

## Case Study Series: What's Working in Marketing & Selling Professional Services

### **The Power of Relationships: How a Solopreneur Does It All, Including Landing Deals with Big Brands**

By Mary Flaherty

#### **OVERVIEW**

As an independent audio producer and editor, Perry Anne Norton faces the challenges familiar to many independent professionals—how to balance the delivery of client services with the marketing necessary to fill the pipeline for future work. As founder and voice talent for PanRight Productions, Norton produces voiceovers and digital audio production primarily for education, training, and marketing purposes. Her studio is a one-stop solution for voice talent, engineer, and editor—creating podcasts, TV and radio ads, audio newsletters, audio books, tutorials, voice prompts, educational and children's media, archival material, and web promotion.

#### **SITUATION**

##### **How Can One Person Do It All**

In 2002, when Norton relocated from New York City to Santa Barbara, California, she left behind a bustling city with established connections for a quiet community where she had no existing network. At the same time she was establishing a studio, she struggled to market her services and promote herself. As she put it, "I was going to be the voice, the editor, the producer, the business manager, the bookkeeper, and the marketer. It's very tough to wear all those hats and, for me, I shy away from marketing—so that was going to be particularly difficult."

How could one person build a business and sustain a livelihood under such conditions? The answer, as Norton found, was that she could do it, but only with a network of hard-earned relationships, persistence, and the willingness to reach beyond her comfort zone.

#### **APPROACH**

##### **Build a Referral Base**

Norton started by reaching out. She first joined a few general networking groups with professionals from a variety of industries. However, she found that in those groups there was a limited understanding of the work she did or the value it provided.

It was only when she connected with a business group whose members were communications professionals that she began to get traction. Members of the Association for Women in Communications [<http://www.womcom.org/>] were professionals in the fields of

journalism, marketing, and PR. As a group of like-minded professionals, says Norton, "They more quickly understood what I do and what I offer and how it could work for them."

She began participating in the group's monthly two-hour networking meetings, offering her services to the organization and its members. It took time to build relationships, "I would say it probably took a year of just getting to know people." The transition from New York City took time, as well. "I now happen to live in a relatively small town and it's very different from New York or other big cities because people don't really care what's on your résumé. They want to know who you are, what you're like, what's important to you in the community before they'll really accept you, which was really difficult for me at first."

Developing relationships, and even friendships, within the Association helped build credibility, as well as generate referrals. Slowly, Norton began to see results. Her involvement with the group generated three clients in two years. "It took awhile," she says, but it has helped build a referral network: "Now, it's an engine that's starting to run and create its own energy."

### **Be Proactive: Build Relationships**

Norton knew it was easy to get caught up in the service delivery and not take the time to manage her pipeline. She found that by nurturing relationships she tended to generate more work with ongoing clients and more compelling and higher-revenue projects. So, she tried to maintain a balance between managing current work while also reaching out to maintain her pipeline.

"When I think about relationship building, I think about making contact with people I see as potential clients or referral sources and then persistently, over time, sometimes over three years, keeping in touch, 'Hey, I saw that you're doing this. You and I had talked in June of last year about maybe x-y-z. I just wanted to see where you were with that.'"

She worked hard to understand what a potential client was all about by looking at the questions they asked and their challenges: "I had to really learn how to do that and to be patient and not just throw something out there but to be patient and ask myself, 'Okay, can I really help them or am I really looking for them to help me?'"<sup>1</sup>

### **Share Samples**

When she believed she could really help a prospect, Norton considered providing a free sample, "I have a folder about six inches thick with potential clients I've identified." Based on the situation, those clients may be targeted to receive a free sample, usually an audio recording in mp3 format. Norton would send an email either including the sample directly or a teaser email.

"Those free samples," reports Norton, "have led to new work, and it doesn't cost me anything but my time." In fact, almost 75% of these emails lead to a request for proposal submission, a direct conversation for more information, or a lead suitable for further nurturing.

---

<sup>1</sup> Norton credits her weekly reading of RainToday's *Rainmaker Report* newsletter as a huge help educating herself in this regard.

## Take Advantage of Social Networking Tools

Initially, Norton did not think social networking sites such as Twitter or LinkedIn would pay off given the time investment. However, after repeated urging from her tech-savvy significant other she opened a Twitter account and became more active in updating her LinkedIn profile. She was pleasantly surprised at what her early efforts generated in terms of business development.

"At first, I was completely dismissive of Twitter," says Norton. But that changed after just two months of casual "tweeting" on Twitter generated two new clients. In one case, she connected with a former co-worker and as a result of those tweets, she became the character voice talent for a recently introduced iPhone application for children's books ([www.istorytimeapp.com](http://www.istorytimeapp.com)).

She started out making non-industry-related comments on Twitter [<http://twitter.com/PanRight>], "Oh, I had this great bottle of Grenache from such-and-such vineyard," recalls Norton. "But now that I realize I can use Twitter as a networking tool, I post links to articles that others have written, such as *Vocal Warm-up Tips for Voice Actors*, or an article I wrote for *Electronic Musician* about *How to Create Inexpensive Quality Audio*, or a link to a podcast that I produced for McGraw-Hill. It's like my little virtual marketer."

On LinkedIn, Norton created a detailed profile that also included a client list [<http://www.linkedin.com/in/panright>]. She posted updates to her LinkedIn profile regularly, often every other day. People who were connected to her on LinkedIn would then see in their weekly LinkedIn updates what she was working on: "I'm constantly doing something new, which says to people 'Oh, she's busy. She's got work coming in. She's in demand.'"

A major new client resulted when a producer in Australia was looking for a studio in my town to produce a series of meditation CDs and PanRight Productions showed up in the results of their LinkedIn search on the term "voiceover." "It's a more robust tool than Twitter in a lot of ways," comments Norton but my goal is to put more time and effort into both tools.

## RESULTS

In the seven years since she relocated to California, Norton has gone from producing a one-off commercial for a local jewelry store to ongoing work producing podcasts for McGraw-Hill and recording audio textbooks for DeVry University. Today her client roster includes the Centers for Disease Control, Barnes and Noble, and Pfizer, among others. She attributes the bulk of her success to her relationship-building efforts, which have indeed become an engine for growing this small business. In fact, despite a recession, PanRight Productions has generated as much revenue in the first quarter of 2009, as it did during the entire previous year—a three-fold increase to date.

Looking ahead, Norton is currently revamping her website so that she can more easily integrate all of her marketing outreach activities, including her newsletter and social networking. "I want all of these efforts to work together for exponential results—like one organism. The way I see it is every connection is a link in a chain that can ultimately lead to a bigger relationship. It feeds on itself and it helps everybody grow."

## Additional Insights Shared by PanRight Productions

- **Be persistent in reaching out to the people who can help you and whom you can help.** Focus on the potential clients who really could benefit from your services.
- **Keep your ears open and be creative when thinking about how you can help.**
- **Stay abreast of how technology changes the rules of the game in terms of making connections and building your brand**—that’s been a really big lesson for me in this first quarter of 2009. If you’re phobic or overwhelmed by the technology, find someone who can help you figure out which of those tools are going to work best for your purposes. Don’t spread yourself too thin or your results will suffer. Focus on what you CAN do effectively NOW and build from there.

## RESOURCES

Association for Women in Communications: [www.womcom.org](http://www.womcom.org)

PanRight Productions website: [www.panright.com](http://www.panright.com)

PanRight Productions on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/PanRight](http://www.twitter.com/PanRight)

PanRight Productions on LinkedIn: [www.linkedin.com/in/panright](http://www.linkedin.com/in/panright)

[Sample email](#)