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So You Want To Be A Copywriter?

By Bill Knight

Wannabe copywriters often check out my site for information relating to my services and fees. And

quite right too! I still give my competitor's websites a 'gander' every now and then, in case they're doing something that I should be doing.

I receive many emails from students working towards their marketing or other media degrees, asking for a few tips about securing work in the 'Copywriting Industry' I didn't realise we had an industry! If we have, it's surely a cottage industry because most copywriters are freelancers who work on their own and usually from home.

"Well what about advertising and marketing agencies?", They enquire. "Well what about them?", I ask. And so it goes on and on until they realise that a copywriter who works for a structured and institutional organisation, is a totally different animal to that of the freelancer.

Institutional versus Freelance

So what are the differences between them? There are many. Let's look at the agency writer. He or she is likely a talented person with creative skills and a good command of the English language. They will have learned, from their course work, the psychology of selling, aspects of communication and how to write in a flowing and interesting style.

Each day, at the agency office, they will work on their assignments, which have been delegated to them by their manager. Their work will be scrutinised by their manager or team leader, who, in the interests of their company, will decide whether it's worthy of publication.

After a couple of years, doing similar 'run of the mill' stuff, they may be offered the opportunity of coming up with something completely original. All by themselves, with no guidance, un−tethered by their mentor. And, in the interests of the company, not to mention their job security, they will produce something as institutional as they have been doing previously. They'll play it safe. Well wouldn't you?

Eventually, their creative awareness and talent may break through the institutional membrane and they'll want to move on. They'll want to do something for themselves. They may even become a freelancer. A freelancer is just about anyone with a passion and a flair for writing. Some have started out on their career path by working for agencies, some have graduated in English and just feel 'qualified' to do the job, whilst others come into the 'industry' from a variety of other routes.

By whichever means, once they become a freelancer, they quickly learn to survive. To survive and prosper as a freelancer you must have the ability to adapt, diversify and develop the skill of writing in any and every style humanly possible. But there's more! You will have to meet deadlines, sometimes work for less than the lower national wage limit and learn to turn your brain inside out. Sounds painful!

What does it all amount to? What's the bottom line?

Let's summarise thus far.

A copywriter working for an agency will work in a nice warm office with nice friendly colleagues, writing simple institutional letters, brochures, ads and information packs. They'll be paid somewhere between 18K to 26K, get 4 to 5 weeks annual paid holiday and get to slag off the boss at the office Christmas party.

Sounds pretty good to me. If you want to be a copywriter, I recommend you go down this path. It offers a good salary and a steady secure position.

The freelancer's life is not so clear cut. They mostly work on their own, write all kinds of stuff about everything and wonder where their next packet of fags is going come from. They only take short breaks, get stressed and slag everyone off at any party.

They're self−employed, so have to keep accounts. They have to buy all their own stationery, stuff their own letters and post off their mailings. They have to advertise or even worse, they have to compete to sell their services for a pittance to unknown clients through some online freelance website. The pits!

Sounds terrible doesn't it? Then why do we do it?

The uncovered truth about freelancing

Well, obviously I can't speak for everyone so I'll tell you why I do it and how I do it. "Listen up"

The main reason I write for a living is because I love it. I've always been a creative person so writing comes as second nature. And let's face it, it's not very difficult to do.

I love the challenge that each assignment brings. I have ghost−written several books for clients and each has been on a completely different subject. The downside of ghost−writing is having to sign away all rights to the work, which means you can't showcase it or put it in your portfolio. The client gets all the credit for your masterpiece.

I've written many articles for websites, emails and sales letters. I write poetry, humor and boring stuff like FAQ's and product information. But I'm never bored because the work can be so varied.

Then there's the money of course. A good freelancer should be able to make around 50K a year. Some make less but some can make over 100K a year. There really is no limit. Make a name for yourself and not only will you be earning a good living, you could possibly find yourself in the enviable position of being able to pick and choose the work you do.

Still want to be a copywriter?

Good! Now let's dispel a few myths by answering a few questions that I get asked all the time.

The 6 Most Frequently Asked Questions

1. Do you need a formal education and a degree?

No way! Although most agencies will only employ graduates, there's no reason why a freelancer needs anything other than a good command of the English language, creativity and a flare for writing. There are many copywriting courses available, if you're a little unsure or want to hone your skills, but make

sure the course work is set by an experienced and reputable copywriter.

2. Can previous work experience help?

Yes! Sales and marketing experience is very useful if you intend to make a living as a sales copywriter. At the very least, you should understand the sales process and the customer service aspect.

3. I don't have a portfolio. How can I get work?

Create one! Write some articles, write a small book, write some sales letters, brochures and emails. Show what you can do. Write for free. Write for charities, magazines or newspaper letter pages. Use your imagination and write about anything.

