

## **WHY COMMERCIAL WRITING?**

### **When You're Looking For Good Money, Lots of Freedom and Time For a Life...**

*by Peter Bowerman*

The PR firm had hired me to work on a 12-page brochure for their client, a local telecomm giant. Source material was nine one-hour interviews which I then transformed into the same number of one-page profiles plus an intro piece. The fee? \$6000. Hours? Probably about 50-55 spread out over 2-3 weeks.

The brochure was an “audition” piece for the PR firm. If it went well, they’d get the contract to produce a six-page monthly newsletter for the next year. Well... it went well. The client really liked my work but wasn’t quite sure what the PR firm was doing to earn their hefty add-on fee. So, once the project was done, she called up the PR folks and said, “We’ve decided to produce this in-house. But, we want your writer.”

What could they do? So, for the next year, I was the writer for this six-pager, the main *internal* (for their employees) communications piece for this division. After paying the PR firm 10% as a “finder’s fee” (only fair), my monthly income from this single account was \$4000. Time invested in writing the piece? 30-35 hours.

Common scenarios? Not everyday occurrences, but hardly rare once you’re established. This is the field of commercial writing – a.k.a. “copywriting” or marketing writing. If you’ve got writing in your blood, you’ve likely dreamed of writing full-time but realize how difficult it is to thrive as a novelist or poet. But, in the commercial field, it’s all about becoming a well-respected *and* well-compensated writer. And with hourly rates ranging from \$50-125+, you can write for a *good* living and still have time and energy left over to pursue your writing passions.

Prior to entering the field, I had no paid *writing* experience or professional *writing* background and I was entering a high-stakes *writing* field. Yet, by leveraging my sales and marketing background to prop up a pretty sorry starter portfolio, I was paying all the bills in less than four months. You may have the writing background but no marketing experience. We all come at this from different places.

### **How Good An Opportunity?**

In the last decade, two huge trends have sculpted the American landscape: downsizing and outsourcing. The creative and communications departments of today’s companies are running leaner and meaner, but the work still needs to get done. Add to that the countless opportunities with smaller companies that don’t have budgets for either those departments or high-priced agencies, but nonetheless, still need to create a wide variety of marketing materials. Put it all together and it spells rich opportunities for freelancers.

A manager with a huge high-tech firm in Atlanta says, “Most people would assume that a company of our size would do the bulk of our writing in-house, and they’d be wrong. My writing needs these days are pretty steady, and I pay anywhere from \$65-85/hour, depending on experience.”

### **Huge Volume of Work**

The sheer volume and variety of work outsourced by not only industry giants like UPS, the Coca-Cola Company, BellSouth, IBM and MCI but companies of all sizes is formidable. Marketing brochures, ad copy, newsletters, video scripts, direct mail campaigns, speeches, web copy, and much much more (and FYI, you just do the writing; graphic designers handle laying it all out).

Corporations outsource for good solid business reasons: They pay for what they need, only when they need it. They get fresh “outsider” perspectives. No salaries, vacations or benefits to pay (as a freelancer, I’m more than willing to take care of those things myself). And given the wide variety of writing projects, a stable of talented freelancers, each with different strengths, ensures the best writer for the job.

And there’s far more work out there than meets the eye. As consumers, we mostly see what’s known as “B2C” (business-to-consumer): newspaper and magazine ads, direct mail solicitations for credit cards, home equity lines, cellular service, etc., newsletters from our frequent flyer program or utilities and the like. What we generally don’t see is “B2B” (business-to-business): all the materials created by a business to market to other businesses.

Finally, there’s the huge arena of *internal communications*: all materials created by a business only for their own people: marketing manuals, brochures, CD-ROMS, sales sheets, newsletters, web sites, speeches, etc. Think of how many materials in all these categories are produced within your own university. Someone has to write them. Sometimes it’s done in-house, oftentimes not.

