

Publishing Advice From Writing Expert Bob Bly: An Interview By RainToday.com

Bob Bly: Author Profile

Current Position: Bob Bly is an independent copywriter and consultant with over 25 years of experience in high-tech, industrial, business-to-business, and direct marketing. He writes materials that clients use to sell their products and services to businesses. Bob also consults with clients on marketing strategy, mail order selling, and lead generation programs.

In The Public Eye: Bob has been a guest on many TV and radio shows, including MoneyTalk 1350, Bernard Meltzer, CNBC, CBS Hard Copy, Winning in Business, and The Small Business Advocate. He has also been featured in the *LA Times*, *Nation's Business* and *The New York Post*, among others.

Author Of: Bob is the author of more than 50 books including *The Copywriter's Handbook*, *How To Promote Your Own Business*, *Technical Writing: Structure, Standards and Style*, *Selling Your Services: How To Get More Clients To Hire You (Or Your Firm)* and *The Complete Idiot's Guide To Direct Marketing*. He is also the author of numerous articles that have appeared in publications such as *Inside Direct Mail* and *Writer's Digest*.

Also Known As: Prior to becoming an independent copywriter and consultant, Bob worked for Koch Engineering as advertising manager and as a marketing communications writer for Westinghouse Defense.

Website: <http://www.bly.com>

***RainToday:* First, I'd like ask what inspired you to write your first book. How did you come up with the initial idea and why did you decide to write it? What were your goals and how did they change over time?**

Bob Bly: In general, I'm a writer and most writers want to write books, including me. I've always loved books and wanted to write a book.

But, specifically for my first book, now called *Elements of Technical Writing*, the thing that inspired me was my work as a technical writer for Westinghouse. As I was working, I realized that the style guides that were produced for English students and people who wrote ordinary prose didn't cover a lot of the issues that technical writers needed to know.

I wrote the book to fill the gap so that I, and everyone else that was writing technical material, would have authoritative answers to style, grammar, and usage questions that needed to be resolved.

My main goal was to get a book published. I thought that it would be very exciting and would fulfill several writerly instincts and needs within me. I wanted to be a published author. I was working for a company at the time, so I didn't think it would advance my career—my company couldn't care less.

I had moved to another firm where I also wrote technical marketing materials. I thought that there was a need for the book, so my objective was to give an easy-to-use style guide for people who wrote about technical subjects. Those were the only two real goals in my mind. It had nothing to do with advancing my career because I knew it wouldn't.

As the book was being prepared for release, I quit that job and became self-employed as a freelance copywriter in 1982, which I still am today. Suddenly, having the book took on a whole new meaning. Now, this book would be my credential as a copywriter. There

weren't a lot of copywriters at the time, but I wanted to be the one specializing in technical material.

When I met with clients and they said, "I want to hire you," and wanted to see samples of my writing, I would pull out a copy of my book and give it to them.

My goal transformed from just a focus on the reader and wanting to be a published author to the book becoming a credential, a calling card, and a means of getting business for my freelance writing. I thought, "By getting the book published, I will further establish myself as a recognized expert in my field, which is marketing, and will therefore accelerate my career; my business will become more successful because I wrote the book."

You know the old expression that you see people use: "We wrote the book on the subject"? Well, now I was the guy that wrote the book on the subject. I thought by having these various business books published, it would accelerate and enhance my career, and that's exactly what it did.

I did write books that I wanted to do for fun and amusement that had nothing to do with my career, and I did publish them. In that case, I did it because it was a book that I thought I might enjoy and therefore thought others might enjoy too.

RainToday: Why did you decide to co-author some of your titles?

Bob Bly: I knew a lot about what technical writers needed, but was ignorant about the process of finding a publisher and an agent and then getting the book published.

I met someone who became a life-long friend, who lived where I did at the time in New York City, and was a published book author. He was not a technical writer but a regular freelance writer. He wrote things that were more entertaining and light, for example, magazine articles, features, and humor.

I approached him with my idea because I wanted his opinion, so he looked at my outline and introduction and told me it was great. I got a call from him the next day saying he wanted to do it with me and I was more than ready to accept his partnership. He had nothing to offer in terms of knowledge of technical writing, but what he brought to the mix was that he had already published a book, which was a mystery to me.

For that book, that's where the primary value of the collaboration was for me. Also, at the time, the idea of writing a book was a little daunting and I thought it would be easier if I didn't do it alone.

