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## How to Find Your Career Niche

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

**Note to Readers:** Here's another weekly e-update on current business communication issues from Write Company Plus, a corporate training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

TV personality and foodie Rachel Ray markets herself to cooks wanting to make everyday, down-home, decidedly un-gourmet meals. Apple Computer's Steve Jobs long has set his sights on consumers desiring easy-to-use, highly graphic, no-learning-curve electronics. Starbucks' Howard Schultz targets coffee lovers willing to pay high prices in exchange for a comfortable, modern, high-brow drinking experience.

In other words, all three focus not on the whole, wide world but on a small, distinct, and reachable niche. It sounds so easy. But, in my opinion, finding your career nook is one of the hardest tasks for business people -- corporate employees and independent entrepreneurs alike.

What's the problem? Simply this: To zero in on a small group or idea means that you have to give up the human tendency to want to be all things to all people -- or at least to throw 10 pounds of wet spaghetti at the wall until something sticks.

I started pondering the power of niche marketing for the umpteenth time last Sunday while reading the New York Times. There, on page 37, was an obituary about a fascinating woman named Bette Friedman Garber. She died in mid-November of pneumonia at age 65. Accompanied by two pictures, the story took up two full newspaper columns -- a humongous amount of space that the hotsy-totsy Times usually gives only to record the passing of uber dignitaries such as college presidents or corporate CEO's.

According to the Times, Garber started her career in the late 1960's as an advertising copywriter at Bobbie Brooks fashions after graduating from the University of Illinois. Somewhere in her late 30s, she became intrigued with both long-distance trucking and high-quality photography. Soon, from her home outside Philadelphia, Garber developed a business niche eventually leading to publication of four coffee-table picture books about big rigs and their drivers. Her photographs also appeared frequently in special-interest magazines such as Truckers News and American Trucker.

"Among the small but lively fraternity of photojournalists who specialize in documenting trucks and truckers, Ms. Garber was considered the foremost in the country," the Times said. "She was known in particular for her images of custom semis, the lavishly decorated tractor-trailers that ply the country's highways like sleek, rolling works of art." From what I could gather, Garber never seriously veered from her trucking niche into wedding, bar Mitzvah, or corporate photography. She stuck with her gut. Having struggled for decades with my tendency to deviate from plans at the drop of a new one, I found Garber's tenacity inspirational. If you're listening on your CB from your Big Rig in the Sky, Bette, I thank you.

Here are some ways that both you and I might drill down to a narrowly rather than broadly defined path -- a definite career advantage:

**Give up the myth.** It's that success is a numbers game, the more the merrier. No, no, no. If you're currently in the job market, apply to only a handful of organizations you really want to work



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for rather than to every possible employer within a 50-mile radius. Trust me: you're likely to land a position faster by making multiple contacts with few companies than making few contacts with multiple companies.

**Focus on one group.** If you're a computer expert, I dare say you might want to abandon products aimed at every Tom, Dick, and Harriet. Instead, perhaps you could help construction companies keep track of their progress at various job sites. Hardhat Software, anyone?

**Look around.** On your corporate job as a graphic designer, you may have noticed that executives are giving presentations with deadly dull PowerPoints. Perhaps you can develop an internal niche improving their material with special effects involving light, sound, and animation.

**Combine your interests.** Using Garber as your inspiration, brainstorm money-making combos such as your cosmetology license and your love of dogs. In that case, open a high-end pet grooming salon featuring spa-like massages and pedicures.

**Stifle your impulses.** One of the flaws in my communication training business has been a tendency to grasp at every inquiry that comes my way – even when it falls outside my primary goals. Even though I know that few requests-for-proposal ever result in actual work, for example, I still have a hard time letting them slide. What if I miss something?

**Seek advice.** Although Garber is a particularly dramatic success story in the annals of niche marketing, you can find plenty of others by keeping your eyes and ears open. How about that architect who designs only churches? Or that accountant who works only with bankrupt businesses? Or the wig maker who sells only to chemotherapy patients? Ask them how they found the discipline to stay their course.

**Put your niche into words.** And repeat them often to yourself. If you're looking for work or advancement in an organization, come up with something like "the numbers guy who's good with words" or "the sales representative who sings." For entrepreneurs, think along the lines of "the plumber for schools" or "the manicurist for kids." Did I mention that I market classes on the deadly dull topic of writing as lively and fun?

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