
Marketing With Content

Using Free Information
to Sell Business-to-Business
Products and Services
to Engineers, Programmers
and Other Techies

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MARKETING WITH CONTENT:

Using Free Information to Sell Business-to-Business Products and Services to Engineers, Programmers and Other Techies

by Robert W. Bly

One of the hottest trends in business-to-business marketing today, especially promotions aimed at engineers, IT, and other technology buyers, is marketing with white papers and other free content offers.

In this special report, you'll learn how to sell technology ... ways to appeal to technology buyers ... how to write white papers that achieve strategic marketing objectives ... and how to build effective marketing campaigns around free content offers.

Selling to Techies

I am a chemical engineer as well as a Certified Novell Administrator, and I have been writing copy designed to sell products and services to engineers, programmers, and other techies for 30 years. Here's what I know about appealing to this special audience of engineers and other techies:

1) Engineers look down on advertising and advertising people, for the most part. Engineers have a low opinion of advertising - and of people whose job it is to create advertising.

The lesson for the business-to-business marketer? Make your advertising and direct mail informational and professional, not gimmicky or promotional. Avoid writing that sounds like "ad copy." Don't use slick graphics that immediately identify a brochure or spec sheet as "advertising." The engineer will be quick to reject such material as "fluff."

Engineers want to believe they are not influenced by ad copy - and that they make their decisions based on technical facts that are beyond a copywriter's understanding.

Let them believe it - as long as they respond to our ads and buy our products.

2) *Engineers do not like a “consumer approach.”* There is a raging debate about whether engineers respond better to a straight technical approach, clever consumer-style ads or something in between. Those who prefer the creative approach argue, “The engineer is a human being first and an engineer second. He will respond to creativity and cleverness just like everyone else.”

Unfortunately, there is much evidence to the contrary. In many tests of ads and direct mailings, I have seen straightforward, low-key, professional approaches equal or out-pull “glitzy” ads and mailings repeatedly. One of my clients tested two letters offering a financial book aimed at engineers. A straightforward, benefits-oriented letter clearly out-pulled a “bells-and-whistles” creative package. And I see this result repeated time and time again.

Engineers respond well to communications that address them as knowledgeable technical professionals in search of solutions to engineering problems. Hard-sell frequently falls on deaf ears here - especially if not backed by facts.

3) *The engineer’s purchase decision is more logical than emotional.* Most books and articles on advertising stress that successful copy appeal to emotions first, reason second.

But with the engineering audience, it is often the opposite. The buying decision is what we call a “considered purchase” rather than an impulse buy. That is, the buyer carefully weighs the facts, makes comparisons and buys based on what product best fulfills his requirement.

Certainly, there are emotional components to the engineer’s buying decision. For instance, preference for one vendor over another is often based more on gut feeling than actual fact. But for the most part, an engineer buying a new piece of equipment will analyze the features and technical specifications in much greater depth than a consumer buying a stereo, VCR, CD player or other sophisticated electronic device.

Copy aimed at engineers cannot be superficial. Clarity is essential. Do not disguise the nature of what you are selling in an effort to “tease” the reader into your copy, as you might do with a consumer mail order offer. Instead, make it immediately clear what you are offering and how it meets the engineer’s needs.

4) *Engineers want to know the features and specifications, not just the benefits.*

In consumer advertising classes, we are taught that benefits are everything, and that features are unimportant. But engineers need to know the features of your product - performance characteristics, efficiency ratings, power requirements and technical specifications - in order to make an intelligent buying decision.

Features should especially be emphasized when selling to OEMs (original equipment manufacturers), VARs (value-added resellers), systems integrators and others who purchase your product with an intention to incorporate it into their own product.

Example: An engineer buying semiconductors to use in a device he is building doesn't need to be sold on the benefits of semiconductors. He already knows the benefits and is primarily concerned about whether *your* semiconductor can provide the necessary performance and reliability while meeting his specifications in terms of voltage, current, resistance and so forth.

5) *Engineers are not turned off by jargon - in fact, they like it.* Consultants teaching business writing seminars tell us to avoid jargon because it interferes with clear communication.

This certainly is true when trying to communicate technical concepts to lay audiences such as the general public or top management. But jargon can actually enhance communication when appealing to engineers, computer specialists and other technical audiences.

