

# Getting Your Foot in the Door

SECTION EDITOR



Ivana Turek  
ivana.turek@gmail.com

## Editorial

There are many paths to becoming a medical writer. Here, Sophie Ash shares her story on how she succeeded in going from scrubbing toilets to mastering medical writing and finding new, flexible ways of work. Her story

encourages us to take a chance and not to give up, even if it is hard to see where the road is leading us.

Ivana

## From burned-out nanny to six-figure business owner: Sophie's road to success

I'd like to preface this story by pointing out that recognising my own accomplishments has never been easy for me. But, of all the personal and professional development I've done, telling my story is perhaps the thing that has propelled my businesses forward the most. So, if you take anything at all from reading this, let it be that storytelling, networking, and personal branding are incredibly powerful assets that you can use to your advantage, if you're willing to be vulnerable.

### Powerful words

The story begins in mid-2017. I had just gotten home from a full day's work as a nanny and housekeeper and was exhausted. But I had friends coming over for drinks and dancing and, honestly, that was the only thing keeping me going at the time. A couple of hours into the festivities, I popped out onto the balcony to interrupt a conversation or two (it was my duty as a host, after all). I wasn't prepared for just how life-changing that particular conversation would be. It went something like this:

**Stanley:** "Sophie – James and I have been talking about you."

**James:** "Yeah, we've got your whole life planned out for you."

**Me:** "Erm... What do you mean?"

**Stanley:** "We've decided you need to get into PR. I have a friend who works at a PR agency. Do you want an introduction?"

### Stop at nothing

Everything changed in that moment. I had 13 virtual coffee chats that following week, in between scrubbing toilets and making packed lunches. It started with Stanley's friend and,

before I knew it, I was addicted! Each contact put me in touch with someone else they knew in the field and it kept going – like a game of dominos but with people-shaped tiles. Every night, on the tube home, I'd re-listen to recordings and meticulously scribble my biggest takeaways. Then, I'd get right back out there the next day and do it all over again. It didn't matter whether I was rushing back from a dance studio, scheduling a play date, or cubing a watermelon – my attention was on my future career. I wanted to be a writer and I was willing to do whatever it took to make that happen.

### Goodbye, old me

From PR, to communications, to healthcare communications, to medical communications, I was gaining more clarity every day around what I wanted to do with my life. "Stanley was right – I *am* supposed to be a writer!" I thought. The more people I talked to, the more confident I felt that I actually had what it took to succeed. With my undergraduate degree in Nutrition, I already had a strong medical education and plenty of clinical expertise that I could bring to the table. And, I'd delivered countless workshops for patients and healthcare professionals. So, if anyone could become a medical writer, it was me! I was going to get out of my crappy job, out of my apartment (which sucked up all of my salary anyway), and into a new reality where I was the boss of my time and loved my work. Within a month, I had quit my job, given my landlord 4 weeks notice, and started preparing to move in with my boyfriend and his family so I could start

Sophie Ash

Prospology

sophie@prospology.com

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my dream life. It was terrifying and invigorating. I loved it!

### Hello, pharma

Just four days after leaving my apartment, I had my first interview as a medical copywriter in pharma. I interviewed for full-time work, but I knew deep down that I wanted to freelance. I went through

several rounds of interrogation before hearing a verdict. When the team told me they'd start me off on a freelancing contract to see how things went, I was ecstatic. "This is my big break!" I rejoiced. Everything was working out exactly as planned. Just one month after my last

day as a nanny and housekeeper, I walked into the largest advertising agency in the city with a three-week Senior Medical Copywriter contract, a company laptop, and an Art Director partner waiting for me. It was a steep learning curve but exactly what I needed. I'd written for a health sciences company when I was a student, and for my own blog for a while, but there was a whole new language to familiarise myself with, even though the writing itself was pretty easy to pick up. I felt challenged for the first time in years and it was invigorating. When I wasn't asking my partner to explain what was going on, or conceptualising new campaigns, I was chatting to as many people as I

I wanted to be a writer and was willing to do whatever it took to make that happen.

could get my hands on. Everyone was incredibly smart and talented. I knew I wouldn't be there long so squeezed every last drop of value from that employee database while I still had access. People are the key to everything.

