

STRAIGHT  
Talk

with ETHAN BOLDT

## The Big Idea

**P**rospects can be a fickle bunch. While a few will respond to the same kind of mailing again and again, many others have to be targeted in new and innovative ways. When trying to come up with such ways, who better to speak to than famed copywriter Bob Bly?

Author of "The Copywriter's Handbook, Third Edition: A Step-By-Step Guide To Writing Copy That Sells" (Henry Holt) and "The White Paper Marketing Handbook" (Thomson), and freelance copywriter for such clients as Boardroom, TCI, Agora Publishing, IBM and Lucent Technologies, Bly knows how visual language, testing the right creative and even good guessing can bring out the full potential of a package.

**EB:** What are some trends that you've noticed in direct mail recently?

**BB:** In your promotion, you have to speak the visual language of the prospect. I saw a promotion for a client that didn't do well, and what I wrote to go against it did better. But I don't think it was the headline or any brilliance on my part. It was a promotion for a trading system and their promotion was a letter in magalog form that had no diagrams or graphics. It was obviously written by a copywriter who had never marketed to traders or traded himself. Traders, what do they like to see? Charts, so you've got to load it with charts. That's not a brilliant strategy, but people ignore that. They don't use the language of their prospect, and the visual language in particular.

**EB:** In general, are letters getting shorter?

**BB:** In some cases, it's the reverse. The B-to-B ones are getting shorter, like consumer magazines, but a lot of direct response consumer offers, which are traditionally long copy, are getting longer. For 10 years the common thing in investment newsletters was a 12- or 16-page letter; then it became a 16-page magalog, which is longer; then it became a 24-page tabloid, which is even longer.

**EB:** What factor makes the most difference when you're testing creative?

**BB:** Besides the most obvious factor of the list, it's not the graphics, the copy or the headlines . . . it's the big idea. I've got a financial promotion on my desk. This guy is promoting a stock, and the cover of his magalog says, "Strategic resources can quickly triple your money if you buy the stock below one dollar." Then he gives other stocks that he made money on and

their gains: "Now I'm giving you another opportunity to make big money from a stock. Buy now up to a dollar a share." So the idea is you're going to buy this stock, and you're going to make money. That's a bad idea because it turns out the stock he's talking about is a uranium mining company.

The big idea here is uranium somehow, but he totally ignores that on his cover. If he's done any research, he'd realize the biggest bull market today is not gold, it's uranium. I've written pieces on uranium. After the crash of 2000, gold has gained about 110 percent, while uranium has gained about 1,200 percent! That's the cover. If I did a cover, "Profit from uranium 10X better than gold, and this is the company that is the best one to do it," it'd do better.

So what makes the biggest difference is the big idea. That being said, you never really know for sure which idea is going to win, and that's the most important thing you're testing.

**EB:** When copywriting for a newsletter, how do you know what theme will resonate best with the market?

**BB:** You're never going to know until you mail. That's guesswork and that's the most important thing to test and that's going to make the biggest difference. What's more compelling: the subprime mortgage scandal, the Fed going to stop raising interest rates or the end of oil? All of these are common themes, but what applies best to your newsletter?

A lot of times the package that works is not any better written than the other. I just picked one thing as a copywriter, and you picked another one, and you beat me because your guess was right. If you choose peak oil, is it "peak oil" or is it "Soylent Green comes true"? What's stronger, "global warming" or "the end of OPEC oil"? Those are ideas you test.

It's as simple as that Miller Lite ad: tastes great, less filling. If you can only do one, which is better: tastes great or less filling? You can make arguments for why either one is better. That is the true value of testing; you put one against the other. Consumer marketers don't do that; they sit around a table, pick one and they hope that one is the right one.

**EB:** Is there only room for one in each package?

**BB:** Generally that's true, but there are exceptions. Instead of having one big idea, you pile on a lot of little ideas. Boardroom does that with an outer envelope that will say something like, "What never to eat on an airplane, page 12," "Bills it's okay to pay late, page 15," and "Great sex after 40, page 19." There's no one big idea; instead, it's one little idea after little idea until you can't resist it. So you're either gathering momentum in the prospect's brain, or you just hit one that they have to know more about. ■



Bob Bly