Why is jargon effective? Because it shows the reader that *you speak his language*. When you write direct response copy, you want the reader to get the impression you're like him, don't you? And doesn't speaking his language accomplish that?

Actually, engineers are not unique in having their "secret language" for professional communication. People in all fields publicly denounce jargon but privately love it. For instance, who aside from direct marketers has any idea of what a "nixie" is? And why use that term, except to make our work seem special and important?

6) *Engineers have their own visual language.* What are the visual devices through which engineers communicate? Charts, graphs, tables, diagrams, blueprints, engineering drawings, and mathematical symbols and equations.

You should use these visual devices when writing to engineers - for two reasons.

First, engineers are comfortable with them and understand them. Second, these visuals immediately say to the engineer, “This is solid technical information, not promotional fluff.”

The best visuals are those specific to the engineer’s specialty. Electrical engineers like circuit diagrams. Computer programmers feel comfortable looking at flow charts. Systems analysts use structured diagrams. Learn the visual language of your target audience and have your artist use these symbols and artwork throughout your ad, brochure or mailer.

7) *Engineers are information seekers.* Nearly all engineers have at least a B.S. earned in most cases through a difficult course of study. They are reasonably intelligent and active consumers of technical and business information that can help them do their jobs better. That’s why Webinars, white papers, and other free content offers work particularly well in business-to-business marketing of technology products to both technical and management buyers.

Writing Content-Rich White Papers

It’s often the case that when a marketing technique is overused, it gradually loses its effectiveness over time. When that happens, usage drops off, and prospects are consequently no longer bombarded by the technique. Example: the AOL CD mailings.

A year or so later, some smart marketer remembers the old technique, realizes it hasn’t been used for a while, and decides to test it again. Sure enough, it works, because the market hasn’t seen it for some time. Other marketers who use it also start getting good results, and the marketing tool becomes popular once more.

In the consumer sector, sweepstakes is a direct marketing technique that varies in effectiveness over time. Now, in business-to-business, some direct marketers question whether white papers are running out of steam. The concern is that there are too many white papers -- so that the offer of yet another one has lost its appeal. As one white paper skeptic told me, “Prospects already have too much to read; why would they ask for more?”

Yet the numbers tell a different story: namely, that white paper marketing is alive and well and working. "The demand for white papers has never been higher," says Michael A. Stelzner, executive editor of WhitePaperSource.com. "During business downturns, corporations rely more on marketing to help them acquire leads and establish thought leadership. White papers are the secret weapon for companies. Our organization has seen a major increase in white paper use among businesses of all sizes, but especially those selling costly or complex products."

In a survey of nearly 1,400 IT professionals, the majority said they were more likely to download and read white papers than product literature. Over the years, I've seen a number of direct mail and e-mail tests in which offering a free white paper or other free content increased response rates 10% to 100% or more.

White papers work; more than half of IT professionals say white papers influence their buying decision. I do think, however, that we have to broaden our notion of how to use free content offers, which is essentially what a white paper is: free information designed to educate our prospects and motivate them to inquire about our product or service.

To begin with, I think it's not white papers themselves that are tiring but the name itself. "White paper" signals to some prospects a document that is an obvious selling tool. And with virtually every white paper in the world available for free, white papers have a low perceived value as a giveaway.

The solution is to keep using white papers in your marketing but to call them something else. The mailing list broker Edith Roman used to publish a print catalog of mailing lists. But instead of calling it a catalog, they called it the "Direct Mail Encyclopedia." Offering a free Direct Mail Encyclopedia helped generate more inquiries for their brokerage services.

Copywriter Ivan Levison calls his white papers "guides." Marketer David Yale uses "executive briefing." I'm partial to "special report." For consumer marketing, marketing expert Joe Polish suggests "consumer awareness guide," and for a B2B white paper giving product selection tips, I'd change this to "buyer's guide" or "selection guide." For a white paper giving tips or instructions on a process, I might call it a

“manual.” If you publish a print version that fits in a #10 envelope and is saddle stitched, you can call it a “free booklet.”

