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Monthly Copywriting Genius



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Monthly Copywriting Genius: Issue #53

How One Person Turned Her Desire to Become a Copywriter Into Reality... and How You Can Do the Same

MCG: Carline, the one thing we've learned over the years is that most copywriters don't start out as a copywriter. What was your job prior to becoming a copywriter?

Carline: I worked 10 years at Phillips Publishing (now Healthy Directions). I started as a customer service rep. When the company launched a health division, I got a job as a marketing assistant. Then I moved up to marketing manager, senior marketing manager, and director of marketing. I was a group publisher when I left the company.

MCG: So you obviously knew what copywriting or direct response/mail was before you became a copywriter?

Carline: Yes. I was working with and hiring copywriters. I noticed that they got to work from home or some exotic location and got paid a heck of a lot more money than I did!

MCG: So how did you make the transition from being on the marketing side to writing copy?

Carline: I started writing renewal promotions while at Phillips and found that I enjoyed promotional writing. Plus, the stuff I wrote was actually making the company money.

In addition to reviewing copy from writers, I started asking more questions on their technique and style. By the end of 1998, I wanted a change. I was tired of trying to balance career and family and wanted more flexibility in my life.

My husband encouraged me to go out on my own. We figured the worst that could happen was that we'd end up back in the one bedroom apartment we started with (although we'd now have 4 kids with us). I got the guts to do it and as they say, "the rest is history..."

MCG: Now I know you worked with copywriters and talked with them about copywriting, but did you wind up training yourself or did you have a mentor?

Carline: I had the absolute BEST mentor in the world. Clayton Makepeace and I had become friends as he was writing killer controls for *Health & Healing*. I studied his copy. He has a great writing style that I thought I could imitate. I bugged him with tons of questions. He encouraged me to try freelancing. He was my copy chief the first 2 years I was on my own. The time I got to work with him was priceless

MCG: So how long have you been writing copy?

Carline: I've been on my own as a freelancer for 8 years. Been writing promotional copy for about 10

years.

MCG: What was the first project you worked on as a copywriter?

Carline: My first big break was writing a male potency package. The client thought he needed an African-American writer to tap into his growing black male customer base. I totally convinced him that I could do the job. After I got the assignment, I completely panicked. I had no idea what I was doing, but I went for it anyway. My copy ended up beating his control and mailed for over a year.

MCG: That's a great first step. Would you consider that your first big success as a copywriter?

Carline: My first BIG success was teaming up with Clayton Makepeace to write a package called "Forbidden Secrets of Sex and Healing." The client thought he needed a male and female copywriter to get the job done. That package was so successful, I put a huge pool in my backyard and paid for it with my first 2 royalty checks!

MCG: Is there one project that stands out as your favorite?

Carline: I really do get attached to my projects and seem to love them all. I just finished a project for Healthy Directions' *Simple Living* newsletter. I had a blast working on that package. I think it's because I was talking to people like me. The package hasn't mailed yet so I don't have results, but I know I loved working on it!

Another favorite package was for a Liver & Kidney Cleanse package for True Health. I ended up using most of my family as testimonials. I got to gross my readers out with the icky details of the stuff that comes out of their liver. It was lots of fun!

MCG: That's the package we're reviewing this month. And yes you're right... it does gross people out. But before we talk any more about that package, let's find out more about your copywriting career. How do you drum up clients?

Carline: Mainly by doing a good job for the existing clients. That gives me repeat business. Good copy gets noticed by the competitors, so – by word of mouth – people seem to find me.

For years, I would send out a one -page letter to prospects that said, "Kick Butt Controls." I would list my winning packages and clients I worked for during the year. I'd end the letter with "let me create a winning package for you." Then, I'd attach my business card and mail it off. That mailing would generate 2 to 3 new projects each year. This year, I joined cyberspace and have my own website www.carlinecole.com. That's definitely increasing my exposure and getting clients to call me.

MCG: What do you like most about copywriting?

Carline: Fun. Flexible. Lucrative. I also love being able to "go for it" and coming up with new ideas and ways to persuade people to part with their money.

MCG: We talked about your successful packages. Let me switch gears here and talk a minute about packages that didn't work. Specifically, what one thing did you learn – or take away – from a package you wrote that didn't work as well as you had expected or hoped?

Carline: Vagueness will bomb every time. After that experience, I've decided that if I research a product and I don't have something meaningful to say, I'm going to give the client his refund and walk away from the job!

