

BREAKING the big money BARRIER

Veteran journalist **Andrew Don** lets you in on how he trousered serious dosh as an independent operator so you can do it too

As a writer and freelance journalist I breached the £100,000 annual earnings ceiling in my peak years. In my new book, *The Bounty Writer – How to Earn Six Figures as an Independent Freelance Journalist*, I suggest how you can, too.

Firstly, apologies for the tautology in the book title – ‘independent’ and ‘freelance’ – a deliberate attempt by my publisher to make the most of online search engines.

I have always described myself as an ‘independent’ but most of my colleagues call themselves ‘freelance’.

John Osborne, an ‘independent’, who sometimes ‘freelanced’ as a sub on a magazine I worked on before I became self-employed, told me: ‘You are not a freelance. You are an independent’.

He explained that those who thought of themselves as independents were perceived by others as credible businesspeople.

Freelance could be associated by some with a fly-by-night-just-bumming-around-until-I-get-a-real-job scenario.

Many writers are martyrs to what they consider their art. Noble that may be, but it does not pay the gas bill, the kids’ school fees or the mortgage.

Writers do not have to be martyrs. We are running businesses – writing businesses – or we should be unless you are one of those rare beasts who writes in their spare time and goes on to publishing superstardom.

Strive to be the best independent businessperson in your field that you can be – whether you write hard news, general features, specialist business to business (B2B) information, online content, fiction, speeches or a blend of many.

Worthwhile writing is not just about the great novel.

We might love the idea of being another Dickens or JK Rowling, but most of us will never reach such heights. That doesn’t mean we are not capable. Many variables have to come together to be recognised as one of the greats or even one of the pretty goods. Luck and perfect timing are essential components – not just dogged determination and talent which go without saying.

I am nothing special. I have suffered from – sometimes crippling – anxiety and depression for most of my life. I have also suffered from lifelong deafness, recently partially remedied thanks to modern medical implant technology.

These factors hardly bode well for career success. Indeed, my first news editor at the Fleet Street News Agency sat me down within my first six months in the job and advised me to give it up.

He was a bully and he was wrong about me. I have enjoyed a fantastically successful career. Now I have achieved a long-held dream. In October 2019, aged 57, I moved to a beautiful house in a breath-taking rural location in West Wales, minutes from the beach

and coastal path.

I got a publisher for *The Bounty Writer* six months later and I am now writing a fictional book focusing on childhood grief and encompassing my love of dogs. I am in the planning stages of a mystery-thriller – my most ambitious project to date. These will hopefully join *Fathers Feel Too*, *Virtuality* and *The Bounty Writer* on my bookshelf of self-penned works.

After I left the Fleet Street News Agency I became, variously, features editor of *Drinks Marketing*, a B2B monthly, a feature writer for Middlesex County Press, a local newspaper group, and deputy features editor, acting features editor, news editor and deputy editor of weekly B2B newspaper *SuperMarketing* before stepping out as an independent in October 1990.

I earned in the £20,000s and £30,000s for the first five years. Then my business went stratospheric after I clinched various online early-morning news services for the B2B sector, including *Estates Gazette Interactive*, *Farmers Weekly Interactive*, *Chemical News and Intelligence* and *Martin Information* – a hospitality industry intelligence service.

I subcontracted other B2B journalists and national newspaper scribes, earned a margin on their work and was soon raking in £100,000 plus.

The secret of my success was having a blend of writing work – the early morning news services, day news

shifts, feature assignments, editorial consultancy roles, freelance editorships, national newspaper work, speeches and corporate magazines.

This blend of work meant I could maximise earnings. Sure I was knackered for most of the time. I sometimes worked eighteen-hour days but it was worth it to be where I am now, picking and choosing the work I do and indulging my passion for writing – and gardening.

And don't get me wrong – I loved my journalism and writing career for most of the time. The variety meant I was rarely bored.

Touting for work and clinching assignments gave me a huge buzz and it was a relief to be removed, for the most part, from office politics.

