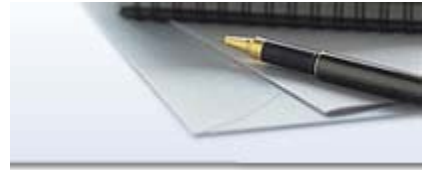


American Writers & Artists Inc. presents

Monthly Copywriting Genius



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Monthly Copywriting Genius: Issue #45

How This "Premium Bandit" Turned His Technical Writing Skills Into a \$100,000-a-Year Copywriting Career

MCG: What was your job prior to becoming a copywriter?

Bob: I was a technical writer with Westinghouse Defense in Baltimore. The division I worked in made military and civilian radar. Also, I was an advertising manager with Koch Engineering, a manufacturer of chemical equipment, in New York City.

MCG: Did you know what copywriting or direct response/mail was... before you became a copywriter?

Bob: I had never heard of either, though I was a direct response "premium bandit" in my youth.

MCG: And what is a "premium bandit"?

Bob: A premium bandit is someone who responds to direct response continuity offers just for the free gift or generous front-end offer, then immediately cancels. For example, I sent for Gevalia's free coffee maker three times.

MCG: That's funny. So how did you become a copywriter?

Bob: One day at Koch Engineering, my boss handed me a copy of *Direct Marketing* magazine, and I thought it looked more interesting than what I was doing.

MCG: Were you self-trained or did someone help you? Did you have a mentor?

Bob: I had several mentors, most notably Milt Pierce - whose class on direct response copywriting I took at NYU in 1982 - and Sig Rosenblum. But while they were friends and advisors, I did not work for them directly.

Andrew Linick taught me how to write copy for mail order, and he is also a good friend. Don Hauptman taught me to write direct mail packages to sell information products. Ed McLean showed me kindness and consideration early in my career - and ever since.

Steve Roberts, who was president of Edith Roman Associates (in 1999) taught me the list business - and is still doing so. A client and friend, Steve and I coauthored a book with Michelle Feit called *Internet Direct Mail: The Complete Guide to Successful E-Mail Marketing Campaigns*.

Bob Jurick of Fala Direct Marketing gave me my education in lettershop.

His First Success Led to a Huge Salary

MCG: How long have you been writing copy?

Bob: Counting my first job at Westinghouse - which involved copywriting for marketing materials, though they did not call it that - since June 1979. And, after that, full-time freelance since February 1982.

MCG: What was the first project you worked on as a copywriter?

Bob: I wrote ads for wastewater treatment equipment for a company called "Graver."

MCG: And what was the first success you had as a copywriter?

Bob: My success in my early career was reliant on the fact that manufacturers and others needed good copy, but agency copywriters didn't understand these products, while I, being a chemical engineer, did. So, I was making \$100,000 a year starting in my third year (and remember, this is back in the mid '80's), and have been ever since.

As for a specific project, I wrote a lead-generating campaign for U.S. West selling disaster recovery services to large corporations. It generated over a 50% response, \$5.6 million in immediate sales, and won a Gold Echo from the DMA.

MCG: Wow, that's pretty impressive. Is there any one project that stands out as your favorite?

Bob: Well, most of them I am not allowed to talk about (confidentiality agreements), but one is when I tripled results to the control for Physician's Desk Reference (PDR).

As of September 2001, this package had been the control for 13 years. It was a snap-pack - low-cost and extremely effective. With this control, the prospect removes the perforated stubs on the sides of the pack and pulls up the top sheet. That frees four or five under-layers. These layers include an order form with PDR product information on the reverse side, one or two inserts that promote additional book products that compliment the PDR and a pass-along order form with the additional products capsulized on the reverse side and a courtesy reply envelope.

The key seems to be that the prospects are repeat customers. They're doctors who are very familiar with the product and this snap pack made it possible to discover the order form as quickly as possible. The order form also contains an option for customers to opt-in to a continuous service arrangement where they'll receive advance notice of the book's publication date, automatic shipment and free shipping and handling.

Another important point: When response started to decline, I suggested adding a sticker to the snap-pack to warn prospects about relying on outdated drug information and revised the outer panel teasers and the order form copy to reflect the warning message... this lifted response.

Three Ways to Lift Response

MCG: Speaking of response rates, do you have a favorite technique to boost response?

Bob: Start with the prospect (their needs, concerns, fears, problems) and not with the product. Follow the copywriting formula: (1) get attention, (2) identify the reader's problems, (3) position the product as a solution, (4) prove the superiority and value of your solution versus others and (5) call for action.

Offer a premium to entice people to respond. For instance, in a successful letter to generate leads for quality control seminars we offered a free special report: "7 Steps to Achieving Performance Excellence Through Continuous Process Improvement: A White Paper For Printers."

Transfer the risk from the buyer to the seller with an unconditional long-term (60 to 90 days) guarantee of satisfaction. Put a time limit or expiration date on the offer.

MCG: How do you drum up clients?

Bob: At this point, as with many senior copywriters, many more projects than I could ever hope to handle come through repeat business, referrals and "over the transom," mainly from my books, articles, seminars and website.

