

# Copywriting UNIVERSITY

*Michael Senoff Copywriting Interview Series*



## **Bob Bly On Copywriting**

Michael Senoff Interviews Master Copywriter: Bob Bly

Dear Student,

I'm Michael Senoff, founder and CEO of [HardToFindSeminars.com](http://HardToFindSeminars.com).

For the last five years, I've interviewed the world's best business and marketing minds.

And along the way, I've created a successful home-based publishing business all from my two-car garage.

When my first child was born, he was very sick, and it was then that I knew I had to have a business that I could operate from home.

Now, my challenge is to build the world's largest free resource for online, downloadable audio business interviews.

I knew that I needed a site that contained strategies, solutions, and inside information to help you operate more efficiently

I've learned a lot in the last five years, and today I'm going to show you the skills that you need to survive.

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And to really make my site different from every other audio content site on the web, I have decided to give you access to this information in a downloadable format.

Now, let's get going.

Michael Senoff

*Michael Senoff*

Founder & CEO: [www.hardtofindseminars.com](http://www.hardtofindseminars.com)

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## **Bob Bly Copywriter Interviewed By Michael Senoff**

Here is a two hour interview with master copywriter Bob Bly. This is a GREAT interview because I grilled bob with your questions on the inside secrets of the copywriting business. The purpose of this interview is not to sell you anything. It's just straight-up killer copywriting secrets and content. Bob Bly is an independent copywriter and consultant with more than 25 years experience in business-to-business, high-tech, industrial, and direct marketing. McGraw-Hill calls Bob Bly "America's top copywriter." He is the author of what many consider to be the "Bible" of copywriting, The Copywriter's Handbook, published by Henry Holt & Co. The legendary David Ogilvy says: " I don't know a single copywriter whose work would not be improved by reading this book. And that includes me." Bob Bly writes sales letters, direct mail packages, magalogs, e-mail marketing, ads, brochures, articles, press releases, newsletters, Web pages, white papers, catalogs, and other marketing materials clients need to sell their products and services to business and direct-response buyers. Most copywriters out there today have, at best, only a few years of experience -- and are not yet masters of their craft. Bob has been writing winning promotions for top clients like Boardroom, IBM, Intuit, Ken Roberts Company, Swiss Bank, Nortel Networks, Praxair, and dozens of other companies for over a quarter of a century! Yes, there are a few other senior copywriters you can hire today. But Bob does something many of them do not: he writes all of his own copy. He doesn't hire junior copywriters to work on your promotions. If he takes on your job, you know that every word in your promotion was written by Bob Bly... an advantage not available from any other source. This may be your only chance to get answers from one of the best copywriters ever. Bob also has a publishing company called CTC Publishing CTC Publishing is the publishing company of Bob Bly, the man McGraw-Hill calls "America's top copywriter." Bob has written copy for more than 100 companies including Boardroom, Phillips, IBM, Medical Economics, AlliedSignal, and Lucent Technologies. He is the author of more than 60 books and a columnist for DM News and Early to Rise. Information on Bob Bly go <http://www.ctcpublishing.net/cmd.php?af=417279>

Bob: Bob Bly speaking.

Michael: Good morning Bob. It's Mike Senoff. How are you doing today?

Bob: Good, how are you doing?

Michael: Good. Did you have a good weekend?

Bob: I did.

Michael: So, we're going to be answering exactly what the marketers and the copywriters want to know.

Bob, the first question is from John Rostoli in Norway and he wants to know how did you setup your copywriting business in the early days and how did you get your first assignments? Did you do any spec work to get testimonials? And this was one of the most common questions that I got from people and I think it goes back to the fear that copywriters don't have credibility and they believe they need testimonials from others to prove their credibility. How would you answer that?

Bob: Well, I wasn't smart enough to think that way. So, when I started I had no testimonials. I had worked in corporate America in the corporate world in junior level advertising manager type positions for a couple of year for two different companies. So, when I went into copywriting, I still had a job.

Michael: Were these newsletter publishers?

Bob: No, not at all. The first one was Westinghouse Electronics and Aerospace. My division made radars, like you go to the airport and you see a radar, that's what we made. And the second company was an engineering firm that made equipment for chemical plants.

Michael: So, what were you doing in relation to advertising with them?

Bob: Well, all those types of companies have to advertise and I was managing their advertising program. The job at the engineering firm,

for example, we would run ads in trade journals and we had an ad agency who created those ads and I managed their work. And this was in the early 80s. When an engineer would respond to one of those ads, they'd want some technical sales literature, so I would actually write it and I'd hire a designer to design it and then we'd print it and mail it out. We also did a lot of marketing in trade shows, so we had to create exhibits and set those up at various trade shows. So, I still had that job and what I did, as I was real simple minded about it. I went to a book called *The Red Book*, the standard directory of advertising agencies. Since I was the advertising manager of an industrial company, I sent a one-page sales letter to 500 creative directors at 500 different advertising agencies, who in the *Red Book* indicated that they had one or more industrial type accounts and that's how I started.

Michael: What did you offer basically say?

Bob: The letter is reprinted in full in my book, *Secrets of a Freelance Writer*, but the headline was, how an engineer and an ad manager can help you write better ads and brochures. And the letter basically said I'm a freelance copywriter, specializing in industrial advertising and I will write your ads or brochures or whatever else you need and if you'd like to get a copywriting information kit, more information about my services and some samples of my work -- and again, this is before the Web, so you couldn't send them to a website -- just mail back the enclosed reply card and I'll send it to you. That was the offer.

Michael: Were you a student of advertising at that time? Were you studying Capels or Eugene Shorts or any of these guys?

Bob: I started out being more a student of writing. I was interested in writing per se. At that time, which was I guess 1980, '81, what happened is when I got this job at the engineering firm, the first day I was there my boss walked in and he said I get some marketing magazines. I don't read them. Here they are. If you want them read them. If not, throw them out. And it was direct marketing in there. And prior to that I had not been exposed to Capels, Ogilvy, and the direct marketing mindset. I came from a technical background. I'm a chemical engineer by training. I worked for technical companies. We didn't practice any of these principles. I'm sure my bosses were

unaware of all of these things. But then I read articles in direct marketing that were written by some of the then top copywriters and agency people and direct marketers and then I got very interested and began to get my hand on everything I could find. This was at the time in New York City and this is before Amazon. So, I went to the Strand Bookstore and all the old bookstores in New York City and I would hunt up these books. On a Saturday that was my great excitement. I'd be banging around these bargain bins. I still have it today. I found an original hardcover of Claude Hopkins, *Scientific Advertising*...

Michael: Oh, wow.

Bob: ...for a dollar. Now you can download it free on the Internet, but then it was such a treasure. Like everyone listening to this program, I would read and study it. I was like the kid in a candy store when I found one of those. I immediately went out and bought Ogilvy on advertising, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*. Back then Prentice-Hall had in print the original Capels books. I bought and read all the Capels books, so I was getting very much into it and my interest was shifting from pure writing, which was always an interest to direct marketing and advertising. So, I would answer yes, but I was a beginning student.

Michael: So, what happened? I'm sure you remember. You mailed out 500 letters.

Bob: Yeah, I remember exactly. I mailed out 500 and within four or five weeks, I had 35 people respond, which was a 7% response and I was on my way. I had 35 people who were interested in learning to some degree about my copywriting services and I began to respond to those as best I could in my limited time because I was already employed. And they began to become clients.

Michael: So, how was your confidence level at that time as a writer and compare that with what you would charge then and then now? I mean did you have the confidence to charge a hefty fee back then?

Bob: No. My strategy, which was probably a huge mistake in retrospect, I charged a very low fee. My logic was I'm a beginner, so I will charge low fees to get the business. I was not as sophisticated as



many of the people listening to this today who would say hey you charge a low fee, people perceive you as a low value. I thought what's going to work, a low price, so I charged very little money. It's not that I wasn't confident. I thought I could because I was going after mainly industrial accounts. I knew how to write industrial copy. I was confident I could do the work.

Michael: So, when you worked it out per hour, you had your time and you had one \_\_\_\_\_. You weren't making anything on the backend on these accounts.

Bob: None of these accounts paid anything on the backend, so what I would say is that I really didn't calculate the hour, but to give you an idea, my last full year of employment was 1981 and back then I was earning I think \$27 or \$28 or \$29,000 a year, which was not a bad salary then. It's not a lot, but I was a couple of years out of school and in my early 20s, so I was earning \$28-\$29,000 a year. And in my first full year of freelancing, which was '82 in which I actually worked ten months because I started at the end of February, I grossed \$39,000 a year.

Michael: What do you love about copywriting? You just love the work...

Bob: There's a lot of things I love about it, but I would say if I listed the top two or three, I love the actually work. It is interesting. I need to be intellectually stimulated by my work and it's at the right level for me. Designing cyclotrons for fusion reactions would be too high a level for me. It would be too difficult. I wouldn't be stimulated. I'd go blank because I couldn't do it. There are other jobs that I've had that were too little stimulus, like being an advertising manager to me was largely boring; placing insertion orders and doing forecasting and putting together a budget and a plan and going in meetings and going to trade shows. It bored me. So, copywriting gave me intellectual stimulation. My great driver in life actually is to not be bored at work and that's why it's perfect for me. I'm never bored at it.

The second thing I like about it is the whole lifestyle. I mean I'm talking to you and I'm alone in my third floor office in an office building in Northern New Jersey and there's no one up here and it's totally quiet and that's just the way I like it. I really didn't like when



I worked in the corporate world. You hear the knock on the door and they'd say can you come in for about a half hour, we're going to talk about the widget. Get the hell away from me. I don't want to talk to you. I want to do my work and be left alone. And here I can. I mean I do have people who work for me, but we have a virtual office. They're not here. I had to do a revision of a package this morning and I finished it just before you called and I just wanted to work on that and nothing else. So, I got three, four calls and I didn't pick them up. I see caller ID and I said I don't have to take that and I'll call them back this afternoon.

Michael: Describe your office? Are you a one-man office or do you have a staff?

Bob: Here's my situation. I don't actually have employees, but I do have a lot of people that work for me, freelancers. Let me go over the setup.

I have an office. It's in a rented office building in Bergen County, New Jersey. It's about nine, ten miles from my house and I'm on the third floor and it's isolated. It's a pretty nice space. It's not a fancy building, but it's a nice big office in here and it's real comfortable and I have a bunch of different people who work for me part time. They're probably the equivalent of one and a half to two full time people. This isn't related to my copywriting, but I have a publishing company. We sell information products on line like a lot of people do today. And I have someone part time who handles that. She handles everything. If I need a landing page put up, I don't call the web designer, I give her the copy and say go get it designed. If you told me tomorrow hey I want you to promote my product as an affiliate to your list, I'd say go have your affiliate manager call Jodi, my affiliate manager who handles all that. So, I have her. I have someone from my copywriting business, my project manager. She handles all incoming leads and inquiries because we get a lot of them and I don't have time to talk to them.

Michael: Pertaining to leads, another question from John is what kind of lead generating system did you use in the early days? From that direct mail, was everything referral or were you out there cold-call prospecting for new business?

Bob: In the early days, for better or worse and it's probably stupid on my part, I never made a cold call. What I did in the beginning is I did two things, only two things and that's what worked for me. I sent out sales letters. These were one-page sales letters with a reply card in a #10 envelop and I would get lists of advertising managers and I would mail them this letter. And the first time I did it, I mentioned I got a 7% response. Then I rewrote it a bit and got it up to 10%. So, if I had a list...and lists were easy to get and they still are...any time I needed business, I could send out just 100 letters and have ten good leads.

Michael: So, you knocked on doors with direct mail?

Bob: With direct mail. Yeah, I didn't cold-call people. I sent to people I did not know with direct mail and the second thing I did is I wrote articles for trade publications. At the time the leading trade publication for industrial marketing was actually called, *Industrial Marketing*, and then they became *Business Marketing* a year after. And I tried to get in there to write articles and finally I did. And I must have had a dozen articles published in there over a two to three year period. That combined with the direct mail is mainly how I generated business.

Michael: And your articles were on copywriting.

Bob: On copywriting or some aspect of industrial marketing.

Michael: And you got to put your tagline at the end?