Interestingly enough, that book became much more important to his career than mine. We wrote *The Elements of Technical Writing* and *The Elements of Business Writing*, and that's what he does full-time now; he's an independent freelance corporate trainer that teaches executives. He goes into companies and gives on-site classes in business and technical writing and he uses those books all the time.

While *The Elements of Technical Writing* was good as a credential for me to start out with, I began writing books that were more oriented and more useful to what I was doing. Actually, all were useful, but I had books that were more directly related to what I was doing.

RainToday: Do you prefer to co-author a book with someone or write a book on your own?

Bob Bly: Which method I prefer depends on the book. If it's a subject where I feel in my mind I'm the master of the material, which means I've experienced it, I've been through it, I know everything there is to know about it, and that I also have an opinionated way in which I want to write it, I prefer to be the sole author.

On the other hand, if it's a subject where either I know someone who has equal or greater expertise in the subject, or where we have complementary knowledge, then I often enjoy co-authoring.

RainToday: Could you tell me a bit about the process of writing the book? About how much time did it take you to write each book? Do you have any advice regarding the balance between writing and your everyday business activities?

Bob Bly: I don't hire people to write the books, but in recent years I have hired people to write certain sections of the book, like rough drafts on sections that don't have to be included and where I'm not really interested in the topic. I outsourced those parts and took those and pasted them into the book, edited it in my voice, and added research that I had done. I normally write all my books myself, but I occasionally hire others to write small sections.

It's different to write a book because I'm not primarily an author, but books integrate very well for me because all of my work involves writing. I write direct mail packages. If I'm working on one and I can't go any further on it and I want a break, I'll work on the book for an hour or two.

Normally, I do the books early afternoon to late evening after client stuff, but sometimes I'll alternate and use them as a freshener to get off the heavy stuff for an hour or two. It integrates very well into my work life.

I don't know in terms of actual hours, but given that I only work on books an hour or two a day, generally I like to have nine months to complete a book. They usually take somewhere between six and twelve months. One recently took me eighteen months because of the amount of research involved.

My advice is that if you don't have the time and desire, there's nothing that says you have to write your own book. You can hire a ghostwriter and people do it all the time. If you're going to take that route, you should write a very comprehensive outline, give it to the writer, and review each chapter after it's been written. Then they'll give you a revised draft and, before you know it, you'll have a book.

RainToday: Why haven't you used professional marketing or PR agencies to market and promote your books?

Bob Bly: For me, the publication, the advance, and the royalties generated are not financially significant. I make a very good living as a freelance copywriter, around \$700,000 a year. Selling another hundred copies is not that important to me, so it doesn't make sense for me to hire them.

All of the marketing we do on the Internet, all the emails and the e-newsletters for example, are free, and my involvement, in terms of time, is free because we have a manager that does everything.

RainToday: What marketing outlets did you find most useful in spreading awareness of your books? Were there any outlets that you found to be a waste of time and/or money?

Bob Bly: I have an e-newsletter published monthly with 70,000 subscribers, so we promote heavily to my e-list, and my other affiliates promote my books to their lists and vice versa. Through email marketing we promote our books to hundreds of thousands of other readers.

The marketing outlets on the Internet that I find to be the most useful are mine and other people's e-newsletters, and sending email blasts to my customers and my affiliates' customers. That is the most effective, hands-down.

The thing that is least effective is, although I do it sometimes, going to Barnes & Noble or the library or a book club and giving a talk on your book. It's not worthwhile at all, it's just not. If authors really analyzed the rate of return on marketing dollars, they'd see it's a total waste of time.

RainToday: I know you have published your books with Henry Holt and Career Press. Could you tell me about your experience working with these publishers? How much do you think publisher reputation affects the success of a business book?

Bob Bly: I've never self-published. I've been pleased by the way publishers have edited and published my books. I was happy in most cases, although sometimes I didn't like the cover or the titles they came up with.

I've had a couple of books ruined by the publishing process. If you only publish one book in your lifetime and it's ruined in the publishing process, that's very traumatic. If you've done sixty, it's not as bad.

In terms of the lack of enough marketing and promotion from your publisher, that's not your editor's flaw, that's the inherent flaw of the publishing industry. It's just a fact of life. They just can't put the time into promoting the book that the author would like. The author can either do it themselves or leave it to faith.

