

# MARKETING MENTOR

advice, accountability & assistance  
for creative businesses

## Case Study

# From One Man Band to Virtual Team of 9 in 4 Years

How **Jim Gorman** Chose His Niche,  
Pursued Select Prospects and Ended Up  
With More Work Than He Can Handle

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by Ilise Benun

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## Introduction

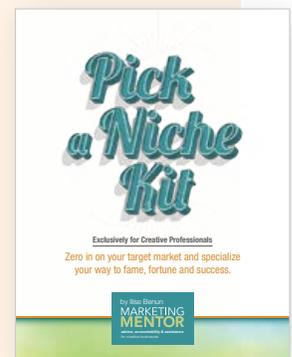
When Creative Director, pilot and owner of [Gorman360](#), Jim Gorman, came to Marketing Mentor in 2011, he had already been freelancing on the side in the aviation world, his passion. But he wasn't sure if this market could support him full time. Was there enough work in that narrow niche? That was his question to [Ilise Benun](#) when they started working together.

Four years later, the answer is yes, and then some!

With a virtual team of nine, four retainer clients and more work than he can handle, he's in the enviable position of turning away the clients that don't get him to his goals.

Says Gorman, "It's this niche (aviation) that has really been the secret of my success. I was very fortunate that [my niche](#) was a natural for me with my aviation knowledge and background, experience and passion. There are very few people even trying to fill this niche. That, from the beginning, was what made it work."

**Here's how he did it.**



If you need to pick a niche, the Pick a Niche Kit will show you how, plus give you more than 25 examples.

[Details here.](#)

## Jim Gorman

Gorman360

### To what do you attribute your success?

It's been a combination of two clichés: **“Success breeds success”** and **“It’s who you know.”**

### Goals

Gorman’s goal when he started his own business at age 62 was to make a living doing something he loved and make sure his retirement was set. “Age is a huge factor in advertising — whether or not companies admit it, it is. I had to position myself so that I wasn’t looked at as a creative guy still trying to be viable as he got older, but instead as someone who has more rounded marketing expertise.”



**Gorman now  
and then:**

A lifelong passion  
for flight

## Positioning

Jim Gorman positions himself as the aviation expert and his message is, “You need a pilot to talk to pilots.”

The aviation niche works in his favor for many reasons, especially because he’s not marketing to 25-year-olds. The people who buy aircraft and the ancillary services are in their 40s, 50s and 60s. It’s a high-income achievement. So age discrimination has not been an issue. He also hasn’t treated it as a handicap — without being explicit, his attitude projects the confidence of “you don’t get this smart overnight.”

Another aspect of his positioning at the beginning was, “I’m just one guy and I will work with your internal marketing department.” As he’s focused on his niche and grown, it’s evolved over four years to, “I am a virtual advertising agency with nine people on my team.”

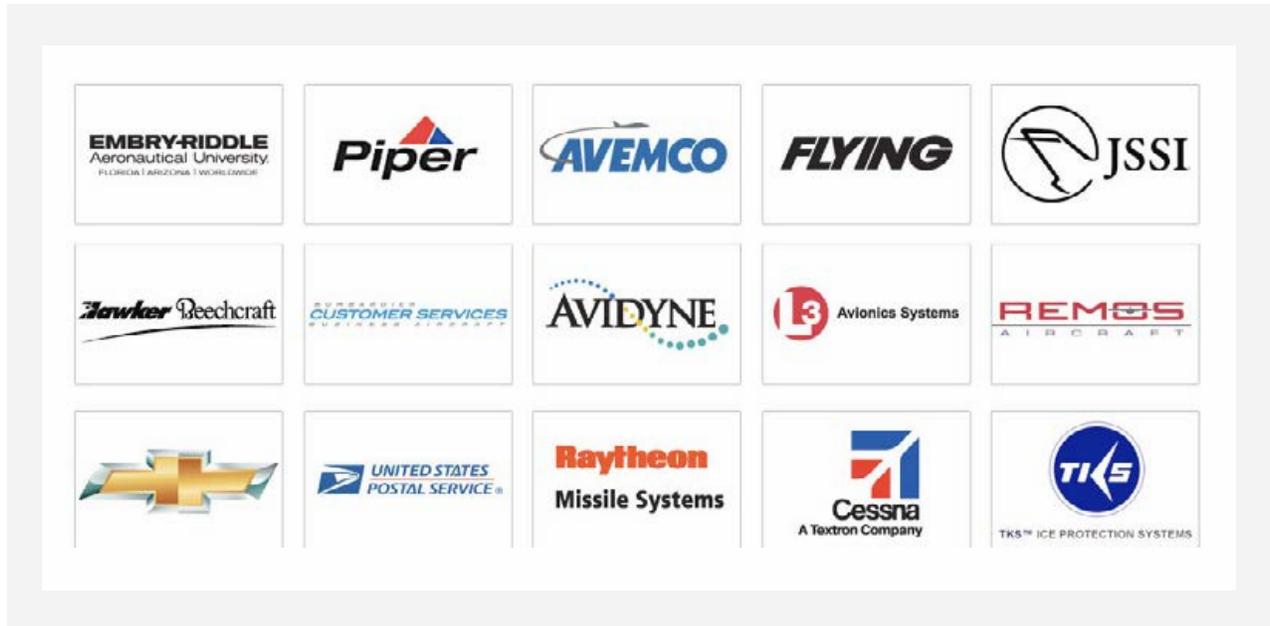
*The aviation niche works in his favor for many reasons, especially because he’s not marketing to 25-year-olds.*