All of the above are variations on the free content offer. Direct marketers refer to free content offers as “bait pieces,” because they are used to “bait your hook” when you go “fishing” for sales leads. Does what you call your bait piece really matter? I think it does, because calling it a report or guide creates a perception of greater value – after all, thousands of publishers actually *sell* special reports and booklets for prices ranging from \$3 to \$40 or more. I often put a dollar price for the guide or report in the upper right corner of the front cover, which strengthens the perception that the freebie has value; I don’t think this would be credible on a document labeled as a white paper.

What about the complaint that prospects already have too much to read? I am reminded of a quotation from Rutherford Rogers: “We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge.” There is more information on the Internet than you could process in a thousand lifetimes. But good white papers don’t merely present information; they offer solutions to business and technical problems. Virtually every b-to-b sale you make is because someone thinks your product or service is the solution to their problem. A white paper can help clarify the problem as well as convince the reader that your idea or method is the best of many options for addressing it.

Every marketing campaign has an objective, yet if you ask most managers what the objective of their white paper is, they probably couldn’t tell you. Too many see white papers as an opportunity to merely collect and publish a pile of research material they found on the Web using Google. To make your white paper successful, you must define the marketing objective before writing a single word.

For example, a manufacturer found that consumers were not buying their do-it-yourself (DIY) underground sprinkler kits, because homeowners perceived installing the irrigation system by themselves as too difficult. Solution: a free DIY manual on how to install an underground sprinkler system in a single weekend. Clearly written and illustrated, the manual overcame the perception that this was a tough project, making it look easy.

In the pre-Internet era, bait pieces were mainly paper and ink. Thanks to the PC and the Internet, bait pieces can now be produced as PDF files and instantly

downloaded online. But at the receiving end, they are usually printed by the prospect and read on paper.

It may be that what's wearing out is not free content, but the standard white paper format: pages of black ink on 8 1/2 by 11-inch sheets of paper. To make your bait piece stand out, consider using alternative formats: DVDs, CDs, audio cassettes, podcasts, Webinars, tele-seminars, flash cards, stickers, posters, software, games, and slide guides. A slide guide is a cardboard promotional item with a moving slide or wheel that allows the prospect to perform some simple calculation, e.g., convert inches to centimeters or determine the monthly payments on a mortgage.

Most white papers are 6 to 10 pages – about 3,000 to 4,000 words – but you are not locked into that length. You can go shorter or longer, depending on the content you want to present and the marketing objective of the bait piece. The bait piece can be as short and simple as a list of tips printed on one side of a sheet of paper. Or it can be as long as a self-published paperback book.

Free content offers have been used effectively in marketing for decades, and rather than tiring, they have been given new life, thanks in part to the information-oriented culture spawned by the Internet. “Every organization possesses particular expertise that has value in the new e-marketplace of ideas,” writes David Meerman Scott in his book *Cashing In With Content* (Information Today, 2005, p. 8). “Organizations gain credibility and loyalty with customers, employees, the media, investors, and suppliers through content.”

Achieving Marketing Objectives

The use of white papers as a marketing tool has skyrocketed in recent years – not only for selling information technology (IT), but also to promote a wide range of products and services beyond hardware and software.

When a professional writer or editor is hired to produce the text for a white paper, he or she is typically not an expert in the subject, which is more often than not both technical and arcane. For instance, I've written white papers on everything from

measuring return on investment (ROI) from content management systems, to promoting bone healing with an implantable electromagnetic generator.

Pre-Internet, the greatest challenge for the writer tasked with producing a white paper was lack of information. Research was often the bottleneck in putting together a white paper. The local public library contained little usable information on the highly specialized topics most white papers covered. And subject matter experts (SMEs) were often uncooperative in sharing information with writers.

In the Internet era, we have the opposite problem: too much information. For instance, let's say you are writing a white paper on COBRA administration.

A Google search on COBRA will bring you 29.2 million Web pages mentioning COBRA. I kid you not. After going to just the top ten or twenty, and printing out the relevant information, you can end up with literally hundreds of pages of background information on COBRA.

Therefore, the writer's challenge is not finding sufficient content for writing the white paper, but in selection. How do you know what content to include? Or what to leave out?

All you have to do is ask and answer one critical question: "*What is the marketing objective of this white paper?*" Importantly, topic and marketing objective are not the same thing.

For a white paper titled "Administering COBRA," the topic is how to administer COBRA benefits. But if you are selling software to automate COBRA administration, your marketing objective might be something like: "Get human resources managers who need help in administering COBRA benefits to call us and ask for a demo of our system."