MCG: Good point about research and finding the idea. Was there a moment in your career where you knew you had made – or could make – good money writing copy?

Carline: Yep, when I got my first big royalty check! It was like FREE money was falling out of the sky!

How You Create Winning Controls

MCG: What's the first thing you do when you get an assignment?

Carline: I panic. I start to think, "This is finally it. They're going to know I'm a fraud and a fake!" I've learned to accept this paranoia and work through it. Then, I start reading the research kit and I definitely take or use the product if at all possible. This is so I can convince myself this is the best dang- gum product in the world and EVERYBODY needs to know about it! After that, I start to write.

MCG: Do you have a specific list of things you need the client to supply you with before you begin writing?

Carline: A good product. Credible research. And breathing room – leave me alone and let me do my job.

MCG: Has a client ever supplied you with too much information... enough that it bogged the project down or was too overwhelming?

Carline: Yes, but I never complain about too much research. I just sort through the stuff and pick out what I need. It would be worse if I got too little research info.

MCG: You mentioned using the product yourself and that's one way to understand the target audience. But how else do you get to know the target audience?

Carline: I hang out at Wal-Mart. I talk to my mom, aunts, in-laws... ANYBODY who's willing to talk to me. I also create my own focus group at times to help me hone in on a project.

MCG: So you really are trying to get to know the audience... to get into their heads. And once you have that knowledge, then how do you come up with the theme or idea for the promotion?

Carline: Beats the heck out of me. Sometimes it's in the shower... while cooking... while I'm sleeping... and even during intimate moments. That's why I keep a notebook on my nightstand. I just read up about the project and let my subconscious do its job.

MCG: Do you develop the headline first or start with the body copy?

Carline: Depends. Sometimes I've got a headline and I'll write the package to fit it. Other times, the headline is the absolutely LAST thing I come up. I'm a very intuitive writer. I just go with the flow and start writing stuff that I think my prospect would find interesting. Then, I cut and paste and create an actual package.

MCG: After you finish a draft... do you let it rest for a day or so and then re-read and make edits?

Carline: Yep, I call that my incubation period. I leave the copy alone and read it again with fresh eyes and I make sure to read the copy out loud. That way I can pick up any awkward words, phrases, etc...

MCG: Do you ever show your copy to another copywriter for comments and suggestions?

Carline: Yep. If you can get another copywriter to "crit" (critique) your copy, consider it a blessing. If they tear to shreds, thank them! Most of the time, I'll give my copy to 2 or 3 of my friends who fit my target audience. I ask them to tell me what they "feel" when they read the copy... where their B.S meter goes off... what they hate, etc...

MCG: So not just other copywriters but other people. And you're looking for their reaction to the copy. That sounds easy enough and something our members could imitate as well. You mentioned writing health

promotions – would you say you specialize in writing for the health market?

Carline: My niche is the alternative health market. About 80% of my clients are nutritional supplements, health newsletters and books.

MCG: How would you characterize your style of writing?

Carline: I talk to my audience. Not at them... not above or below them. To them. I love telling stories to hook a reader.

MCG: Do you make suggestions on what things the client could test on your package, such as alternative headline, lead or offer?

Carline: Absolutely. I think that's part of my job. I make it a point to deliver 2 to 6 alternative covers for them to test. Sometimes it's a headline test or new lead. If they're willing to test at least 2 covers, that doubles my chance of getting a winner!

MCG: That's a great point for our readers. Don't just deliver one piece of copy, provide at least two because as you said it may increase your chance of getting a winner. Let's talk about design. How involved are you in the design?

Carline: Very involved. I'm giving design direction while I'm writing the copy. If I have an idea of a look I want, I'll note it in brackets for the designer in the copy. Then, I usually have a kickoff meeting with the designer.

I'll also see several drafts of the project. Once I'm okay with it, then the client can see it. Design is critical to your success. A bad design can kill even the best copy. So, don't leave the design to chance.

MCG: If you could divide your work up in parts, how much time do you devote to research, to writing, to editing?

Carline: 50% research; 40% writing, 10% editing.

MCG: How do you figure out all the benefits a product offers? Do you list them out, do you talk with the client, do you use the product yourself?

Carline: Yes to all of those.

MCG: Over the years, direct marketers have had to add online prospecting in addition to direct mail. Do you think there is a difference between online prospects and direct mail prospects?

