

Starving the Creative

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As an experienced freelance creative, you've most likely been around the block a few times. You have worked with a number of agencies and proved your worth in the creative industry. You have probably also worked with corporate companies, adding to your portfolio and increasing your experience. Logically speaking, your diversity and depth of experience should mean that you are remunerated commensurate with that level of skill and ability. Recent conversations with some creative minds I know have proved to laugh in the face of said logic.

As a creative practitioner, you make a living through the ideas you have, the ones you get when a brief is presented. That is coupled with years of experience and the ability you have to execute your ideas.

The more you deal with people from both creative agencies and corporate companies; the more you realise that there is a mindset that "ideas are free". At the very least, it seems to be expected that if they're not free, they should at least be so cheap that paying for them shouldn't be an issue - except it tends to be.

Here are some of the common reasons freelance creatives are given for poor remuneration, when called in to help with a variety of projects:

- **We need you to do this, but budgets and timelines are tight**

This is the most common and if you have done any sort of creative work, you'll know that budgets and timing are the most unavailable resources. The client has recently signed, what you know should be, a medium to long term multi-million Rand deal.

Seeing that you are brought in as a fire fighter with an impeccable track record of getting work done within short timeframes, you should be remunerated fairly. Of course there will always be someone who can do it cheaper, but your record and the work you have done for them before, should speak for themselves.

- **The team is busy**

In most instances, the freelancer gets work because the team - of about 20 people - is busy and you are the one person they have come to rely on.

The problem here is, because the team is busy, you can't rely on them to pay you on time, let alone agree to a rate that you know is less than what your industry counterparts are earning. Even though you're often aware of what the job is worth to the agency - what the client is paying for their expertise, your regular rate (known to the agency) is still heavily negotiated down.

- **A coffee and the odd pat on the back**

Do you have that one person who invites you out for coffee and somewhere in mid-conversation mentions a project they are working on? As a creative mind, you can't stop yourself from coming up with ideas that would be useful. Your mind races and you blurt out a string of great ideas and proposals on what they could do to make it a kick-ass campaign.

This is what a colleague refers to as the "Creative gentleman's code of honour" where if you come up with useful ideas, you'll get the odd pat on the back and build a reputation of being the "go-to" guy who should be called in to add value to any project.

Instead, you quickly become known as "that Joe Soap, who thinks on his feet and will come up with brilliant ideas over coffee. Buy him lunch and you'll leave with all the ideas you need to present to your client the next day."

The thought of actually hiring this individual for your projects and then paying him reasonably for his input never crosses the agency or corporates' minds. Why pay for the cow when you can get the milk for free - or at the very least the price of a cup of coffee?

- **This is a tough industry**

While talking to the MD of an agency a while back, it became evident that they were not willing to pay for a proposal they wanted for a client of theirs. In his words "this is a tough industry, you need to make friends" and in any industry you have to build credibility as you grow.

Where do you draw the line between building your portfolio and getting paid work? An organisation you had past dealings with, knows you have proven your worth and abilities. Make it clear that based on past input, it's only fair that you get paid for any further work.

- **It's a once off pitch**

Being involved in a big pitch is always interesting because you come up with big ideas and compete with even bigger names. In most instances, you don't get paid for work that goes into a pitch as a freelancer or external asset. You get involved because you believe that when they get the work, you'll execute your portion of the contract and everybody goes to the ATM with a smile.

In a discussion on this topic with a creative friend recently, he told me he was paid R80 000 by an agency that needed a strategy for a pitch - and that was two years ago. This statement left me questioning what I thought should ethically be happening in the industry and once again deliberating whether or not I should be following the "Creative gentleman's code".

What Next?

As a creative practitioner with a proven track record, here are some ways to continue building your credibility while getting paid for your input:

- **Have the difficult conversations upfront**

The quickest way to avoid Joe's dilemma is to raise the question of whether you will be part of an ongoing project

when they seal the deal. We often assume that the ideas we pitch (for free) will be the only ones presented at a meeting, when in most instances it's one of many and during the campaign, different strategies will be implemented. The freelancer, on the other hand, tends to get a small once-off piece of the pie which doesn't guarantee a long term income.

- **Draw the line**

While it's great getting many calls for your input, it's worth your while clarifying your role with clients. If they need ideas and your expert knowledge, they should pay for it. A pat on the back is not payment.

- **Fire fighting costs more**

If you are brought in to resolve problems and have to work through the night, be clear that it will cost them more. After all, they charge more if a client has an emergency.

- **Burn the Creative's Gentleman Code of Honour**

This is probably the hardest one, well for me it was. The logic is, if you want a pat on the back you can sign up as a volunteer at your local NGO (which is a different discussion altogether).

If someone doesn't pay you for work that you put hours into perfecting, they are not a client. Start increasing the number of paying clients who put a monetary value to your work.

Ideas are free but a man's gotta eat. If you love something, pay for it.

ABOUT MONGEZI MTATI

Mongezi Mati founded WordStart to help companies generate buzz around their products and services among South African influencers. He is passionate about helping brands to connect the dots from social media, digital data and human interactions outside the web. Mati is also digital analyst, a speaker and a contributor on some of South Africa's leading platforms.

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