Once you have defined the marketing objective, then it's much easier to select the appropriate content from your vast library of source material for inclusion in your white paper, as well as ruthlessly prune research materials that sound interesting but do not help achieve the white paper's marketing objective.

There are three categories of content you should include in your white paper. The first is content that directly enhances the effectiveness of your white paper in achieving your marketing objective.

For instance, I recently wrote for a client a white paper on how to comply with a particular federal regulation concerning data privacy; let's call it "Regulation X." One of the white paper's marketing objectives is to convince readers that they should in fact make Regulation X compliance a priority (many do not).

So quite logically, I went on the Internet and researched whether any organization or their employees had suffered negative consequences from not achieving full Regulation X compliance. Many of them had, and I added some of that material to the white paper to drive home the point that you can't ignore Regulation X, and doing so would be harmful to both your company and your career.

The second type of information you can add to a white paper is useful tips or how-to information. On the Regulation X white paper, the client provided me with a list the federal government publishes on "9 simple steps to achieving Regulation X compliance."

The list is short and sweet, and so I included it in the white paper as a sidebar. The purpose of the white paper is not to serve as an actual how-to manual on Regulation X compliance; that's beyond the scope of any document limited to white paper length. But the reader feels he is getting some useful, actionable ideas from the sidebar, and so is more inclined to read and keep the white paper.

The third type of information your white paper should contain is content that compares the various options for solving the problem and steers the reader towards yours.

In the Regulation X white paper, there were two types of options. Most software companies sold one specific tool to enable compliance in each of the different rules covered by Regulation X.

My client, by comparison, sold a single comprehensive tool that covered all areas. In the white paper, we gave a seemingly objective analysis of the two options, which of course indicated that the advantages of the single-source approach outweighed those of the rule-specific tool approach – a belief which would naturally lead the reader to pick our software over competitors.

Now, when you are writing a white paper and there is a ton of information readily available on that topic, the temptation is to take the attitude “the more content we can cram into our white paper, the better.”

But that’s wrong. Why? Because your reader is busy. If your white paper has the heft of, say, *Moby Dick*, the reader will put it aside. The reader has limited time, and the writer’s task is one of *selectivity*: knowing what to leave out is almost as important as knowing what to put in.

So what do you leave out? To begin with, leave out information that the reader could just as easily get elsewhere but does not help forward the white paper’s marketing objective.

In the Regulation X white paper, for instance, the client had initially wanted to put several pages outlining the various sections and subsections of Regulation X. I asked him where he had gotten this detailed write-up. He replied that he had lifted it from a government Web site almost word for word. I recommended just summarizing Regulation X, its purpose, and its importance in a paragraph or two, and then including a link to the site for readers who wanted the complete description.

Next, leave out extraneous detail. I also asked the client, “Does knowing the full Regulation X requirements line by line help the reader decide which tool to use?” No, the client admitted, it does not. Then it’s extraneous detail, I replied, and should not be included because it adds length without adding value.

The third type of information you should leave out of your white paper is material that is interesting but irrelevant. I read a white paper on fuel cells that went into detail on the history of batteries, and included the invention of the voltaic cell and galvanic pile. It was fascinating but totally irrelevant to the auto maker deciding which fuel cell technology to put into his electric car.

Is there an ideal length for white papers? Yes and no. Of course the text of a white paper should be as long as it takes to achieve the marketing objective.

But as a rule of thumb, I find the most effective white papers to be between 3,000 and 4,000 words. If yours is 2,000 words or less, it doesn’t seem substantial enough, and perhaps is best suited to an article instead of a white paper. Once you go much

beyond 5,000 words, the bulk becomes ponderous enough to scare off busy prospects who would at least skim the document if it seemed less imposing.

Where to Get Content Free

One of the most effective and popular marketing techniques being used today, both online and offline, is the free content offer.

You know how it works: to generate a lead or an order, you offer the prospect some valuable free content in exchange for an inquiry or a purchase.

The free content can take many different forms: booklets, special reports, white papers, article reprints, manuals, even books. These items are called “bait pieces,” because they are used to “bait the hook” when you go “fishing” for a lead or sale.

