the client-bound report

freelance + solopreneur client acquisition in 2026

an original research report

MANDAROO
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How do I find clients???

If you've been a freelancer or solopreneur for long, you've probably asked yourself **that** question with varying degrees of urgency.

Sometimes it's as a backup plan while your plate is still full. Sometimes you wake up at 2am in a cold sweat, panicking preemptively. (I'm guilty of this one.)

And sometimes, everything hits the fan: *Budgets get cut. Your client contact leaves.* Suddenly, you're stuck in the "famine" side of the feast-and-famine cycle.

Meanwhile...

Your LinkedIn feed is filled with posts from über-successful solopreneurs talking about how much they made last month, how happy their clients are, and all the leads in their pipeline.

Even if you're doing well, that urge to compare your business to others' is strong. "What's everyone else doing, and what should *I* be doing?" you wonder.

I've got you covered. This report is here to satisfy your morbid curiosity. (And my own!)

Whether you're pitch-proficient and can convince an editor to hire you in just a few sentences, or clients naturally flock to you, this report is our 2026 reality check, with a dash of reassurance about what actually works.

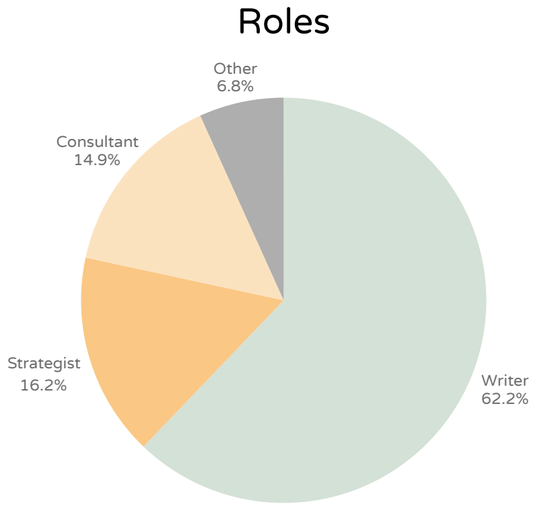
The Client Bound Report is a client acquisition state of the union. 70+ freelancers and solos who engaged new clients in 2025 shared **where** and **how** they found their clients. Here's what they said.

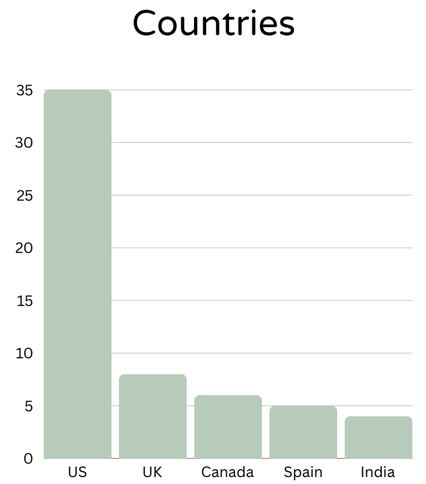
methodology + approach

I reached out to respondents primarily via LinkedIn and Slack communities.

The survey asked them to qualify themselves by confirming that they were a freelancer or solopreneur who found new clients in 2025. Respondents then self-segmented based on whether they found most of their new 2025 clients via inbound or outbound methods. Each cohort answered questions about:

- The client acquisition tactics that worked
- Weekly time spent
- Success factors
- A short description of their approach





60/40 split

59% said clients found them (inbound)
and 41% said they found clients (outbound).

I will find you: What outbound is all about

Love it, hate it, tolerate it—pitching is often part of the deal as a freelancer, especially when you're new to owning a business.

Most of us can't just stand up a website and assume clients will find us overnight. This is true even if you have a supportive network of former colleagues, kind bosses, and miscellaneous acquaintances to refer potential clients to you.

Sometimes, you need to pound the pavement and go find those clients. Here's how outbounders operated in 2025.



Which tactics work in outbound?

Outbound tactics take some legwork. They take boldness, vulnerability, and follow-up. Out of **29 outbound respondents,** here are the top three strategies that actually brought them income.



Warm LinkedIn connections: 45%

Survey says: “I lean heavily on connection-first outbound. I start with LinkedIn interaction: commenting, connecting, DMing, IRL meet-up or coffee date sometimes, then exploring ways to work together. It becomes less of a pitch and more of a collab.”



Cold LinkedIn connections: 17%

Survey says: “I find my Ideal Client Profile (ICP) on LinkedIn and simply ask if they use freelance writers. They will do one of three things: ignore my DM, tell me they don't, or tell me they do.”

Open calls for freelancers: 17%

Survey says: “I review the Slack content/marketing group channels for people hiring and I respond to any that could be a fit with a 2-sentence pitch and 2-3 writing samples. I also receive email digest round-ups of people looking to hire from LinkedIn or job sites, and I follow up on those.”