True, I worked ridiculously long hours seven days a week which was detrimental to my physical health. I suffered from herniated discs in my neck that squished nerve roots on two separate occasions because of poor office ergonomics.

The pain was so debilitating that I wanted to die so I would not feel what felt like hot poker sending electric shocks through my body.

Epidurals and CT-guided injections eventually helped me over these horrendous episodes. I also got diagnosed with an autoimmune condition, Hashimoto's Thyroiditis, which became apparent when exhaustion reduced me to crawling upstairs to get to my office. Diagnosis and a lifelong prescription of replacement thyroid hormone got me back on an even keel.

Throw into the mix the adoption of two children and I needed more hours each day than the Lord provided. Somehow, I managed to balance all the demands on my time but I'd be lying if I said it was easy. You have to be a person that is doggedly determined, focused and – not in a negative way – ruthless.

Here are some of my top tips for breaching the six-figure ceiling:

• Self-belief.

If you genuinely believe in yourself, you will find a way of convincing prospective clients/publishers. You may encounter people who put you down and try to

erode your self-confidence. Don't waste time giving such people head space.

• Become a skilled multitasker.

Juggle editing a magazine with news shifts, features, subbing and producing editorial packages by working all hours. Contrary to popular opinion, freelancing is not for those who want work-life balance. You need a work 'blend'. I could be working a day shift on news from 9.30am to 5.30pm for *The Grocer*, but before then I might have been working on *EGi*, *Farmers Weekly Interactive (FWI)*, *Chemical News and Intelligence (CNI)* and *Martin Information* in the early hours of the morning producing national press news summaries with any other journalists I subcontracted and managed, on whose work I would make a margin.

• Resist distractions.

Focus, focus, focus.

• Have specialisms but be willing to write about anything and everything.

A good journalist can research anything and, with the use of skilful questioning and an ability to nail the right interviewees, no subject should be off limits.

• Reinvent yourself.

Be the Madonna and David Bowie of writing. Keep recreating yourself to ensure a lifelong career.

• Work towards your endgame.

I thought my dreams were all over when I visited John Toner at the National Union of Journalists' freelance branch in 2013 and told him that after seventeen years, *EGi*, my most lucrative client had pulled the plug on my services. I was a mess and worried sick. But I worked my contacts and made new ones – it was almost like starting again but before long I was pulling in loads of work.

• Know your worth.

Don't be scared to request a bigger fee than other independent journalists. If you undervalue yourself, so will editors. You are not others. You are you and worth your weight in gold. If it looks like you might lose the gig on price you can always negotiate. Good editors and section heads respect those who know their own worth.

• Look after yourself.

Despite your workaholic hours you

must find time to look after your mental health. For me, using a sauna, steam room and swimming pool – before Covid – as well as regular acupuncture helped control stress, as did time spent in nature.

• Stay in touch with any mentors you have had in your life.

I had two – Stephen Clackson, most recently news editor of the *Evening Standard*, and Jim Muttram, my former editor at *SuperMarketing* who went on to become managing director of what was then known as Reed Business Information. I probably would not be where I am now without them.

• Don't let your weaknesses deter you.

I am diabolical at maths, yet I can look through a company balance sheet and produce a cracking news story. You don't need an -ology to earn big money as a freelance journalist – just a sensitive nose.

If it had not been for writing I do not know where I would be now. I had a traumatic start to life exacerbated by my mother's death from cancer when I was fourteen and a dysfunctional home life.

Writing was my saving grace – at first for my own sanity. My father worked in an office machinery shop in Clerkenwell, east London, selling typewriters and adding machines when I was a child.

I used to take adding-machine rolls from the stockroom and write poetry on them. I called them my poetry rolls. That's how it all started for me.

If it were not for my ability to write I dread to think where I might be now – possibly committed to a psych ward or dead. Writing got me over addictions and mental health problems, and led to happiness. Wise investment over many years has meant I now live a comfortable life. So why not you? **WM**

The Bounty Writer: How to Earn Six Figures as a Freelance Independent Journalist is published by Beachy Books and can be ordered from all popular bookshops and independent stores.