Bob: Yeah. Now, again, this is before the Internet. You couldn't put your website address, you couldn't put your email address, but you could put your tagline and say Bob Bly is a freelance copywriter in -- at the time I was in a different town in Dumont, New Jersey. I can't remember if he let us put the phone number in or not. But see that was a bug-a-boo back then. You would write these articles and you'd want to promote yourself and you'd put the phone number in and the editor wouldn't include it because he thought it smacked of self-promotion. But in the Internet, they encourage you to put your email address and your website address. So, now articles are more effective than they were back then and you can get more business from them. But they were still very effective back then.

Michael: So, in retrospect, compared to how you started with your example of the letter, this question has come up over and over again, what's the first thing I should do as a freelance copywriter to get clients?

Bob: Here's what I would do if I were starting today and it's hard to give you one first thing, so if I had to give you the first two or three things, number one, decide what your market is and what your specialty is. As a rule of thumb, you're better when you're starting off a specialist than to be a generalist. And there are all kinds of specialties, so if you edited the newsletter for the Cerebral Palsy Foundation or the Red Cross, maybe you should start with fund raising, non-profit and make that your specialty.

The first thing I would do is decide what niche do I want to work in and what type of services do I want to provide.

Michael: Before you move onto that because this question came up, as well, what in your opinion are the best niches and the most lucrative niches to approach? Any advice on that?

Bob: I will give you some of them. First of all direct response in itself is a niche. Now, maybe everyone of your audience is into direct response, but there's a huge world outside of direct marketing and the majority of people in the world who do advertising don't want to do direct marketing. They want to be on Madison Avenue writing the next Super Bowl TV commercial. So, the better field is not to do that.

Direct marketing is a good niche. Online marketing is a good niche...to write online copywriting. Within those fields, information publishing is a good niche. The highest paid niche is probably writing promotions, direct mail and online for consumer newsletters. That is basically travel, health, and investment newsletters. Those guys pay more than just about anyone. Another good niche is writing for healthcare, particularly alternative medicine, nutritional supplements. Although, and this is not direct marketing, pharmaceutical and medical advertising is a very lucrative niche. That's another good area. Speech writing, another non-direct marketing area, in which I've done very little work, is a very well paying niche. And I would say then direct marketing of information

products, in general, not just newsletters, which is almost a separate niche, but audiotapes, audio learning systems, seminars, conferences, that's a good niche. High-tech direct marketing, particularly software, is a very good niche; writing about software, IT products and systems, that's a good niche. And business-to-business is a good niche today.

Michael: Let's go on to your track on what you would advise someone to do.

Bob: Pick a niche, which means what type of service or product that you are covering, what industry, and also what are you writing for them. If you pick computers, are you only writing data sheets or are you writing websites. What are you going to write for these clients?

The second thing I would do is I would go find and identify good lists of prospects in those areas. Maybe there's a trade association that has a local chapter where you live that you should go to and network at and become a member of. Maybe there's a newsletter or a magazine subscription list you should be renting. Identify how you're going to reach these people. If you determine that my market is marketing directors of pharmaceutical companies, to reach them you need a list and there are lists. So, you've got to identify and find and get your hands on the list.

The third thing I would do is I would contact them and guess what, direct mail is still very, very effective. There are other methods that people advocate today. You will hear some people say oh it doesn't work, but it does work. If I were starting out today, that would still be the first thing I'd do. I've composed a really good lead generating sales letter to generate inquiries from my copywriting services and then mail 100, 200, 300, 400, 500 to a list of prospects in my market and then wait four or five weeks and see. I mean I do other things during those four or five weeks, but see what happens. If that letter works and you can get a 1, 2, 3, 4 5% response, you're going to be able to fill the pipeline with leads and if they're good leads that percentage of them is going to reliably convert to business and you'll be set.

Michael: You'll never need to cold prospect again or worry about referrals.

- Bob: Absolutely. By the way, referrals I think are a great way of marketing and I encourage people to do that. But you're right. If you can generate a steady flow of sales leads -- I call it a lead generating machine -- and you can create a sales letter that every time you mail 100, you get 3 good leads or 5 or 2, you're really not going to ever have to worry about having business as long as there are sufficient lists and your market is broad enough. If you tell me I want to specialize in writing copy for people that are readers of Asian cats, then you have a problem because I don't know that those people hire copywriters and it's a pretty small list if there is one. But if your market is newsletter publishers, it's easy for me to help you find a big directory of lots of newsletter publishers.
- Michael: It should be a prerequisite because if you can't generate leads for your own copywriting business and you're going into the copywriting business to generate sales and leads for other companies, what's the point.
- Bob: Exactly.
- Michael: You should do it first for your own business to prove that you're able to do it for other businesses.
- Bob: Yes. Maybe your lead machine is something different. You can do it online, for example. But you need at least one promotion that every time you dump it in the mail or turn it on, you get back a reliable, consistent number of leads. And I actually talk about this on one of my product sites, [www.theleadmachineonline.com](http://www.theleadmachineonline.com), which is all about how to generate sales leads.
- Michael: Here's a question from Kye \_\_\_\_\_, "What kind of books, Bob, magazines, books, periodicals, and journals do you currently read for inspiration and for writing?"
- Bob: I read a lot and I think most copywriters who are successful, not all of them, I know a couple who don't, most of them are big readers. So, in terms of books, I read very broadly. I read lots of books on business marketing, copywriting, writing, and advertising. I read lots of non-fiction books on a variety of subjects and I also read fiction. And in terms of publications, again, I read a lot of different publications online and offline. For example, I have a lot of clients

in IT, information technology, so I read *Information Week*. That's a good publication to read to keep up with that. *Computer World* is another one. In general business what I do is always rotate them. Right now I'm getting *Fortune Magazine*. In a year I may let go of that and get something else. I tend to vary it a little bit. Every copywriter who is in direct response should order at least one publication for most of the major direct marketing publishers like Boardroom and Filbert Publishing and so I always get at least one thing from one of them because if you do that then all their promotions are going to flow to you and you can see what they're doing in the mail and online.

Michael: He also asks what kind of mental, emotional, and spiritual exercise or mind power meditation does Bob do to obtain his creative juices for writing his copy content.

Bob: I have to admit I don't do two things that everyone says you should do. The first is what you just described. I don't do any kind of meditation and the reason I don't do that is because that sounds like you have to rev yourself up to do it. I don't have to rev myself up. When I wake up in the morning, I want to come here because I enjoy it so much. So, I don't really do anything deliberate.

There is one thing I do, but it's different than what he suggested. I tend to work on a lot of projects rather than one or two projects. And the reason I do that, and this is a trick I got from Isaac Asimov, not personally, but something he wrote.

Michael: Who is he?

Bob: Isaac Asimov is a science fiction writer and science writer who had the record of being one of the most prolific authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote and published about 480 books during his lifetime, sometimes as many as a month or more. And I just liked him. He's sort of my role model for a very productive writer. And he said the key is not to try to pump yourself up, but work on a lot of different projects. And the reason that worked is because if you get tired of one, you could move onto the other. But if you're only writing a promotion, let's say, for a product that you're selling and that's all you have to do in terms of writing -- you might have other things that you have to do, but that's your big copywriting, you only



have two things to do -- if you burn out on those today, what else are you going to work on. But I always keep a large number of projects and in different fields. So, if I get tired of writing a big direct mail package like I did this morning, I won't go back to direct mail, I'll go do a landing page.

Michael: So, give me an example. How many client copywriting projects do you currently have?

Bob: Probably around 15, 16.

Michael: Do you set the deadlines where the stress and the pressure of deadlines don't kill you?

Bob: I try to do that. It's not always possible because my demand is very high. Theoretically I would like to schedule projects so the deadlines are always convenient for me. You can't always do that, but I try. Yet I would say that I personally am under a lot of deadline pressure. It's probably the biggest negative of my existence as the way I've set my life up is that there is constant deadline pressure and I don't dislike it as a rule, but sometimes you can get weary of it and that's always a danger.

Michael: But having the multiple projects helps you get through everything.

Bob: Yes and also the diversity or the variety of projects. They're not all direct mail packages. They're not all email marketing messages. They're many different things in many different industries. So, if I just say ah, God, I'm sick of talking about the stock market today, I'll go write a white paper for a computer company on cyber security or I'll write a white paper on wastewater processing or whatever it is.

Michael: Where do you draw the line? Will you take a project that bores you or that you don't believe in?

Bob: I don't take any project that bores because one of my primary drivers is I don't want to be bored. And I don't take any project that I strongly disbelieve in. Like there might be a project for a financial newsletter. When I first see it, I'm not convinced that it's the greatest thing since sliced bread, but I know that if I study it and take



it on, I'll be able to get what I call temporarily enthusiastic in order to write a good package. But if it's something that's distasteful to me, like for example, I've never in 25 years or more of copywriting written a sweepstakes. It's not because I'm against them or I think they're immoral or unethical, but I personally hate them. I don't see why anyone looks at them. And that doesn't mean they don't work, but I wouldn't be able to do a good job. They're not in my repertoire. I could give you the name of someone else who could do it for you.

Michael: Here's a question from Paul. He says, "certainly long-copy outpolls short-copy as long as it's interesting. How does Bob keep his readers entertained through the long-copy?"

Bob: Well, let me just back up. I don't actually agree with his statement if he's saying long-copy always outpolls short-copy. It does not and I'll give you proof. You've noticed in direct mail, for example, for magazines, which is an information product, what's the most popular mailing format. It's that voucher. Open up the envelope, looks like an invoice, that's extremely short-copy and that's beating four-page letters in traditional packages.

Michael: Are those on soft offers?

Bob: They're on soft offers, yes. Normally if you're selling an information product to a consumer on a hard offer, normally long-copy was better, but not always. So, there are tools that I teach and have and some of them are on my website for determining copy length. One of them is called The Copy Length Grid, which I could go into later if you want, but the statement isn't true. It doesn't always. You could say it often outpolls it, but it doesn't always. And that's one of the things you certainly can test. But when you are writing long-copy, there are a number of devices or tricks you use to make it interesting, but the one that's not a trick and is just overriding is totally understanding your prospect. Often copy gets boring because you're packing in information. The client gave you a bunch of source material and it all looks credible and interesting, so you're packing it in, but you're not really thinking about -- the reader is always more interested in themselves than you, so you're not thinking about well if I was this person, let's say you're writing a package to sell a medical magazine to pediatricians. I'm not a

pediatrician so I had to talk to a bunch of pediatricians and what are they interested in. The lay copywriter might have tended to talk about cute little kids and they're so adorable, but maybe that's not what motivates a pediatrician.

Michael: Let's do this. Why don't we take that as a case study? So, last year you got that assignment. Was it to create a direct mail piece?

Bob: It was a direct mail package to sell some newsletter for pediatricians.

Michael: So, you took on the project. So, for the listeners, take us through your process of how you handle a project. You accepted the project and before you go into exactly what you did on the research, what are you thinking in terms of what are you going to charge, do you ask for backend, do you make money on pieces mailed; how do you structure the money part of it?

Bob: So, let's talk about that. You're really talking about fees.

Michael: Yes.

Bob: So, at this point here's what I do for a fee. I have two standard fee schedules. One is for online copywriting. One is for offline copywriting. Basically if I get an inquiry, I say to the person, I will email you the PDF of my fee schedule or schedules depending on what they want. When they have it, I'll point out the item they want on it and what the price is. And if they can pay it, I'll do it provided they can wait long enough, which is often not the case.

Michael: Is it always the same or will you customize it for each project?

Bob: The answer is it's pretty much the same. If my fee schedule lists \$10,000 for a direct mail package and someone tells me his budget is \$500, I don't go okay. But it basically depends on the nature and the complexity of the project. I did a direct mail package for a guy a year ago whose product was a telephone answering service for small businesses. There's no complexity in that. It took a certain creativity to do a package that was good, but to understand it was pretty simple versus someone could want a direct mail package with the same number of components, of the same length, on something to do with complying with HIPPA Regulation 72.50. That might be very

difficult for me to understand or take a lot of study, so the fee for that would be more than the other one.

Michael: All right. So, you mail your fee schedule.

Bob: Yes, I give them my fee schedule. I point out what the fee is and if they have the budget and the time to wait and I'm interested and they want to go ahead, I'll book it and I send them a little confirmation, which they have to okay and send back with a check for half. And then it's booked. And if they don't, we let the time go.

Michael: So, currently how far are you booking ahead of time?

Bob: I do have some projects that we'll book four or five months ahead of time, but normally I'm booked solid or 99% solid because you could always choose to give up Sunday. But I'm booked normally pretty solid three to four months in advance.