**IF YOU EVER HAVE A CLAIM,  
WE WON'T LEAVE YOU HANGING.**

**Jim’s messaging:**

You need a pilot to talk to pilots.



Here are a few of the clients Jim works with. Most (but not all) are in aviation.

Says Gorman, “I was happy to migrate to the virtual ad agency model — it is still far less expensive for clients, but not a cut-rate offering by any means.”

Indeed, his homepage message is: You don’t have to pay for an ad agency to get the thinking of an ad agency.

His USP (unique selling proposition) is his combination of aviation expertise and big agency experience. “I’ve always described myself as a creative director, as the orchestra leader. I don’t

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The advertisement features a large image of astronaut Nicole Stott in a white space suit floating in space. To the right, a yellow banner contains the text 'GO EMBRY-RIDDLE GO ANYWHERE'. Above this banner, it says 'NICOLE STOTT / NASA ASTRONAUT' and 'CLASS OF 1987 / BS, AERONAUTICAL ENGINEERING' with social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and the hashtag #ERAUgo. Below the banner, a block of text reads: 'Six Embry-Riddle grads have become NASA astronauts. Seven more are members of the USAF Thunderbirds. Over 20,000 others fly for the airlines. In all, nearly 120,000 of our alumni have gone on to exceptional careers in aerospace. What does that tell you about how far a degree from Embry-Riddle can take you? Find out where else you can go at ERAU.edu/go See more selfies from ERAU alums and share your own at #ERAUgo.' At the bottom right, the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University logo is displayed with 'FLORIDA | ARIZONA | WORLDWIDE' underneath. A horizontal strip of small, square photos of various people is at the very bottom of the ad.

Sample: Ad for aviation university client

play the cello, I don't play the oboe but I bring everybody together. I get them playing the same tune and I have a vision that I want them to fulfill in ways that they can do better than I could on my own.

“If it weren't for the niche, I'd be another aging creative director competing against 22-year-old kids that charge a quarter of what I do. Everyone vying for the same, small slice of the big pie.”

## 4-Step Strategy

The cornerstone of Gorman's strategy is an intentional and highly selective choice of which clients to pursue.

### Step 1: Look for prestigious clients.

Once his positioning was set, his strategy was to pursue the right kind of clients. "I started going after clients I felt were prestigious. Prestigious in a way that if somebody knew I was working with a particular client, they would be impressed at the company I keep, that I'm not taking just anything that came through the door."

That also means targeting prospects with room to grow into. For example, one of his biggest clients is a large institution with substantial resources. His challenge: to prove that his virtual firm is capable of handling all of their needs.

### Step 2: Look for trusting clients.

Then he started looking for clients that would allow him to bring in his team members, who could do things he couldn't do, such as a market researcher and a media specialist, in whom he has much trust and respect. "It was a little painful: to tell myself I needed to hire people to do things I either couldn't do or couldn't do well or didn't want to do. But it's the best of all possible worlds because I don't have to do all the work myself."