I don't push publishers. I tell the PR department that I know they're busy and that I'm there to help. Occasionally, I've taken a proactive role and it's gotten me some nice publicity that I would not have otherwise gotten.

For example, I did a press release on a science book that I published. The publisher did a very good press release, but I thought it was very standard and I had a better idea. I did a press release that was more content-driven, which I thought a magazine could pick up

and run with as a feature article about science and science fiction. I sent it to *Bottom Line Personal* which has about a million subscribers.

They called and said they wanted to run it, so it will appear in their January issue. That would not have happened without me. I don't know for a fact if it will sell books, but it's very nice publicity and hopefully it will.

The reader, the buyer, does not care who the publisher is. The fact that it's Warner's vs. McGraw Hill vs. Clap Tree Press doesn't matter at all to the book buyer.

It does matter when you're promoting yourself as a consultant or a self-employed professional to potential clients because they're impressed when you say you have books published by McGraw Hill. If you say that you've had books published by Clap Tree Press, they think you've self-published it and won't be impressed.

It matters when you're using it as a marketing tool for yourself, but not to the book buyer out on the street. And, of course, it matters for distribution--the bigger publishers have sales representatives and can get the book in stores, and it'll sell.

**RainToday: How has becoming a published author affected your career?
What were the tangible and intangible benefits?**

Bob Bly: It has had an enormous effect on me, all positive. The short and simple answer is that when I started as a freelance copywriter, it accelerated my career and my income. Most copywriters who are high earners have had some advantage, like working for big marketing firms. I worked for an unknown company, so the way I became known was to have these books published.

Writing and having books published is important and helps in several ways. First, they will attract leads to you; it happens all the time. People will call and say they've read

your book and ask how much you charge to come speak. But unless it's a bestseller, the lead generation will be modest.

Second, it's a huge credential. People will want to know who you are, so they go to your website where it says you're an author. Suddenly, you have a credential and most people are more inclined to do business with you. What you want to do as a consultant or service professional is establish your reputation as an expert or guru in your field and a book is an essential part of that.

The third thing it does is act as a closer. Someone once said, "A book is a brochure that will never be thrown away." People will ask why they should hire you and you can pull the book out of your briefcase and say, "Here, here's why." A book is a great sale closer; people will want to hire the person who wrote the book on the topic.

The advantage of establishing yourself as a guru is that it drastically pulls people to you; everyone wants to hire the expert. And the way to become a guru is selective dissemination of information on your topic to your target audience.

Gurus are people who write and publish books and articles on the topic, who give workshops, speeches and keynote addresses at the big conventions, who have an e-newsletter, who have content-rich websites with great articles, tools, documents, and whitepapers on the subject. They are the people who publish, write and speak about the subject, and who become known as the gurus, and the book is part of that.

If you look at any field, you would be hard-pressed to name a guru that hasn't written at least one book. It's your union card, your calling card to becoming one. It's almost impossible to become a guru without a book. That's why anyone that wants to sell knowledge, expertise, or intellectual capital should think about eventually writing a book.

RainToday: How strong were these effects after publishing your first book compared to now, after publishing over 50 books?

Bob Bly: You have to continue to publish books because it's a peak and valley effect. People always want the next new thing. Someone new comes along and you're forgotten.

You need to continue to disseminate information and keep writing to maintain guru status. If your book was from 25 years ago, you're an old hat, especially today with the internet. You have to keep doing it.

Being a book author and always having new books coming out probably doubled or tripled my career. I'm twice as busy, twice as successful, and I've made two to three times as much money. I like writing, I like books, so I chose the book route, and it worked very well for me.

When it got to the point of twenty books, the number of books itself became a talking point. People in my industry would start commenting about that, and I actually didn't like it. I'd rather be known for writing one good book than for writing lots of books, but that's what I became known for.

All the books I have in progress or have had published actually gave me more visibility; that number got me attention. And even though it's not the type of attention I wanted, I'll take it, although I don't recommend that strategy.

What's better to do is write a book, learn new things, adapt new strategies, and update it with a second edition, to present what's new and what's fresh in your market. You write books to present the best of your state of expertise and if you do that on a regular basis, it'll accelerate your career.

It was easier before because now there's so much more information competing for the reader's attention and people have less time, not more. Nevertheless, it's still a very effective credential, even if no one's ever heard of your book.

