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Freelancing 102: Cold Calls and “Duets”

by Shelagh Abate

Based upon the feedback I got from “Freelancing 101” in the May 2014 issue, as well as from other discussions, the two hottest topics for new freelancers are Cold Calls and when to (or *not* to) ask a player for a Lesson versus “Let’s hang out and play duets!” when trying to establish yourself in a new city.

•Cold Calls•

Many colleagues, students, and young professional players have asked me about this issue, and it’s a tricky one for sure. Keep in mind that this is just my opinion on a broad topic where there is much to say – let that serve as my disclaimer, should you disagree with my stance on this issue. I’d be interested to know some other opinions as well.

What is a Cold Call? Simply stated, a cold call is the act of soliciting work from a complete stranger in a similar professional field to your own. A cold call can be done by phone or email. Lots of people nowadays tend to prefer email as it is seen as simultaneously more immediate and less intrusive. Ah, technology! Still, there is much to be said for phone contact, and hearing another human’s voice, but that may just be the old-fashioned girl in me talking. Just saying.

Okay, let’s play pretend. Let’s pretend that the world is a magical fairyland where we all pull no punches and no one has to worry about being tactful, polite, or politically correct. In this nonexistent world, a cold call might go something like this:

Ring Ring!

“Hello?”

“Hello! Is this Dennis Brain?”

“Why yes, it is! Who’s this?”

“My name is Splatty McClammy. We’ve never met, but I also play the horn. I just finished my DMA, and have just moved to the same city as you. I am awesome. I play really great, probably better than you, but I don’t know anyone here. And I need gigs. My loan payments are ridiculous, and I don’t want to have to work a retail job or bartend in order to make said payments. Um, and rent. And food. And my cell phone bill. Also, my name is on Dan Rauch’s waiting list, and I want to be able to buy the horn when it’s my turn. Can you get me gigs? We both know you can. And we both also know that you probably won’t ever think to use me or give away my email/phone number until you are completely and totally desperate to cover your a** on a gig that is terrible, far away, and pays like \$40. And that’s ok. Because I am there for you, Dennis. I really am. I know that is the way the world works, and that kind of gig is how I endear myself to you and become useful, and meet other players. All it takes is that one, awful gig for me to be on my way to piecing together a freelance career and playing horn instead of relying on my paper route to pay off my \$45,000 student loan debt.”

“Wow, Splatty – It seems as if you have a pretty good grasp of the way things work. What’s your email again? Do you use Facebook? Great – I’ll friend you and save your email address. Good luck, and I hope to see you on a gig sometime soon. Cheers!”

“Cheers, Dennis! You da man!”

Click

So, that’s pretty much how it would go, if stripped of all social niceties and humility. Add some tact and sugar coating, and you’re on your way! Tact and sugar coating could manifest itself in phrases such as “I know we’ve never met, but I have heard such great things about you and your playing.” Followed by “You’re an extremely busy player, and I am sure you have your own circle of players that you call when you’re in a jam, but I hope that you’d consider me in the future if you’re ever really stuck. I’m around, and very very much available to help.” You could then close the deal with “I freelanced quite a bit while I was a graduate student, and I’ve played lots of different styles – I can play high horn, low horn, in-between horn, shows, big bands, orchestra stuff, and chamber music.” Voila! It is, in fact, possible to come off in a cold call as nice, humble, gracious, and grateful. It just takes planning.

All that said, should you actually make a cold call? It depends. Some people would be open to and appreciate communicating in this way. Other people are shier and more stand-offish (translation: defensive and territorial). I think the real answer to this question is: do your homework. Find out whom you’re calling, and let what you learn about them determine whether you should make the call. Do you know *anyone* in your new city? Even if you know just one person, that one person can help you better understand what personalities you’re dealing with, and who may be safe to call.