How much work does outbound actually take?

4.7

The average number of pitches outbounders sent per week. That's about one per day, assuming a five-day work week.



2.9

The average number of hours outbounders spend per week on marketing activities, or just over a half hour per workday.

Here's what that means:

Taken together, we can gather that folks spend, on average, a half hour per pitch. Some DMs will take 10 minutes, some more researched pitches will take hours.

A lot of freelancers or coaches say that you *must* do a certain number of marketing activities per day, which can get overwhelming fast. But even in a busy or overwhelming season, aim to find 30 minutes to send a pitch, connection request, or DM to an ideal client. These outreaches plant seeds that might take root next week or next year.

What makes outbound succeed?

What is it about outbounders' business, work, and positioning that wins them new clients?
We asked what single factor they think is *most* responsible for their success.
Here are the top three elements they pointed to:

Strong portfolio and credentials (28%)

The strength of your past work majorly boosts your outbound efforts. Name-drop clients, or share a link to a similar piece to what you're pitching. If you can't, your pitch needs to show how you think or present an idea they can't say no to.

Personalized outreach (28%)

There's a time and place for a quick "Hey, do you work with freelancers?" DM. But if you're striking out, try putting in more legwork. A well-researched idea that speaks directly to the prospect can do wonders.

Persistence and follow-up (24%)

This is a great reminder to *never* sleep on the follow-up. Didn't hear back from a pitch? Check back in. Lost touch with a client? Ask if they need anything this quarter.

final outbound takeaways



Tools and automation were a response option for success factors. No one picked them. Can you streamline parts of your outbound efforts with your tech stack? Sure. But tools are likely not the key to your entire outbound strategy.



Only one respondent picked volume as most responsible for their success. Yes, you need to keep sending pitches. But quality will do more for you than quantity will. Focus on targeting. Sending the *right* pitches is more important than sending as many as possible.

Relationships really matter in outbound. (Not just inbound!) Warm connections led the pack for successful tactics, pointing to the power of existing relationships and timely follow-ups to help you find new work.

Now, let's talk about what it looks like when a client reaches out to you.

Don’t call us, we’ll call you: What inbounders are up to

Most solopreneurs’ dream is basically the same as most actors’. *The directors (er, clients) come to you. You have your pick of projects. You go from one interesting, exciting endeavor to the next.*

And for those of us outside the inbound lifestyle, it seems like an incredibly glamorous, borderline magical existence, right?

Yes... and no. That ish doesn’t happen overnight. A lot of work, building, connecting, and marketing happens before (and well after) you start seeing inbound business. Here’s what it entails.



Which tactics drive inbound business?

Today, we're demystifying inbound strategy. The **45 inbounders we surveyed** crowned three key strategies as the most common for bringing in income in 2025.

Referrals: 87%



Social media presence: 71%



Community involvement: 22%

On getting referrals

Survey says: "So far, I've been very lucky to rely primarily on client referrals, many of which are within the same wider company but different departments."

On giving referrals

Survey says: "I'm the friendly and helpful brand strategist next door with a big network who makes a lot of referrals and gives without expectation of getting."

On social media posting (and referrals):

Survey says: "I post regularly on LinkedIn, and I think that does the heavy lifting. I also try to do excellent work for all my clients, and they tend to refer me to their friends."

How much work does inbound actually take?

153 minutes

The average time inbounders spend per week on marketing activities. That's just over 2.5 hours total, or about a half hour per day per 5-day work week. (And not too much less than outbounders spend!)

Here's how they spend that time, based on the top four marketing activities inbounders complete at least weekly:



Engaging in online communities or groups: 73%
22% of inbounders cited community involvement as a channel that drove client income. The "success rate" calculation is quite a bit lower here (about a third of those who engage in communities find work as a direct result). But communities aren't *solely* a client acquisition channel—they're a space to learn, connect, and explore, too—so mileage may vary.

Networking events: 22%
This number was lower than I expected, especially considering that only 4% of respondents said they have weekly networking *calls*. This might suggest that the quality of these interactions matters more than the quantity, or it could point to the prevalence of async relationship-building.

Posting on social media: 84%
Let's double-click on this finding.
84% of inbounders post on social at least weekly, *and* 71% of inbounders got business from social media. That's also an 84% *success rate* from social: a more than passing grade.

Asking for referrals: 31%
Almost 3x as many freelancers say referrals drove business for them as ask for them weekly (87% vs. 31%). However, this might be because weekly would be a pretty high frequency to make referral requests, especially if you have a smaller pool of anchor clients or a limited network.

What makes inbound succeed?

Inbounders are magnetic; they attract freelancing opportunities naturally.
Here is what's so sticky about them, by way of what they attribute their success to.

