



HOW TO SUCCEED AS A COMMERCIAL DRONE OPERATOR !

My Story

My name is Ian Titchener, and as well as running ProDrone Academy I also own and operate Ely Aviation. Despite what you might have read on Facebook to the contrary it is possible to make a living as a commercial drone operator. This is a brief guide to how we did it, starting with my personal back story!

I remember the moment vividly! I was sat at my desk daydreaming about where else I could be, and what else I could be doing. After nearly 20 years in publishing selling advertising space, I decided that it was time to make some kind of change. I didn't know what, but I knew I had to do something! It wasn't even a mid-life crisis (Yes I know I don't look 44!) I just needed something different.

These words accurately describe the moment when my commercial drone operation was born. Having been flying RC helicopters and UAV's for many years, I hadn't even considered the possibility that I could make serious amounts of money out of doing the thing I loved to do!

This is a situation that many people find themselves in. Stuck in a rut, unsure of what to do, and not sure if they can afford to take the risk! One of the unique things about the commercial drone sector is that you can operate it as a side



hustle alongside your existing job, this also means that you can take your time, build the momentum and make the jump on your terms and when you are ready. That is exactly what I did.

I won't lie and tell you that it's easy, but then again what is! There is an adage that was told to me many years ago that sums it up.

"The only people that make money work in the Royal Mint, the rest of us have to earn it. If you want to earn more, work harder and do more of what you do! If you want to earn less then do less!"

It takes hard work, determination and perseverance, but it can be done!

So here we go, here's how we did it!



1. Have a plan

Having a plan means that you are working toward something, helps focus your mind and means that you are less likely to encounter errors and pitfalls. Your plan will be something that you find you will tweak as time goes on, and you may find it changes altogether from what you envisaged it to be but in essence it will consist of

Learning

- What type of courses do I need?
- What sector of the industry am I specializing in?
- What type of aircraft and sensing capabilities will I need?
- How much do I need to charge (more info on pricing later)?

Sales and Marketing

You're both the sales and marketing manager for your new business, that is unless you have time and

money to employ someone else! You need to give time to investigation of the market.

- Figure out who your customers are!
- Where do your customers hang out?
- What type of messaging will they best respond to?
- What platforms will be best to accomplish the above?
- What should the content of my website be?

Have a budget to get started

Your start-up budget will need to encompass all of the above including your training, marketing, aircraft and more. Don't be tempted to go out and spend 20k on an aircraft that's way above your paygrade. Seek advice from somebody who knows, preferably not somebody trying to sell you a drone!

Have a time-line

Have a time line that encompasses all the above and execute your plan!



2. Choose a Training Partner (otherwise known as an RAE)

There are now over 40 NQE's/RAE's all offering a slightly different flavour of training, some online only, some hybrid, some classroom based and some purely face to face. So, the questions remain which of these options is best for you? Let's have a look at the bare bones of the most common options and try to come to some kind of conclusion!

Online only training

Online only training says what it does on the tin. These learning systems consist of a series of different videos normally delivered via video on a learning management platform. The student sits and watches these video's and normally and completed a pop quiz at the end of each module.

Advantages

- It is convenient, and you can complete the course in your own time, around your existing work
 - You don't have to travel anywhere other than for your theory examination and practical assessment
- They are generally a lot cheaper than classroom-based courses

Disadvantages

- Its easy to fall into bad habits and not take in all the information
- You don't have an instructor to ask questions and classmates to bond with
- You can completely misunderstand what you are being taught and not know the difference
- It's far harder to gain real understanding from online learning as it lacks practical elements
- Online courses are very often out of date and do not reflect current law/best practice
- The systems are very often full of bugs and don't work properly

Classroom Based Learning

When attending classroom-based learning sessions the student travels to their chosen NQE and attends a 2-5-day ground school. Modules are presented in PowerPoint style onto screens and the student listens intently whilst making notes. The student then sits a theory examination and attends a practical flight assessment.



Advantages

- You get a better learning experience and get to draw on the knowledge of seasoned professionals
- You can ask questions and gain a greater level of understanding
- You form friendships and start networks that can help you throughout your entire career

Disadvantages

- Class sizes can be huge, sometimes up to 30 students depleting the learning experience
 - Some courses are based on learning by wrote, can be quite boring and shorten attention spans
 - A lot of instructors come from a manned aviation background and teach material that is irrelevant.
- Whilst this experience is great, you need to know about unmanned aviation, this doesn't help you.
- Large class sizes can present a 'sausage factory'

style environment making it harder to learn anything of value

Conclusion?

