Start & Run a Copywriting Business

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Self-Counsel Press
(a division of)
International Self-Counsel Press Ltd.
USA  Canada
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Adventures in the Copywriting Business

Being a self-employed copywriter can be a lot of things. It can be fun, creative, challenging, invigorating, lucrative, tough, intensive, scary, relaxing, stressful, a pleasure, and a pain — but, thankfully, not all at the same time. One thing it’s not, though, is boring. Copywriting is always an adventure.

Personally, I get a kick out of the new creative projects that hit my desk each week. One day it’s an ad; the next, a website. This week, for example, I’m working on a series of brochures for an insurance company. I’m also writing an annual report for a large software firm. I enjoy learning about new products and services. And, like all writers, I love seeing my work published in the dozens of ads, brochures, websites, direct mail, and other material I write each year.
A Great Home-Based Business Opportunity

When it comes to a home-based business, copywriting is (in my opinion) as good as it gets. I can think of few pursuits that offer a more optimal mix of low risk and high income potential. Hanging your shingle requires little more than a computer, business cards and stationery, and a desk to work on. Yes, a little writing talent and marketing savvy help, but not as much as you might think. Perseverance and a willingness to learn can take you a long way (as they did for me).

As a copywriter, you can expect to be well paid. Self-employment gurus Paul and Sarah Edwards report in their book, *The Best Home-Based Businesses for the 21st Century* that an established, self-employed copywriter can earn between $80,000 and $175,000 a year. This seems a little high to me, but most copywriters I know do earn at least $50,000 a year, with some incomes creeping well over the six-figure mark.

Freelance copywriting, I might add, can also generate a good income from working on a part-time or casual basis. Just one project per month — whether it’s an ad, a brochure, or a website — can earn you an extra income of several hundred dollars per month. Many freelance copywriters I interviewed for this book began writing copy part time, slowly developing their skills, knowledge, and client base until they were ready to make a full-time commitment. I began part time, and the money I earned and lessons I learned went a long way toward more successfully launching my full-time business.

If you’re a freelance writer used to the pittance magazines often pay, copywriting can greatly augment your income. This is because the magazine market is a buyer’s market — with plenty of writers willing to work for free, simply to see their name in print. It’s tough to break into, and even tougher to earn decent fees for your work.

Copywriters, however, encounter a demand for their services. As I explain later in this chapter, it’s not exactly a seller’s market, but it’s close to it. And there is certainly no reason for you to accept a copywriting assignment for little or no fee. Even as a beginner, you can expect to earn good fees for the work you do.
Just how much experience and expertise do you need to earn these great fees? Obviously, the more experience you have, the greater your chance of success. But don’t let a perceived lack of direct experience prevent you from tackling your goal of becoming a self-employed copywriter. Operating a successful copywriting business essentially involves a combination of writing ability and marketing strategy. If you have a modicum of the first, you can learn the second in this book.

Copywriting is a subset of business writing. Think about the business documents you’ve written: memos, reports, proposals, query letters. Were some of these written to persuade others to act or make a decision, or to steer them to your point of view? If so, then you already have some experience as a copywriter. Even if you haven’t, your love of writing and commitment to learning the unique strategies and approaches to crafting effective marketing copy are the keys to succeeding in this business.

What Is Copywriting?
A few of years ago, while attending a business networking event, a man introduced himself to me and asked, “What do you do?” When I explained that I’m a copywriter, he immediately launched into a long story about his nephew, a patent and trademarks lawyer. “He works with copyrights all the time,” he told me. “Perhaps you know him?” I tried, of course, to explain that I don’t copyright anything. I am a copywriter. But to no avail.

So, no, copywriting does not involve trademarks, patents, and copyright. Copywriting is a creative process of organizing information and writing words (and sometimes suggesting concepts, structure, and visuals) used in creating effective sales and marketing documents. These include print ads, Internet banner ads, brochures, case studies, direct mail, sales letters, sale sheets, flyers, case studies, and new product announcements — in fact, the list is endless.