The process of building marketing campaigns around free content offers is called “educational marketing” or “edu-marketing,” because it generates sales by educating prospects about your product or service – or the problem it solves.

Today, the bait piece is often electronic, not print. For online marketing, white papers and reports are offered as downloadable PDF documents. The advantage is that the prospect gets instant delivery of the bait piece, which costs you nothing in printing and postage.

Bait pieces don’t have to be documents. You can offer software, DVDs, videos, or CDs. The advantage is that the prospect is forced to give you his snail mail address, because otherwise, you can’t ship the physical item to him.

I am constantly urging clients to use the bait piece strategy -- free content offers - to increase response rates to lead-generating and one-step promotions. But to my dismay, many don’t follow my suggestion.

Why not? The three biggest objections these marketers have to the bait piece strategy revolve around the creation of the bait piece itself. They are:

1. I can’t write.
2. I don’t have time to write it.
3. I don’t have the budget to hire a writer and designer to produce the bait piece.

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If any of these are stopping you from offering free content, I have some good news for you: now you can get “ready-made” bait pieces from Uncle Sam. And most won’t cost you a nickel.

How? Many people don’t realize that the U.S. government printing office (GPO) is one of the largest publishers in the country.

They also aren’t aware that many of the U.S. GPO publications are not copyrighted – meaning they are yours to reprint, distribute, and use however you want (the government does ask that you credit them as the source, as a courtesy).

Years ago, when radon was in the news, I responded to a newspaper ad for a radar inspection service because they offered a free “consumer awareness guide to radon.” When I got it, I realized they had taken a GPO publication and just imprinted it with their name and address.

You can find a selection of GPO reports and booklets at the Federal Citizen Information Center (FCIC). Before the Internet, FCIC used to advertise their free publications catalog aggressively on TV – remember those commercials urging you to call or write “Pueblo, Colorado”?

Now, you can find the FCIC online at www.pueblo.gsa.gov, where you can download and print dozens of publications for free. Or you can call them toll-free at 888-878-3256 for a free copy of their catalog of publications.

How might a marketer take advantage of this rich treasure trove of free content from Uncle Sam?

Well, one of the publications I found on the site is “Stop, Think, Click: 7 Practices for Safer Computing.” This 12-page report “helps protect your information, your computer, even yourself ... [against] online scammers, hackers, and identity thieves.”

Could you imagine a high-tech firm selling firewalls, anti-virus software, Internet monitoring programs, or content filters offering this as a free report in their ads or online? Of course: it’s a natural fit. And they wouldn’t have to write a word; they could just put their logo and contact information on the front and back pages of the existing report.

Another report I downloaded for free at the FCIC Web site was “Taking Control of Your Finances.” This 12-page document had sections on common mistakes people make with money, how to protect yourself against financial fraud, and five things you should

know about credit cards. Any financial planner could get more leads by offering this free bulletin to potential customers interested in saving and making money.

The library of free content available at <http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/> is quality material: the federal government pays writers and designers good money to produce these publications, which are almost universally well written and attractively designed.

So if you want to offer free content, but you don't have the time, skill, or resources to create your own bait pieces, that's no longer a valid excuse for ignoring the bait-piece strategy. Your tax dollars have already been spent creating a wealth of content you can offer your prospects as a bait piece. And it's yours free for the taking.

One additional tip: another good source of content is books in the "public domain" – that is, books on which copyright protection has expired. Most nonfiction books published before 1923 fit into this category. Of course, the drawback here is that much of this content is dated – but not all.

Note: I am not an attorney. So I can't give you legal advice. Therefore, you should check with your attorney before using previously published material from any source, other than your own company, in your marketing programs.

Building Marketing Campaigns Around Free Content Offers

One of the easiest – and most effective – ways to generate more leads and orders from your marketing is to offer, as a bonus, a free special report. But be careful: your prospects already have too much to read and don't really want a "report" per se.

What they seek is valuable content that can help them solve a problem, do their job better, or make more money. If they think your free report can deliver some of that, they'll respond to your e-mail or sales letter just to get their hands on it.

So how can you transform a ho-hum offer of yet another "free report" into a compelling free content offer that sends your response rates soaring?

The most important factor determining the desirability of your free special report is the topic: does it cover something your prospects need or want to know?

Great topics for free special reports include tips, predictions, news, interpretation, analysis, case studies, and discussion of a controversial issue.

