

Why I don't compete on price

 By [Tiffany Markman](#)

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I'm not a hard-ass. Okay, I am a hard-ass. But I'm not a bitch. So I don't turn down quoting opportunities to be brassy, nasty or spiteful. I turn them down when the proffered rate is so laughable as to waste my time entirely.

(Or when the job sounds horrible. Or when the prospective client is rude. Or when it's a government RFP with no real scope and payment on 'approval'.)

Here's my thinking:

With 12 years in business, great clients, and a busy work schedule, I'm not the right writer for the job if you have (what I perceive as) an unreasonable budget. And that's not because I'm expensive - I'm usually somewhere in the middle - it's because I've taken a business decision *not to compete on price*.

Disclaimer: I get that, sometimes, budgets are small. But what I don't get is clients who pretend that small budgets aren't small. That annoys me. To illustrate, only this week I got a call from a would-be client. It went like this (specifics have been tweaked to protect the un-deserving guilty party):

- [Excited and upbeat] I'm Ozzy. I represent a national media company. We've checked out your website, we like what we see and we'd like you to blog for one of our three sites monthly. In time, you could do all three!
- Absolutely, Ozzy. I'd be happy to. How long would each blog post be?
- [Still chipper] Between 500 and 1000 words.
- [Really? That's uber-long for blog posts.] Okay. And how frequently?
- [Boastful now] 3 times a week, so 12 articles a month. And there'd be two of you – we have a copywriter already – so 24 monthly pieces, total.
- [These guys must have a very active blog.] Cool. Sounds interesting.
- [I go on to ask questions about their current blog topics, what kind of briefs they give, turn-around times required, whether or not research would be required on my part, and the extent of organic in-text SEO they'd like. In a nutshell, it's skimpy briefs, a lot of research and significant SEO work.]

- [Casual] So Tiffany...what would you charge to do this for us?
- Well, I have a base rate, but for this much work I'd gladly discount it. Could you give me an idea of your usual expenditure on this sort of thing?
- We pay 30 cents a word.
- [He must mean US cents. Not ZAR cents.] Sorry?
- 30. Cents. Per. Word.
- [I do a quick calculation. That's R3600 per month for 12 pieces of copy, at a princely R300 each, including all research and basic SEO.]
- [Dumbfounded] Wow. Ozzy, I'm going to be honest with you, because I don't want to waste your time. My base per word rate is R4 ex VAT. I occasionally discount for volume, to R3. But I wouldn't work for less than R2.75 per word, which is almost 10 times what you're offering here.
- *crickets*
- Are you there?
- Yes.
- Uh – you okay?
- [Irritated] Yes. But... You're a freelancer. And we're in a recession, so I'm surprised you won't do this for 30 cents per word. Our other writer will. Plenty of other writers will. Surely 3k a month is better than nothing?
- [Also irritated, but trying not to let it show] Ozzy, we're not a content factory. We provide quality writing based on good research and proper time spent, and we charge accordingly. Just over 3k a month for what you need – to be honest – isn't better than nothing. So drop us a line if your budget changes, as we'd love to help you. But we're not right for this.
- [Grumpy] Fine.

Ozzy's never going to call me. Ever. And that's a good thing. Because I'm not prepared to negotiate from that particular starting point. I'll not compete on price. On quality? Sure. Strategy? Sure. Experience, expertise, even (depending on my mood) kneel-at-clients'-feet service. Fine. But not price.

Why not?

Really good service providers are seldom negotiable on fees. Because there's enough demand for the services of good people. And when there isn't demand, hypothetically, that time can be spent marketing, studying or fine-tuning admin and systems. Regardless of what the economy might be doing.

So what's the bottom line? It's this: Know your value. And if you're good, experienced and a pro, don't allow clients to pay peanuts. Because you know what taking peanuts makes you, right? (I won't use the m-word here.)

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ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.

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