### Living the dream

Six months later, I had worked with a total of 35 freelance medical writing clients and counting. As anticipated, my three-week in-house contract gave me the insight, connections, and confidence I needed to branch out on my own, and failure was not an option for me. I learned how to build a website, crafted a story that showcased my expertise, and started pitching to companies who might need my help. The first few calls and meetings didn't go anywhere, as I didn't have a portfolio yet and no-one took me seriously. But, it didn't take long before a few companies were willing to give me a chance, and I soon had an array of samples to show prospective clients. I learned the ropes mostly through paying close attention during client briefs, asking more experienced writers questions, and getting feedback on my work in any way I could. Word spread fast that I'm a great writer (talent speaks for itself, but it's also nice when people talk favourably about you!). After 6 months, I didn't need to market my services anymore and was well on my way to owning a six-figure business. My rates were higher than most experienced medical writers in my newly curated network, but it didn't matter. I was thriving and everyone wanted to be a part of it. I was living the dream.

### Expansion mode

In November 2019, I attended my first ever AMWA conference (I'm a dual British-Canadian citizen with many US clients). I was burning out like no tomorrow and making \$120k+ per year, so I flew into San Diego with the intention of learning how to hire subcontractors in my business. That I did (when I wasn't trying axe throwing or exploring an art museum). Entering into 2020, I had a small team of freelance medical writers, with varying levels of experience, who could take on all of my excess work. This allowed me to focus on sales, marketing, and client relationship management instead of all the nitty gritty of producing deliverables. I was ready for my next challenge.



Storytelling and personal branding are incredibly powerful assets that you can use to your advantage.

### Howdy, partner!

Skipping ahead to August 2020, business hadn't died down at all, despite being 6 months into a global pandemic. I was struggling to find any form of work-life balance and needed more help. I reached a breaking point and decided I was either going to a) start scaling things back, or b) bring in a business partner and grow even more. I chose the latter. I gave 50% ownership to my now partner, Sam Sibalis, who was fresh out of business school looking for an exciting opportunity. We expanded our team and tripled our revenue in our first year as an official medcomms agency: A perfect example of how it helps to remain open-minded whenever you're in need of a change.

### A self-made guru

Nowadays, I spend most of my time coaching budding freelance medical writers who want to enter the field – most from a pharmacy, clinical, or research background – while my team takes care of the agency side of things. I travel often. I work whenever and wherever I want. I constantly invest in my personal and professional development. And I tell my story, often. One of my favourite things to do is to chat to new people

on LinkedIn (if you haven't already started building a personal brand, do it!). Every day, I'm grateful to have such a flexible lifestyle that operates 100% on my own terms. No more toilet scrubbing (I have a cleaner!). No more human taxi service (I got a brand new Mercedes-Benz this year, just for fun). No more living on someone else's terms. I'm a writer and bad-ass entrepreneur and I'm here to stay.

### Dare to dream

No matter how far you've come, there's always so much more to learn. And, as you've seen in my story, it's never too late to turn your life around. My advice is to embrace change, be curious, and remain open to any and all opportunities that come your way. Only you know what's best for you. Don't ever let anyone tell you you can't do something just because they don't understand. It's ok to be a visionary. Not everyone will understand and that's ok. If it feels right, go all in and give it everything you've got. I've seen and helped so many individuals

transform their lives through freelance medical writing. You don't need to have run a business before in order to succeed. You don't need an advanced degree or a background in marketing. You don't need to already have the right connections. You just need to be intentional and tactful, and seek support from those around you who know their stuff. I believe in you!

### Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by EMWA.

### Disclosures and conflicts of interest

Sophie's company, Prospology, offers business and marketing coaching services to individuals who are new to freelance medical writing.

### Author information

Sophie Ash is a former dietitian who emigrated from the UK to Canada, where she built a six-figure freelance medical writing business with no PhD, formal training, or direct industry experience. Now, she coaches individuals on the business and marketing aspects of freelance medical writing to help them thrive too. You can find her at <https://linkedin.com/in/sophieash>