MCG: What do you like most about copywriting?

Bob: It is intellectually stimulating, and I am never bored. I like the variety, too.

The First Steps to Crafting a Control

MCG: What's the first thing you do when you get an assignment? Study old controls... research the subject matter... talk with the editor?

Bob: I gather as much information as I can about the product and the market. This process is outlined in my article *How to Prepare for a Copywriting Assignment* which you can find on my website www.bly.com. I spend a lot of time studying the information. I key my notes into my PC. This reduces the mountain of source material into a more manageable print-out of between 2 and 20 or so single-spaced typed pages.

For long-copy assignments, I cut up the typed notes and paste each bit of information on an index card. I write a descriptive topic title at the top of the card. I then arrange the cards so the information is roughly in the order in which it will appear in the copy. This order usually comes to me as I study the material.

I write a copy platform describing the package I intend to write, including the assumptions made about the audience and the theme or slant of the package. Sometimes this platform is a brief, informal memo. But when I feel the client and I would benefit from greater detail, I do a more formal copy platform.

Often a platform will contain several different copy approaches and headlines. I recommend, wherever possible, split-testing of the best two or three, rather than betting the entire mailing on a single approach. But whether to do so is completely up to the client.

Once the platform is approved, I write the package. I go through many drafts before showing it to the client. Before the copy is e-mailed to the client, it is read by a professional proofreader (usually my office manager).

MCG: What do you need the client to supply you with?

Bob: For an existing product, there's a mountain of literature you can send to the copywriter as background information. This material includes:

- Tear-sheets of previous ads
- Brochures
- Catalogs
- Article reprints
- Technical papers
- Copies of speeches
- Audio-visual scripts
- Press kits
- Swipe files of competitors' ads and literature

And if the client suggests they can't send me printed material because their product is new, well that's nonsense. The birth of every new product is accompanied by mounds of paperwork you can give the copywriter. These papers include:

- Internal memos
- Letters of technical information
- Product specifications

- Engineering drawings
- Business and marketing plans
- Reports
- Proposals

By studying this material, the copywriter should have 80 percent of the information he needs to write the copy. And he can get the other 20 percent by picking up the phone and asking questions about the product, the audience and the objective of the copy.

Five Questions That Identify Your Target Audience

MCG: How do you get to know the target audience?

Bob: I usually ask the following questions about them:

- Who will buy the product? (What markets is it sold to?)
- What is the customer's main concern (price, delivery, performance, reliability, service maintenance, quality, efficiency)?
- What is the character of the buyer?
- What motivates the buyer?
- How many different buying influences must the copy appeal to?

Here are two tips on getting to know your audience:

- If you are writing an ad, read issues of the magazine in which the ad will appear.
- If you are writing direct mail, find out what mailing lists will be used and study the list descriptions.

MCG: How do you come up with the theme or idea for the promotion?

Bob: Start with the prospect, not with the product, using Michael Masterson's "BDF" formula for analyzing the core buying complex.

MCG: What is the BDF formula?

Bob: Beliefs, feelings, and desires:

- *Beliefs.* What does your audience believe? What is their attitude toward your product and the problems or issues it addresses?
- *Feelings.* How do they feel? Are they confident and brash? Nervous and fearful? What do they feel about the major issues in their lives, businesses or industries?
- *Desires.* What do they want? What are their goals? What change do they want in their lives that your product can help them achieve?

Now, before writing copy, you should write out, in narrative form, the BFD of your target market. Share these with your team and come to an agreement on them. Then write copy based on the agreed BFD.

Also, study the competition (especially in a crowded consumer marketplace like stock market newsletters or supplements) as well as the control and test packages. Look for an unexploited angle or hook or big idea.

MCG: Do you develop the headline first or start with the body copy?

Bob: I develop a ROUGH headline as a placeholder, and then start with the lead.

If I can nail the lead, I can write the rest of the body copy, and better headlines often emerge in the process.

MCG: After you finish a draft, do you let it rest for a day or so and then re-read and make edits?

Bob: Of course! I can't imagine there is a copywriter on the planet who does not do this!

Writing in an Authoritative Tone

MCG: Do you ever show your copy to another copywriter for comments and suggestions?

Bob: I have a reader on monthly retainer. She reads and comments on all my leads (usually the first one or two pages). I also have the entire draft read by a professional proofreader.

MCG: Do you specialize in writing for certain products? If so, which ones?

Bob: I specialize in writing about products that are technical, difficult to understand or have some degree of complexity to them: trading systems, software, computers, telecommunications, biotechnology, nutritional supplements, etc.

MCG: How would you characterize your style of writing (great at creating a conversational tone, strong on offer, etc.)?

Bob: I use a conversational tone that is also authoritative and credible.

Michael Masterson may not remember this, but 20 years ago, in reviewing a financial package I wrote for Buddy Hayden, he said: "I like this because it sounds like the writer knows what he is talking about." That's what I aim for.

Also, any time I can write a promo where we are selling a strong premium or offer, I love doing so.