Michael: All right. Let's go back to the magazine for the physicians. So, you took on that project. Now, you've got a project in front of you, the time has come, you've got to get to work, what's the first thing you're going to do if you don't know much about what physicians want? How are you handling your research?

Bob: Here's what I'll do. I'll do it in two or three ways. First there will be various facts that I want to know that the client maybe can't tell me. Like I'll want to know how much money does a physician earn per year compared to the general practitioner, an internist, an oral surgeon, and it happens pediatrician earnings are on the lower end of the doctor scale. How much did they earn 20 years ago? So, there will be some factual things that the client doesn't have. Those I'll just give to my researcher. I have someone who works for me on a freelance basis, so I'll make a list of five, six, seven questions, email it to her, and within 48 hours I'll get back all the research, documented with sources.

Then I'll have more of the emotional questions, which are do pediatricians really love kids or do they just like kids and happened to go into this specialty for some other reason. Do pediatricians, who my research shows don't earn as much as other doctors, do they resent it? Do pediatricians, like other doctors, resent managed care?

Is it ruining their lives? I'll ask the emotional questions. And I'll definitely ask the client, who will probably find someone like the editor of their magazine to speak to me and I may be satisfied with those answers or I may get the feeling that the editor really doesn't know, in which case I'll say can you give me the names of three to six subscribers who I could talk to for 15 minutes or 10 minutes. With a doctor it usually has to be shorter rather than longer to ask a few questions. And then I'll do that.

Michael: So, you intuitively or over the years and experience knew to ask emotional questions and there's probably a very good reason for that. So, what would you tell the listener why you are looking for emotional questions and from someone who maybe doesn't have your experience, you know it through experience, but what advice could you give for a copywriter to look for those important emotional questions and why are they going to be important to your copy?

Bob: The reason they're important...one of my clients once told me you reach people on three levels. The weakest level, which is where most copywriters try to reach them is factual, intellectual. To write a letter that says Dear Pediatrician, would you like to know how 20,000 of your fellow pediatricians are keeping current with the industry today? Then read *Pediatrician Today*. That's intellectual or factual. The much stronger level is what you said, emotional. If you can get to something that has an emotional resonance from them, that will be many times stronger. And the slightly above that is actually a variant of emotional is what we call personal. In other words, emotional -- let's say we're doing fund raising. Emotional is here's Timmy. Timmy has cancer. That's very emotional. That'll really grab you. But personal is here's Timmy. Timmy has cancer and did you know that within your lifetime, your chances of you or someone in your family getting cancer are 1 out of 3. In other words, related to you personally.

Clayton Makepeace, who publishes, *The Total Package*, a great newsletter on copywriting and who's one of the great copywriters of all time says that if you can tap your lead of your promotion into the dominant resonant emotion, what is a personal feeling right now, your chances of success are much greater.

Michael: Your lead meaning your headline?

Bob: Meaning your headline and the beginning of your piece. Normally the emotion actually isn't a headline. The headline is a device really to get them to read the lead and the lead is where you can start at getting to the emotional issue of it.

Michael: That answers that on why you're choosing emotional questions because that's the most powerful part.

So, we're still on the track of research on what you're going to do with your client. So, you know these questions to ask. Like for the magazine you wrote, did you actually talk to physicians for part of your research?

Bob: I talked to the editor, I talked to my client, and I talked to a couple of physicians. They are hard to get and they were very reticent to get physicians so I spoke to one of their subscribers and I spoke to my child's pediatrician. And they were hard to get so you take what you can get.

Michael: Do you record the calls when you talk to them?

Bob: I don't record them. I'm a very fast typist and I take notes on the keyboard.

Michael: I got you. Okay.

Bob: Occasionally for certain projects I will record, but not usually. I record when I want to quote them verbatim in the written piece, which I don't want to do in these interviews. I want to gain an understanding of what they're thinking. Now, what I've done before I've done these interviews is I've given the client a list of stuff that I want to review and I've already reviewed it. And that list includes, let's say a magazine, their control mailing piece, a bunch of their past and recent test mailing so I can see what's worked and what hasn't, a least a years worth of issues if it's a monthly magazine, and if they have a file of subscriber testimonials, I want that.

Michael: So, as you're reading and wading through all this content, are you taking notes?

Bob: Yes, I'm taking notes in Word, single-spaced on my computer. So, after I do all this and then have the interviews, I might print it out. I might have nine single-spaced pages of notes. I might have 19 single-spaced pages of notes.

Michael: So, you're categorizing it?

Bob: What I will do is, in many cases, I will print it out and start clipping it apart with a scissor and tape it onto a large index card. I'll be reading my notes and if I read ten lines that I can see are on one topic and then it starts another, I stop, I clip that out, paste it on the index card and I write the name of that topic at the top of the card. So, when I'm done, I have a stack of 50 or 60 index cards or however many, 20 or 40 that have all this content on them and are headed by category. Pediatrician compensation, dealing with terminal kids, dealing with kid's family, dealing with Mothers, dealing with Fathers, getting office space, malpractice insurance. And then I'll figure out some kind of rough outline at the computer or on a piece of scrap paper and when I have an outline I like, I will order the content of those cards in that order. And now I have all the information I need to write the package in the order that I need it.

Michael: Let's move on to another question. Here's a question from Andrew Cavanaugh. He's a health writer out of Australia. He says, "Bob, where does most of your income come from today, writing copy for clients or selling your own information products?"

Bob: My income is 90% or more writing copy for clients. I am not really primarily an information marketer, although I do have products that I sell online. But I'd say over 90%, maybe 85%, most of it, I am a traditional freelance copywriter or what people call a contract copywriter. That is how I spend almost all of my time.

Michael: Here's a question from Sherri Fields. "Bob, before you became well known, what did you do to convince clients to take a chance on you?"

Bob: Well, here's one strategy that I use. I mentioned writing articles. After the articles, I wrote books on marketing and I'll give you a perfect example. I had a guy years ago from IBM call me and said I



need you to give a seminar on business-to-business marketing to my marketing people. And he was in a division at IBM and they had like 20 or 25 people. And he said what would you charge to come for two days. I quoted him a fee. He goes, well you know what, that's higher than some, it's lower than others, but it's higher than a bunch of others. There are a lot of people out there who do this, why should I have you instead of them. And I said I'll tell you what. Give me your address. I'll FedEx you my new book. I had just had a book come out called, *Business To Business Direct Marketing*, published by NTC Business Books. I said I'll FedEx you the book and you look at it and if you think they're better, they can do the job as well, call them, don't bother calling me back. If you read my book and you think I'm the guy for you, you call me back. So, one of the ways I prove credibility, and it was real helpful, is to write books and articles.

The other way is when anybody was interested in my service, and again this is before the Internet, I would offer them a copywriting information kit. And one of the things in that kit was a typed list of two or three pages of testimonials from client that I had done work for. This was fairly at the beginning of my career, but any time I had a client that liked what I did, I said would you mind sending me a short letter and this was before email. Some people would be willing and some people because it was work didn't bother. But I would get whatever I could and I would type them onto a sheet of paper and mail it out. And so, people would see that and they'd look at my copywriting information kit and they'd say look at all these testimonials, he must be good, and that gave them confidence. I had more clients that didn't give me testimonials. Not everyone will. I typed their names on another sheet of paper alphabetically, just a list of clients and the products they made and it was a client list. I included that as a separate page and people would look at that and say well look there's 22 companies on this client list and we're industrial manufacturers and 8 of them are industrial manufacturers. That also gave them confidence.

Michael: What about the guy just starting. He's got no clients. Would you recommend doing some free work just to hopefully gain additional work or do you recommend always taking some kind of fee to know that your prospects qualified upfront? What would you recommend for one starting out?



Bob: Here's what my advice always is. I say the first thing you need and that you should concentrate on is getting three satisfied clients and three projects. So, therefore, you want to get however you can get them. If it's on spec, do it on spec. If it's for a fee, do it for a fee. If it's for Uncle Ned who has a dry-cleaning store and he'll let you write his neighborhood door hanger, do it for Uncle Ned. Get three samples from three different clients who will write you three different testimonials and act as three different references. Then you can go out to other people confidently and they say well can you give me the names of your clients, you go well I've done work for A, B, and C, among other companies. You can send them three samples and you can have three testimonials in your letter. And people don't need to see a lot of samples or testimonials to hire you, but they do need something and once you have those three real samples, you'll feel much more confident. And in the beginning you do anything you can. If you try to get a fee, he goes no I want you do it on spec, do it on spec.

Michael: This is a question from Ron Hayness and it says, "Which of your books on copywriting do you most highly recommend for freelance copywriters just starting out?"

Bob: There's two books. If you want to learn how to write copy, I recommend *The Copywriter's Handbook*, which has just come out in a revised third edition.

Michael: Was that one of your first books?

Bob: It was early. It was in 1985, so maybe my fifth or sixth book. The other book is *Secrets of a Freelance Writer*. That's doesn't tell you how to write copy. That tells you how to succeed in the copywriting business. Those are the two books that most people who come to me and are getting into copywriting buy and use.

Michael: How many books do you have total?

Bob: A lot of my books have nothing to do with marketing. At this point, I guess I have 70 books.

Michael: Seventy books.

- Bob: Yes.
- Michael: Is that all with that publisher?
- Bob: No, no, no. Different publishers will be interested in different things, so no.
- Michael: How many are use you self-publishing?
- Bob: Books. None. They're all by regular publishers.
- Michael: They're all by regular publishers.
- Bob: Yes. I sell publish in my online marketing business, I sell about half a dozen e-books, but I didn't write those. I hired people to write them. My name is not on them, their name is. And the other thing I sell is I sell audio CD albums as information products.
- Michael: How many of your books, the 70 books, have been sold? Do you know total?
- Bob: I don't know, but certainly the average have sold 25,000 copies, it's in the 1.25 million or more. Well over a million, but that's not a big deal because again if you only sold 10,000 each, you'd be up to 700,000. So, it's well over a million copies of my book, probably over two million.
- Michael: Are they different languages, as well?
- Bob: Well, they are. I mean I don't really track that, but I've got editions that are in all kinds of languages. I don't keep track. I know we've got Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, whatever language they speak in \_\_\_\_\_.
- Michael: Are you getting inquiries to do copywriting work from China and Japan?
- Bob: No, I rarely do. I confine my copywriting to the United States, Canada, the U.K., and Australia.

- Michael: So, I guess what I'm asking is if you've got a million books out there, how many leads are these books producing for you?
- Bob: Well, a lot of them, of course, don't produce any leads because a lot of them have nothing to do with copywriting.
- Michael: Oh, I got you. Okay.
- Bob: I mean I have a book; the title of it is the *I Hate Kathy Lee Gifford Book* and I don't get any inquiries from that. And I've got a lot of books like that. However, the answer is that between everything I've done in my life, books, articles, and just being around a long time, I get one to two to three unsolicited good inquiries come in here every day of the year. Much more work than I could ever hope to handle. Of the stuff we get, we accept 20% of it.
- Michael: So, what do you do with those leads? You have colleagues that you refer over?
- Bob: Well, it depends on the situation. If we get a lead where I just think it's a bad quality lead, I wouldn't then give it to a colleague if I thought it was crap.
- Michael: That's true.
- Bob: Because you get leads from people that are just not good potential clients. So, those I just say I can't handle it and if they say do you know someone, I say no because I don't want to wish bad stuff on my friends. If it's a lead that I don't want to take, they can't afford me, they're not a good fit for me, I'm too expensive, then I will refer it. I keep a list of people, but I'm almost hesitant to tell you this because people listening, I would not advise them to email me to get on this list because it's already too large.
- Michael: That's fine.
- Bob: But I have a list of people who I refer stuff to and I give them referrals. And then there are people who will contact me and I want them. They're a good potential client, they can afford me, but I tell them you've got to wait and they don't want to wait. Then I'm not giving referrals to. I want to train them to wait. If I can't do them for

a year, I'd say I understand you can't wait that long. I'll say to them, if I'm booked for three months, I'd say well now you can book me, it's June, you want to book me for October you can, but I don't want to give that lead away.

Michael: I noticed on your site, you make it a point to differentiate yourself by saying, "You do not take work and farm it to copy cubs or sub-copywriters in your office." And there's a lot of that going on. There's a lot of opportunities being sold to teach copywriters how to create copy cubs and make a lot of money out of that. Why don't you do that? Can you give the listeners a brief background on what that's all about?

