

# About **CURRENT** newspaper

## **GUNS FOR HIRE: INSIDE THE WORLD OF PUBLIC RADIO FREE AGENTS**

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How is this for a job description?

You will work in a field you love. You get to plan your own schedule. You'll travel to interesting places and work with people you admire. Your maximum commute is 30 seconds. You can make unlimited money. And, you can take the day off if you want to.

But wait, there is more....

You'll be working without any guarantees. Health insurance is expensive, if you can get it at all. There is no employer match for your retirement account. You'll keep an eye on the mail for checks that never seem to come. And, maybe you won't be taking a day off any time soon.

Welcome to the world of public radio free agents. These are people who have established their own businesses outside of public radio's usual employers. They are taking the risk to be entrepreneurs in an industry where lifetime employment is still a possibility.

The number of people working in public radio as free agents is at an all time high. There are about three-dozen free agent businesses serving the public radio industry. Free agents provide pledge drive assessment, research, coaching, recruiting, program marketing, organizational development, public relations and more. Name a specialty in public radio and there is probably a "hired gun" ready to serve.

### **IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME**

I became a free agent in 1997. The two people who inspired me the most to start my own business were Marge Ostroushko and Peter Dominowski. Marge had left PRI about a year earlier and had established a thriving business combining her creative talents and marketing skills. Peter was one of the first public radio free agents and showed that there was a long-term future working in conjunction with established industry institutions.

But, why are so many free agents now working in public radio?

I think the reason is that the success of public radio has encouraged a marketplace where people with a variety of specialties can be part of the process. In some cases, free agents are the leaders for public radio.

The work of David Giovannoni and the PRPD are excellent examples. By focusing attention on the basics of our business --- increasing our value to listeners, making our programming easier to listen to, providing dependable public service --- public radio's audience and listener-based revenue had increased dramatically.

Increases in revenue have created more discretionary money that can be used to hire expertise. In part, this is a sign of a maturing industry. It's also a sign of an industry where a person doesn't need to be part of a major organization to make a difference, or make a living.

Giovannoni says a diversifying industry means more opportunities: "Back in the early 1980s, there wasn't much choice for potential partners. Now there is the Station Resource Group (SRG), DEI, PRPD, PRI, the CPB Future Fund and Public Service Competitive Fund and others. There are more places to shop a new idea."

Technology, such as e-mail and the Internet, has also helped in the proliferation of free agents. Programmer Sheila Rue says that technology has redefined working in public radio: "This is a great time to be a free agent in public radio. The Internet has made all of us closer. The public radio industry has become a virtual community."

## **MEET SOME FREE AGENTS**

I talked with seven public radio free agents at various stages in the evolution of their businesses to get a sense of why people decide to become free agents, what keeps them going and what advice they have for others who might consider similar career paths.

- Peter Dominowski, Market Trends Research and a co-founder of the PRPD, has been a free agent since 1985.
- David Giovannoni, President of Audience Research Analysis (ARA), began as a free agent in 1977.
- Tom Livingston, Livingston & Associates, became a free agent since 1997.
- Steve Martin, SFM Consulting Group, began his free agent business earlier this year.
- Leslie Peters, a free agent since 1997, works extensively with ARA.
- Sheila Rue, SR Sound Programming, debuted as a free agent in August 2000.

The single motivating factor for each of these people to stay in the industry is the love of public radio and the desire to contribute to its success.

Sheila Rue sums up this feeling: "When I left KUSC, leaving public radio was never an option for me. I love the programming side of the business and want to do everything I can to help it improve."

Another key factor is the ready-made list of contacts free agents have made while they worked elsewhere. Turning former co-workers and associates into clients is common in most industries.

Tom Livingston started building his recruiting business with contacts he made over two decades of work within the industry. "When I left WETA, I had a ready-made network of people I liked to work with. They were the first people I called when I went on my own. When I started my business there was a risk but there was also an opportunity because I was known."

Not everyone interviewed is a "free" free agent. Leslie Peters is an excellent example of someone who is not an employee but is also not on the hunt for new business: "I get a fair number of inquiries about my services but I rarely take them because of my obligations to ARA. I think I have the best 'free agent' deal in public radio because I have a long-term contract, and a substantial monthly check, from an organization that represents much of what I admire about public radio. What I don't get in benefits I make up for in occasional small projects that keep me in touch with other aspects of the business and other people whose work I like. That, to me, is the perfect public radio 'job.'"

### **A WORD FROM OUR FOUNDER...**

David Giovannoni, President of Audience Research Associates (ARA) and the creator of AudiGraphics, wasn't the first public radio free agent. But he says he was close to being the first.