Relationships and connections (38%)

Survey says: "I don't think of it as marketing: I think of it as building actual relationships with real people."

Exceptional client experience (18%)

Survey says: "I deliver a work product so good that my clients will think of me whenever a friend or colleague says they need help with a service I offer."

Strong personal brand (18%)

Survey says: "Showing up consistently on LinkedIn, sharing knowledge and experiences, and maintaining positive relationships with folks in my network!

final inbound takeaways

If you're trying to build up your inbound pipeline, the path that these survey respondents have taken is pretty straightforward—but that doesn't always mean it's easy.

Do good work. When you have client work, do the best job you possibly can. Don't cut corners. Don't deliver late. Don't overpromise and underdeliver. Give clients the best of your talents and time, then ask them to work together again or see if they're willing to refer you to others.



Show up online. You don't have to have 10,000 followers or a podcast to have a strong personal brand. But you do need *visibility* to find success with inbound. Comment on the right people's posts. Create content about what you're learning or your industry thoughts. DM someone whose work you admire to compliment them or ask questions. *Just show up.*



Be friendly, helpful, and relational. It really is all about who you know. Whether you build relationships through 1:1 calls, networking events, outreach, or even IRL, genuine connections to people are how you get found inbound.

how to win the timing + numbers games

Is finding clients more about quantity or quality—or something else entirely? Almost no outbounders said that their main success factor was the volume of pitches they sent. But as we saw, nearly a fifth (18%) *did* attribute their success to persistence and follow-up.

Finding clients has a critical timing component. And multiple outbound respondents pointed out that it all comes down to **when potential clients are searching for someone like you**.

Survey says:

- "If the person you're reaching out to doesn't actually need your service, no amount of personalized pitches seem to help. But, if you reach out to them, offering help when they're looking for it, you're more likely to get the gig, irrespective of how simple that first message seems."
- "I find the right editors at the right time looking for pitches."
- "Slow and steady because it wins the race! I only reach out to people that are actively looking for my help and do very little convincing."

The takeaway: Focus on channels where you're most likely to encounter clients that are actively looking. When they are, make sure your outreach is timely, relevant, and strategic. In the meantime, make natural, personal connections that keep you top of mind. (That's where the inbound magic happens.)

a moment for the minimalist approach

If you've put in the legwork to build relationships, online presence, and portfolio, you might be ready for a more minimalistic, Ikea-style approach to marketing yourself.

A few inbounders describe their strategy as "relaxed" or even "lazy." Another didn't do anything; their current client emailed them unexpectedly.

Before you can ease off the gas pedal (and if you're still on the search for more work), make sure you have these bases covered.

Survey says:

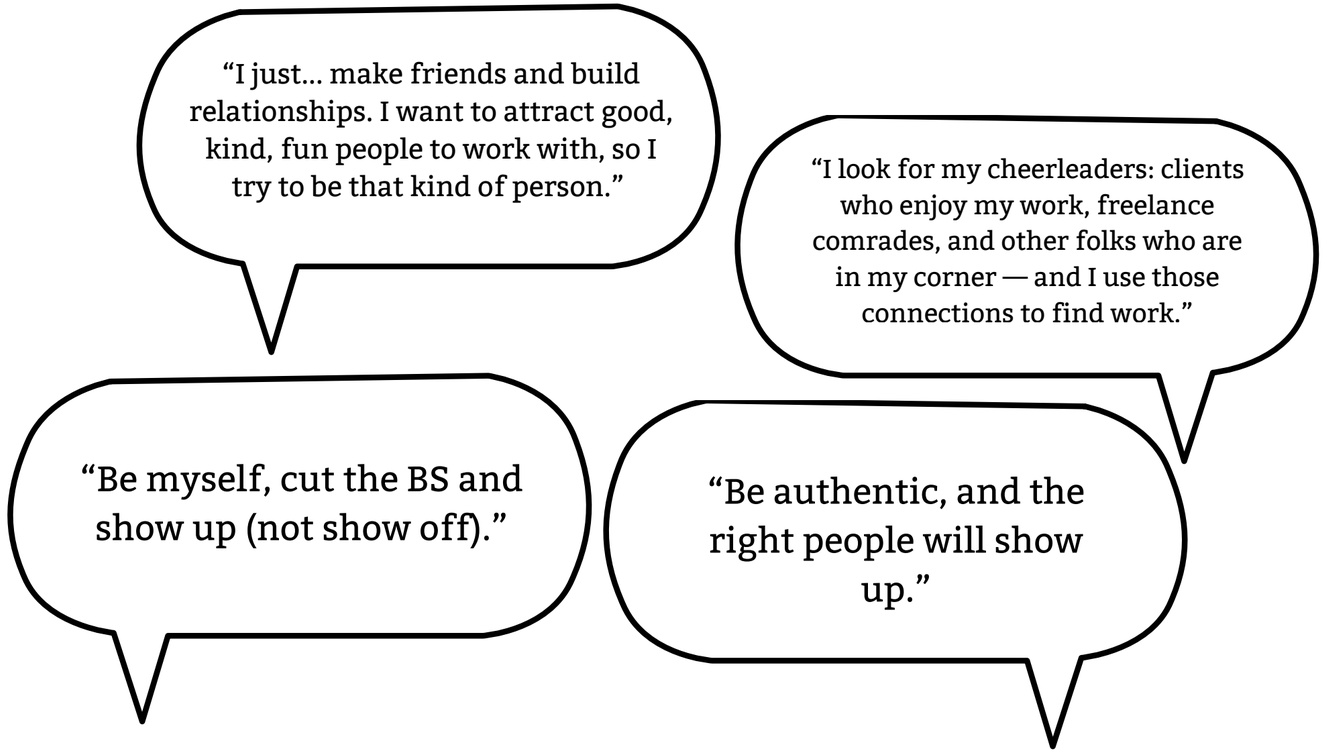
- "I keep my website optimized, my portfolio current, and add new client logos and testimonials as often as possible. I'm not well-known, but I make six figures and I'm an introvert, so it works for me."
- "Networking with warm leads from old jobs and at co-working spaces has made the biggest difference."
- "I try to be consistently active in the places I already am online, like LinkedIn and freelance communities."

