

The Client's Perspective on Freelance Medical Writing

FROM THE 2010 FREELANCE WORKSHOP

By RuthAnn Deveney

Hudson Global, a provider of medical communications services for the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries, employs freelance medical writers when staff writers are at full capacity and assignments require specialized experience in the type of project or therapeutic area. Chris Morabito, MD, Vice President of Medical Strategy, discussed the relationship between freelance medical writers and Hudson Global during “What Clients Look for in Freelance Medical Writers” at the AMWA-DVC Eighth Annual Freelance Workshop.

Dr. Morabito asked the audience, “What do you think *your* clients are looking for?”

“Cheap!”

The first response triggered a laugh in the group before other answers sprang up.

“Reliable!”

“Good communication!”

The audience and speaker were in agreement on the most important aspects of a freelance writer, even though the first attributes did not pinpoint skill level. Dr Morabito explained, “We’re hiring a freelancer for a specific experience skill set,” such as a particular therapeutic area or target audience (e.g., specialists, nurses, pr pharmacists). He gave examples of what he calls “the right writing skills”:

- Content: medical and scientific accuracy
- Interpretation and expression: clear and concise writing skills
- Relevance: strategic focus.

Where these three skills intersect is where the most effective medical writer – and most attractive to medical communications companies – will operate. However, a base of strong technical and verbal skill is not enough to foster a warm, productive working relationship. After establishing a reputation for high-quality work, the freelance writer must aspire to high-quality, professional behaviors to retain clients and acquire referrals.

Dr Morabito emphasized the need for clear communication between the freelance writer and the client regarding feedback, responsiveness, and deadlines. “Be aware of internal sub-timelines that may surprise you,” he advised, “and try to beat the timeline. That makes everybody happy.”

Other desirable traits of a freelance writer include tact in handling negative feedback, enthusiasm, and creativity. Dr Morabito clarified the last item, saying, “Creativity is not about choosing cool colors.” Instead, creativity in medical writing lies in presenting a value proposition in new ways that are compelling and assimilating previous knowledge into intriguing content. Many of these intangible characteristics won’t be on a writer’s resume, and clients rely on references to determine a candidate’s personality. It is critical to develop strong relationships with past clients who can vouch for your character.

When asked how to begin a career in freelance medical writing, Dr Morabito said, “Companies like us don’t know what we’re missing.” He recommended networking proactively, seeking out regional medical communications companies, and above all, making your competitive advantage clear.

RuthAnn Deveney is a medical editor at Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children.

The AMWA-DVC Eighth Annual Freelance Workshop was held on April 17th, 2010 in Plymouth Meeting, Pa.