



A personal account of my first year as a freelance medical writer

By Samina Hamilton

In the last issue of *The Write Stuff* (TWS), you heard about my journey to freelance medical writing and my first three months in business. The next three have been no less interesting, with new challenges presenting themselves, sometimes on a daily basis! I have gained new clients, and diversified my portfolio to take on training roles within my local university. Read on for an insight into the highs and lows I have experienced during my second quarter in business.

Months 3 to 6

January 2007

The seasonal holidays were well and truly over with the children back at school and the decorations boxed up in the loft. I was eager to pick up on two projects where I left them in late December 2006. I was expecting final statistical output for one study, enabling me to begin draft reporting, and I was to begin front-ending another report. January looked set to be a busy month, or so I thought... A couple of days after I received efficacy output for the draft report, it became clear from ensuing discussion that the safety output 'was not quite ready yet'. There were also some issues with the efficacy data which would require further statistical review, however, the required resource would simply not be available for what could be several weeks and possibly a few months. As for the front-end report I was supposed to be preparing, that completely disappeared into the ether. Suddenly, my packed January was looking a little freer.

I took advantage of the immediate gap in my writing fortunes by embarking on the new year exercise plan I had vaguely considered over the holidays. Exercise is great for allowing space and time to think. Having recognised that the reality of unmet milestones meant payment delays, sometimes long ones, I made a mental note to build in an extra assumption for milestone contract bids. I would reduce my risk by stating that I would invoice for the work done to date where milestones were delayed by the client, and deduct that amount from the eventual milestone payment. I also saw that I was going to need several more contracts ongoing simultaneously to absorb potential delays and apparently contracted work.

The rest of January 2007 was therefore spent on intensive business development activities. I went back to square one and trawled the internet, applied for several contract posi-

tions of interest via InPharm.com and got back in touch with old contacts to ask if they were in need of writing services. I re-examined some of the e-mail applications I had sent out before the holidays. I restructured them by comprehensively stating my experience and capabilities in the covering e-mail, rather than relying on the reader to actually make it to my web link and CV to review this key information. It was a simple enough presentational change, but amazingly, it appeared to do the trick. Within a few hours, requests for information and invitations to bid for projects started to appear in my in-box. I had learnt the valuable lesson of gaining the attention of potential clients within the first few lines of an e-mail.

I was delighted to be invited by Alistair Reeves, EMWA Freelance Coordinator, to help out with the set up, conduct and reporting of the Freelance and Small Business Survey planned for 2007.

February 2007

I updated the material for my website and had a few information technology glitches I was experiencing, ironed out. With ongoing business development activities, but no billable work as yet, it seemed like a good time to get away for a few days to celebrate our 15th wedding anniversary. With the children's Gran installed at home, Paul and I escaped to Krakow, Poland, for what was an impromptu break in a cultured jewel of a city. Paul reminded me that had I still been a paid company employee, I would never have had the requisite annual leave in hand to make this trip.

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My return to work heralded the beginning of an absolute onslaught of enquiries, and more importantly, contract wins. I sent out a total of eleven requests for information and bids in as many days. I had also been concentrating on developing longer term relationships with some companies, so that the work would not completely dry up once I had closed out individual project contracts. That strategy was paying dividends. I signed three separate contracts for periods of 6 to 12 months to provide medical writing services, on an 'as-needed' basis. I also won several individual pieces of work, not all associated with the 6 to 12 month contracts. Three of these clients were hoping to use my first piece of work to decide if they wanted to develop a longer term relation-

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ship with me. For the first time since starting out on my own, I had what I considered to be a healthy backlog of work that would occupy me until the end of June 2007. I had breathing space in early July before our scheduled family holiday in late July/early August, and I was in discussion with two clients about work for my return from holiday.

Another interesting opportunity arose during February which really caught my imagination. My good friend, Helen, with whom I had done my PhD, had called me to discuss 'something big'. We had both ended up as freelance medical writers and she now lived with her American husband and two children in the US. We had stayed in touch over the years and were now enjoying more regular contact, mainly because our working lives now allowed it. Helen had been invited to bid for a very large contract with a major pharmaceutical company. It was for a programme of early phase protocols and there

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were enough of them to keep several writers busy for a period of 18-24 months. She asked for my counsel during the bidding process and for me to be part of her team, should she secure a win. I was delighted to be included and we had fun working together on her bid. I spoke with several UK-based freelancers to ensure that I would be able to resource the UK end of the operation in the event of a win. With the bid safely with the client, Helen and I both put it to the back of our minds. So far, we have been lucky enough to be able to subcontract small pieces of work to one another from time to time, and we both hope to nurture this working relationship as our businesses develop.

March 2007

At the EMWA Brussels conference, I had realised from talking to experienced freelancers, that it would be pertinent to contact my local university and hospitals trust, as this could unearth potential business from an alternative sector. I decided to try a multi-pronged approach to make the quickest possible in-roads. I approached parents at my children's school whom I knew were hospital consultants associated with groups involved in clinical research. I also joined the Healthcare Network North East England (www.hcnetnee.com), a local organisation which works with companies, including those involved in clinical research, to increase sales and market opportunity through networking. Both approaches initially drew a blank. It then occurred to me that I should make the best of existing, albeit dormant, contacts. My next, and best move so far, was to contact my old PhD supervisor, who was now not without professorial clout, and was still based at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne. I updated him on the last 15 years of my life and then asked him to spread the word about my services at the university and within the

hospitals trust. He very kindly facilitated some key introductions for me and I soon had enquiries and two contracts in process from a newly formed hospital-based group overseeing the conduct of clinical trials in the region. Great! I had broken into the local market, and my breathing space in early July started to shrink. It was rather fun to be going out and meeting local researchers, not to mention revisiting the medical school where I had studied and worked for so many years. Oh, did I forget to mention that I agreed to present a postgraduate training seminar in July 2007 to talk about my career to date, and the possibilities for careers in clinical research? I'm not sure the promise of a buffet lunch and university car parking permit for the day sold it to me though; I think it was more the opportunity to show that a fulfilling career, via the path I had chosen, can be a viable and achievable alternative to a career in academia.

Alistair and I were in touch over the survey and Freelancers' Forum planned for the Vienna conference. I registered for EMWA Vienna, or rather two days of the whole, as the conference was unfortunately scheduled right in the middle of my reporting two studies.

I was writing again too, to my relief. I began reporting for two new clients, in addition to updating the report which

had stalled in January. I also won three unexpected, smaller pieces of work which I wrote and closed out during the month.

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Late March was a very busy period for me, as I hit critical path on a large clinical study report. I luckily remembered to submit my second value

added tax (VAT) return just in the nick of time. Never a dull moment... I now look forward to a slight breather over the Easter holidays (or at least part of them) with the family.

I will continue to update you as I navigate my way through my first year in business, so look out for my articles in future issues of *TWS*.

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Internet healthcare

Rumour has it healthcare is the most searched topic on the Internet. MedHunters.com¹ tells us that searching healthcare is more popular with teenagers than online games. The site outlines how to find healthcare information on the Internet and lists some useful sources.

1. www.medhunters.com/articles/healthcareOnTheInternet.html