

Profitable Partners

By Linda Turner Griepentrog, Freelance Contributor

Freelancer, noun, {FREE-lan-ser}:

A person who sells services to employers without a long-term commitment to any of them.



Pauline Richards teaches a class on creative embellishing at the Fox Valley Technical College Sewing and Quilting Expo in Oshkosh, WI.

If your business needs help, but you can't add to the employee headcount, look "outside" to get the task done. There's very likely someone qualified to fill the need.

Working as independent contractors, freelancers are paid for the agreed-upon tasks -- there are no salaries or benefits and no employee obligations.

The freelancers' tasks may vary greatly and include bookkeeping, Web site management, display, pattern design, sample making, creating project sheets, or graphic services (newsletters, posters and/or brochures). Representing your store at a consumer or trade show or demonstrating a product is also a great job for a freelancer.

Some freelancers are paid hourly, others opt to be compensated per project, and still others who will be working long-term may request a retainer. Teachers often want to be paid a set amount per student.

The most frequent freelance arrangement in sewing retailing is for teaching services. Whether it's a noted author with a newly released book, a talented local instructor or a company's traveling educator, you can bring expertise to your store when you want it -- on a regular basis, or for special events. And because the teacher has a vested interest in helping you sell products in your store, sales can skyrocket based upon their endorsement.

Finding the right people

If you don't have local talent, there are several groups that can help you find the perfect match for a freelance teacher.

The Sewing Educators Alliance (SEA), a program of the Sewing Dealers Trade Association, offers a Certified Sewing Educator (CSE) program with ongoing classes on sewing, teaching and business topics. Members are listed in an online directory along with background and contact information, so it's easy to get a hold of them.

The Sewing & Craft Alliance (SCA), formerly the Home Sewing Association, also offers a certification program resulting in the designation Trained Sewing Instructor. Three-day training classes include the latest information on sewing, fabrics, business, and marketing.

The National Quilting Association (NQA) also certifies teachers.

Private teacher certification programs are available from companies such as Islander Sewing Systems, Palmer/Pletsch, Martha Pullen, Pam Damour, Sulky and Christopher Neiman. These programs offer instruction in company-specific sewing techniques and also include business information for teachers.

All teacher certification programs require their educators to meet certain standards before completing the program, and most also build in ongoing updates for currency.

Publishers are always willing to provide contact information for their authors. Booking them into retail stores for special events is great publicity for new titles. Book signings and classes based on book content are sure selling venues.

If you carry a line of independent patterns, many times the designer/owner is a potential teacher, and he/she usually comes with an extensive trunk show offering. Having your customers actually see made-up garments and in some cases, being able to try them in various sizes, is a huge sales boon. Marsha McClintock, owner of SAF-T-POCKETS Patterns says, "Samples definitely sell fabric and patterns, especially garments made from in-stock fabrics, as customers want what they see."

Your customer base is also a good resource, not only for letting you know who they want to see and what they'd like to learn, but also to recommend speakers they may have heard elsewhere, such as at American Sewing Guild conventions, Surface Design Association shows, etc.

Caution!

When you hire a freelance teacher, remember that they own their class content. Many have written copyrighted books, offer teaching certification programs, and often they own the rights to photos used in their classes. Respect the copyright laws and don't offer unauthorized classes using their methods after they leave -- simply invite them back!

Making it work

Knowing all the information up front is key, seconded only by a detailed written agreement of what will be done and how the services will be paid for.

Many teachers have their own boilerplate contracts to be filled in by the hiring store; others rely on the store to issue a letter of agreement.

Before signing a teacher, be sure to understand all the tenets of the contract and make notes about any conversations you've had. Some points to check:

- When is the teacher paid? Some require payment at the time of the event, others require a deposit (often non-refundable), and less commonly, others may bill you after the event.
- Does the teacher get a portion of the student sign-up fee, or are they paid a flat amount no matter how many students attend? Many teachers require a guaranteed minimum number of attendees or they charge higher fees.



Quilting instructor Diane Gaudynski helps students at Heirloom Creations, Sioux Falls, SD.

