. Who knows if she will remember to call me when she gets back to her office? Instead, she gave me her card. When I get back to my office, I sent her a package of my marketing material, along with a cover memo mentioning how much I enjoyed chatting with her at the train station on Tuesday, so that she was reminded of who I was. Then, three weeks, later, I sent her a copy of my newsletter. And a couple of weeks after that, I sent her a Rolodex card, along with a reminder that she can subscribe to my free email newsletter simply by emailing me. The net result of having asked her for her business card instead of just giving her mine is that I was able to do three non-intrusive follow-up contacts with her -- instead of possibly none at all.

The secret of a good "elevator speech" is to make yourself memorable, and to describe the benefits you provide rather than the features you offer. My interaction with the prospect on the train platform focused on what I could do that I suspected that she could not, that is, find "hidden" business information. That intrigued her enough to continue the conversation. If, instead, I had said “I provide business information to business professionals”, the conversation would have ground to a halt. Refer back to Technique #1 for a formula to describe the features you offer clients. And file in the back of your mind a few interesting examples of your research, appropriately anonymised to protect the confidentiality of your clients, of course. My latest example when I am having a conversation at the train platform is a company that was considering going into a new market. The high-priced consulting company they used advised them to move forward; the information I found convinced them that this was an over-saturated market and they decided against making a multi-million pound investment.

You probably have a similar success story you can share; the important thing is to be able to describe it quickly and compellingly, in terms that anyone can understand and remember. In fact, your goal should be to have an “elevator speech” that is memorable enough that everyone you tell it to remembers what you do and can explain it to another person. My siblings refer me to people they know; my mother has sent several prospective clients my way; my neighbour tells her aerobics class about what I do. Everyone you know can become your unofficial marketing department, as long as you have a memorable elevator speech.

11. Look Professional, All the Time

As you set up your business, it is tempting to browse through Microsoft Word's clip art collection, find a nice image, slap it at the top of a document, add your company name in some unusual font, and call that a letterhead. Resist the urge. Having a professional design your Clients can tell the difference between a company logo designed on a word processor and one custom-designed for your business. Having a professionally-designed logo and letterhead sends the message that you are an established and committed business person, not just a hobbyist.

How do you find a design professional to develop your logo and letterhead? Ask around. If you know any consultants or small businesses whose logos you find appealing, ask them who they used. Some office supply stores provide customised logo design as well as printing services, often for a relatively modest cost. Be sure to get a copy of your design in digital form so you can incorporate it into your web site, handouts, and so on.

When you order your stationery, envelopes and business cards, spend the money to buy high-quality paper stock. As one independent info pro commented to me, "Printing and the quality of the paper is important. I can always tell when someone has designed their own logo and printed it on a laser printer, and it makes me think they're really small-time." Considering how few printed letters you will send out, it is worth the additional cost to invest in a heavy paper stock.

If you provide several types of services, you may want to develop several brochures and hand out the one that addresses a prospective client's needs. For example, I wear several hats in my business. I specialise in business research, so my brochure talks about that. I also offer consulting services to the information industry, so I have a one-page fact sheet on my background relevant to these services. And finally, I have developed a number of workshops and seminars that I tailor to specific audiences, so another handout describes the types of training I provide. I never give all of these to any one prospect – I want each person to focus on the aspect of my business that I think is most pertinent to his or her needs.

Some info pros have their brochures custom-printed professionally; others use pre-printed brochure stock from Paper Direct (www.paperdirect.com) or an office supply store. The advantage of custom-printed brochures is that they do look more professional, and you are assured that no one else will have a brochure that looks quite like yours. On the other hand, they are more expensive to print and, printing economics being what they are, you will probably print a large quantity. That means that you will live with that brochure for a long time. Using pre-printed brochure stock, on the other hand, gives you a full-colour brochure without the expense of custom printing, and allows you to print small batches at a time, making updating easier and more cost-effective. However, you run the risk of selecting the same stock as another independent info pro, and the finished product will probably look less professional than a custom-printed brochure.

You may want to develop a tag line or slogan that you can include in your brochure, on your Rolodex card, and on other marketing material. A tag line is a short sentence or phrase that memorably and succinctly describes your business specialisation:

* “We Know the Aviation Industry”
* “Competitive Intelligence for the Biotech Industry”
* “International Trade Consultant”
* “Research Services for Nonprofits”

Make sure that your name, company name, mailing address, telephone and fax number, email address and web site URL appear prominently somewhere in your brochure, in print large enough to be easily read.

12. Build a Marketing Kit

Now that you have taken all the steps listed above, what do you do when a prospective client asks you to send her some information on your company? Sure, you can refer him to your web site or toss a brochure in the mail, but that does not create a particularly strong impression. You will want to send him a more professional package – something that tells the story of who you are and why you are the answer to his dreams.

Your marketing kit can be as simple or as elaborate as you want; think about what your client base would expect. At the least, it should include the following:

- A good-looking two-pocket folder (sometimes called a portfolio folder) in a colour that coordinates with your logo. Make sure it has slots where you can insert your business card.
- Your brochure or fact sheet describing your services
- A reprint of a recent article you have written or that has been written about you
- A page of client testimonials (do not be shy about soliciting testimonials from satisfied clients or even from people for whom you did research in your prior job)
- A short biographical profile – not a résumé (you are not looking for a job!), but a brief sketch that highlights your expertise as an information professional
- Your business card and Rolodex card
- A cover letter addressed to the prospect, thanking him by name for contacting you, and highlighting how you can best meet his needs

Word processing makes it easy to tailor every package you send to the information needs of the individual prospect. You do not want a potential client to think “boiler plate” when he opens your envelope. By taking time to understand each prospect’s business and what is going on in their industry, you can customise your cover letter to that person’s concerns.