Bob: Well, what you're referring to, of course, is one negative of freelance copywriting is like a dentist. He will say dentists make a lot of money, but the dentists have an old saying, "You only can bill if you drill and fill." They only get paid for when they work and a traditional freelance copywriter is that way. So, what are your options? One option is to sell information products; write copy for your own products. Another option is to start an ad agency. A third option is to take on a lot of work and then subcontract it to other copywriters. And I have chosen not to subcontract work for two reasons.

Number one is ethical. I'm not saying that anyone who does it is unethical. I don't think they are. But for me, when someone says well if I hired you, do you write all your own copy or do you farm it out. I want to be able to say I write every word, which is true.

And the second reason I don't do it is to me, I mean I know people who do it and say it works for them, to me it seems like a pain in the ass. You get somebody who's junior; well they're not you. I've seen copy that some beginning people have written that's pretty good, but a lot of times I look at it and I say it's worthless to me. I'd have to start all over again. So, I don't even want to be involved in that.

Michael: Here's a question from Darrin Philips, "Bob, is it possible to teach the average person how to write killer copy."

Bob: Well, here's the thing. On one hand this isn't brain surgery. On the other hand, can you teach everyone to do it? You probably can teach

average people to do it, but you can't teach everyone. There's a theory -- you may have heard this -- Michael Masterson from the American Writer's and Artist's Institute says, "If you do anything for a thousand hours, you're going to get good at it." But I think yes, but you have to have some type of inherent attitude or interest. So, there are people I've seen in various classes I've taken who they're either not going to get good at it or it would just be too much of an uphill battle. Having said that, there are a lot of people who become copywriters that you wouldn't have thought would have. I have a friend who does a lot of freelance work for Agora and he had no interest in copywriting. He's name is Paul Hollingshead and he's a terrific copywriter. When they found him, he was stacking cans in a grocery store. He had no interest. I always thought copywriters would have to be people who were writers to begin with and interested in writing like I was and that's how I came to it, but no. So, there are people who do it and surprise you. They decide to do it for a second career, they study it, and they do it. So, can an average person, yes. I'm an average person. But can everyone, I say not everyone.

Michael: Here's a question from Perry, "Bob, do you feel it's best to pick one writer to follow as a mentor and stick with him or her so as not to confuse your writing style voice or do you think it matters?"

Bob: No, I think it's best not to do that. There's all kinds of people out there and usually what happens is you've got to read a lot of books or go to a lot of boot camps on any topic. Forget copywriting. I mean this applies to copywriting also. Usually if you want to learn the subject, say copywriting, there's a lot of books, a lot of seminars, a lot of boot camps, a lot of website, a lot of newsletters. You should go to a lot and read a lot. What'll typically happen is for each person, 90% of this stuff either you'll reject, it doesn't work for you, or you already know it. But you'll pick up from each of them one gem that you wouldn't have gotten elsewhere and that's how I've learned from various people. I don't want to name people, but there's a very famous copywriter out there who's teaching courses and he's got massive amounts of material and I read all of his material. And I said it's all good, but I knew all this, except there is one thing he does that I knew it, but I wasn't doing it and now I do it all the time.

Michael: Well, can you tell you that is and what it was?

Bob: I'd rather not name him. Basically his stuff is great. I'm just saying for me I knew a lot of it. And I wouldn't say it's the only thing I got from him, but the one thing that stood out is traditionally in a direct mail package, you have your headline, you get attention, then you state the problem, then you start getting into the product, and then you build the credibility of the company, of the author. He says you should do pre-credibility. You should get some credibility up there right upfront because people are more skeptical today. So, like if you take a look at my product websites and I've got one on copywriting. We've got a program called, The World's Best Kept Copywriting Secrets, and it says, "Now, Bob Bly, the man McGraw-Hill calls "America's Top Copywriter" reveals..." Now, I get into my credentials much later in the promotion. The promotion starts with the importance and the benefits of becoming a great copywriter and the content I teach, not who I am. But I get that upfront real quickly because people look at something and they say, yeah that's great, but there's a million of these. So, right away you want to differentiate yourself with some upfront early credibility.

There's lots of technique like that. I learned one or two things from this guy and one or two or three things from that guy, like Michael Masterson at the American Writer's and Artist's Institute. I've worked with him for many years. He's been a client. He taught me a lot of stuff, but the one thing that stands out, he has this little trick, he has for headline writing, which you may have heard called Four U's, and it's a little mnemonic device to judge is your headline strong. And it says basically is your headline urgent, ultra specific, useful, and unique. It's not that that's never been said before, but that combination in that way has never been explained quite that way and it's amazingly effective.

Michael: How about personalities and writing? I mean every writer has an individual personality. Do you see a style or a personality in your writing, in Clayton's writing, in a lot of the different copywriters? Can you identify that personality or style of writing like a thumbprint?

Bob: I generally can, but what I tell you is more important is you want to have the personality of the person you're writing for and through. If

you're writing for Rush Limbaugh, you want to sound like Rush Limbaugh, not Bob Bly.

Michael: Good answer. Here's a question from Dave Rice from Canada, "Bob, I find I have quite a difficult time doing my own copywriting. It would help if there were somewhere that I could go for examples of different industries or products that have worked for other people. Is there such a reference source?"

Bob: Yes, it's basically the websites of successful copywriters. Today, people put their portfolios online. \_\_\_\_\_ Rosenblum was one of my early mentors. Milt Pierce. Here's what I would say. I actually don't keep copywriter's websites bookmarked because what I do is another method and the method I suggested is good. You can do copywriter's websites. I keep very expensive swipe file. A swipe file is samples of control promotions. I subscribe to all of the newsletters from the big publishers and buy nutritional supplements from some of the big marketers, so I get all the promotions and the ones you get three times in a row, you know are the controls. Also, I know most of these people, so I can ask them and say what can you send me. Sometimes I go to big publishers who know me. I say can you just send me your most successful package you did this year and I keep those and study those.

Michael: Have you ever used Benny Hatch's resource?

Bob? Denny Hatch's resource is good. If I didn't have these contacts myself, I would use it. But I can go to Nightingale Conant and ask what's the best promo you did in the last 12 months and she'll send it to me. But, yes, you can look on Denny Hatch's mailing webservice. It's an archive.

Michael: Here's some questions about being a new copywriter. Question from Hugh in Australia, "Bob, I'd like to know how the best way to get started and I don't mean what books I should read, handwriting letters, etc. I mean how can I startup a business even though I don't currently have any existing clients, testimonials, etc. What steps can someone who is starting out take to start to build up a business, clients, credibility?"



Bob: When I started I didn't know anybody in the industry. I didn't have any clients. I had no testimonials. I had no business lined up. I started cold. Now, I did have a couple of corporate jobs under my belt and I had some samples from that. Assuming you had some samples of things he's written, do what I did. You can just pick up the phone and cold-call or what I did was I mailed a bunch of people and there's other promotional techniques that you can use. But you can just put together a sales letter, mail it out to a list, and you can start getting clients.

Michael: So, when the phone rings and someone calls you and they say I got your letter and you've got a qualified lead on the other phone, what are you looking for? What kind of process do you do to decide whether this is a good client? How do you handle that inquiry?

Bob: There's a formula I teach called -- it's not a swear word -- MAD-FU. It's doesn't stand for what you think it stands for. There's five characteristics that makes someone a good client. So, you run through the list of these and if they make three or four or five of them, they're good. If they don't, they're not.

Number one in MAD is money. Do they have the money to afford me?

Michael: Do you ask them right upfront?

Bob: Different people can say different things. When they contact me, I say, I'm interested in talking with you, but I am one of the most expensive copywriters you can hire. Is that a problem? And if they continue talking, I've sort of gotten that out of the way. That's number one, money.

Number two, is authority. Is this the person who can write the check or make the decision?

Michael: How do you handle that?

Bob: You say, is there anyone else that we need to talk to who is involved in making this decision? And they'll either say no, I can buy this, or yes my boss or my committee and then you only talk to the committee.

So, it's money, authority, and the D is desire. Do they really want to have a successful promotion? Do they want good copy? And you can sort of tell that. That's sort of instinctual. There's no question I have for that.

Then the F is fit. Are they a good fit for me? So, when I started, since my background was industrial, someone called and they worked for a company that manufactured valves, that was a good fit. If they told me, oh we sell cosmetics and jewelry; I didn't think it was a good fit, so I would kind of shy away from them.

And the U is urgency. Did they really need this done within a specific timeframe and when is that or are they just calling for their health?

Michael: Okay, that's great. Here's a question from Andrew Cavanaugh, health writer out of Australia, "Bob, what's the biggest mistake new copywriters make trying to get a new client?"

Bob: It's very simple and it's directly related to what we just said. They don't do that MAD-FU pre-qualification. They treat every lead like they're a great lead. They chase after everyone when if they would have asked these simple questions, they would have found out in two minutes the guy has no authority to hire you and he has no budget and thinks copy is worth nothing. And you charge \$1,000 a letter and you're selling him as hard as you can; it's a waste of your time.

Michael: Give me a personal case study where you didn't follow this rule, maybe even in your earlier days and what affect it had on you?

Bob: It wasted a half a day of my time. I was in New York City. A guy called me. He had a small ad agency in New Jersey. I was so excited because I wasn't getting many leads and that's what happens when you start out. You're not getting many leads and you get excited every time the phone rings, which is a huge mistake. So, he called me and I was so buoyant and he said why don't you come on out. So, I rented a car. Didn't ask him any questions. Drove out and we talked and this dinky little ad agency in a crappy building and finally we had a nice meeting and he looked at my samples and they were okay and we were somewhat a good fit. And so, he said all right, for

one client I need a sales letter and at the time I was charging \$500 for a letter and I told him well it's \$500 and there's dead silence. He said, \$500 for a letter. And I said well what did you have in mind? He says \$35. To them, real advertising was magazine ads and a letter was crap work. I could have saved myself \$30 for renting the car and an hour driving out there, an hour meeting with him, and an hour driving back. I wasted half a day.

Michael: If I were a new, talented copywriter trying to get work with one of the big names like Agora Publishing, what approach would you suggest I do?

Bob: If you're trying to reach a big name direct response client, the best thing you could do would be to start with smaller, easier to get ones and do great work for them and send them something that's somewhat related to their industry or area that got great results. That would be one thing I would do.

The second thing is I would suggest to them that hey you don't know me; I don't expect you to start me on a full package or a magalog. Why don't you start me out on a small basis? Maybe let's do a renewal letter and if you're happy with that, maybe I'll do an insert after that. Start with a small project and then move upwards. And then, because they're testing you out, when they ask you how much, say you tell me what you want to pay. So, if you show them that you've done good work for others, gotten good results in direct marketing, especially for something at least related and you're willing to start small on a test basis and money is not a key issue right now, although you say to them obviously if I'm successful for you, I'd want to be paid what your successful writers get paid, that's the way to start.

Michael: Very good. If I were a talented copywriter and I wanted to be a copywriting cub, what would be the best way to approach one of the larger copywriters to do that?

Bob: Well, there are people who do that regularly. Some of them are known. Some of them are not known. So, Clayton Makepeace, \_\_\_\_\_, for example, both of them do that. You could approach them. I think Jim Rutts used to. I don't know if he still does.

And then I had a guy recently approach me and he apparently sent out a letter to a bunch of copywriters he got from some list and I bet you that approach probably worked. I really didn't ask him. If I'd know you were going to ask me this, I would have asked him. Now, I didn't hire him because it was kind of embarrassing for him. I said have you ever been to my website. He said yes. I said well did you notice on the home page it says I don't subcontract. So, it was a mistake to mail to me. He didn't do his research. But he went to a mass list of copywriters and I'm sure that worked.

Michael: Very good. Here's another question from Mary Hudson, "Bob, if you were starting over as a copywriter, let's say you had no clients, no money, nowhere to live, and you were starting over, what specifically would you do today, tomorrow, this week to generate an income as a copywriter?"

Bob: Well, first of all I don't know if I'm quite answering her question, but my philosophy was always don't become a freelance copywriter unless you have at least one year or at minimum six months worth of living income in the bank because you don't want to be in the situation she described. If you are desperate and you absolutely need the income, you're going to do all the wrong things. You're going to take work for clients that are not a good fit for you according to the MAD-FU formula, that are lousy clients to work for, that pay bottom dollar, which is doing sales letters for \$35 instead of \$500 or \$1,000. So, you basically want to have enough money that you can pick and choose. Your business will always be better if you can pick and choose clients rather than them choosing you.