Carline: Nope. The key to success is the same: Give the prospect what he wants and convince him you've got the solution to his problem.

Special Tips and Techniques for Boosting Response

MCG: Do you have any special tips or techniques for boosting response?

Carline: I try to use involvement devices as much as possible. Quizzes are great. I'm a big fan of storytelling. The brain is hard-wired for stories, so I think stories help with readership. Short paragraphs... short sentences... and short words are also critical to a successful package.

MCG: Is there a special thing you do to come up with headlines for your projects?

Carline: I just keep digging for the ONE powerful benefit that will resonate with the prospect. I jot down

all ideas I come up while writing the package – even if they’re really goofy. Many times a goofy idea can be massaged into a powerful headline!

MCG: Is there ONE thing that every package you write always has?

Carline: A response device – preferably an order card. Without it, I’m toast!

MCG: How do you build credibility for the product?

Carline: Testimonials are great. For new products, I’ll ask the client to send me more products and I’ll give it to my friends and create my own testimonials if necessary. Credible sources, e.g. Harvard Medical School, JAMA, Linus Pauling are critical. Even if they haven’t used your product – they may have something to say about an ingredient that’s in your product.

Dig for that info and then BLAST it on the cover. For one product, the guru had appeared on Oprah. You better believe Oprah’s name was splashed on that cover and throughout the copy!

MCG: How do you stay in touch with the marketplace?

Carline: I read every issue of People Magazine. I’m not sure if that’s really my market, but I just love the magazine. I’ve finally gotten old enough to BE my market, so I really tune in to what I like/dislike. I make it a point to spend time with my 60+ year old relatives and just listen to what they’re talking about. It’s amazing how many headlines they’ve given me for free!

About Your Current Control:

MCG: Since most people wouldn’t think there is anything wrong with their liver, who is the target audience for this piece?

Carline: The target audience is anyone over 50 who takes prescription drugs, doesn’t always eat a healthy diet, is stressed out and/or drinks alcohol. In other words, it’s your average American. The fact that people don’t think about their liver was a serious challenge. That’s why I wanted to dimensionalize the liver as much as possible.

I had an idea for a cartoon showing a before picture of your worn out liver and an after picture of a healthy liver. Lori Haller – the designer – found a great cartoonist and we had a successful launch. We also tested just putting lists of popular prescription drugs on the cover and said, “Read this if you take these prescription drugs”.

That cover was also successful. However, I really wanted to try a scarier looking cover showing how your liver would look if it was on your face. That required a photo shoot and additional cost. So the client decided to wait to see how the package performed before investing the money.

When we had a control, Lori arranged the photo shoot and we got a fantastic shot. That cover beat the previous controls and it’s still going strong. So I guess the lesson is: Find ways to dimensionalize whatever you’re trying to sell. If it’s a hard concept, then tie it in with something your market is already familiar with.

MCG: Great tip Carline. Now, on page 3 you make an analogy: “it’s like a 16-hour spa treatment.” That’s very good wording. Did you come up with that phrase specifically for this promo or have you used it before?

Carline: I don’t know if I’ve used it before. It just seemed to fit. Again, I was trying to create visual imagery my audience could relate to.

MCG: On page 7, you outline the entire “flush” process. Why go through that much detail?

Carlina: Because specificity sells. I wanted people to see how easy it is to get results. That way they can say, "Hey, I can do that," and order the product. By the way, I just revised the package, removing the 16-hour flush, to see how that version will pull. The client receives more one-bottle orders than his normal 3-bottle average. We're testing to see if we can increase the bottle sales. Stay tuned...

MCG: The entire package has lots of good information. How long did it take you to research this?

Carlina: This was one of the fastest packages I wrote this year. The client is awesome at providing me with solid research material. Once I got the idea for the 16-hour flush, I wrote the package in 2 weeks. Lori designed it in about 2 weeks and we had this sucker in the mail in less than 2 months from conception!

MCG: One of the premiums is specific to arthritis, while the others are more generic. Why not have all the premiums generic?

Carlina: I always try to use a few targeted premiums. I knew arthritis and cholesterol were 2 problems high on the list for this demographic, so I went with arthritis and cholesterol as the 2 specific premiums. I'd rather have 7 specific premiums than 7 generic premiums. Again, it's back to my specificity sells approach.

MCG: The quiz comes near the end of the promo. What's the rationale for putting it there as opposed to earlier on?

