



DIVERSIFY YOUR *Writing Portfolio*

In bad economic times (and in good),
your best shot at a fulfilling
writing career is to branch out.

BY MATT VILLANO

Before the stock market tanked, during those "glory days" of Wall Street, a certain number of portfolio managers actually might have been on to something.

Determined to minimize risk and maximize profit, they diversified their investments. This meant that instead of spending all of their money on stock from one business, they spread it around and tossed smaller amounts behind different companies in different industries. The strategy was like an insurance policy: With so many irons in the fire, the managers assured clients at least some degree of profit, as well as protection from catastrophic failure.

They essentially hedged their bets.

It turns out the same diversification philosophy is a key to longevity in the world of writing. I've learned from personal experience over the years that writers who subsist on income from a varied number of sources are that much more likely to succeed than those who focus their energy on one market or niche. And especially when the economy is in shambles, freelancers who diversify are best equipped to survive.

If your primary goal is to publish a book, you probably know that publishers are putting increasing demand on authors to have platforms—and diversifying your portfolio is a great way to accomplish just that. Even markets that aren't especially lucrative in terms of dollars can add a wealth of credibility to your name in the form of publishing credits. Just think how great they'll look in your query or proposal.

Try something that's a natural extension of your current skill set (leaping from magazine and newspaper writing to corporate work, or from your novel-in-progress to short stories), or challenge yourself to take a shot at something entirely new (like one writer you'll meet in this article who made perhaps the biggest of switches, going from writing reviews of adult videos to writing books for children).

The bottom line: Writers who diversify their repertoire tend to get published more—and are happier and more fulfilled by their work.

AVOIDING THE PIGEONHOLE

If anybody knows about diversification, it's Seattle-area author, journalist and speaker Michelle Goodman, who quite literally wrote the book on the self-employed writing life: *My So-Called Freelance Life: How to Survive and Thrive as a Creative Professional for Hire*. Her own diversified portfolio extends beyond the bookshelf to magazine articles, newspaper pieces and blog posts about career issues. She regularly lectures on how to make a living as a writer as well. "If you get into this thinking, 'It's all about the art,' you might get lucky and make enough money, but most likely you won't," she says.

Rather than focus on one type of writing for one kind of reader, Goodman believes writers should strive to serve multiple markets and audiences. Across the industry, however, the odds aren't exactly in favor of this type of growth. Publishers like labels; plopping writers into pre-established categories makes it easier for them to commoditize us and make sense of what they think we're each about.

This phenomenon is known as *pigeonholing*. The goal of diversifying is to break out of that box, and you fight the labels of pigeonholing by fetching more work.

Information abounds about the art and science of growing a writing business, but expanding your own professional horizons can be boiled down to four basic steps.

STEP 1: Target new markets by identifying those magazines, journals, publishers, websites and corporate entities for which you'd like to write.

STEP 2: Study these new markets you've identified until you're familiar enough with them to write convincing pitches and proposals for review.

STEP 3: Write those pitches, get them out there and chase the assignments down.

STEP 4: Repeat the first three steps until you've nabbed a new outlet.

Granted, this process doesn't happen overnight. Freelancer Sharon Florentine spent the better part of this decade pigeonholed as a technology writer before she added some business and health writing to her lineup. Ghostwriter Carrie Rossenfeld logged nearly 20 years writing for and editing trade magazines before she landed her first science writing gig for Atomic Archive, a website about atomic bombs.

Diversifying entails more than convincing new editors you've got the chops for the job. It also involves pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone and having the courage to take advantage of new opportunities as they arise. Exhibit A: Charyn Pfeuffer.

Now based in the Pacific Northwest, Pfeuffer started her journalism career as a dating columnist for *Philadelphia Weekly*. After five years of dabbling with restaurant reviews and food writing for local newspapers and newsstand magazines, she decided it was time to diversify again into an entirely new industry: porn.

This wasn't part of a larger lifestyle change; Pfeuffer simply had been looking to write about something new, and was browsing craigslist.org classifieds when she came across a call for freelancers to review videos for AVN (Adult Video News). Under this new arrangement, once a month AVN sent her an oversized brown cardboard box filled with 10–20 films in need of reviewing. Pfeuffer filed her reviews online: she was paid per review.

"At the time, most of AVN's video reviewers were men, and I thought I'd be able to bring another perspective to readers," she recounts. Pfeuffer was able to write under a pseudonym, so she never worried about those bylines spoiling any of her other editorial clients.

She gave up the reviews a few years ago to focus more of her energy on food and travel writing, and she has since branched out even further and penned some children's books. Looking back, she says she'd still be willing to explore any type of writing for the experience of trying something new.

"I realized that the key to success in freelancing is being flexible in what projects you're willing to take on," she says. "This doesn't mean compromising your rates or what your time is worth, or even taking on projects that hold absolutely no interest, but instead simply being open to unconventional editorial possibilities—whether it's crossing the line to work on press materials or writing adult video reviews."

BRANCHING OUT

Once you've started branching out, it's important to continue the effort to diversify sufficiently. For most writers, this means adding at least three or four new clients in different genres and industries per year. Add any fewer than that number and you likely aren't diverse enough; tack on any more and you may risk overextending yourself and watering down your ability to meet the needs of each market effectively.

In many cases, even in a competitive landscape, the momentum of branching out will crescendo like a Berlioz symphony—quickly and unexpectedly. Other times, you'll need to make a more concerted effort, orchestrating every step on your inexorable march to becoming more of a generalist.