Michael: Here's a question from Karen Myers, "Are there any good agents or agencies that represent freelance copywriters that you would recommend?"

Bob: There are a couple of agencies. I really don't keep up to date on this, but the big names are -- there's Finn Communications, John and Kevin Finn, who represent copywriters and a lot of copywriters have had great results with them. On Long Island, New York there's the Copywriter's Council of America, run by Roger Dexter. Those are the two major ones as far as I know. There's another one, Direct Marketers On Call, that is fairly well known. And then there's a bunch of smaller ones that come and go.

- Michael: And so, these agencies take a percentage of the...
- Bob: They all take a different percentage. Their formulas are all different. I think the Copywriter's Council takes 20%. I'm not sure what the others take or how it works.
- Michael: Bob, can you give us your best tips regarding copyrights, for example, when, if you retain the copyrights to materials, which you write? How do you do that?
- Bob: Very simple. I never do. I say to the client they own the copyright. It's their stuff. When they pay me and as long as they can pay me, and if there's a royalty, continue to pay me the royalty, it's their stuff. They can do whatever they want under the terms of our agreement. There is a move or a belief that if you write it, you own the copyright and you're just loaning it to them. That's certainly not their understanding and my philosophy is always do your business in a way that the client comes out ahead.
- Michael: What advice would you have, let's say you've got copywriters that are producing leads, they're getting work, but I'm sure every client isn't a picnic. What advice would you give a copywriter as their copywriting business matures in dealing with clients, in dealing with egos, in dealing with the ego of maybe the client who wants something that you don't recommend? What's your philosophy on that?
- Bob: The best advice I ever got was from my friend Jim Alexander, now retired, who ran a great business-to-business ad agency in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He said to me, "Bob, I can deal with the client who is ignorant. I can deal with a client who is arrogant, but I cannot deal with one who is both." If someone is arrogant, but they know what the heck they're doing, keep them. You're going to learn a lot. If someone is ignorant, but they're willing to have you guide them, you can be successful. If you have a client who is both ignorant and arrogant, they don't know what they're doing and they dictate how to write the copy, you should fire them.
- Michael: Great. Do you have any personal case study or experience you could reference that?

- Bob: For that, I mean I've done it all the time for many years. The best advice, which I don't follow myself, is to fire them just because they're ignorant and arrogant. I always felt I had to have more work in the pipeline so that not only did they not fit, but I didn't need them. I would only fire clients when I felt I was so flushed with work that I could afford to. You really should do it at any time. You should never continue working with those people, but I would only do it when I got to the point where I could afford to.
- Michael: So, you've got a lot of client who you are working with. How often does a client stay with you for repeat copywriting business? I can imagine three or four or five good clients who have successful businesses will use you over and over again.
- Bob: I would say that the rule of thumb that I have here and I tell people to strive for, approximately 80% of your work should come from repeat business and 20% should come from clients you have not worked with before. Eighty percent repeat, you make more money on the repeat business because you're familiar with the client and their personnel, their staff, and their products and their methods. But you don't want it to be 100% because you're going to tend to get bored. So, I use the 80/20 rule. Sometimes it's 70/30, maybe sometimes it's 85/15, but never much more of variation than that.
- Michael: Here's some questions about pricing structure. A question from Tom Vargan, "I'd like to learn more about structuring compensation for copywriting, flat fee plus royalties. I'm still a bit lost with the pricing structure."
- Bob: Basically, although there are other people who do it differently, I usually work on a flat fee basis, except when working for a client that is setup and accustomed to paying royalties. So, the best royalty clients are people who are large volume mailers and consumer marketers. Specifically they sell nutritional supplements, they sell home study courses, they sell investment newsletters and health newsletter because they're mailing in large quantities where they can afford to pay you the royalty. If you're writing a package for *Endocrinologist Today Magazine* and there's only 15,000 endocrinologists in the United States, the rollout potential of that mailing is very slim. They're not going to pay you a royalty. So,



let's say someone comes to you and they publish an investment newsletter, their potential market is one or two million hard-money investors. Depending on what list they go to, they could mail one or two or three million packages a year. If your package is successful, in that case, you would charge an upfront fee, plus what's call a mailing fee, which is you would get somewhere between a penny and five-cents. I normally get two or three-cents and more often than not two-cents per piece mailed when they roll that out after the test. They will test say 50,000 to start and if your package is successful and then they rollout, on each one they mail after that, you get two pennies, which works out to \$20,000 per million pieces mailed.

Michael: Can you give us a successful case study with a client that you've done -- you don't have to mention the client's name -- but...

Bob: I have a client, they sell a commodities trading course, and I wrote their mailing a couple of years ago, three years ago, and I'm up to \$65,000 or \$70,000 on that package.

Michael: So, they've mailed out three or four million.

Bob: I guess, however it works out to. I guess I'm up to \$80,000.

Michael: When do they cut you the check, right when they mail?

Bob: They cut you the check when they mail. They send you an email and say our plan is we're going to rollout with 83,000 pieces, which means we owe you \$3,222. Please email us an invoice and we'll get it out right away.

Michael: Who are you dealing with in that department? Is that accounting?

Bob: You're dealing with the marketing publisher, the marketing director.

Michael: Here's a question from Dave Rice from Canada, "Do you ever offer performance based copywriting assistance as in ask for a percentage of the increased revenue and if so, how do you structure it to be assured you'll get paid?"

Bob: No, I only do what I've just described, which is the mailing fee royalties. The reason is I don't think it's a bad idea, but I've always



said it's very difficult to track and make sure clients know what they're actually making. I mean some people tell me they do this all the time, but I don't really know what my client's sales are and I hear it bandied about a lot, but I've never found that it'll work, especially with smaller companies. It's very difficult to know you're getting an accurate figure. So, I only like to do performance based arrangements with major mailers that are in the business of paying royalties because if the company doesn't do it and you push them into it, they're going to look for a way not to do it. They're going to hope you forget. Then you've got to be chasing them all the time.

Michael: Has that happened to you? Have you had a bad experience where you...

Bob: I'll tell you a funny experience. I had a guy who said he wanted me to write a package and this was years ago and it was like \$7,000. And I said I wanted a mailing fee and he goes I'll give you a bonus. I'll give you \$7,000 now and \$7,000 if your package becomes the new control. So, we mail out my package. Beats the control by 50% and I send him an invoice. He goes well no I'm not going to pay this invoice. I said why not? He said well your package isn't the new control. I said you told me it beat it by 50%. He goes well I've got to do this three or four times before I'm sure. I didn't get paid for two years. Finally he paid it. But that's my fault. My agreement said when it becomes the new control. Now, it says, when I beat your control by X percent or more.

Michael: So, do you have a file of all your copywriting agreements and contracts and do you sign contracts or letters of agreement or what?

Bob: They're confirmation forms. They aren't really formal legal contracts. You could call them letters of agreement. They're more like a standard form confirmation. You can actually see that on [www.bly.com](http://www.bly.com). If you go to my website, [www.bly.com](http://www.bly.com), click on methodology and click on terms and conditions, you'll actually see my standard agreement. They either sign it or email it back and say okay we approve. And then when I have that and their check, we begin. And yes, we keep them on file. My assistant does that.

Michael: We're still on pricing. This maybe a little bit repetitive, but maybe you'll have something new here. It's a question from Mark

Spangalow, “How do you determine, Bob, the amounts and fees to charge a client for any specific assignment without it being perceived as too high or too low?”

Bob: I’m going to give you a real easy answer to that. And the answer is this. What you could do is you say to the client -- let’s say they want you to quote a price -- what this guy could do is say to the client, Mr. Client, let me ask a question. Do you have a budget for this project? Not what your budget is. Do you have a budget? And people will either say yes or no. If they say yes, you say to them would you mind sharing with me what it is. If they say no, I wouldn’t mind and then they say well my budget is \$5,000 or \$6,000, you know whether your fees are in the ballpark or not and you can tailor what you offer them accordingly. On the other hand if they say no, we don’t have a budget, you then say well do you at least have a dollar figure in mind of what you’d like to pay? And many people who said they didn’t have a budget in mind will say I don’t know, \$2,000, \$3,000. So, they’ll give you some idea. And then based on what their budget is, you can say well I can do a magalog for you because you have the budget for that. Oh well, I can’t do a magalog, but based on your budget I could do an insert. I could a sales letter. I could do an email blast or whatever. So, you can figure a quote within their budget. That way you’ll know that the quote you give them can be acceptable.

Michael: That’s great advice. Get them to reveal it first.

Bob: Get them to reveal it. Now, if they won’t reveal it, there’s another technique. If they won’t reveal it, you give them not one price, but three. You give them three options. My friend Andrew \_\_\_\_\_, the copywriter, calls them good, better, or best. So, good might be for this much money, I’ll write two email messages for you. Better is this much money, I’ll write two email messages and a conversion page. And for this much money, I’ll write three emails, a conversion page, a pop-under, and five banner ads. You give them different packages with different pricing. Then you say do you want to choose the good, better, or best. And experience shows that most people will choose the middle option.

Michael: Here’s another question from Ron Hoss, “Bob, do you require a signed contract and if so, are there any special or unique provisions

in your contract that you would recommend other freelance copywriters to use as well?”

Bob: Well, I don't want to recommend them because I'm not a lawyer and I can't give legal advice and I don't want to be responsible for someone using my provisions and then saying well I used it and I still didn't get paid. So, I don't want to do that. But if he goes to [www.bly.com](http://www.bly.com) and clicks on methodology and then clicks on terms and conditions, you can see my standard agreement. It's right on the website and I require people either to sign it and fax it back or just to reply by email we approve these terms.

Michael: A question from Greg McPherson, “Is it necessary to have a hundred percent passion for the subject you are writing? Do you think it would come through in your writing if that passion was not there and do you have a basic knowledge of the subject you are writing or can you acquire it during the research stage of writing?”

Bob: Let's divide that up into two parts. The first is about passion or enthusiasm. And what I would say is it's necessary to have a hundred percent enthusiasm. What is necessary...the term I like to use is I'm able to get temporarily enthusiastic about any product for which I'm going to write copy on. It has to interest you enough that you can become engaged and become the advocate for that client. It's like an attorney. An attorney may take on a client and forget the issue of guilt and innocence, he's not crazy about the person, but it's his job to be the advocate for that client and so he shouldn't take it on if he can't do that job. For me to do that job, I have to become temporarily enthusiastic about the product, which for me isn't hard and if I can't do that because it's something I don't like or I loath, then I wouldn't take it on. A good example is a publisher approached me a few years ago and said we need a bunch of direct mail packages. That was a really good possible assignment and I said what about. And he said we have a series of books on hunting. Well, I don't hunt. I'm not telling you if you hunt you're wrong or it's a bad thing, but for me it has no appeal and I dislike it so I had to turn it down. There's no way I could get enthusiastic about that. If you gave me the job of promoting a book or a magazine on vegetarianism, I'm not a vegetarian, but I could get temporarily enthusiastic about that idea. There's a lot that appeals to me about it.

Do you have to know about the topic? Yes and no. You really don't have to know and you can research it. That being said, remember we talked earlier about the 80/20 rule; 80% of your time it's a repeat business.

Michael: Yes.

Bob: If you follow that, then you're kind of writing mostly about stuff you're somewhat familiar with. I take it further and even though 20% is not the repeat business, of that 20% most of it is in product areas that I have some experience in. I do a lot of stuff in IT, so if a guy comes at me and needs a brochure on a certain software package, I may never have done any software in that industry, but I've done similar things so I know how software should be sold.

Michael: Here's a question from Andrew Cavanaugh, "Is there really more copywriting work than current competent copywriters in the market could handle or is that just hype designed to sell copywriting courses?"

Bob: I worried about this for a long time and I was concerned that those of us who are teaching others to do, me through my books, for example, are we flooding the market and creating too many copywriters. I would say that in my opinion no, but. And that means no. There's not too many copywriters because there's so much work out there. In the United States there are over 10 million businesses and if you take the small portion of that, the tip of the iceberg, the big companies produce tons of material and so they had a large demand or need for copy. Having said that, not every company needs copy, so you may run into individual companies or even individual market niches where the opportunity doesn't seem so great so you may have to fan out to other businesses or other niches or other industries. But overall, I think the answer is no, we have not flooded the market for copywriters yet, but we are heading slowly in that direction. I don't know that we could ever reach that, but I think it's a valid concern.