In case you’ve been wondering, the answer is yes: I have *totally* been burned by cold calling people. I have made several terrible decisions in this category and am happy to offer my experiences and myself to you all so that you can learn from my stupidity and what *not* to do. *#nofilter #ohtoturnbacktime #awkwardradiosilence*. There are some calls that I made that were successful, and regardless of how many gigs I may have gotten from them (or not), it was a good experience to meet a new player on the phone, connect, and have a nice conversation. Some of these people – actually, all of them if I were to think about it – are still close and valued colleagues. Other calls did not go so well, and in retrospect, I should have known better than to call them at all. This does not mean I learned that they’re bad people. It just means that I went at them with guns blazing, and my bulldozer-meet-and-greet method did not gel with their particular vibe.

If you do not know anyone who might be able to help you get perspective on whether a call is a good idea, you should err on the side of caution. In other words, when in doubt, *don’t* make the call. On the other hand, though I was being extreme and sarcastic in my make-believe phone call with Dennis Brain (?!), the possibility that you might come in handy when the chips are down or when someone double-books themselves is



very real – and their gratitude will be very real as well. This is a good thing, and how connections and contacts are made.

Plan what you will say ahead of time. Plan to ask questions in addition to telling them who you are and what you can do. An exchange of information is what defines something as a conversation, and therefore different from a one-sided sales call. Get my meaning? Make calls when you are calm and collected, and when you have time to chat. Don't make a call when you're distracted, running late, have to pee, or when your dog is in desperate need for a walk.

Another reality: let's face it; people rarely *actually* pick up their phones these days. Make sure you're prepared to leave a voicemail (or not) in the event that your victim does not pick up. There truly are few things more embarrassing than a 32-minute rambling and awkward voicemail that you cannot undo. Ugh. I've done this too. In fact, I probably still do it on a regular basis, but not on cold calls, thank *God!* Good luck to you.

•Lessons versus Duets•

OK, now this other issue is super sticky: "Hey new buddy! Let's hang out and play duets" versus a Straight-Up Lesson. When you move to a new city and you don't know many people, it's safe to say that no one will know how you play. How best to rectify this? You're...say, 27 years old (give or take a year or two), just finished a master's degree, and sound pretty dang good. You want to be heard. You need to be heard. It's true. If you didn't nail that audition last November and as a result you're not the new principal of the Yadda Yadda Symphony, you need to make your start as a freelancer in whatever city you've landed. You have to begin somewhere, right? Yes. So, seeking a lesson from someone established in your city is one very valid way to go about doing this. But first, let's lay out two quick facts:

Fact #1: Lessons cost money. You just finished school. Chances are, you don't have any money. Understood.

Fact #2: The act of soliciting a lesson from someone is a crystal clear indication that the person seeking out a lesson (aka the STUDENT) regards the recipient of the request (aka the TEACHER) as a better, and more experienced player. This translates as respect. This is a good thing. These two universal truths will likely never change.

BUT. As a 27-year-old master's (or higher!) degree recipient, you're more than just a kid ... and you've been taking horn lessons weekly for probably more than a *decade*. Also, your loan payments are huge, your rent is more than you've got saved, and you're totally broke. Likely, you're burnt out as well. You're so over Koppasch, Shostie 5, B^p basso, Reynolds #16, triple tonguing, and the Persechetti *Parable*. Enough with the lessons, already, right?!?!

Wrong. Really sorry, but *wrong*. While it makes sense that you feel this way (and we've *all* felt this way), it is essential that you go about this process in a way that shows regard for the difference between those who have lived "there" for 30 years and You, who showed up with all your crap in a U-Haul last Thursday.

In "Freelancing 101," I mention dues several times. Dues are a reality. This falls under the same category. Lessons are dues. For example, let's say you play the trumpet. You gradu-

ated from school three weeks ago, and are chomping at the bit to start subbing on Broadway. Join the club. If you call some legendary trumpet player who, over 30 years in the business has played with Buddy Rich, Frank Sinatra, three presidential inaugurations, 12 recordings with Tony Bennett, and has opened 26 Broadway shows in order to "go out for beers and play duets" with you, you're an idiot. But it happens. All the time. So it needs to be said.