Writer Timothy Bracy has experienced this struggle firsthand. In the earlier part of this decade, Bracy wrote songs for and performed with a popular rock band called The Mendoza Line. Although his songs were critically acclaimed, Bracy wasn't exactly a fan of life on the road. He knew he wanted to settle down, but wasn't sure what kind of writing to do next.

The answer was humor writing. Mendoza Line lyrics often had been described as "wry," so Bracy called upon his network of friends and contacts to hunt down paying copywriting gigs that enabled him to carry over the same snarky, witty approach.

In the last few years, he has written ad campaigns and TV shows. He also has a regular gig with *The L Magazine*, in which he opines on everything from sports to pop culture. "I've always felt that it should be generally incumbent upon any really good writer to be versatile enough to handle most topics with agility," says Bracy, who still writes music and recently has had songs licensed to movie soundtracks and TV programs. "To me, once I've set out to find new work, the boundaries between songwriting and prose writing and journalism have always been extremely permeable."

Another writer, David Sirota, appears to be in the throes of a similar transition. Since 2005, Sirota has published two political books with Crown: *Hostile Takeover* and *The Uprising*. But his next book, recently contracted with Ballantine, isn't about politics; instead, it's a pop culture study tentatively titled *Back to Our Future: How the '80s Explains Everything*. Rachel Klayman, Sirota's editor at Crown for *The Uprising*, sees his switch from politics to social commentary as a solid strategy. "He's trying to expand his audience, and it's always smart to take risks," she says. "He's a keen cultural observer. If the book does well, he can write more of that kind of thing. If it doesn't do as well as he'd like, he still has his political pulpit to fall back on."

Klayman's point about having a fallback is insightful; another important element of diversifying is to grow your portfolio organically. This doesn't necessarily mean taking every opportunity that comes your way (though in this economy, that might not be a bad idea). Instead, it means the best diversifiers are always looking for smart ways to expand into new markets.

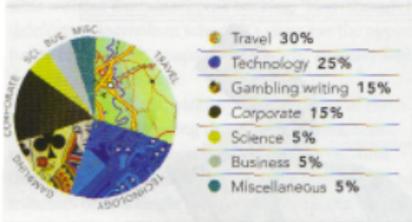
Remember Pfeuffer, who dabbled in porn reviews? One of her newest gigs is managing social media networks for Web-based publishers. Florentine, the tech writer, recently added webinar moderating to her list of skills. Goodman has inked a speaking gig.

TAKING STOCK

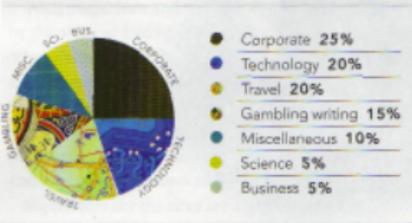
Effective diversification isn't just about adding venues for your writing; it's also about constantly shifting the equilibrium of your portfolio. One month, for instance, you might spend 80 percent of your writing time tackling your novel and only

10 percent penning short stories for submission to literary journals. The next month, it might make sense—whether for artistic, logistical or financial reasons—to reverse those figures.

Back in January, before the birth of my first child, my writing business broke down into the following categories and percentages:



Today, however, now that I've got an infant at home, my breakdown looks more like this:



What's different? My travel writing pieces went down. With a new baby, the last thing I'm going to do is leave my working wife alone so I can jaunt all over the country to chase down stories. As my daughter grows, however, that travel figure likely will increase.

Achieving this degree of fluidity isn't easy; above all else, it requires the ability to step back and take stock of exactly how much time you'll be able to divide in a given month.

Some months, your markets will make these decisions easy by offering a limited number of opportunities. Other months (and let's hope there are many of these), you'll need to practice the liberating act of saying no. "If you're doing the whole diversification thing correctly, no two weeks or months will ever be the same," Goodman says. "If they are, that's when you need to sit down and ask yourself what you could be doing better."

MANAGING YOUR ASSETS

We writer types have a finite amount of creative energy in a given day, and it can be difficult to maximize those precious hours and produce on demand. Add new clients into the mix and all of a sudden the pressure to create content becomes that much more significant.

With this in mind, it's important to be wary of burn-out as you diversify. The last thing you want to do is spread yourself so thin that you eliminate time to recharge the proverbial creative batteries. From a professional perspective, this situation can render great content mediocre; from a personal perspective, it can make you a basket case.

"You don't want to be all things to all people," says Lambeth Hochwald, a freelance writer who specializes in health and fashion, but also has tried her hand at nonfiction books and copywriting. "If you can't diversify without maintaining time for yourself, perhaps you're trying too hard."

Another challenge is managing a portfolio that keeps you interested. Your goal is to add new clients tactically enough so you're always working on at least one assignment, big or small, to satisfy your inner artist.

Novelist Michelle Richmond, author of *The Year of Fog*, makes this a priority. She says that no matter what book projects she's tackling in a given month, she always makes time to write personal essays and submit them to literary journals. "For me, the reason is twofold: I enjoy doing that type of writing, and it allows me to flex muscles that are purely literary," she explains. "There's no commercial appeal to literary magazines—it's just writing. That kind of outlet makes me a better writer all around." Richmond adds that she likes writing for journals because they have "cred" with other writers. If you're an aspiring novelist, those publishing credits can strengthen your novel query.

This notion touches on arguably the most important challenge of diversification: advertising yourself accordingly. Some writers have separate business cards for each genre in their portfolio. Others (myself included) list their top three markets on the same card. Still others have websites with pages for each of their specialties.

However you approach the marketing, be sure your message is strong. After all the work you've put into diversifying, a brand is a terrible thing to waste. [WD]

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