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Example: a newsletter publisher found that its most popular feature was the monthly “You Be the Judge” column summarizing a court case and challenging the reader to guess the outcome. Subscription rates skyrocketed when the publisher began offering a “Best of ‘You Be the Judge’” compilation as a bonus to new subscribers.

I’ve found that anything having to do with making money works well as a free information bonus. For instance, a newsletter published as part of its subscription an annual salary survey of the industry it covered. When we offered reprints of last year’s salary survey to new subscribers, orders for new subscriptions increased 25%.

Giving your free report an attractive or compelling title also helps boost response rates when offering it as a premium.

During the Clinton years, the American Spectator offered a special report “Inside the Clinton White House” (that may not be the exact title; it was years ago and memory fades) free to new subscribers.

Since so many marketers offer free reports, you may stand out by offering free content in other media; e.g., audio CDs, videos, software, online tools.

Here’s a way to quickly and easily create an effective information premium: promote a paid teleconference to your list and record it. Then duplicate it on audio CD and offer that bonus. If you charged \$79 for the teleconference, you can legitimately say the CD has a value of \$79. That’s important, because the higher the perceived value of the free bonus, the greater the demand.

If you use free special reports as information premiums, put a price in the upper right corner of the front cover of each report. Set up a reports library on your Web site where visitors can purchase the reports for that price.

That way, when you give them away as free bonuses and specify the value, you can legitimately say: “This report sells for \$29 on our Web site, but reply today and it’s yours free.”

Here’s a gimmick that works well: instead of using an 8 ½ by 11-inch page size, make your report digest size (5 ½ by 8 ½-inch page size).

Let’s say the report is tips about leadership. Print the title on the front cover in reverse – white letters on a black background – and call it “The Little Black Book of

Leadership Secrets.” Both “secrets” and “little black book” create an aura of importance and exclusivity that make people want the booklet.

If you want the free booklet to build your image as a thought leader in your industry, consider publishing it as a small paperback book. Then, when you offer it free in your marketing, you can position your company as “The Folks Who ‘Wrote the Book’” on Topic X. Note: If you sell to the federal market, government employees are not allowed to accept free gifts worth more than \$25. So the price on your free book or report should be \$24.95.

About the Author

BOB BLY is an independent copywriter and consultant with 30 years of experience in business-to-business, high-tech, industrial, and direct marketing.

Bob has written copy for over 100 clients including Network Solutions, ITT Fluid Technology, Medical Economics, Intuit, Business & Legal Reports, and Brooklyn Union Gas.

Awards include a Gold Echo from the Direct Marketing Association, an IMMY from the Information Industry Association, two Southstar Awards, an American Corporate Identity Award of Excellence, and the Standard of Excellence award from the Web Marketing Association.

Bob is the author of more than 75 books including *The Complete Idiot's Guide To Direct Marketing* (Alpha Books) and *The Copywriter's Handbook* (Henry Holt & Co.). His articles have appeared in numerous publications such as *DM News*, *Writer's Digest*, *Amtrak Express*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Inside Direct Mail*, and *Bits & Pieces for Salespeople*.

Bob has presented marketing, sales, and writing seminars for such groups as the U.S. Army, Independent Laboratory Distributors Association, American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and the American Marketing Association. He also taught business-to-business copywriting and technical writing at New York University.

Bob writes sales letters, direct mail packages, ads, e-mail marketing campaigns, brochures, articles, press releases, white papers, Web sites, newsletters, scripts, and other marketing materials clients need to sell their products and services to businesses.

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He also consults with clients on marketing strategy, Internet marketing, and lead generation programs.

Prior to becoming an independent copywriter and consultant, Bob was advertising manager for Koch Engineering, a manufacturer of process equipment. He has also worked as a marketing communications writer for Westinghouse Defense. Bob Bly holds a B.S. in chemical engineering from the University of Rochester and has been trained as a Certified Novell Administrator (CNA). He is a member of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and the Business Marketing Association.

Bob has appeared as a guest on dozens of TV and radio shows including The Advertising Show, Bernard Meltzer, Bill Bresnan, CNBC, and CBS Hard Copy. He has been featured in major media ranging from the LA Times and Nation's Business to the New York Post and the National Enquirer.

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