MCG: Do you make suggestions on what things the client could test on your package... such as alternative headline, lead or offer?

Bob: Always. On landing pages, I often push clients into multi-variate testing, which means we are testing multiple pre-heads, heads, subheads, salutations, offers, guarantees and visuals.

MCG: How involved are you in the design?

Bob: I do a copywriter's rough, and I like to review the final layout in PDF.

MCG: How long did it take you to complete this project?

Bob: I probably had two to three weeks to do it. But if I had done it nonstop, it would have taken a few days: a day to study the product and other background, a day or so to write it and a half-day for rewrites.

A Promo That Out-performed the Previous Control

MCG: If you could divide your work up in parts, how much time do you devote to research, to writing, to editing?

Bob: I used to say 50% to research. But I don't really time it much. Probably still 50% research, and 50% writing and rewriting - between which I do not make a huge distinction. If you forced me to split research, writing, rewriting, then I'd say 50/25/25.

MCG: What are the statistics on this package... such as how long it has been a control, number of times mailed, by how much it beat the old control?

Bob: This is many years old, written for a German publishing company's U.S. office, which they no longer maintain. The only statistic I have is that the client told me it doubled the control.

MCG: Did you develop the theme of this package, or was it developed in conjunction with others?

Bob: It was my idea, though I often develop the idea in collaboration with the client. However, I told them what I wanted to do and got their approval before I wrote the package.

MCG: What was the goal? Bring on new subscribers... increase pay up rate... expand the universe of lists?

Bob: Increase sales of the product and beat the control.

MCG: What's the driving force behind this promotion?

Bob: The product, a loose-leaf, consisted of three elements: (1) a large and expensive loose-leaf binder, (2) supplements mailed every other month and (3) a disk with some shareware programs.

The control emphasized the binder first, supplements second and just mentioned the disk. It treated the Novell Companion as a product consistent of those three elements.

What I did was to say the Novell Companion had two parts: the binder and the supplements... positioned the disk as a bonus... and led with the bonus instead of the product. This is what doubled response.

A Value-driven Promotion

MCG: What emotion were you tapping into?

Bob: In this case, it was an offer package: I built up the value and benefits of the free software using the first two pages or so of the letter. (The control didn't go into any detail on the software on the disk.) I made it a "free" offer: If the reader ordered the product on a risk-free trial basis, they got the disk with the software, which they could keep regardless of whether they kept the product. In this way, the software was free.

MCG: Who came up with the idea for the format?

Bob: The package format was similar to their control, but the idea to focus on the software and make it a free premium - and feature it on the outer envelope and letter lead and headline - was mine.

MCG: Did you talk with subscribers to get a feel for their thoughts on this product - or was that not allowed?

Bob: I usually do, but - in this case - I was already intimately familiar with the audience - network administrators - a group I have written to countless times.

MCG: Do you think there is a difference between online prospects and direct mail prospects?

Bob: They are more similar than they are different, but there are two key differences that are important: (1) Prospects are even more skeptical online than offline, and (2) their attention span is perhaps even lower, in that it is so easy to click away the second their interest falters.

MCG: How were you able to build credibility for this product? And how important is that in this marketplace?

Bob: It was not the most important factor. What was more important is that we understood the problems these IT folks had in running their network and we had a solution they could try risk-free. The credibility is built by the technical content of the copy, demonstrating that we really know and understand these Novell networks and what is needed to manage them.

MCG: Is this product unique to the market place? If not, how did you make it stand out from the competition?

Bob: I don't recall if there were other loose-leaf services, but there was a ton of how-to information on Novell networks, particularly computer books and magazines, and we positioned our loose-leaf as better than both: magazines are up-to-date, but not comprehensive. Some books are comprehensive, but are out of date the instant they are published. A loose-leaf service is comprehensive, and with the supplement service, it's always current - never out of date. This is a standard argument in favor of loose-leaf products vs. books and magazines, and we used it here.

MCG: In your opinion, why has this package been working so well for so long?

Bob: It's a unique offer. Instead of "Buy this notebook and get supplements and some utility software on a disk," we said, "Get five great programs for managing your network FREE!"

MCG: Now that you see the package in print, if you could change anything about this package, what would that be and why?

Bob: My first draft had even more detail on the five programs, and also had a few more bursts and heads pointing the reader back to the free disk, and I would restore those.

A Few Fun Questions...

MCG: What's it like to work with you on a project?

Bob: On the egotistical scale, with 1 being "humble" and 10 being "the copywriter thinks he is God," I believe most clients would say I am a 3.

MCG: If you could choose another career besides copywriting, what would that be and why?

Bob: Copywriting is ideal for me, and I do not want to change. But if I was forced out of it tomorrow, then I would be a research chemist, which was my original ambition upon entering college. But that would require a better mind for science than I actually have, so it is not a realistic goal.

MCG: What advice would you give up-and-coming copywriters to help them learn this trade?

Bob: Specialize and then gain as much knowledge in your specialty - both knowledge of the subject as well as knowledge on what copywriting and marketing techniques work best in selling it.

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