Portrait of an indexer: the first year

Kendra H. Millis

Kendra Mills describes her first year in indexing and the careful thought, the luck, and the sheer hard work that have got her career off to an encouraging start.

Not quite a year after starting my indexing career I attended my first indexing conference. I was still quite new, although I had managed to find a few paying jobs by then. While there, I attended a presentation on starting your indexing business, and pestered quite a few experienced indexers, wanting to know how they had gotten their businesses up and running. Everyone I spoke to had a different story, and had found their first few jobs in different ways. A year later, at the 2010 ASI conference in Minneapolis, I gave a presentation discussing my own experiences. This article is based in large part on that presentation.

My main goal, both in my presentation and in this article, is to simply provide a portrait of what a first year might look like. As mentioned above, everyone has a different story. Clearly, there is no one right way to start an indexing business. And yet 'How do you get started?' is one of the most common questions among 'newbies'. By way of disclaimer, I should say that my intention is not to provide any sort of hard and fast advice on legal matters, accounting, website management, human resources, insurance, banking, taxes, or any other matters better addressed by an expert in the appropriate field. Nor am I suggesting that I have necessarily proceeded in the best way. Some of the decisions I made were sound, rational decisions. Others were based solely on my own circumstances, and would have been different if I had had alternatives. Nevertheless, I hope that a glimpse of what my first year in business looked like may help others just starting out, and possibly spur some new ideas for those of you who have been in business longer.

Preparation for business

I completed the indexing course offered by UC-Berkeley in the summer of 2008. While taking the course I had moved myself, my husband, and my eight-month-old daughter from North Carolina to Maine. I managed to get my coursework completed while packing and unpacking, and was in the midst of house renovations at the time I hung out my indexing shingle. Needless to say, renovating a house while taking care of a baby did not leave a lot of time to develop a comprehensive marketing plan, and I had even less time for research. I was hesitant to spend too much money on marketing materials before knowing whether I was going to be able to make any money indexing. At that point my husband and I were able to pay the bills from what he brought in, and I had a bit of money saved from my former career. So I took a deep breath and jumped in. I made the conscious decision to spend money when necessary, while carefully considering each major purchase.

Using the Vistaprint website, I ordered business cards, and matching letterhead and address labels. Before choosing my design, which I knew I would have to stick with for a while, I thought about whom I planned to market to, and what kind of image I wanted to present. I ended up choosing a conservative design from their stock selection. I also chose a font that is easy to read and that has a bit of extra space between the letters, as many people misspell my name when they first see it.

The next step was to develop a one-page marketing letter that could be modified as needed. I wrote up a letter introducing myself, stating what qualifications I had at the time, and inviting the recipients to contact me with any questions. In spite of the additional cost, I felt that sending a letter on letterhead was a better approach for me than simply sending email messages. Knowing my own habits, I was afraid that email messages would either get lost in the recipients' inboxes or simply be deleted. Whenever I sent out a marketing letter I also included a business card, hoping that one or the other, or both, would be retained.

Initially I found publisher information by doing Internet searches and looking at the books on my own bookshelf. I used Amazon to take a look at the kinds of books published by some companies, and to determine whether they included indexes in their publications. I did some targeted marketing to companies I was familiar with, and whose books I had read and enjoyed. However, in part because of lack of time, I often chose to forgo additional research on a publisher and simply sent the letter. Jumping ahead a bit, I should mention that not too long ago I finally decided to pay the $20 or so to get a one-week subscription to the online version of *Literary Marketplace*. It was well worth the money, and in retrospect, would have been a better way to gather the initial information I needed.

One other thing that I did to prepare for business was something a bit less tangible. In essence, I began to think of myself as a professional indexer, even though I had not yet had any paid work. I made sure to craft my marketing letter in a professional, businesslike style. I made the decision to join ASI. I read the posts on indexing listservs. Most importantly, when people asked me what I did for a living, I stopped saying things such as 'I'm planning on being,' 'I'm starting a business as,' or 'I'm trying to become' an indexer. Instead, I got in the habit of simply stating, 'I'm a book indexer.'

The first job

My first job was a subcontracted project from another indexer. She had posted a message on one of the listservs,

saying that she needed help. I responded, and she hired me. It was that simple. (Of course, I had replied to many other such requests previously, and had always been too late.) I was surprised that she did not ask for any information about my background or experience, but mostly I was just happy to have some work.

Once the project arrived, I had a moment of panic, during which I was completely sure that I had no idea what I was doing. Then I pulled myself together and took things one page at a time. The project itself was quite appropriate for a first job: the book was not too long; the writing was not too dense; and there were headings within the chapters, which helped me stay focused. I did not keep any statistics regarding how long it took me to write that index. The per page rate was not great and I was working slowly, so my hourly rate was probably quite low. However, that was not the point. My main concern right then was to complete the first project, and to do so on time and well.