4. Where are the best places to get work?

You could try contacting marketing agencies by way of a letter of introduction, but don't hold your breath. Magazines are always looking for fillers, so this would be a good place to start. Local small businesses might be interested in having some leaflets written for door to door delivery. Contact them by letter, listing your services and your rates. When you have gained a little experience, go online and subscribe to some of the freelance websites. Elance, Freelance Work Exchange and Getafreelancer are quite good, but be prepared to compete with other bidders from all over the world. Some Indian freelancers will work for as little #3 an hour, so you're up against it. Still, I think it's worth the experience. I get some of my assignments this way.

Build a website or have someone do it for you. I'm of the opinion that all businesses should have a

website if they want to stay in business. Create a mail shot and work your way through your local Yellow Pages. Sell yourself. It's what you will have to do anyway, so get used to it.

5. What should I charge for my services?

This is just a guide. You'll instinctively know when you've become established.

A one page letter consists of around 500 words and should take no more than 2 hours to write, revise and finalise. If you want #10 an hour, that'll be #20 for the job. Don't bother quoting a price per word as you'll find yourself writing a load of drivel in order to fill the pages.

Again, once you're established you can charge what you think your work is worth. It's not uncommon to charge #400 for a 6 page sales letter, if you're good.

6. What do you think is the most essential skill of a successful copywriter?

If you can't do this, you won't be very successful.

"Write as you talk"

That's it! You must be able to communicate with your reader right off the page. Your words must be conversational. You must be able to 'speak' to your reader and stir their interest, their emotions, their desires.

If you're trying to sell them something, you must be convincing. Your letter has to be compelling and attention−grabbing. Finally, your letter has to make them take some action. This could be filling in a form, making a phone call or writing a cheque. It's a call to action.

Still think you have what it takes?

Then go forth and return with the bountiful harvest of your creative genius!

If you want to know more, and there is a lot more, subscribe to my newsletter.

Good luck and warm regards, Bill Knight

Bill Knight is an International freelance copywriter and marketer, based in the UK. He specializes in creating compelling web page sales letters and informative web page content.

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A Professional Copywriter Can Help You Avoid These Seven Common Marketing Pitfalls

By Heather Robson

Small business owners often make the mistake of believing that they can get by writing their own copy for their marketing materials. Even big corporations sometimes fall into this trap believing they can be just as effective handling copy development in house.

While it's true that you can produce passable copy this way, you often are missing out on better results−−results that a copywriting professional can bring to your marketing efforts. And settling for lesser results means your business isn't doing as well as it could, and its marketing materials are not providing the return on investment that they should.

The main concern that business owners and marketing directors alike have about hiring a professional copywriter is cost. They fear that the cost will be prohibitive. But in most cases the copywriter's fees are minimal compared to the overall cost of the marketing campaign. And good copy can improve the success of the campaign by up to 34%.

The reason a professional copywriter can make such a difference to a marketing campaign is not only that they know how to write persuasively...they also know what common mistakes to avoid. If you're trying to get by using copy written by somebody whose main focus is not copywriting, your marketing materials could be suffering fron one of these common traps.

1. Me−Centered Copy
It's so easy when you're selling a product or service to focus on that product or service. It seems like a no−brainer. But the truth is doing so can kill your response rate. Professional copywriters know to avoid this me−centered mentality and focus on the prospect instead. This shift alone is enough to make a sharp improvement in any marketing campaign.

2. No Call to Action
So many marketing pieces do a great job of getting the prospects attention. They draw them in, convince them of the product or service's merit...and just when the prospect is ready to buy, they drop the ball, and forget to tell the prospect what to do next. A call to action is a simple, but often overlooked, way to build response rate...and it's something that every copywriter worth his (or her) salt will include.

3. Selling Features
This common marketing trap is similar to the Me−Centered copy trap. Instead of figuring want the prospect wants to know about your product (why they need it, how it will help them), it's so easy to just tell them what you know about the product. A professional copywriter will avoid this trap and focus on a product's benefits, not features.

4. No Testimonials
If your copy doesn't include powerful testimonials, you're marketing efforts are missing out on one of

their most powerful tools. A professional copywriter will always ask about testimonials. If you don't have them, they'll offer some tips for collecting them.

5. Where's Your Target?
One of the most common copywriting errors is overlooking the target market. In an effort not to exclude anyone, the copy doesn't appeal to the people it's really meant for. If your copy doesn't immediately grab (and hold) the attention of those your product or service is meant for, a professional copywriter can help your response rate.

6. What's Your USP?
Your Unique Selling Proposition. What sets you apart from the competition. And ultimately why someone buys from you. A professional copywriter will want to know what it is or will help you determine it. And they will use it to make your marketing copy stronger.

7. Don't generalize.
A professional copywriter will spend time researching the market and issues of interest related to your product. They'll always be specific with the information they convey, adding intrigue and credibility to your every marketing piece.

These are just some of the most common pitfalls that a professional copywriter can help you avoid. By enlisting the services of a professional, you can improve your marketing efforts through a better response rate and an increased return on investment.

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