So whats the answer! Online training just doesn't offer the same opportunity that face to face does, but classroom-based training has its own issues! Well I cannot answer for other NQE's/RAE's but here's our take. First, we cap our class sizes at 8-10 people and you very often get two instructors. Our presentations are focused on unmanned operations and are interspersed with practical exercises humor and student engagement so that delegates are not just talked at. We also see ourselves a business school for drone pilots and not just an RAE. We can offer courses in

- Sales and marketing for commercial drone operators
- Surveying, mapping, photogrammetry
- Congested area operations
- Aerial photography and cinematography
- PfCO Refresher Courses
- PfCO-GVC Conversion Courses

We also offer free mentoring, engage with our students long-term and make their success our number one priority. We teach them that just like any business being a commercial operator requires hard work, persistence and professionalism (not that they will be millionaires inside a year) Its just basic honesty, integrity and a great team on hand to impart knowledge that brings success.

3. Pricing and Sales

There is a big Elephant in industry room, and that Elephant is called price.

- What should you charge?
- What if other people come in cheaper than you?

Here's my advice, as somebody who has not only mentored small and large businesses but has also been in business for a number of years.

Choose a price and stick to it. Make it realistic, make it what your skills are worth. You studied long and hard to get your permission from the CAA and you're worth it!

When I started out in sales we didn't have computers, email or mobile phones. We had hard copy mail, telephone lines and good old-fashioned fax machines (for those of you under 40, try looking underneath the pile of paperwork in the corner of your office) We were in the dark ages in comparison to the luxury that salespeople live in today, and it made selling harder. But it also made us better salespeople. It taught us customer service, patience and persistence. No sending of email in the 90's, you had to send hard copy mail and a covering letter, this was usually followed up swiftly with a face-to-face client visit. It was all about building relationships and providing a real value for your clients.

The advent of new technologies such as email, instant messaging and social media have opened up the whole world of business, making it easier than ever before to connect with your prospects, but alongside this ease of use has come laziness. How many times have you seen a salesperson (and if you own a small business you ARE a salesperson) sending an email rather than picking the phone up to speak to a client? How many times in the past six months have you gone to visit a client? (be honest!) and how many times have you knowingly under-priced work!

When you don't build relationships or establish rapport with your clients all you have left is the

price. When your client feels no emotional connection to you, your brand or your company they buy based on price. When you are selling on price, and your prospect is buying on price there is only one way it's going to go, and it isn't up!

Here's the opportunity. Switch off your email, call your clients, build a rapport that will turn into a friendship, one that will last for years to come. Be in business to help your prospects succeed. But most importantly sell on value not price.

Define value in terms of what it means to your client. Tell your potential clients how much money your service will put into their bank account, don't tell them you're the cheapest option on the market!

When you sell on price and don't take the time to establish relationships there's only one way it's going to end. And it is not pretty. Not for you, not for me and not for the UAV industry as a whole!

Work out your real costs, what you need to earn on top to make a profit and don't forget to factor in things like travel, subsistence and accommodation if needed.

Work out your price and stick to it!

4..Your first Job...I'm an expert! Don't be that guy

The UAV industry is still very young and as such it has its fair share of del-boy operators, newly qualified pilots and so called 'experts' But the truth is that they can be far from being an expert!

Just last week I was speaking to a client regarding an aerial topographical survey that they had very recently commissioned from a local drone operator (they had made their decision based on price) who

had claimed to be an expert in his field. He turned up on site and set up his operating area and then proceeded to spend the following half an hour playing with his ipad trying to persuade the drone to fly. The pilot eventually got his drone airborne, left the site and around 3 hours later sent the client a link to a drop-box folder full of individual photographs.

Whilst this may sound like great service, what the client has actually asked for was an orthomosaic image, a point-cloud file and a high level of accuracy necessitating the need for Ground Control Points. The upshot of this story is that we were asked to go and do the job properly and provide what the client had asked for. And as for the other remote pilot, he had to refund all of the client's money and made himself look stupid to boot.

You can only shoot a wedding once, and as such it has to be right! There are no second chances to get the shot! The moral of the story is this. If you are a new pilot, don't make the mistake of thinking that the learning ends when you get your PfCO, and don't take on jobs that are above your skillset before you are ready. Take your time to learn and master the precision flying skills that you need to earn the big bucks.

Take your time, persist, plan, work hard and the rest will take care of itself!

**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS
OUR RANGE OF COMMERCIAL
DRONE TRAINING COURSES
PLEASE DO CALL OUR OFFICE
ON 01353 780 766 OR
EMAIL IAN@PRODRONEACADEMY.CO.UK**