Michael: He also said, "With all the great copywriting courses sold on the market, including your own, why do you think there are so few really good copywriters coming out of these courses?"

Bob: I actually don't think that there's so few copywriters coming out of these courses. But remember we talked about Michael Masterson, who created what is probably the biggest course in the market, the AWAI, American Writer's and Artist's Institute, a six figure copywriting course. He says you have to do something for a thousand hours to get competent and five thousand hours to be a master. And there are a lot of people out there who are not willing to put in that practice and don't, in fact, follow what they're taught to do in the course. They don't follow through. They don't do the assignment. Masterson, in his program, will say here's a great promotion, I want you to copy the sales letter word for word and it's an eight page sales letter. 99.9% of the students never do it. So, one reason there are not so many great copywriters is they don't follow the instructions, they don't follow the courses, and the more relevant reason is they don't put in the time required to become a master at it.

Michael: On that subject, copying out a sales letter in longhand, do you believe in that? I mean is that something that you think is a good exercise for copywriters and how do you think it helps one?

Bob: I haven't done it a lot, but I have done it and I think it is a helpful exercise. I find that to copy a 24-page or a 36-page magalog, it's too much. What I will do, though, and I have done, is copy the leads of great sales letters. Like if there's a client six page or eight page sales letter to sell *Psychology Today* or *News Week*, what I do is I don't copy the whole thing. I read the whole thing carefully several times. I probably copy the lead, which is the first half of page one or all of page one, but then I outline the rest. This is more useful to me. I break it down, so I say okay first we discuss the product in this type of letter. Then we discuss the cents off. Then we get to the objection. Then we go to testimonials. Then we get to the articles that are published. Then we go back to some testimonials. I look for letter models within these controls that I can knock off or duplicate for other clients.

Michael: Here's a question from Sherri Fields, "Bob, do you believe headlines have to be outrageous to catch the reader's attention? For example, how a broke, homeless, 28-year-old learned to earn millions?"

Bob: It depends on the market niche and in the industry. And my simple answer is I don't think they have to be outrageous or absurd. I do

think they have to make a fairly big promise. Now, what she means by outrageous, it's a little crazy, it's a little goofy like a one-eyed sailor smoking a corncob pipe learning health secrets of living to 100. That works. You don't have to go in that direction.

Clayton Makepeace in one issue of his *Total Package* gave an example of a headline that was enormously successful for nutritional supplements based on the concept of improving vision. What was the old thing...you were supposed to eat carrots to see better or something? And the writer's headline -- it wasn't his copy -- was why bilberry and lutein don't work. That's not outrageous, but it was so effective he said because people getting these promotions have read 8,000 of these promotions where they've been told lutein, bilberry are the key ingredients and they probably ordered some of the products and they probably didn't work. So, that's going to grab you. You can start where the prospect is. The classic Dale Carnegie; how to win friends and influence people. That's not outrageous.

I'll answer more concisely. The answer is no, you don't have to be outrageous, but yes you do have to make or imply a big promise.

Michael: What are the two most important rules for a headline that you would advise a copywriter to keep in mind?

Bob: The two most important rules. One of them is that you have to understand what the purpose and what you want your headline to do. And headlines can have a number of functions, but the main two are to get attention and draw the reader further into the copy. So, when you're looking at a headline, you want to ask yourself if I was the prospect, would this stop me? Not to get me to buy the product. That's the wrong question. But would it stop me. Would it get me to stop and catch my attention?

The second question you want to ask is, assuming it stopped me, okay I've read it, would it compel me to read further. Would it draw me into the body copy?

And so, those are the two most important rules. You have to write something that's going to get their attention and you have to write something that's going to -- if it's direct marketing -- draw them into the body copy.



These rules don't necessarily apply to other types of advertising, like consumer advertising for packaged goods. Often there is no body copy or the body copy is very minimal. So, in that case you might have a headline that -- and this is another function a headline can perform -- is some headlines just deliver a complete selling message. Just to come up with an example of one that delivers a complete selling message, Crest Toothpaste, it used to be "caught early enough, using Crest can actually stop and reverse tooth decay in 80% of children," or something like that. That's the whole message. It doesn't really compel me terribly to read on, although I might want to know how, but it's not that compelling, it's not even that powerfully attention getting, but the main thing it does, it tells me the complete story. I might just read that if I get it versus a more direct response headline. Duncan Hines used to run ads for years for their chocolate cake mix and the headline was, "the secret to richer moisture chocolate cake." That lures me into the body copy. It sounds like it's promising to reveal some useful information. That's the difference.

Michael: Can you think of a case study from one of your clients where you crafted a headline that just smashed a previous control?

Bob: Well, I've done it, obviously, like anybody who's been writing copy for any length of time has done this or you wouldn't be in business, but if I can one specific one, I had a client approach me and they had a product -- do you know what a Day Timer is?

Michael: Yes.

Bob: So, everybody knows what a Day Timer is and this is a product that was one of the Day Timer knock-offs of which there are several. So, they had a direct mail package that had been their control for many years. Their headline was, "how many times have you told yourself 'next week I'm going to get organized,'" which I thought was pretty good. I wrote a headline that was as follows: "inside: now you can get at least one more hour of productive time each day than Day Timer or other planning systems can give you guaranteed." And that headline beat theirs by 50%. And that's a good example of something that was specifically crafted to beat a control as we direct



response copywriters do; we look to see how we can beat the control.

- Michael: This kind of brings me to testing. What's your take on testing? I mean obviously you don't have the luxury of spending a year on a client's project to test all different variables...headline, body copy, offer; things like that. So, you're limited with your time, but how do you use that time limitation and use testing to benefit your client's copy that you write them? What's your take on that?
- Bob: Well, offline in print, specifically direct mail, typically the client is testing my package versus if it's any client of any size or sophistication, they're testing my package versus their control, so the only test that's being done is a split-test of mine. If it's a client that does not have a control or is not that sophisticated, then in direct mail because of the time and expense, most clients do very limited testing. So, I'll say let's test the most important thing and that may not be the headline or the creative. If the client is introducing a new product, I might say the biggest variable with this is the price and I'd say the first thing we need to test...and that usually is the most important thing you should test. Well, first you should test with...that's a given. But in terms of the actual package, it would be probably price. Should we sell this newsletter on commodities trading for \$99 a year, \$199, or \$299? We do a three-way split and if \$299 works, then we do another AB split of \$299 versus \$399. And as you know from your own experience, surprisingly it shocks beginners and it shocked me when I started, the low price often doesn't win. And so, you have to test to find which price point is most profitable.

The other thing you would want to test is the offer. I had a guy talk to me today, he sells a membership in a professional society for technical people. He said well right now we charge \$200 or \$300 a year for membership. And the question is well should they pay \$300 for one-year membership? Should he give them a 30-day trial period? Should he give them the option of quarterly payments, monthly payments? That's going to make a huge difference, so pricing and offer, that's what I test first.

Once I had done enough testing to say I have the right offer and the right price, then I would do creative testing and the two most

important things there in direct mail are the headline or the outer envelope teaser and the lead to the piece, the lead and the headline. And number two, the format. Should I test a jumbo envelope versus a snap-pack versus a #10? So, format and lead/headline are the most important creative elements. Overall, it's price and offer.

Online it's a different story. There are systems now...you're probably familiar with the term Taguchi testing, which will allow you to test multiple elements of a sales letter online and these tests will allow you to test many permutations. So, at minimum you can do an AB or ABC split-test of the landing page headline, but really you can test five or six elements. You can test headline, you can test placement of the letterhead on the first screen. You can test a picture. Let's say you're selling an audio CD program. Is it better to show the author, a picture of the CD product in its case, or a woman or man enjoying the benefits of the product? That can make a huge difference. I saw a test recently where this guy, the only thing he changes was the color of his order button and split test a traditional bright red order button versus an orange order button and the orange beat the other by 27%.

Michael: Have you used any of the Taguchi stuff?

Bob: I don't get involved in that. I have clients that do online testing, but I certainly know where you can go get it and I certainly recommend to people that they do that. Normally if they're doing this, the only element that I'd be asked to provide is three or four different headlines. In terms of the placement of the logo or picture, the client will do that without me.

Michael: Do you have any feedback on offers that are pay nothing now and your card will be billed in 30 days? I guess that's the difference between a soft offer and a hard offer.

Bob: Well, the traditional hard offer is you give me your credit card now and we'll start your subscription. If you don't like it, you let me know within 30 days, within 60 days, within 90 days, whatever the terms of the no risk trial period are and we will refund your money in full. But you've already paid.

The soft offer is traditionally send no money now and we will bill you later. Return the form, fill in the form, submit the form online and we'll start your service and we'll send you a bill in the mail. And if you don't like it, you just mark cancel on the bill and send it back. So, you haven't paid.

What you're talking about is a hybrid, which is basically you pay online with a credit card and yes you must enter your credit card online to get the product, but they don't charge you the price of the product for 30 days. This is a very old technique. You know Joe Karbo, right?

Michael: Yes.

Bob: He wrote, *The Lazy Man's Way To Riches*, with the subhead of most people are too busy earning a living to make any money. And he did it with checks before the Internet. His coupon...if you remember...said, "Joe, you maybe full of beans, but what have I got to lose. Here's my check and I understand you won't cash it for 90 days. And if I don't like your program, I'll return it and you'll rip up my check."

We do that now online. I have one client that sells books that way. The way it is, is you put in your credit card and he charges your credit card for the \$7, \$6 shipping and handling, which is non-refundable and then he sends you the book and you have 30 or 90 days, whatever his terms are, and if you send it back before then, they never charge you for the rest. If you don't send it back, 30 days later or whenever it is, the charge for the \$50 cover price of the book goes through. And that works very well.

Michael: Here's a question from Wayne \_\_\_\_\_ out of Australia, "Bob, when building value for the product being sold in a sales letter by making out it's worth \$7,000, but I'm selling it for \$397, what's the best way to tell the reason why it's being sold for so much less than the value amount?"

Bob: Well, a better way...and not all products lend themselves to this...but there's several ways to establish value. I call it...and this is not original to me. Do you know Mike Pavlish at all?

Michael: I know the name.

Bob: He's a well-known copywriter and he wrote a report years ago where he used the term "the drop in the bucket technique," which is what I've stolen from him. And it means when you say add value, what I think of...you have to show that the price you're asking is a drop in the bucket compared to the value the reader is getting. Do you remember Don Dupre on TV, the infomercial guy?

Michael: Yes.

Bob: He used this technique and we call it "the infomercial technique." He was selling a report for a course on how to be in the mail order business with tiny classified ads and then later on I think he showed you how to do a website. But he started with classified ads and he said, "Okay, so here's what you get. First you get my guide, *How To Make Money With Classified Ads*," and there'd be a picture of this report on the screen with a nice cover and it would say \$39 on it. "And you get my list of 200 best newspapers to advertise in, my *Newspaper Guide* and that would be \$49. Then you get my guide, *How To Get Free Publicity* and that's \$59. Then you get my guide, *How To Write Your Great Classified Ad* for \$29." And there'd be like ten guides and they all said \$39 or \$40 and you add them up and it was \$700, but he said, "I'm going to give it to you now for only \$49." So, it looks like you're getting this incredible bargain. And that's much easier to do when you have a product that you break up into components because if you just had one product and you said it normally sells for \$7,000, but I'm going to give it to you for \$300, that doesn't quite make sense, although there's ways around it and I'll tell what those are in a minute. And then I actually ordered Don's product. I don't know if you ordered it.

Michael: I ordered it.

Bob: So, you remember you would get the ten guides and when you stacked them up, they were much thinner than an ordinary trade paperback book at the bookstore you could get for \$20. It was just packaging, but it's smart packaging. The packaging of an information product in different ways can allow you to charge different prices. You want to charge more...if you want to be like a Don Dupre...throw in a DVD. Videos have a much higher perceived

value than books. Throw in a piece of software even if it's shareware or for utilities. Software has a perceived value of \$50 to \$100 to \$200. So, that's another way that you can make the price seem like a drop in the bucket.