Carlina: Since the headline is specific to the name of the product, I didn't want to mention it too soon. Based on the priority of the message with the other sidebars, it just seemed to fit better on that page. Lori may have some additional rationale of why she placed it on page 16 versus another page. On the revised version where I removed the mention of the 16-hour cleanse, I did move the quiz to page 7. No results yet.

MCG: On page 16, concerning the testimonial and photos... is the photo real?

Carlina: Of the 12 photo testimonials, 8 are real photos. This was a launch package and I had no testimonials. So, my client sent me a bunch of the product and I asked my friends and family to help me out and try the cleanse. So the pictures you're looking at could be in my family album J.

We used stock photography for the 4 shy friends who didn't want to have their picture included. The testimonial on page 16 is my cousin standing in my kitchen holding REAL liver stones that were passed just hours before!

Since this launch, we've gotten hundreds of testimonials. I've revised the package to include testimonials from customers. Another lesson learned: Just because it's a launch package, doesn't mean it won't have testimonials. Don't be afraid to create your own testimonials – take advantage of your friends and family! Just make sure the testimonials are true.

MCG: The headline on the back cover seemed a bit vague... was that deliberate or something the target audience would immediately understand?

Carlina: My original copy was "Diapers...Dialysis...or Death." But the legal department made me tone it down. So I substituted "Disaster." The purpose of the headline was strictly attention grabbing. It worked well for about a year. We just recently tested a different back cover that beat it.

MCG: You mentioned testing the cover... how many tests did you do for this product until this version became the control?

Carlina: We launched with 3 covers: the before and after cartoon cover, the testimonial cover and the list of drugs cover. The list of drugs cover boosted response by 25%. That stayed strong for six months. Then

we tested the liver face guy and it beat that cover significantly.

MCG: Are there any other tests you would have liked to do?

Carline: I was on this "let's really gross them out kick," so I wanted to test putting a yucky looking skin picture on the cover. We just tested that and so far the gross skin is looking just as strong as the liver face guy. This is exciting because we now have 2 strong covers to rotate.

MCG: If you could share with us an idea of the royalty money you made from this package – just a range if possible – so that our readers get an idea of the money they could make as a successful copywriter?

Carline: I can't share the specifics since this is an active mailing, but I can say that this package is already breaking six-figure royalties. In fact, I've already got it on my own website as a future million dollar mailing.

Designing a Breakthrough Package

MCG: Now, let's switch gears and talk about the design behind this package. I'd like to introduce you to Lori Haller – the graphic artist on this package. Lori we're just going to jump right in, how did you come up with the cover photo?

Lori: Carline's copy came with wonderful notes and ideas as usual – she always presents such helpful direction! The original thought was to have a full bleed photo of a man with lesions on his face, and various scratches and color tones that would illustrate a sick liver. Stock photos were just not working so we decided to get Larry Ruggeri, a photographer we use a lot for special shots like this and his guru make-up artist Jodi to work their MAGIC. We hired Aaron Marcus an actor/model from an agency in NYC and had Jodi create wax legions to adhere (with glue) to his face.

The make-up took over an hour and then we directed the actor into a variety of facial expressions to fit the tone. Choosing a grey/black simple t-shirt really helped out – we couldn't have him in a suit or anything too sporty or fancy. PLUS we needed to draw the attention to his face. I did not want too much color – and I didn't want to see too much of the background. We just lit the face and everything else is just barely visible. Having just a headline and one quick bullet really helped too. It truly helps to work with professional actors and a high-end team to pull something like this off – it can easily look silly and FAKE.

MCG: Why did you pick a 4-column format for the body copy?

Lori: As usual, I did hours of research even before I flowed in the copy. We needed a whole NEW fresh look. I researched in the bookstore and saw some really interesting medical journals. After trying the typical 2 column and 3 column designs – I wanted to just look at a 4 column test and once I tried a few headlines and subheads – it really just started to make sense. When using so many columns – you do have to watch out for hyphens and odd line breaks. We worked together to make it fit just right – easy to read but exciting at the same time.

MCG: The graphic on page 7 is good. Because of the dotted lines, it looks like something you would cut out. Is that what you were trying to achieve?

Lori: I did a campaign for an agency back in the '80s for METROCALL. It was the "MetroCall Hippobeeamus" campaign where we used this big pink hippo for commercials/ads and in direct mail. I tested a hippo shape cut out with bold thick pink dotted lines for the order device. We found that a HUGE percentage of folks who sent in their order form actually took the time to sit down and carefully cut out that exact tedious HIPPO SHAPE – AMAZING. So I learned early on that people do see and read what's on the page – and they follow the lead or instructions that you visually give them.