If you offer a free or for-fee client newsletter, either print or email, you can also include a postage-paid postcard soliciting a subscription. Yes, it will cost you a little extra for each marketing kit you send out, but a prepaid reply card makes the offer more attractive and easier to respond to; the more newsletter subscribers you have, the easier it is for you to stay in touch with your clients and potential clients on a regular basis.

Whether or not to include a rate sheet in your marketing kit depends on your business and your client base. I usually include one because I price most of my work at a single hourly rate, and the printed fee schedule alerts prospective clients to the fact that, while I am good, I am not inexpensive. Some independent info pros prefer not to quote their fees until after discussing the specific project, particularly if they expect to charge a per-project fee rather than an hourly rate. If you do enclose a price sheet, be sure to include a date limit: “These rates are valid through December, 2005.” I make a habit of re-evaluating my rates at the end of each year, so putting an expiration date on my rate sheet lets me raise my rate without prospective clients crying foul.

Further Reading

Bates, Mary Ellen
Building and Running a Successful Research Business: a guide for the independent information professional
CyberAge Books, 2003
ISBN 0910965625

Berkman, Bob and Amy Pass
50 Ways to Make Yourself Indispensable to Your Organization: Strategies for Today's Information Professional
Find/SVP, 2003
www.findsvp.com/offers/50WaysOrder.pdf

Edwards, Paul; Sarah Edwards and Laura Clampitt Douglas
Getting Business to Come to You, second edition
Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1998
ISBM 087477845x

Levinson, Jay and Seth Godin
Guerrilla Marketing For the Home-Based Business
Houghton Mifflin, 1995
0395742838

Sabroski, Suzanne
Super Searchers Make It On Their Own: top independent information professionals share their secrets to starting and running a research business
CyberAge Books, 2002
ISBN 0910965595

Key Resources for the Info-Entrepreneur

Association of Independent Information Professionals

www.aiip.org

The private email discussion list alone is worth the cost of membership. This is an incredibly collegial association, and an excellent source for subcontracting, advice, encouragement and networking.

Dilbert Newsletter

members.comics.com/members/registration/showDilbertLogin.do?aid=1

(Select the DNRC option – the acronym stands for Dogbert's New Ruling Class). I read this one to remind myself of why I enjoy being an *independent* info pro!

Free Pint Bar

www.freepint.com/bar

This wide-ranging discussion forum covers far more than just info-entrepreneurs, but a number of independent info pros participate, and the discussions are often relevant to info-entrepreneurs.

Info-Entrepreneur Tip of the Month

www.batesinfo.com/info-brokering.html

I write a free monthly email newsletter addressing issues of interest to the independent information profession. This URL also points to additional resources for the info-entrepreneur, including a survey I conducted and Frequently-Asked Questions.

MarketingBase Mentor program

www.marketingbase.com/mentor.html

Amelia Kassel, a long-time info-entrepreneur, offers a formal year-long mentoring program via email.

ResourceShelf

www.resourceshelf.com

Edited by Gary Price, librarian extraordinaire, it is a frequently-updated web log of web resources of interest to researchers and information professionals.

Searcher magazine

www.infotoday.com/searcher/

Although this publication looks at all aspects of online research, it frequently includes articles of specific interest to info-entrepreneurs.

Are We Just Selling Information?

Independent info pros used to refer to themselves as "information brokers"; the idea was that we are not just fetching information but rather finding, evaluating and packaging it. That phrase has fallen from favour, partly because the news media have used it to refer to companies that engage in illegal or unethical practices to find personal information on individuals, such as their bank account balance. "Information broker" is also a misleading phrase, since we do not simply serve as a go-between from our clients to the information sources. Rather, we *create* something new – a report, an analysis of a market or a topic, sometimes even a summary delivered in person or over the telephone.

The question still arises, though, as to whether we are simply reselling information, either content that we find on a fee-based online service or information we found on the open web. It is true that many independent info pros do not provide much original research – that is, they do not spend most of their time conducting surveys, studying trends and writing their own market research reports. Instead, they gather information from a number of sources, including the web, trade and professional journals, newspapers, magazines, government agencies, associations, and consulting reports. What they are charging for is not the information per se but their time and skill in *finding* the information, and in knowing where to go to find it cost-effectively.

That is why an independent info pro still charges even if he did not find the information that exactly answered the client's question – the client is paying for the info pro's time, not just for the information retrieved. Compare it to going to a doctor for an illness; you pay the doctor for her time regardless of whether or not you were eventually cured.

Similarly, info-entrepreneurs sometimes hear the question, "Why do you charge me when it's all free on the web?" The short answer is: Time is money. An independent info pro should be able to find useful, accurate and relevant information in less time than her client can. But more to the point, most information is *not* available on the free web. It is hidden in databases that do not show up in search engines. It appears in articles and white papers that never make their way to the web. It is found in government and association reports that are hidden deep within web sites. It is buried in a book chapter or periodical article housed only in a library somewhere, or in a document filed in a county courthouse. Or it is unearthed by doing telephone research, interviewing experts to get their take on a given situation.

In addition to finding information that simply never shows up in a web search engine, independent info pros also add value by analysing and synthesising the results – by providing not just information but answers.

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