## Step 3: Look for opportunities.

With those clients in place, he grew (and continues to grow) by looking for opportunities. “I’m looking for problems my clients have that I can solve. Sometimes, it’s a problem they don’t even know they have. For example, a couple clients never thought of doing research but they desperately need research in order to get to the next level. I now have my research director, a guy that I’ve known for 35 years who’s very, very smart. He does the proposal and then we show them what we can do for them that they didn’t know could be done. That’s an example of bringing my team into a place where a client hadn’t imagined it.”

## Step 4: Look for retainers

When taking on a one-off project, Gorman’s intention is to turn it into a retainer. His approach with retainer clients is, “Let’s make this work for both of us. I will charge you a lower rate in exchange for knowing we’re going steady. Because you know we’re going steady, I’m going to be there for you and I’m going to put my heart into your business.’”

## Tools Implemented

### Face-to-Face Networking

One of Gorman's most effective marketing tools has been networking, attending trade shows (or air shows), talking to people, building and leveraging his network. "I think face to face is tremendously important for people to trust you and realize what your capabilities are.

"The account executives and the people on the business side of an advertising agency are the ones to do that stuff. I'm a creative guy by background. I'm a writer, not a business guy, not an account guy. I never thought I could be any good at that.

"But I've learned that's not true. I can do that pretty well."

There are half dozen large air shows around the country every year. They last several days, with seminars and booths and opportunities for face time. Gorman travels to these shows – in fact that's how he spent all his vacations while



Sample: Ad for aviation client

*"I think face to face is tremendously important for people to trust you and realize what your capabilities are."*

working full time and that's how to started building his network. "I use the opportunity to meet new people, to talk to the people I know and get them to introduce me to other people."

## Customized Proposals

One secret to Gorman's success is the [thorough and tailored proposals](#) he writes for the prospects he thinks have potential. Here are some highlights of his proposals:

- The tone and personality make each one feel as if it was crafted just for this prospect, not copied and pasted from a previous proposal or based on a boilerplate template.
- Gorman "demystifies" the creative process by providing a description of his process and how the project will progress, which builds trust and, in the case of a competitive proposal process, improves his value proposition.
- Gorman positions himself as "marketing partner" by suggesting additional components that were not requested by the prospect, but could enhance the marketing effort.

## Tangible Results

“I have all the business I can handle, that’s the biggest result. Four and a half years ago when I started talking to you, I was just turning 62. I’m 66 now, I have 4 retainer clients and I’m working harder than I ever thought I would be working, but my retirement is set.

“I have all the work I can handle. Now, I’m in the position where stuff comes in unsolicited.”

## Intangible Results

**Freedom.** “I want to fly my plane. That’s a huge benefit to me. I’m in the aviation business. I love flying. I bought another airplane last fall through my company. I’m using that to go visit clients in Florida, Chicago, Maryland, Texas.”

**Control.** “There is a sense of building something and doing it on your own terms. I could not imagine going back to working at an advertising agency. Getting up, driving to some office and having to be there because other people make you be there the whole day and work late and work weekends. I do all of that stuff now. I work late, I work early, I work weekends. But it is very largely on my own terms,



Listen to this podcast interview with Jim Gorman on winning proposals that get retainer clients.

with the huge exception that I have clients and clients have deadlines and I make promises that have to be kept. It's not like I can just come and go whenever I please.”

**Flexibility.** “That’s one of the great things about having my own business. My office is anywhere I have a cellular connection and an electric outlet. I can carry on business with clients from anywhere.”

**Higher quality of life.** “There is a calm, if you will, that goes along with knowing your retirement is set.”



## “I needed someone I could trust.”

*You were one of the last links in the chain before I went out on my own. I started talking with you about my website and the name of the company. The website was one thing where you were very helpful with constructive criticism. If you have been in charge of other people's brand image, it's very difficult when all of sudden you're on your own. Everything goes out the window because you think, "I've got too many important things to say." So it becomes very important to have some sort of counsel you can trust, somebody who will tell you when your baby's ugly.*

Jim Gorman

If you need help growing your business, picking a niche or figuring out which marketing tools will work for you, take advantage of Ilise Benun's **free mentoring session** to see what's possible.

[Sign up here](#)