The takeaway: Don't neglect basics like your portfolio, organic connections, and communities. Keep your freelance foundations updated and optimized, especially if you're hoping to attract inbound leads.

Be yourself! (The best advice of all?)

Scroll LinkedIn for a few minutes, and you'll see 20 different versions of advice or frameworks that tell you the single, "universal" way you should build your business.

That's not how these freelancers approach finding clients, though. Several respondents were adamant that showing up as yourself, being authentic, and finding your people are a surefire way to grow as a solo.



The takeaway: Put your own unique spin on the "right" approach to finding clients. Infuse your personality into pitches, make connections *your* way, and focus on finding your people.

finesse the offer, then do good work

Call it a signature offering, a niche, or a specialty. By any name, most freelancers and solos are adamant about *clarity on what you do*.

Here's what one said: "Some people don't know what they need. So be loud, upfront, and clear about how you can help and that you're always open to new prospects."

That's step one. Once you nail your positioning (and hopefully the client), you open the door to step two: doing the work well.

As one inbounder says, "Deliver great work, and be easy and pleasant to work with; the rest will take care of itself."

That's solid advice... but what does "great work" look like? Another inbounder says it's about three outcomes:

1. Getting up to speed quickly and delivering value right away
2. Being collaborative and offering insight beyond the ask
3. Delivering a high quality of work that requires few edits

The takeaway: The caliber of your work can lead to the relationships you need for inbound and outbound alike. Do everything in your control to knock it out of the park in every client relationship.

final thoughts from a freelancer like you

If you're like me, the questions about freelancing tend to be a whole lot louder than the answers.

Will clients have budget for me next quarter?
Will they try to outsource my services or skill set to an LLM?
Will my contact leave the company?

You're not psychic. (At least, I don't think you are?) So you can't see or control the future; none of us can. But you *can* double down on your client marketing and spend your energy on the tactics that work for solos like you.

If you need one more reminder: **Relationships are your most important asset**. They happen in DMs and connection requests. They happen in communities and on networking calls. They happen through client relationships, one above-and-beyond project at a time.

Here's my parting, heartfelt advice based on the current state of client acquisition: When you picture a potential client, don't go straight to dollar signs (if at all possible). Picture the person: their hopes, needs, and struggles.

Connect authentically, offer generously, and do what you say you're going to do. As inbounders and outbounders alike have shared, the work will, in many cases, follow from there.

We could all use more humanity, empathy, and connection these days. Those gifts let us grow as people and business owners. And it's not over-dramatic to say that those things actually *do* make the world a better place.

Here's to more great clients and building the businesses of our dreams this year. I'm rooting for you.

PS: A few recommended next steps



Reach out to a contact
Let someone know you're thinking of them. A former colleague, lapsed client, or solopreneur you admire. If you take anything away from this report, let it be that relationships make the freelance + solo world go around!



Join a community
You can find tons of great digital communities (free or paid) to tackle client acquisition with others. I recommend checking out Top of the Funnel, Superpath, or Freelance Cake for a start.



Find a friend (or coach!)
Let's work on your business together with **Client Bound Coaching.** After four years as a freelancer with a full plate, I'll help you master your inbound and/or outbound strategy to find clients. Book a 45-minute session with me here.