When you mail it to a potential client, or when you show it on your website and have a review on it, that's a tremendous credibility builder.

RainToday: Could you tell me a bit about the revenue that you have received as a result of your books? Was the amount of time and money invested worth it in the end?

Bob Bly: For me, most of the royalties have translated into increased business. Here's a little anecdote. I wrote *The Elements of Tech Writing* in 1982, twenty-four years ago. I got a check for the royalties for my half a few weeks ago and it's only a couple of thousand of dollars, but I haven't even looked at that book in a couple of years.

I couldn't live on the royalties if I totaled them. They haven't been huge; my books don't sell five million copies each. We get a few thousands in royalties a year, a nice extra bit of income. So that income has never been tremendously significant for me, it's just a nice extra.

Book writing itself is not profitable, but when you add the secondary income, it's totally worthwhile. In my field there are tons of people who spend the day on the phone cold-calling; I never do that. I have consistently had, since 1982, much more work offered to me than I could ever hope to handle, and my choice of clients and fees is always in abundance.

I don't advertise – it's solely from my books and articles. Especially nowadays, a lot of what I write in articles goes into books. I'm having my third book published now that's a collection of my articles.

RainToday: What is the most challenging aspect of writing your books and getting them published? What advice do you have for future writers to overcome this challenge?

Bob Bly: If I had to pick one, today it is all about getting the book published, because selling books to publishers has become more difficult as the years have passed, not easier. The reason is that publishers today want to know if you have a platform, a built-in audience you can reach who you can sell your book to.

You have to have a platform today, and therefore it's much more difficult for authors to get their books published. You can be an expert and have private clients that love you, but if you can't sell hundreds of copies to each client, or these clients aren't coming to monthly events where there are thousands of people, you don't have a way of selling it to them. Overcoming that, for me, is the big challenge today - proving to the publisher that I have a platform that can sell the book I want to write.

They want a platform, so you have to build a one if you want to write on a particular topic. You have to build a content-rich website with a free e-newsletter and promote it so you have thousands of subscribers.

That's a platform. That interests a publisher. If you're in fashion and they tell you to go on QVC, do it - because if you're on QVC, you have a platform. If they ask you to be a spokesperson for the Eastern Seaboard, do it. It's the most important obstacle to overcome in getting published today.

RainToday: What, if anything, have you changed about the writing and publishing process in the years that you've been writing books?

Bob Bly: When I started, I just wanted to get a book published, and if I could do that, that was great. Then in the middle years, I wanted to write a specific book that would further or advance my career.

Now, having written so many, I only want to do a book when I think I can bring a totally unique value or perspective to the readers; when I know if I do this book it'll bring a special flavor that other books cannot duplicate, that it will bring something fresh and

original to the reader. Then I'll do it. I only want to do something when I can offer a unique, knowledgeable, and different approach. But, if I was starting out and I thought a book could make my career, sure I'd want to do it.

RainToday: Do you have any final advice to give to fellow professional service providers interested in publishing a book?

Bob Bly: This may be banal advice, but all else aside, if you feel compelled to write a book because you love the topic, or if you think you have something to say and you want to write it, pursue that.

It may not be an easy path, but if you persist and don't give up, you'll find a way to do it and it will be rewarding to you personally, psychologically, and emotionally. And even in today's over-published society, it'll still give a boost on your business far in excess of the time and money you put into it. It's worth doing.

RainToday: Are you planning on writing another book?

Bob Bly: I just signed a contract to write another book. I had never started my own internet marketing business because I'm too busy and, while I like writing the copy, I don't like the other details of the business. But I finally got around to it and launched my little internet publishing business, which is doing very well.

I was approached by a publisher to possibly to do a book in a *Starting and Running a Business* series, and I thought I would write a book to chronicle everything that I'm going through in doing it myself. That would be a worthwhile book.

I'm at the point where I'm ready to stop, but if one comes along or presents itself to me that will be really valuable to the reader, then I'll do it. After this one I doubt anything else will come up, but if it does, I'll do it.