"I started crunching numbers professionally after meeting Tom Church in spring 1977. He was at CPB and I was Larry Lichty's Teaching Assistant at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. For the next couple of years they both fed me work from stations, CPB and NPR. Then in 1979, when Lichty was consulting with NPR on the design of Morning Edition, he hired me as a research consultant for the network. This may have been the first case of a consultant hiring a consultant at NPR. It was certainly not the last." (Lichty is now a Professor of Radio/TV/Film at Northwestern University in Chicago.)

"Many people don't realize that I was never on staff at NPR. Lichty thought it was important that I also work for stations and CPB. He didn't want it to appear that I was singing the 'NPR company song.'"

"Tom Church left CPB in 1981 and started the Radio Research Consortium (RRC) and for a while it was just Church and me working as free agents."

Giovannoni uses AudiGraphics as an example of the changes in the public radio marketplace. "Back in the late 1980s, there was a lot of encouragement but no money to help develop AudiGraphics. Now CPB is sharing the development costs for Strategic AudiGraphics --- that's a big change. But one factor is the same. A new service or product has to bring a positive return. If it doesn't, I fail financially. Accepting and managing that risk is not optional."

### **WHAT FREE AGENTS FEEL THEY BRING TO PUBLIC RADIO**

Free agents agree that perhaps the most important resource they bring to public radio is expertise. For Sheila Rue, it is about public radio keeping some of its best and brightest people: "Look at all of the years of experience [free agents] have."

Look at Gio. Look at the folks that started PRPD. They are still in public radio but are not at stations. And, they continue to make a tremendous difference now."

Part of what seems to drive free agents is the lack of a career path within public radio's established institutions. Steve Martin says a person becomes defined by what they do: "When you have a job, in a way you become that job. People think that is all you can do. Organizations hurt themselves by not considering the full range of their people's skills."

David Giovannoni quotes mentor Ron Bornstein on the value of innovative, creative people: "The history of public radio is one of individuals, not institutions."

Tom Livingston feels free agents bring valuable perspective: "We are 'inside outsiders.' We can be objective and probably say some of the things people inside the organization can't say."

Being able to focus on work, rather than "managing supervisors" allows for greater productivity according to Leslie Peters: "I'm not constrained by a bureaucracy in my free agent work. My job used to be filled with meetings, endless meetings. I had very little time to actually do my work. I'd get to the end of a ten hour day and ask myself if I had accomplished anything."

Steve Martin feels that part of the problem in the workplace is that managers don't have the skills and training they need: "Public radio companies don't pay enough attention to how their people work together. Many managers say they desire a harmonious workplace where people feel respected and appreciated. But they lack the training to make it a reality. Managing people is very similar to raising children. Most of us don't receive any formal training. But, the good news is that there are experts who can help."

Public radio free agents also believe they bring a commitment to help public radio succeed.

Even though Peter Dominowski is no longer at a station, he still feels he has a stake in the sound of public radio: "When I refer to public radio programming, I call it 'our programming.' Because if it's on public radio, in a way I feel part of it."

Sheila Rue feels that being a free agent is part of a larger calling: "As a PD, I always tried to make my stations sound better. My mission is still the same but now I am working with a lot of stations. My work feels bigger and my impact feels wider."

"It is a privilege to be in public radio. I love it in my bones," reflects Tom Livingston. "Working in public radio makes me glad to get up in the morning. I feel I am making a contribution."

## **THE DOOR GOES BOTH WAYS**

Though the trend is for people to leave organizations and start their own businesses, some leave free agency and go back into the workplace.

"I worked myself into an excellent job," says one former free agency who asked not to be identified. She is now on staff at one of public radio's biggest institutions. "I

accomplished a lot as a free agent. But now I want to focus on specific projects. And, my boss gives me the chance to do that.”

“This is not as easy as it looks,” says pioneer free agent David Giovannoni. “My life is filled with risk. I hate risk. But, the fear of failure is a great motivator.”

Steve Martin has been a free agent for less than a year but he already feels the boom-and-bust emotional cycle: “Free agents experience a lot of extreme ups and downs. There are days when it all clicks and days when it doesn’t. It is different from having a job because jobs usually just chug along.”

Tom Livingston echoes a common complaint of free agents --- the reality of working alone: “After twenty years working in stations, it is a challenge to get use to working by myself. Sometimes I miss the stimulation of eye-to-eye contact. But, this feeling drives me all the more to work on projects and get out and meet people.”

And, the fear of failure is always around the corner, says Sheila Rue: “There is no ‘safety net.’ Sometimes it’s scary.”

But, for Leslie Peters, meeting the fear of failure with success is one of the best benefits of being a free agent: “When you succeed on your own, it gives you confidence. You know you have skills that other people want. It allows you to love living your life.”

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