

What to say when you're asked to work for free

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SHUTTERSTOCK

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If you own a small business or are self-employed, sooner or later you will be asked to work for free. The more successful you become, the more requests you'll get.

But with the right response, you can turn these freeloaders into something positive.

You may want or need to work for free, especially when you're just starting out to build a resume, client list or broaden your skills. At any time, you may be happy to donate your time and talent to good causes or very good friends.

Here are some ways to respond to common requests:

I can't pay you, but you'll get great exposure

- What exactly is the nature of the exposure? How will my name and description be used? Will you have a link to my website?
- How many people will be there?
- I'll need a testimonial from your company for my website and brochures.
- Thank you, but I obviously have enough exposure since you contacted me.

I don't have a budget for this project

- When does your next fiscal year start? Let's talk about a project then.
- Who in your company might have a budget now?

We're a start-up and don't have any money

- I'm swamped right now. Good luck and call me again in a month or two.
- I would be happy to help out. But I can give you only 10 (or whatever) hours for free.
- I'll take stock. (Hey, if you believe in the company, take that chance. Graffiti artist David Choe got stock for painting a start-up company's offices. That start-up was Facebook, and Choe's stock turned out to be worth \$200 million.)

I'll trade you

- Sure. Let's get the deal in writing, so we know exactly what we're swapping.
- Sorry, I don't really need (whatever they have to offer.)

We're friends

- Happy to help. Let's write down what you're asking me to do, what you're paying for and what you're not, so we keep our friendship.
- Sorry, I don't have the time. I need to (choose one) finish the paying projects I'm on, look for paying work.

There are lots of other people who will do it for free.

- You should absolutely contact one of them.

When you give something away, send a bill listing your fee, followed by words such as "Fee Voluntarily Waived." This establishes your value and reinforces that you won't always work for free.

Be realistic: At some point if you can't get paid, change the field you're in or recognize that you have a hobby and not a business.

Rhonda Abrams provides business planning advice to entrepreneurs and is the publisher of books for entrepreneurs. She writes for USA Today.