Copywriters seek to inform, persuade, and sell. The process sometimes goes by other names — marketing writing, sales writing, persuasive writing, ad writing, and public relations writing are just a few. Sales letter guru Herschell Gordon Lewis likes to call it “force communication.” Mal Warwick, an authority on fundraising letters, refers to the process simply as “writing for results.”

Copywriting is “... a broad term. The words on a menu are copy. So are the words in an ad, product description, press release, annual report, announcement, invitation, package insert, sales letter, web page, broadcast fax, CD-ROM presentation, and food label.”

— Elements of Copywriting by Robert W. Bly and Gary Blake
My definition? When my wife comes home from work and asks me what I did that day, I often reply, “I wrote about segregated life insurance” or “I wrote about industrial imaging sensors.” So for me, copywriting is writing persuasively about products and services and the benefits they bring to the lives of customers. Tom Stoyan, author and sales coach, teaches that selling is “influencing the thinking of others to get them emotionally involved in an idea to help them make a buying decision.” Copywriting is very similar. And it’s not a bad way to spend the day.

Copywriting versus Other Types of Writing

“But wait a minute,” you say. “Isn’t copywriting just good business writing?”

Well, yes and no.

Materials

Copywriting does have everything to do with good, clear business writing. In fact, “copy” can refer to the written text of any type of document. But the term “copywriting” is more commonly used in reference to sales, advertising, and marketing materials; effectively and persuasively writing these requires finding a unique approach to a specific, often skeptical audience.

Copywriting is a subset of business writing, which is a catch-all term encompassing a wide range of business documents and audiences. The thousands of documents written and produced by a major corporation, for example, might include any of the following:

- HTML help menus from the technical service department
- Press releases from the public relations department
- Countless e-mails, letters, memos, and reports written by executives and support staff
- Employee newsletters published by the employee communications office
- Invitations to shareholder meetings produced by investor relations
Audience

The above list of materials can be targeted at audiences as diverse as managers, CEOs, customers, employees, vendors, the media, and colleagues.

Where does copywriting fit in? You’ll usually find this type of writing in the marketing department, or plied at an advertising agency or design firm. While business writing is broad, copywriting has a more specialized focus. At its most basic level, copywriting seeks to gain the attention of buyers and communicate successfully with them. Buyers may be current customers, past customers, new customers, or potential customers. Of course, the skills of persuasive writing — so deliberately applied by copywriters — can be used to great effect in many other documents (a proposal to upper management is one such example). But a copywriter’s ultimate concern is how to craft headlines, sentences, and paragraphs that will tweak a buyer’s interest and nudge him or her closer to making a decision to buy.

Writing that sells

Many copywriters call copywriting “writing that sells,” but sometimes the direct sales message within a marketing document isn’t obvious.

Direct mail certainly packs a deliberate sales punch. A direct mail package is designed to get you to make an immediate buying decision, and the success of a mailing is measured by how many people from a given list respond. But marketing documents such as case studies, success stories, and features take more of a “soft sell” approach. They contain no direct “buy now” message. Still, copywriters tasked with writing any form of marketing document, whether it be hard sell or soft sell, will use all the persuasive tools at their command in a deliberate attempt to win the hearts and minds of buyers.

Style and structure

Copywriting can also differ from general business writing in style and structure. Here’s an example.

On the one hand, a technical writer trying to explain the safety procedures of a welding torch might write this:
It is important to turn on the acetylene before turning on the oxygen. If the oxygen valve is turned on first, an explosion may occur.

On the other hand, a copywriter might write the same thing this way:

“A” before “O” — or up you’ll go!

By the way, copywriting does not always involve catchy phrases and clever wordplays. In fact, the best copy I read gains attention simply, and then talks persuasively about the benefits of the product or service in a clear, interesting way.

Grammar

Copywriting can also differ from business writing in its use of grammar. It’s been called the rebel son of business writing — and traditional English composition in general. Copywriters will unabashedly use colloquialisms, clichés, contractions, repetition, underlining, and italics to get their point across. Ads and brochures may be riddled with sentences starting with And, But, or Or. Sentence fragments are also common. Like this one.

