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Guerilla WriteFare: A Conversation with Bob Bly

If I had to pick someone who represents the freelancer's freelancer, Bob Bly would be one of the first names to appear on my list. Bob is the author of over 50 books on writing and the writing business, including *Write More*, *Sell More*, *Secrets of a Freelance Writer*, *The Copywriter's Handbook*, and *Become a Recognized Authority in Your Field*. He is an independent copywriter and consultant with over 20 years in the direct marketing business.

Bob attributes his success in the freelancing business to a love of what he does and his focus on customer service and self-promotion.

WT: You've written over 50 books. How do you manage to be so prolific?

Bly: I'm a book person. When I have something that I learn, I need to communicate it. For me, a book is the easiest way. There are alternatives: put what you know onto a Web site, write articles for magazines, publish a newsletter, give speeches and seminars. You have to find the venue that works for you.

WT: It really is about getting your name out there, isn't it?

Bly: As I discuss in *Become a Recognized Authority in Your Field*, it's a combination of areas that gets you recognized. Most of us gravitate toward one area -- for me, that's books. For someone else, that's a Web site and speaking, or teaching classes. It's the combination of things you do, not any one thing, that gets you exposure. I got an inquiry recently from someone who read a few of my books and subscribes to my free ezine. I don't know which one of those prompted her, but it's usually a combination of things.

WT: But you didn't begin by writing books. In *Secrets of a Freelance Writer*, you talk about using sales letters to promote yourself.

Bly: I wrote my first sales letter, having never written direct mail, based on instinct. I went to the Red Book of Advertising Agencies in New York City, sent out 500 letters

second thing I did was write a ton of articles at no cost for Business Marketing, which in the 80s was the one magazine that served the market I was going after -- advertising managers in technology, manufacturing, and industrial companies.

WT: Some people recommend cold-calling, but direct mail seems more effective.

Bly: I have never done much cold-calling myself -- normally I did direct mail. But I went into a new market a year or so ago, so I hired someone to cold call into that market. It was tremendously effective. I like using a third party because she could say things about me that I couldn't say for myself.

WT: How can technical writers make the transition to business writing?

Bly: Technical writers often take the attitude that the writing should be dry because the subject matter is dry. They start with the process or the subject. As a business writer, you start with the reader and bridge them to the subject matter.

Good writing begins with the audience, with pinpointing that target, defining it, and understanding it very well. I do a thing I call BDF analysis: Belief, Desire, and Feelings. At the top of a page I define the audience at the surface level -- pediatricians, or middle managers at service companies, for example. Then I use BDF to identify the core complexes of the readers:

- Beliefs: What do the readers believe? What are their attitudes? What do they think?
- Desires: What do they want?
- Feelings: Are they angry or scared? Are they nervous?

If you define these well, your work will be much better.

WT: What would you suggest to those just starting out on their freelance careers?

Bly: Before you quit your current job, take the time to set up everything in your freelance business short of actually starting to work. Have the tools you need in place -- your computer, business phone, voice mail, e-mail and domain name. Create and print your stationery, letterhead, and business cards. Write the sales letter you're going to use. If you're going to have a brochure, create and print it. Set up everything.

Save enough income for the first six months. Make sure your money situation is covered. The best piece of financial advice for freelance writers comes from David Kohn: Live below your means. That takes a lot of pressure off you.

Moonlight before you start. Get your first two or three clients while you're still employed. That way you'll not only have samples, but you'll also have reference accounts.

Ask yourself who you want to work for, and what services you want to provide. Then, figure out how you're going to reach those people. Where are you going to get a mailing list? Are there associations you need to join?

WT: And then it's time to build your client base. The writing business is as much about giving your customers good value as it is about getting the ink onto the paper.

Bly: I always take the point of view that the client wants to spend as little as possible. Maybe I create a postcard mailing for them to send to 80 distributors. Let's say they net six of those. It may only be a few hundred dollars for me, but they're going to appreciate that I was successful for them. You're building the relationship -- you're not just trying to get the project.

It's this business side that most writers fall down on -- customer service and marketing. If you don't know how to treat customers, you turn people off. If you don't market yourself, you don't get the exposure you need to be successful.

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