Detour ahead

Consider a road less traveled, and you may discover a new career path.

After 14 years as a college fund-raiser, I decided to pursue my dream of being a writer. My plan included freelancing for clients while trying to establish myself as a slice-of-life essayist who made readers laugh and cry. Visions of a newspaper column and frequent appearances in women's magazines danced in my head.

I got the clients easily through word of mouth. Shortly after I made this career change, *The Arizona Republic* put out a call for local columnists. I submitted a sample column about overly perky salespeople, and the editor called within 24 hours to offer me a monthly gig writing about whatever I wanted. With two things checked off the list, I focused on magazines, assuming I would make my first appearance in the *Glamour* "Hers" column. That was my milieu and those readers were my people. The editors didn't agree. After one too many rejections, I broadened my outreach just enough to include other women's magazines because I was 100 percent sure my stories *belonged* there. But every query and submission met with a "Thanks, but no thanks."

And then one day, without thinking about publication, I sat down and wrote an essay about childhood memories of watching my dad clean the birds he'd shot on hunting trips. It came easily, and I was proud of it, but I was totally stymied about what to do with it. For the first time ever, I looked at market listings that were miles outside the niche I thought I would occupy. My research revealed that *Outdoor Life* accepted personal essays. Who knew? I submitted the piece, and my first essay-acceptance phone call from a national magazine came from the editor who said the piece was "beautifully written" and was perfect for the publication.

What I Learned

When I told a friend how strange it was that a non-hunting, non-outdoors-woman would appear on the pages of *Outdoor Life,* she said, "A real writer can write for any audience." That may be stretching the truth slightly, but it did make me realize that by narrowly identifying myself as a women's magazine writer, I was ignoring millions of readers in other markets who might enjoy my personal tales.

That success prompted a continued broadening of my market considerations. I learned to look through a new lens at publications with which I was already familiar, such as trade journals I had read as a fund-raiser. CASE *CURRENTS* published my story about jumping *off* the fund-raising career ladder to become a writer, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published my essay about freelancing for pompous academics.

Realizing that essay markets and essay readers were everywhere, I adopted a nothing ventured, nothing gained attitude. When I saw an ad from *Angie's List* magazine in which the Tampa editor was polling readers about adding a humor column, I contacted him and said, "I think you need a humor column, and I think I should write it." I wasn't an Angie's List member but I got the job based on writing samples, and my column, "The Homefront," was eventually syndicated in more than 60 markets across the country.

In the interest of full disclosure, my work has still never appeared in a women's magazine. But my hefty clip file includes essays that ran in *The St. Petersburg Times, The Christian Science Monitor* and *Notre Dame Magazine* – all of which are likely read by women *and* men.

Advice

Resist pigeonholing yourself and your readers – the stories you want to tell may appeal to an audience you never considered. Resist pigeonholing the markets in which you think you belong. Maybe you do, maybe you don't. There are many more consumer and trade magazines that publish personal essays than you think. Write what you love and take off your blinders. It's OK to follow a path that keeps you on track toward reaching your goals, but don't let assumptions guide you the whole way. Explore the detours. Some of the most rewarding destinations aren't on the map. W

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