Copywriters have always strived to make their writing conversational. Why? Because one-to-one conversations are the most persuasive form of communication. It’s no accident that sales letters are so popular in direct mail and other marketing communications. They are direct and personal (even if they are mailed to thousands of people from the same list of names).

Visuals

Copywriting can also be a bit like screenwriting. A screenwriter will often “see” the movie playing in his or her head while writing the scenes. A copywriter does something similar. He or she will often “see” the ad or brochure while writing — visualizing how the artwork, headlines, and body copy work together to tell a persuasive story.

Ideas for artwork, visuals, and other graphical elements often pop into my head as I write. When this happens, I sketch out the idea and send it to my client or the designer (I can’t draw, but I’m famous for my stickpeople). I may create a mocked-up version of the collateral I’m writing — folding and cutting paper, roughing in
The Demand for Good Copywriters

What does the future hold for copywriters? A lot of work! Most established, self-employed copywriters regularly turn down work. In fact, on the day I’m writing this, I had to turn down an assignment from a potential client because I was just too busy. I hate doing this because every business thrives on new clients (and turning them down makes me feel pretentious). But my current clients always come first.

Of course, I’m not immune to slow times and dips in business activity. No self-employed copywriter is. But you can rest assured there is a high demand for writers who can craft persuasive words, sentences, and paragraphs for effective advertising and marketing materials. If you’re dedicated to learning the required skills and you can actively identify and attract clients, there is little reason why you won’t be a busy professional for years to come.

There are a number of reasons why the demand for good copywriters is so high:

- **Continuous need for copy.** Businesses have an ongoing need to develop ads, brochures, websites, sales letters, press releases, articles, newsletters, and other collateral to promote their products and services. Business people often don’t have the time, inclination, or skills to write the copy themselves, so they “outsource” to self-employed copywriters.

- **The growth of the Internet.** The growth of the Internet has created a new market for copywriters. When the medium first emerged, many people thought the days of printed brochures and direct-mail promotions were over. But did television replace radio, or even motion pictures? Hardly. These days, when I get an assignment to write a brochure, I get a second assignment to write copy for the website. In fact, developing content and writing copy for websites is now an important part of my business.

- **Shorter life cycles for materials.** The lifespan of sales and marketing materials has shrunk. This means more work, more often, from the same client. A few years ago, a brochure for
an industrial gizmo would have had a useful life of five years. Now, it’s trashed and redone within six months. (I wrote a series of brochures for a software company just seven months ago, and recently received an assignment to update every one.) Today’s market moves fast, and customers want to see fresh, up-to-date material.

- ** Downsizing of big business.** There was a time when many corporations and most ad agencies employed in-house writers. Those days are gone. After years of downsizing, businesses routinely farm out copy to freelance professionals (that’s us) because they don’t have the internal resources to handle the workload. Yes, downsizing has motivated many formerly employed copywriters to set up shop, which has increased competition. But the demand for copywriting services has outpaced available copywriters by a wide margin.

- **Writers don’t know about the market.** There just aren’t enough copywriters on the market to handle the demand. The reason? I suspect many prospective writers don’t appreciate the potential of this business, or have little knowledge of copywriting in general.

**The Road to Success**

Copywriting is a surprisingly easy field to break into. Unlike writing a screenplay or a novel, you don’t need to get that one-in-a-thousand lucky break. Copywriting is a business, and if you apply yourself, learn a few strategies, and stick with it, there is no reason why you cannot generate a solid income with your own copywriting business.

Everyone can come up with reasons why they won’t be successful. For me it was age. I thought I was too old to switch from being a sales rep to becoming a self-employed copywriter. That was until I found out about David Ogilvy, perhaps the most famous copywriter of the 20th century. In advertising circles, he’s a legend — but he didn’t write a word of copy until he was 38 years old. Before that, he worked off and on as a salesperson, a diplomat, and even a farmer.

My road to becoming a self-employed copywriter was also not traditional. In university, I knew I loved to write. I also knew I enjoyed business. I just didn’t put the two together. So, when I
graduated with a degree in business, I drifted, eventually finding my way to sales.