Once I had a mostly completed index, I posted a message on IndexPeers asking for someone to review it for me. A couple of people responded and provided very useful reviews. (I have suffered through a couple of major computer malfunctions since then and no longer have my email records of those reviews, and therefore cannot provide any additional information about either the reviewers or their comments.) The comments provided helped me to think constructively about the decisions I made, and certainly helped me to improve the final index. I made sure to check and recheck for any errors, doing everything I could to make sure that the index was as good as I could make it. All of the work paid off, for several reasons: the index was good (not award-winning level, I'm sure, but certainly acceptable for publication); I had proven to myself that I was capable of indexing an entire book; and the person who hired me was pleased. That one job led to a number of others for that same subcontractor, and in fact, I earned more from her in my first year of business than I did from any other single client.

Subsequent jobs

Eventually my marketing efforts paid off. I was contacted by several small presses in response to my letters. I have no idea what, in particular, made these presses respond. At some point I plan to conduct a marketing survey with my established clients, to see if I can gather some information about what works and what doesn't. The only feedback I have had on my marketing materials came from an editor at a scholarly press. She responded to my initial letter, asking for additional information. When I answered her query, she responded in turn by politely informing me that the indexers they work with have significant previous experience working with scholarly books – in essence, that I was unqualified. However, she also told me that the professional nature of my materials made them stand out among the dozens of such letters she receives each week, which is what led her to contact me.

It's possible that other presses responded for the same reason. It's also possible that some of these presses were simply looking for less expensive indexing; some of my early projects paid pitifully low rates. However, as I became more

confident, and more knowledgeable about what appropriate rates would be, I was able to negotiate more effectively with new contacts. In some cases, due to the nature of the project, what appeared to be a low per page rate turned out to be a very high hourly rate. Unfortunately, at least twice the reverse has been true.

I currently have two small presses, both of whom contacted me during that first year, who have me index everything they publish. I have at least one other client from that first year who sends me five or six projects a year, and I still occasionally do work for the indexer who gave me my first job. Due to the nature of my clients, I have indexed more military history than I ever thought I would. I have also indexed in other areas that I would not have expected, such as health psychology, medicine, and bartending. Although some people recommend sticking to familiar subjects for the first projects, sticking to my background in Russian literature and political philosophy would have been quite limiting, as well as more difficult than the first projects I accepted.

Altogether I ended up with nine jobs my first year. Seven of those were subcontracted, and the remaining two were from publishers. Several of the projects were full books, and several were partial indexes.

Costs

While nine jobs may not sound like much, those projects did cover most of my first-year expenses. Had I been a bit more conservative in my spending, I would have broken even, or even turned a profit. However, since I had my savings to fall back on, I was more concerned with doing what I thought was advantageous to building my business than I was with immediately turning a profit. My first year's expenses included the following: the indexing course; software; books; fees for professional associations and conference attendance; marketing, which included both materials and postage; a new computer and printer; and general office supplies. Certainly I could have survived the first year, and beyond, without spending money on several of these items. However, as I mentioned earlier, I considered major expenditures carefully, and truly believe that the majority of my early spending either helped me get more jobs or made my work easier to complete, or both.

Very early in my second year I recouped all of my start-up costs, and I have been turning a profit ever since. I am not yet anywhere near the earning level of the job I left behind when my daughter was born, but I am also not working as many hours as I was then. Every indication at the moment is that my business will continue to grow, and I fully expect that within the next several years my earnings will be close to, if not more than, what I was earning at my old job.

Beyond the first year

As I am approaching the end of the second full year of my indexing career, I would say that I have successfully launched my business. I have a number of regular clients, who send me projects throughout the year and who have started to refer other clients to me. In the past 12 months

I have completed a number of projects for one-time clients (mostly authors), and have received very positive feedback from them. My marketing efforts continue whenever I have some down time. In addition to staying in touch with my current clients, I periodically send follow-up postcards to publishers that I have previously contacted but not heard from.

I have also recently expanded my business offerings. After taking several editing and proofreading courses, I applied for and got a job as a freelance editorial assistant. The editor who hired me strongly dislikes indexing, and so we are now working to develop a partnership that would allow her to offer my indexing services to her clients.

I would very much like to be able to conclude this article with a succinct, pithy comment that would provide all the information necessary to start a successful indexing business. Unfortunately, I can't. Ultimately I believe my success to date is the result of some careful thought, a bit of luck, and a fair amount of hard work.

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