About RainToday.com

RainToday.com – The Website

RainToday.com is the premier online source for insight, advice, and tools for growing your service business. Based in Framingham, Massachusetts, RainToday.com's core offerings include:

- Free articles by well-respected marketing, sales, and service business experts such as David Maister, John Doerr, Patrick McKenna, Suzanne Lowe, Mike Schultz, and Charles Green on core topics in selling and marketing professional services
- Case studies on what's working in marketing and selling professional services
- Interviews with world-renowned services marketers, rainmakers, and firm leaders
- Best practice and benchmark research such as How Clients Buy: The Benchmark Report on Professional Services Marketing and Selling from the Client Perspective and The Business Impact Of Writing A Book: Data, Advice, And Lessons From Professional Service Providers Who Have Done It by the analysts and experts at RainToday.com Research
- Premium content, products and tools designed specifically for helping service providers to grow their firms
- Webinars, seminars and conferences for rainmakers and service marketers

Rainmaker Report – The Newsletter

Rainmaker Report, the flagship free newsletter of RainToday.com brings 5 new pieces of content each week to rainmakers and services marketers worldwide. Visit www.raintoday.com to subscribe.

RainToday Research

The RainToday Research team produces best practices and benchmarking research to help marketers, sellers, and leaders of professional services firms to grow their business. The RainToday Research team delivers custom market and client research studies for individual organizations. For a complete list of available research titles, visit www.raintoday.com.

Featured Research: The Business Impact Of Writing A Book: Data, Analysis, And Lessons From Professional Service Providers Who Have Done It

This 71-page research report details the actual effects of writing a business book on 200 authors' practices. Learn more and view the full table of contents at: <http://www.raintoday.com/bookpublishing.cfm>

About The RainToday Research Team

Mike Schultz, Publisher, RainToday.com

As Publisher of RainToday.com, Mike is responsible for leading the world's foremost content publication on growth strategy, marketing, and selling for professional services firms. Mike is also a Principal with the Wellesley Hills Group and consults to professional services firms worldwide. He has written over 50 articles, case studies, research reports, and other publications in the areas of marketing and selling for professional services.

Prior to joining the Wellesley Hills Group and RainToday.com, Mike was Director of Training and Education Partnerships for Linkage, Inc. At Linkage, his primary responsibilities were leading the company's public and in-house seminar divisions, growing revenue and profit by over 800% in his tenure with the firm. Mike has also served as a marketing and sales process and strategy consultant with the boutique firm Product Knowledge Systems. Mike holds an MBA in Marketing and Entrepreneurship from Babson College.

John Doerr, Principal, Wellesley Hills Group

At the Wellesley Hills Group John consults with professional services firms in the area of growth strategy, marketing and lead generation, and business development. Before the Wellesley Hills Group, John served as the President of Management Centre Europe, the largest pan-European management and leadership training company, as President of AMACOM Publishing, and Senior Vice President at the American Management Association. John is a frequent public speaker and prolific author, and holds an MBA, magna cum laude, from the Graduate School of Management at Boston University.

Andrea Meacham Rosal, Chief Content Officer, RainToday.com

As Chief Content Officer of RainToday.com, Andrea is responsible for the content on the site, day-to-day operations of RainToday.com, and editing *Rainmaker Report*, the RainToday.com flagship weekly newsletter.

Andrea has worked as a consultant, writer, marketer, and researcher within professional service firms and non-profit organizations. She has written numerous articles, white papers, e-books, and major market research reports on a number of business and management subjects. Andrea holds an MBA from the John M. Olin School of Business at Washington University in St. Louis, with emphasis in organizational leadership, marketing strategy, and entrepreneurship.

Rebecca L. Gould, Editor, RainToday.com

As an Editor at RainToday.com, Rebecca is responsible for editing the content for RainToday.com and creating *Rainmaker Report*, the RainToday.com weekly e-newsletter. She is also a co-author RainToday's research, *The Business Impact Of Writing A Book: Data, Analysis, And Lessons From Professional Service Providers Who Have Done It*.

Rebecca has worked as a research consultant and business analyst for several Fortune 500 clients. Her experience includes determining the market scope for new products and services, conducting focus groups, designing websites, and writing industry reports. She has also conducted extensive research on the thought processes involved in decision-making. Rebecca holds a BA from Wesleyan University with honors in psychology.

Sarah McArdle, Research Associate, RainToday.com

As a Research Associate at RainToday.com, Sarah prepares and conducts interviews for research reports such as *The Business Impact Of Writing A Book: Data, Analysis, And Lessons From Professional Service Providers Who Have Done It*. In her free time, she enjoys reading, traveling, vacationing in Maine, and playing sports. Sarah holds a BA, summa cum laude, in Communications from Clark University and is currently an MBA Candidate