The other way to do it is to show that your product can make or save them ten times the money that they're paying. I once did an ad for this product. It was for a landlord and reduced the heating and cooling costs in apartment buildings and it was \$50,000 to install it or something like that. And we said on the first year alone, you'll save in heating and cooling costs twice what you pay for it or we'll give you your money back because these were big apartment buildings. I don't remember if it was \$50,000; whatever it was, it was very expensive, though. We call it "low total cost of ownership;" greater ROI that it will pay back its cost in two months or three months. It's the old Jay Abraham thing. If I give you a dollar, will you give me a quarter?

Michael: Here's a question from Oliver \_\_\_\_\_, "With the advent of online companies like Elance, which encourages copywriters bidding out each other to get the deal, the average price companies pay right now for copywriting jobs is around \$250 to \$500. What special niche should I endeavor to get business at a higher price?"

Bob: Well, here's the thing. Never, ever go to any of these jobsites like Elance and bid on their jobs. Buyers who go to Elance, they're looking for a low price and there is in every service, in every product, in every niche price buyers. Those are the people you don't want to deal with. Through your marketing you want to go directly to the buyer, not through Elance. Clients who come to me don't go looking at Elance. And by the way, Elance is not in many ways that hard to compete with. God forbid you needed a brain operation. The first surgeon charges \$9,000, the second charges \$8,700, but his education isn't quite as good. The third surgeon has a place called brains-r-us and charges \$200. You going to go there because it's cheap, like Elance?

Michael: No.

Bob: You're never going to go there. For a service that is competing on price, it's really a stupid strategy. And I tell freelancers, I don't mean

to be crude about it, but anyone who tries to get work on Elance is stupid. It's a total waste of time. You don't acknowledge them. Not now, but when I tell them my fee. Remember that guy who said he wanted to pay \$35 for a letter. People would call me and they'd say what do you charge for a brochure and I'd say \$2,000. \$2,000, I've got a copywriter here who can do it for \$80. And I'd say why are you talking to me?

Michael: That's good. Here's a question from Jason, "How do you go about explaining to prospects that graphic rich ads that don't give any information or have a call to action are ineffectual in comparison to properly written ads? So many people think that if an ad is funny or looks neat, it will sell. We know that isn't true, so how would you explain that to a potential business client without hurting their feelings?"

Bob: You're not going to like my answer. My answer is go with clients who already believe it. In other words, go find clients that run the kind of ads that you, as a copy connoisseur and a copywriter, like and think are good. You look at this guy's ad and say this guy knows what he's doing. That's your potential client. If I'm Omaha Steaks and I'm doing a direct mail, I don't rent the list of *Vegetarian Times* and send out a mailing that says, "don't eat vegetables, steak is good." I find lists of meat eaters. You want as potential clients the Boardrooms of the world, the conscious ones of the world, the Nightingale Conants of the world. You want people that believe in and use your kind of copy. You don't want to go to somebody who does pretty image ads and say did you know that that's stupid; I have a much better way. As Tom Peter said in his *Search For Excellence*, "people don't argue with their own data." So, I never try to convince anybody.

Michael: Is there a simple, quick, and cheap way to protect your intellectual property? How do you make sure the work you do doesn't end up in other people's hands?

Bob: I never take any precaution. I mean I only send my work to my client and I don't send it to them until they've paid half in advance, and further, they don't own the work until they pay the whole fee. So, I don't feel that's a danger, really.



Michael: Here's a question from Murray Hudson, "I read often that the most common questions copywriters ask is how do you find good profitable clients. I'm discouraged when I hear legendary copywriters say, if a copywriter can't find clients, he isn't qualified to call himself a copywriter. In your opinion, what is the best method or system for attracting good, new clients and generating profitable work?"

Bob: First of all, what he said about senior copywriters, I've heard that too and it really ticks me off. Senior copywriters will say, "Well if you're any good, clients will come to you. If you have to go out and get clients, you can't be a freelance copywriter." That is utter nonsense. The truth is people aren't going to buy your mousetrap until they find out about it. So, you have to market and promote yourself actively. And the details of this, of course, are covered in the book I mentioned earlier, *Secrets of a Freelance Writer*.

For example, I tell all novice writers get a website up. And they say well do I have to have a website to start? You don't have to, but why wouldn't you. It costs you a few hundred dollars to get a website up. You need to reserve a domain name. One of the ways that people find beginning copywriters in today's technological era is they Google it. Now, I don't optimize my site for Google. That's not how I find clients. But if I was a beginner today, I'd get a domain name, I'd search engine optimize it by using the right...what I call magnetic meta-tags. That's basically my term that I made up for meta-tags that are keyword rich. Have a search engine optimized site and I would drive traffic through SEO and maybe Google AdWord and some other ways, postcards to my site and capture the email names and there's ways to do that which we could talk about. And then I would quickly build lists of people who are interested in hiring freelance copywriters or that needed copy and I would communicate with those people. We couldn't do this in the old days. I would communicate with those people at least once a month via email.

Michael: So, let's talk a little bit about the differences in online copy compared to offline copy. I know that the purpose of an online website is to capture a name, but what about when it comes to the straight copy that's selling a product or a service? Are these differences things that whisper rather than things that scream?



Bob: What I tell people is online and offline copywriting are much more alike than they are different. They're mostly alike. There are only a few minor differences, however, the few minor differences are very, very important and you have to know them.

One of the differences, of course, is what we mentioned earlier, keywords. You have to know what the keywords are for the product you're selling and optimize your site for it.

Another one is that...like in the old days...if we were doing a print sales letter and we had a four-page letter, we'd start to ask for the order -- mail the reply card, call our toll-free number -- at the bottom half of page four if it's a four-page letter. We do that online, but we also ask for it at the beginning. You've heard the expression, put the first link above the fold. That means have a response link to your order form, whether it's an email or a landing page, have a response link to the order form on the first screen and have one probably every screen. That's another major different.

So, you have to know the half a dozen rules that make it different. So, you have to know the differences and use them, but the basic writing style is pretty similar.

Michael: Here's another question from Murray Hudson, "In your opinion what is the best way to leverage your time in order to increase your income as a copywriter? For example, work with larger clients or clients who want ads more often or send more letters so you can justify higher fees, specialize within an industry so you can work from copy you've already written from another client, etc.?"

Bob: The easiest way...he named it...is to work for repeat clients. Have, as we said earlier, 80% or more of your business come from repeat clients, therefore, you need clients, of course, that have multiple assignments. And some do and some don't. When you do that...exactly what he said...a lot of the times you'll get an assignment from the repeat client...let's say to write a letter or an email...and you open your files for that client that are well organized on your hard drive so you don't spend an hour searching for them. They're in a subdirectory folder and you open it up and you say that's pretty similar. I mean I've had situations where I'm doing

something for a repeat client and the guy doesn't remember that his predecessor did something like that four years ago and we never used it and now he wants to go out and mail it. I'll open it and some of it has to be changed and updated and it could be made better, but 80% of it is already done. And you don't have that when it's a first time client.

And then if you can't work that much with repeat clients, you work in similar industries. I do a lot of work in IT. I used to do a lot of work in the chemical process industry. I do a lot of work in publications; consumer and business-to-business newsletters. So, you know how to do the promotion. What's hard is when someone comes to you and says I'm a hospice and we want to promote our hospice. I don't know anything about hospice marketing. I have to learn it all. That's going to take me a lot of time, so I often turn those down now a days. I like to work with businesses where I already understand the business.

Michael: I often frustratingly say to my wife, if only my clients would give me good information, I could easily write good copy for them. How do you extract information from your clients, the hidden nuggets that you need in order to produce good copy for them? For example, most business owners have no idea about why their business is different, better than their competitors. How do you help your clients to develop differences that you can illustrate in your copy?

Bob: What this fellow says, it's so true. I did a letter for an insurance guy. I did the first draft of his letter and he said, oh I'm very happy, but there are some things I want you to maybe change. And he says, by the way, I'm emailing you a PDF of my sales brochure. And I'd never seen this document before despite the fact that I asked him send me all your literature. And there in that brochure were gems. Unfortunately, the transfer of information from client to copywriter is imperfect and no matter how much we try to systematize it, it remains imperfect. Yet, you should try to systematize it as much as possible.

So, for example, one of the things that I do is, I have a checklist on my website, on [www.bly.com](http://www.bly.com). It's a reprint of an article I wrote on here's what I need to write your copy. And it lists 20 or 30 things they should send me and it lists 30 or 40 questions they need to

answer. And I actually enclose a reprint of that article any time someone asks for information on my copywriting services. That article is in the package. So, I let them know in advance what I'll be doing. You need to know what you're after when you're interviewing the client. I like to use my checklist to gather the brute facts about his product or service. No need for me to spend six hours discussing with him the specifications of his pump if that's in some catalog somewhere. Just give me the catalog. What I want to spend my time with...because the client's time is limited, they can't spend 14 hours with you on the phone. But if I have an hour with a client or two hours or a half hour, I want to ask him hard questions that's going to help me write the copy, which typically might be...as you said...how is my product different or better or if I'm focusing on the prospect, what's the prospect's biggest concern, which is a great question. Experienced copywriters ask this all the time...some variation of the question...well what's the one thing that's keeping your prospect up at night that your product could help them address. That's a great question.

As far as the other question of how is it different, he said, well clients don't know. So, I'll ask a client how is it different and if they tell me well it's not really different or they don't know, I'll say well then why on earth would anyone buy yours instead of your competitors. And then there's usually silence and then they start to talk slowly and they sort of sound out for themselves for the first time...like they never thought about it...the differences. They'll go, "Well, we not only deliver it to their door, but we unpack it and we set up the system and turn it on and we don't leave until it's on and we remove the box and the packing. And then if they want to return it within 60 days, we'll come there and pack it up for them and bring it back." I say does anyone else do that? "No, I guess they don't." But they never thought of it when I asked them. "Well, my monitor is the same as everyone else's." So, you have to probe and dig.

Michael: Do your copywriting clients, as you get started with them and you create some success for them with your copy, do you fall into the position where they're asking you for more business advice than the copywriting, like more marketing consulting? I mean it seems like it's a natural inevitable thing.

Bob: The rule of thumb is smaller businesses will tend to need and want from their copywriters more marketing, consulting, and advice. Larger businesses -- you're writing for Boardroom, which I do, you're writing for Agora Publishing, which I do, you're writing for Nightingale Conant, which I do -- they don't need marketing help. I prefer that kind of client myself. I don't want to be a marketing consultant. I want to be a copywriter. Having said that, there are many people out there who prefer to be marketing advisors and consultants and if you want to do that kind of thing, just work for small and medium size companies rather than giants or work for companies that are not marketing driven. You might work for a company that's a big widget manufacturer and they're a large company, but they're that sophisticated about market and then they will ask for your advice. Like I just did a project for a guy selling, I mentioned earlier, this professional association. I just wrote what he asked me to, but I realized clearly when I was writing it that he doesn't know the model for making money online. And so, the question is how do I get that to him.

Michael: How many copywriters are the big publishing companies like Boardroom and Agora working with?

Bob: I don't their numbers. I think it's in the low dozens.

Michael: Low dozens. Not that many.

Bob: Like Boardroom tends to work with only a handful, but Agora Publishing, which has many more products, Agora works probably with the largest number, Boardroom the smallest and the others are in between.

Michael: What kind of stuff can you reveal, like what kind of projects do you work with on Boardroom? Are you doing magalogs or online promotions?

Bob: Boardroom has a small core of writers who do their magalogs and I am not part of that group. Sometimes clients will slot you into a specialty for them. I do for Boardroom, although I have done some mail for them, I do online promotions for them.

Michael: The online stuff.