However, if you call that player, and you ask for a *lesson* – watch what magic unfolds: the player responds with enthusiasm. You make an appointment. That lesson takes place. You show up, play your butt off, and chances are (albeit it's a risk, but trust me on this one) they will not charge you. And if they *do* charge you, it won't break your budget. Offer them a standard fee, in the event that they don't pre-establish one. Say, \$150 maybe? Chances are they'll negotiate: maybe \$50? A cup of coffee after the lesson? (Hey, more time to chat and become buddies!) Perhaps they will only ask that you cover the fee charged by the rehearsal studio, in the event that this lesson is not at their house. Either way, you've paid someone the respect they deserve, gotten the chance to show your stuff, learned something from someone who's been out there playing gigs, and who knows?!? Maybe they'll throw you some work. That's the way it should be done.

Recognizing the "Pink Elephant in the Room." I hate this expression, but it fits so well, that I'm going to use it anyway – anyone who is out in the world freelancing will know what's going on when you call them – they will know *why* you're taking the lesson. They know you want work. And they know you need the work to pay your rent. Even if you don't just come out and say it – which you *can*, I might add, provided you do the right thing and treat your meeting like a lesson – they might say it for you. And then you can get some *real* scoop. Good information. A valuable contact. What's more, they will know what work might suit you best by hearing you play. This is perhaps the most valuable piece of the puzzle. The last thing you want is to get thrown to the wolves on a gig that is totally over your head when you're right out of the gate. With a bit of luck, this player might take you under their wing and send you on a gig that will allow you to get your feet wet and ease you gently into that vast Sea of Gigs. How awesome!

Another practical fact that you may not have considered: busy freelancers do *not* have chops to burn. They need to save them up for all their gigs. Seriously – duets are not an option for most players on most weeks. Chances are, they've got a show at 8 p.m., or a session in the morning that will be taxing, a rehearsal, or whatever. To a great extent, duets are a luxury activity that stops happening on a regular basis the second work becomes anything close to steady. Therefore, you're not only insulting a player by not respecting their place in the "gig food chain," but you're putting them in an awkward position to have to deal with just not wanting to or not being able to physically deal with playing duets with you.

I will speak for myself here, but I know that there are many dozens of players in the same boat. For the last nine or so years that I have been playing shows on a regular basis – even as a sub – actually *especially* as a sub, 90% of my practice time has been maintenance/chop management/recovery from whatever last night's bloodbath involved. Don't get me wrong. I



love duets for real. It's not that I don't love to play them – because I do. All music geeks of all ages like to get together and play through stuff, have fun, dork out on great music in their free time, but it's worth pointing out that this becomes harder to do when work is steady. Because work becomes the priority. End of story. It's just another good reason to ask for a lesson.

As a result, potentially a lot is riding on this lesson. You should prepare this lesson a bit like you would an audition. Because that's what it is. You're auditioning for someone who can hook you up, advise you, and knows all too well the playing field that you're about to enter. The good news is, that you can play whatever you want. You know those two etudes that you can actually get through and still look at yourself in the mirror, smiling? Play them. Your best excerpts, your best everything. Strauss 1? Leia's Theme from *Star Wars*? Great. Seriously, play whatever. Unless this person is completely lame and mean-spirited (some more research for you to do before you call them...), they're not going to put you in a difficult spot, and blindside you by demanding excerpts from *Billy Budd* for no reason. We've all been where you are, and maybe not too long ago.

Conclusion

I've heard it said that freelancing in any field is a referral business. The act of reaching out, making connections and forging relationships is what it's all about. Playing our instrument is just one part of the whole, and the sooner we learn how to be a respectful colleague and recognize a potentially valuable colleague when we see one, the easier our paths will be. I have personally come to value the practice of paying experienced, older, and probably wiser colleagues the respect they've earned by being in the field longer than us very highly. This is my main reason for addressing the two issues in this article. Establishing good habits in this area can only lead to good things. Moreover, doing the right thing and learning to become a good colleague is an important way to pave the way for a better future for music in general. We are all most painfully aware that today's economic climate is a challenging one for the arts. Our industry is in the process of changing drastically, and we must be alert and adaptable in order to continue working, to remain relevant.

While it is true that we must be individually competitive in order to thrive and improve, it is also true that we need each other in this business. Through cooperation, we enable each other's abilities. And this, my good friends, is the among the very best of things.

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