

The Art of Negotiation

Award-winning composer and sound designer, Marc Sylvan, on knowing your worth – and knowing how to get it.

Negotiating a deal, especially in the formative years of a media composer's career; is a tricky thing. To borrow Winston Churchill's famous tax analogy, negotiating feels "like standing in a bucket and trying to lift yourself up by the handle."

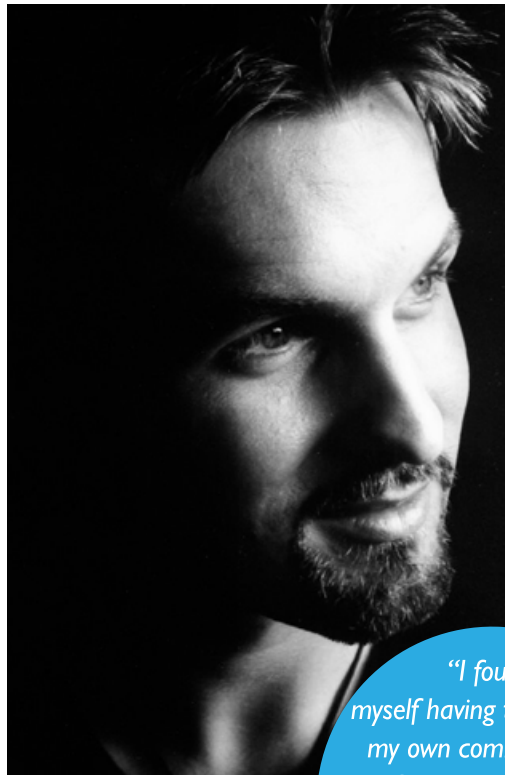
Starting out in the early 2000s as an unpublished media composer, I found myself frequently in the rather awkward position of having to negotiate my own commissioning fees. Initially this proved problematic, principally because I had absolutely no idea what the fee should be.

In light of this ignorance, my tactic soon became a vague questioning of, "What's in the music budget?"

This was generally met with, "We have no music budget but we can give you a printed mouse mat and/or a cool rucksack with the company logo on." Clearly not ideal, although the rucksack did become a 'lucky rucksack' that I took to all future client meetings and genuinely seemed to help. But there are only so many novelty mouse mats and rucksacks a chap needs. I realised I had to up my game.

My fee negotiation strategy improved when I started scoring a series of BBC shows. The BBC has historically served as a wonderful place for young media composers to cut their teeth, and dealing with the Music Copyright department directly led to my experience growing – with 'minutes of music' and 'previous fees' becoming factors in helping to define the remit of negotiation.

Another stride forward came when I joined BASCA, still in the early stages of my career. I became surrounded by more experienced media composers who were openly discussing fees and publishing splits. This shared knowledge and sense that we're all in the same boat certainly buoyed




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my confidence.

With experience and confidence amassing, I thought I was beginning to get modestly handy at deal negotiation. But then everything changed in 2004, when I signed to Faber Music, and have happily been published by them ever since. Suddenly, before my eyes, I began to see how negotiation should be done. Even with an experienced publisher, there is still some uncertainty as to what the music budget should be but what the publisher does provide is a great sense of belief in their composer and depth of knowledge as to what a good deal is in relation to a range of other similar deals.

Ultimately, I sense the key ingredient for a successful negotiation is self-belief. Self-belief is nurtured through experience and knowledge and the core trick is to really believe in your music and

its intrinsic worth. In the early stages of any career, I would suggest never working for free as it implies the music requested doesn't have value.

Even if it's just a novelty mouse mat or rucksack as payment, a precedent of worth has been set. And anyway, like Jack and his magic beans, it may just turn out to be a lucky rucksack. 

Mark Sylvan

Marc Sylvan is an award-winning composer and sound designer whose many credits include The Million Pound Drop, Pointless, Total Wipeout and the reboot of The Crystal Maze.
www.marcsylvanmusic.co.uk