I liked selling. As a technical sales representative, I often toured manufacturing plants in a variety of industries and found it fascinating to learn about new products and how they were made.

I also enjoyed the independence of a sales career. Although I was employed, I often worked solo and unsupervised. Because my income was a mix of salary and commission, I had more control over how much I earned. It was a little like being self-employed.

Yet, despite these advantages, I began to feel increasingly unsatisfied. Even though I was a top performer for a number of years — in fact, for three years in a row I held the record for signing new accounts — I developed a nagging feeling that a sales career was not for me. Confused, I began to flounder.

Then it happened. One day, the company I was working for decided to redesign its sales brochures. I was pleased. Most of the brochures were poorly written, some even painful to read. I gave them out to customers only reluctantly. My fellow reps often said they used the brochures only to show pictures of the products. I thought, “Shouldn’t a sales brochure do more?”

Taking a breath, I marched into my sales manager’s office and offered to write the new brochures. I gave him a song and dance on the few writing credentials I had, and assured him the task would not interfere with my selling duties. Much to my surprise, he said, “Yes.” (In retrospect, he was probably not looking forward to writing the copy himself, and jumped at the chance of having the job lifted off his shoulders. Besides, my services were free.)

I don’t remember a time when I approached a task more enthusiastically. I worked late into every evening on the brochures; weekends too. I coordinated my work with our graphic design firm, even hanging around the studio during the photo shoot. I admit I loved it. Although I knew little about copywriting (I didn’t even know it was called copywriting) the brochures were received with unanimous applause around the company.

Then my carriage turned into a pumpkin, and I was back to life as a sales rep. But things had changed. Word of my writing skills spread through the company. First, the equipment division asked me to rewrite a proposal. Then the service manager enlisted my help.
on a particularly difficult customer letter. It didn’t happen as often as I would have liked, but whenever people in the company had something challenging to write, they turned to me.

It wasn’t long before I began learning everything I could about copywriting. I read every book I could find on the subject. Soon, I began to wonder if I could become a self-employed copywriter and work from a home office writing copy for clients.

Eventually, I began to build my copywriting business on a part-time basis — working many evenings and weekends to promote my services and complete copywriting assignments. The extra money I made went into a savings account to fund my eventual foray into full-time self-employment. This happy event occurred about three years later.

Over the years, I’ve built my reputation with a growing list of ad agency, design firm, and Fortune 500 corporate clients. I’m surprised at, and admittedly proud of, how fast I’ve managed to build my business to become among the top freelance copywriters in my market. If I can do it — starting with very little money, knowledge, or experience — with diligence and persistence, you can too.

You as a Self-Employed Copywriter

The road to success as a self-employed copywriter is not the same for everyone, but I am confident that success lies in wait for you if you try. I’ve seen too many people from so-called nontraditional backgrounds succeed in this business (myself included) to not believe that success is possible if you work hard.

Don’t discount your life, education, and career experience — whatever it is. Some people mistakenly assume that all copywriters graduated with marketing degrees and plied their trade in advertising agencies before setting up shop as copywriters. This is true for some copywriters, but not for most. Many self-employed copywriters, in fact, have an astonishing variety of backgrounds. Some copywriters I know were once high-ranking marketing managers. Others drove trucks. Copywriter Alan Sharpe was a former British soldier and saw action in the Falklands war. Direct-mail specialist Ron Marshak taught economics.

Brenda Kruse comes from a more traditional background. A university graduate with a degree in advertising, she worked with

Freelance copywriter Bob Bly says in his book Write More, Sell More, “Freelance copywriting does not require a degree, certification, specific educational background, or work experience. The main qualification is the ability to write good copy.”
several ad agencies before deciding to freelance. “I was approaching burnout at the agency,” Brenda remembers, “and needed to make a change.” She admits that venturing out on her own was scary, but today she is well niched as the “Farm Girl Copywriter” and works with major agri-marketing clients throughout the United States.

Copywriting may be a specialized field, but this book, as well as other books and resources I list on the CD-ROM, can help you learn what you need to succeed. So, if you love to write and enjoy business in general, you too can start and run a profitable copywriting business.