- Bob: Right.
- Michael: Are they using audio in any of their online promotions?
- Bob: As far as I know they're not, but that's definitely something that I can bring to them with you.
- Michael: I would love to test it. I think it could really enhance some online promotions is having the straight copy with some intensive audio with it, as well.
- Bob: Well, next time I'm at one of their meetings, I'll mention it. They do get approached by a lot of people who say I can help you do this or that and they're very wary. They really try to insulate themselves and don't want to be contacted.
- Michael: This gentleman, Murray, he has some other good questions. "Do you have a favorite letter opening that you fall back on to time and time again?"
- Bob: I certainly have a toolkit of headline leads and formulas, and in my book, *The Copywriter's Handbook*, I do have a chapter on direct mail and sort of list my favorite 15 ways to open a letter, but I don't have a single one that's really my favorite. I do write very much problem solution. Do you know who Jerry Huntsinger is?
- Michael: No, tell me.
- Bob: He's one of the top, top fund raising copywriters and he's a master of this. He did a letter for Red Cross that I think is the quintessential problem solution letter. It says, "Dear Mr. Jones or Dear Mr. Bly, Some day, you may need the Red Cross." That's a problem. Next paragraph is, "But right now, the Red Cross needs you." That's the solution. "You give money, they'll be there when there's a flood in your town." And I use problem lead a lot. I use testimonial leads and quotation leads a lot. For example, "The other day I was speaking to client and he told me, God it's so hard to find a web designer that not only understands design and programming, but also can help me make money on the Web. Do you have that same problem? If so, I want to introduce you to an interactive agency that can help you." I

like things that make the first paragraph a quotation or even a testimonial or a problem. I'll often say, "When Tim Harris had to design a new chemical plant for Pfizer with 600 processes mixed in one, he knew it would be a big job. That's where he turned to Pipe Flow software." I like that kind of thing.

Michael: How about legalities? I know you're working with the larger publishers and they have whole legal departments to review copy to make sure no one gets in trouble. But let's say these new copywriters and they're working with smaller businesses and they're using testimonials and they're using claims, talk to them about what issues they need to be aware of when they're writing that copy and if they go over the line what some of the consequences can be regarding that?

Bob: Well, there's two things they should do. First of all, they should go to my website, [www.bly.com](http://www.bly.com), click on methodology, click on terms and conditions and look at my agreement. In my agreement it says, hey, even though Bob makes every effort to make your copy compliant with the law, he's not a lawyer and you, Mr. Client, are responsible for that because the client dictates the content. So, I tell every client in their agreement they sign and return it says I have no responsibility for the liability and the legality of the copy.

Michael: And make sure they sign off on that.

Bob: And make sure they sign off and approve that. The second thing, though, is common sense can go a long way, which means first don't do something that is illegal or that strikes you as illegal or immoral. Second, if it seems wrong to you, it probably is. Third, if you think the client is crossing the line, tell him or her so. If she doesn't back down, you can refuse to write the piece or you can send an email saying I'm including this paragraph at your insistence, though I am almost one hundred percent convinced this will get you in trouble with the FDA or the SEC and I wholly urge against it. And then I'll file.

Michael: Who are some of your mentors that you look up to, some of the guys you really learned from even the old timers like Claude Hopkins or Clyde Bedell?

- Bob: In terms of people that are old timers, there is an old timer who is largely forgotten today, Paul Bringe. I don't know if you know him - - B-r-i-n-g-e -- who was a terrific copywriter. Another one, Ed McLean. Do you know Ed McLean?
- Michael: No.
- Bob: He wrote the classic letter for *News Week* that said, "If the list upon which I found your name is any indication, this is not the first nor will it be the last letter you receive asking you to subscribe to a magazine."
- Michael: How do you spell his last name?
- Bob: McLean is M-c-L-e-a-n. And he has great books he wrote on direct marketing that are out of print and impossible to get. More contemporary, Zig Rosenblum who recently retired. Milt Pierce, he's retired.
- Michael: The name Milt Pierce, I've heard it over and over again. Who did he write for?
- Bob: He wrote mainly for magazines. There was a time in the 60s and 70s and 80s where the big copywriters wrote mainly subscription packages for magazines. Today, it's more information products and newsletters, but then it was magazines and he was one of the top magazine writers. He wrote a package that I don't think today would work, but 40 years ago he wrote, "144 ways *Better Homes & Garden* can save you time and money," and it was like an unbeaten control for 17 years or 20 years. So, Milt Pierce, Ed McLean...
- Michael: Tell me about Eugene Shorts.
- Bob: I never had much contact with him. I think he's certainly one of the great copywriters, especially for books. I have read a lot of his promotions and I have a lot of the books that he sold through his instant improvement company. I actually only spoke with him one or two times. I think I interviewed him for an article I wrote once. He was a brilliant guy.



- Michael: You see the large mail orders using magalogs. Are magalogs out pulling the standard #10 long letter format?
- Bob: Generally for financial newsletters and health newsletters magalogs are for most publishers out pulling #10s, although it really varies with each individual publisher like Porter Stansberry's *Pirate Investor*. All their packages, all their controls are #10s. Some other Agora divisions it's mixed. At Martin Weiss, I think it's mainly magalogs now and magalogs have been a very successful format for a long time and the reason they work is that if written and designed correctly and usually they aren't, but when they're done right, they come across as what we call an advertorial. They look like they're a report on how to do something useful rather than some guy trying to sell you something and that's the power within them.
- Michael: Let's talk about the money. Let's say a copywriter does what they need. They're the 10% out of a 100 who studies, who gets out there, who sends out 500 letters to potential clients; what have you seen from some of your students in the past or students of other copywriters the income potential and compare that to the time they're putting in. Are they limited if they're not farming out their work? Obviously, you're limited by your time.
- Bob: Well, it's like the dentist saying, "You're not billing unless you're drilling and filling." There's an upper limit theoretically on what you can earn and a top-earning copywriter is generally recognized as a solo copywriter. That means he's really a freelance copywriter. He makes his money not from publishing newsletter, not from selling information products, but from writing copy for clients. Clayton Makepeace is generally regarded as the highest paid copywriter and he reports earnings on a bad year \$1 million a year, on a good year \$3 million a year and that's from mailing fees and royalties mainly. So, he's writing strictly for large consumer direct marketers selling information products and nutritional supplements and things of that nature. That's all he writes. He's not interested in anything else.
- Michael: Because the money is in that mailing.
- Bob: Right. So, that's what he can make it that market. He has some students of his -- I can't mention by name -- but at least two or three of them are making \$1 million a year and a couple more making half

a million a year or more. But if you're not working on that, well how else can you make big money? One thing that people do is they start out as copywriters and then they decide to have their own products and they become rich like Bill Bonner at Agora Publishing. He's a great copywriter, but you can't call him and he makes millions of dollars a year. He's fabulously wealthy, but you can't say he's a freelance copywriter or even a copywriter. He's a business owner. He's an entrepreneur.

Michael: Did he start out as a copywriter before he started Agora?

Bob: Yes. I don't have his history in front of me. I've read it, but it's in my memory, but I think he started out as a copywriter for fundraising or for publishing; something like that. He made a lot of money when he switched and he tells the story, he said he started working for this company and writing their letters and he said, "Then I realized you could write a letter to a stranger and they'd send you money, what's a better gimmick than that?"

Michael: So, do you encourage or teach or educate in some of your products and courses that let the copywriter know if they can master the skill and do somewhat great with it, you can make a good living on it, but you can make a fortune selling and controlling your own products that you sell with your copy.

Bob: I do have products, but I'm primarily of the old model of Clayton Makepeace. I teach people how to be what we would call a contract copywriter. And people will say well why would you want to do that? You can make so much more. Hey, you do what you want to do. I do what I want to do.

Michael: You don't want to mess with the business.

Bob: Well, I actually do because I do have a product line, but primarily -- forgive the clique -- that's not what floats my boat. I like being a freelance copywriter. I'm not making \$10 million a year, but I'm closing in on \$1 million a year. I'm making \$600,000-\$700,000 a year and that's more than sufficient to meet my needs. I don't have to work very hard for it. I have friends who say leave copywriting, devote all your time to selling products, and I'll say you do that and you spend your day doing things I'm not interested in. I had one

friend, I said what do you do all day. He goes, well my main thing is I'm constantly emailing and on the phone and trying to setup as many affiliate deals as I can. I don't want to do that. I want to write copy. Also, the products that I can develop and sell are somewhat limited based on my own expertise. So, I get to work on things as a freelance copywriter I would not work for my own. Like I just wrote a report for an investment client on carbon sequestering, which is basically how a company that's polluting the air can get away with it by investing in a reforestation project. They can get credits for the forests they plant. And the company I wrote about has a system of carbon dioxide sequestering based on growing plankton in the ocean. That kind of stuff is really fascinating to me. I get to write about gold mining, which is interesting to me.

Michael: Tell me about the gold mining.

Bob: I've done a number of promotions for gold publications that's a subset of the investment community is Gold Bug. I have a history of having had some very successful promotions. I've worked for Doug Casey. I've worked for Paul Sarnoff. I've worked for James DeGeorgia doing gold promotions.

Michael: Is it a hungry market?

Bob: Yes, it's a hungry market. These people are really interested in it and investing is hard money. People who buy financial newsletters are an information hungry market. And I think that's a great Gary Halpert \_\_\_\_\_. He says, "Look for hungry markets. Don't go to markets that are blasé and are not really information buyers. Go to markets that are hungry for stuff," and its very good advice.

Michael: And there's a reason. There may be a lot action, a lot of people selling to that market, but there's a reason for it.

Bob: Yes, because they buy. I had the idea years ago to start a newsletter or some type of product on coping with infertility. But just because someone's trying to have a baby, they may desperately want to have a baby, but they're not necessarily information seekers. When we were trying to have a baby, we went through infertility. My wife probably had like 83 books in our bedroom and we would go to these meeting of the infertility groups and she'd meet other people.

She'd say, oh have you read this? They don't want to read any book. Lay people don't understand that. Not only do you have to have someone who is interested in your subject -- gold or investment -- they have to be an information seeker.

Michael: Do you have experience with renting lists and mailing lists?

Bob: I have a huge amount of experience in the list business. I've never been a broker, but I used to be an advertiser and I rented mailing lists. And, of course, I've been guiding clients on list rentals for 25 years. I have a long running relationship with some of the biggest list brokers. So, I'm not an expert, but I'm pretty well versed in mailing lists.

Michael: So, you've got the SRDS, a huge compilation of mailing lists.

Bob: Right.

Michael: But just because it's in there, that doesn't mean it's a good list or an ethical list or an honest list. Is there a lot of fraud?

Bob: Never rent a list directly from the source. You should always go to a broker because the broker can spend full time being aware of what lists are available because they can amortize the cost of that investment in research over their hundred clients. You can't duplicate that. So, my advice is to find a good list broker and I have the ones that I use listed on my website if you want to look at them. And you go to [www.bly.com](http://www.bly.com) and click on vendors, then click under mailing lists and there they are; Merit Direct, Edith Roman Carnegie. These are the best lists brokers.

I always go to the best profession. You don't go to freaking Elance for a copywriter; forgive my language. You're getting the pot scum. I didn't mean to insult anybody who advertises on Elance, but get out of there. You want to deal with the best copywriter, the best designer, you want to deal with the best list broker and they will do the job of listening to what your market is, looking at your promotion, and then matching the best list for that.

The list broker only makes money if you actually rent the list. If you go to a list broker and they give you a bunch of list

recommendations, then they quickly email you or fax you or FedEx you a set of what's called data cards. These are the lists that they recommend. And you decide not go ahead with this you don't owe them a dime. If you do go ahead, you're not paying extra for those lists. You're paying the fee to the list broker as you would to rent directly from the owner. The commission to the list broker comes from the owner. People don't realize this. It costs you nothing to use a list broker.

Michael: So, your vendors that you have up on the site, these people are genuinely interested in your best interest. They're not going to send you rate cards on lists that they may know are crap.

Bob: No because a list owner would do that or even maybe a list manager, but usually a list owner. You call up Hog Magazine. Let's say you're mailing to hog farmers and you say should I rent your list. What are they going to say? They go oh yeah our list is great. They're not being objective. They want to sell you their list. A list broker has no vested interest in selling you any particular list. They know you're only going to return to them if your mailing makes money. No, they want to give you the best list for you. So, their advice is totally objective.

Michael: You see mailing in SRDS minimum order is 5,000 names. Can that be negotiated with list brokers?

Bob: Everything is negotiable. In many cases, that is not, so your choice is either see if you can negotiate it or what some people do is they'll rent the 5,000, hold 3,000 back and just test 2,000. Now, you've paid for the names, but you haven't paid for mailing. Do you know what I'm saying?

Michael: Right. \_\_\_\_ an offer to someone listening for the end of this.

Bob: Here's what you do. You go to [www.bly.com/reports](http://www.bly.com/reports) and if you go there, you can get not only a free subscription to my monthly e-newsletter, The Direct Response Newsletter, you get four of my marketing reports with a value of over \$100; about 200 pages of material.

Michael: That's the end of this interview with Bob Bly. I encourage you to go check out his website at  
<http://www.ctcpublishing.net/cmd.php?af=417279>