Since that incident – I take the sidebars and boxes that we create VERY seriously. I wanted them to cut out or tear out this cleanse and have the sheet with them for future info. Maybe tape to the fridge – also

used it for our Quiz that appears later in the promo. Looks like it worked.

MCG: Some of the photos are unusual to say the least... the cover, the things that were flushed out, the rash on the back. Were you concerned they might be a turn off to the reader?

Lori: We were trying for a cross between shocking the reader a bit with the important data and photos that tied into the product and study – but also showing them – what the results were. It's a tricky and fine line between gross and getting the readers' attention, so you have to try out a few things first. I think teaming those types of scary shots with the other interesting ones made for a nice combination. How could you not keep reading?

MCG: Are the photos with the testimonials that run throughout the package stock photo or real? If stock, how long did it take you to find each one?

Lori: Most of the photos were sent in from the folks who did the cleanse – some did not have a shot or were too shy to include one – so when that happens – we just try to find a good match to represent to the reader the "type" of person who did the cleanse.

Readers love to identify with the others who send in testimonials. It's kind of like – oh she is just like me – that sort of a thing happens – so you really have to just get good data and go with it. If I do not have a photo – it can take hours to search for realistic non-model looking shots that have the proper age and look. We use about 10 different stock agencies and that helps but the time does add up!

MCG: Is the cartoon liver your idea... or picked up from the book?

Lori: Carline had suggested a set of 2 cartoons for the front cover. I did a few roughs and sent them on to Art Glazer in New York. He is just a genius at getting ideas across with illustration. We looked at the color palette that I had created and as he was creating the drawings we also worked some of those tones in so it all tied together. I was just thrilled when the first sketches came over – I didn't know what a "liver man" might look like – he really brought the whole concept to life!

A few fun questions...

MCG: Carline, what's it like to work with you on a project?

Carline: I have a lot of fun with my projects and my clients. My best clients are willing to take chances – even if it's just letting me test one crazy cover idea. We usually have a kick off meeting to review the project and then they leave me alone.

I'll send a bazillion emails if necessary for quick answers, and that's about the only contact I'll have with them until I've got my draft done. Then they give me input/legal comments and I finalize the sucker!

I only work with 3 or 4 clients a year. But I'll write 2 to 3 packages for each of them. Last year, I wrote 7 packages for one client. I understood his market and his business so well, I was churning out control after control. That's a great feeling!

MCG: If you could choose another career besides copywriting, what would that be and why?

Carline: I can't think of another job I'd like to get paid for. I really love what I do. Maybe one day, I'll teach copywriting. I used to want to be an actress, but my husband wouldn't be thrilled with me kissing Antonio Banderas, so that's not really possible.

If money was no object, I'd probably be a missionary living in a remote island – but I'd still need to have access to a computer so I could write copy!

MCG: What advice would you give up-and-coming copywriters to help them learn this trade?

Carline: Write. Write. Write. Keep at it. The more you write, the better you'll get. Read other copywriters' works. Get "crits" of your copy and develop a thick skin.

MCG: Here's a fun question we love to ask because the answers have been all over the place. Tell us about your most outrageous client and how you dealt with it.

Carline: I can't. He reads this newsletter. But I will say this: When you have an irrational, unrealistic or abusive client – fire him! You can do it in 2 ways: 1. Raise your rates – double or even triple them. If he's willing to pay that ridiculous amount, accept the job and consider the extra money as combat pay. 2. Make yourself unavailable. Tell him you have an opening in 3 years but you need the deposit immediately. He'll get the point!

MCG: Ok, let's go the other way. Tell us about the funniest copywriting experience you've had.

Carline: Well, it was the "Forbidden Secrets of Sex and Healing" package I worked on with Clayton Makepeace. The client loved the copy and was complimenting us – and himself – for hiring a male-and-female team. He said, "Carline, I could see your feminine touch in the copy when you talk about love, snuggling, and caressing." I stopped him and said, "Nope, that was Clayton." Then he continued, "Clayton, you really put a masculine touch when you talk about sheet ripping orgasm and heart pounding foreplay. This time Clayton interrupted him and said, "Um, nope, that was Carline." The lesson learned is: You don't have to BE your market – you have to KNOW your market.

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