- Will the teacher supply a list of products being used at the event? If so, you are expected to have them in stock to support the event attendance. Or, will the teacher bring product on consignment and bill you for items sold?
- Are there transportation specifics? Some teachers will only stay at hotels (some even specify the quality level), others will bunk in private homes to help save money. Does your teacher expect a limo pick-up, or will your fuel-efficient vehicle suffice?
- Where will the event be held and what facilities are available on location? What will the teacher need to bring or have supplied for the special event?

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Photo courtesy of Sally Cheney's Superstore

Krause author Christopher Nezman enthralls audiences at Sally Cheney's Superstore in Madison, TN.



Rebecca Kemp Brent demonstrates Creative DRAWings software at Quilt Market.

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- Is there a limit on the teacher's day rate? For example, some teachers specify two three-hour classes per day, others may work from dawn to midnight for the same day fee.
- Who promotes the class and how? There's much to be said for nationally known teachers and their drawing power for in-store classes and special events. Often they will help you promote the happening on their blog, Web site, e-newsletters and e-blasts that tout their teaching schedule. These, of course are in addition to what you do with your own store promotion.
- What if you need to cancel the event? Is there a kill fee for the contract, and who pays for previously incurred expenses (such as airline tickets)?

Not having any surprises will make the event go more smoothly, and also add up to more profit for your store.

No matter how well an event is planned, there are always last-minute needs, so have an employee on hand to help. This might involve running to the copy shop for more handouts, or trekking to a local distributor for more books. 🐾

Resources

To reach the freelancers featured in this story:

Christopher Nejman, www.christophernejman.com
 Deb Yedziniak, smockingdeb@aol.com
 Linda Visnaw, www.lindavisnaw.com
 Marsha McClintock, www.saf-t-pockets.com
 Pam Damour, www.pamdamour.com
 Pauline Richards, stchsafe@msn.com
 Rebecca Kemp Brent, rgbk1@aol.com

To find certified sewing teachers, visit the following:

www.christophernejman.com
www.islandersewing.com
www.marthapullen.com
www.nqaquilts.org
www.palmerpletsch.com
www.pamdamour.com
www.sewingeducators.com
www.sulky.com
www.trainedsewinginstructors.com

What the experts say

We asked several freelance teachers what they feel is most important in a good relationship between a retailer and a hired educator, and here's what they said:

Marsha McClintock, SAF-T-POCKETS Patterns

"Good communication is very important. Talk with the retailer and don't just rely on e-mail. Most important is a complete understanding of what's expected from each party and a written contract to avoid misunderstandings."

Linda Visnaw, LMV Design

"The teacher should provide the store owner with as much information as possible, and go the extra mile to actually develop a promotional package so the dealer simply has to drop in the event particulars and it's ready to print, mail or e-mail."

Pam Damour, Damour Designs

"COMMUNICATION – both ways! The educator needs to ask questions like: Do any attendees have special needs? Are there any students that tend to be disruptive, or how about students who want to buy everything talked about? And don't forget the basics, like: Where are the restrooms and what discounts are you offering students?"

On the other side, be sure to let the dealer know things ahead of time like room set-up, AV needs, electrical requirements, etc."

Pauline Richards, Total Embellishment News

"It's important to realize that the teacher is hired to teach a specific subject and that their visit must generate enough sales dollars to cover the costs. Allow time for shopping, browsing and sharing, along with the instruction."

Deb Yedziniak, designer, teacher, author

"There needs to be a steady flow of communication between the shop owner and the teacher, beginning well ahead of the event and continuing past it, so nothing is left to chance. There can never be too much information – better to be over-prepared than under-prepared. Customers know if things are well prepared and well presented."

Rebecca Kemp Brent, author, writer

"In addition to clearly defined communications and a contractual agreement, it's important to have an employee assigned specifically to help the teacher with tasks like distributing handouts and kits, any product sales, and on-site needs, all of which can take time away from effective teaching."

Kathy Monaghan, Project Manager, Pendleton Woolen Mill Store

"We feel that the most successful freelance educators come in knowing that sales are the primary reason for having classes. Teachers should come with creative projects based on items the store stocks."