### **Study Your Mail**

Start taking the time to study your mail (okay, yes, the junk mail) – the B2C stuff you get every day – the ads, direct mail and newsletters. Take a gander at the rack brochures in your bank. Pick up a brochure or two from a car dealership. Take a closer look at the web sites you visit. Notice the ones that are well-written and user-friendly and the ones that aren’t. Ask yourself if you have the skills to write any of this. I’m guessing you do. Every single one of these projects is written by someone and many by a freelancer.

### **Could You Get Used to This?**

Recently, I had nicely productive three weeks of business. A non-technical eight-page brochure for a medical software firm: \$2500. A four-page financial services newsletter (recurring quarterly): \$1800. A rework of a rack brochure for the same client: \$600. The first phase of a brochure project for our state’s EOE department: \$900. An 800-word article for a huge global staffing giant: \$800. Two sales sheets explaining a company’s new Web site: \$850. And finally, the same company had me bid on two big brochures (\$3000-3500 each), both to be done within the next six weeks.

### **A Reality Check**

Again, stretches like these aren't every week occurrences but they don't have to be to make a good living (and they become more common the more established you become). No question, you'll have your share of \$300-400 weeks. In the beginning, with prospecting and marketing, you'll be working a lot harder for a lot less. This is NOT a get-rich quick proposition. Any field that pays \$60 to \$80+ an hour, is flexible, home-based and can potentially earn you \$75K or more annually in the space of a few short years, by definition, is going to require an investment of time to get established. Few professions meet those criteria.

### **How Good Do You Have To Be?**

You *do* have to be a good writer. No one's going to pay you \$60-80/hour if you're lousy (at least not more than once...). But the good news is that many fields – i.e. financial services, healthcare, high-tech, real estate and others – don't expect brilliant prose. They want clear, concise, readable copy.

That said, the better-paid scribes in this field do more than just craft pretty sentences. They're professionals who take the time to learn about a company – its products, customers and market niche – and what it does better than the competition. He or she then uses this information to help the company craft marketing materials that speak effectively to their target audience. And you do that by asking enough questions to determine what's important to that audience – the things that *they* care about, which are *benefits*. As opposed to *features*, which are about the product or service and the company selling it. When writing persuasive copy, always begin with benefits, follow with features.

It's about determining what things that company does better than any other and highlighting that in the copy you write. We're not talking rocket science here. Yet, interestingly enough, ideas like these are not universally understood or practiced by a goodly chunk of commercial writers out there. Master them and you'll set yourself apart.

### **Who Will Hire You?**

The first broad category of prospective clients are end-users (EUs): various divisions and departments of corporations – ranging in size from 10 to 100,000 employees – not-for-profits, universities, government agencies and others. The second is middlemen (MMs): graphic design firms, marketing companies, PR firms, advertising agencies, etc. MMs are hired *by* EUs to execute various projects and since most don't staff full-time writing help (larger ad agencies and PR firms will but even they outsource a lot of writing), they'll need to find writing talent to get the jobs done.

Approach EUs through their marketing communications department (also known as “MarCom”), marketing or sales. At MMs, contact the Creative, Assistant Creative, or and Marketing Directors, Production Manager or Account Executive. For both EUs and MMs, make the first contact by phone or through networking functions (business associations, Chambers of Commerce, etc). And speaking of networking, tap your different circles to land business contacts. Don't feel uncomfortable doing this – it's the

way it's done. Referrals are the best way to get in the door. And since your likelihood of being hired rises dramatically once you meet a client face-to-face, always push for a meeting.

### **What About a Portfolio?**

If you don't have any "corporate-type" samples (i.e., the kinds of work corporate clients might hire you to do: marketing brochures, newsletters, ad copy, direct mail, web content, etc.), you'll need to gather some of those.

Start with any projects from past/present jobs: manuals, press releases, newsletters, web content, speeches, articles, etc. Do *pro bono* work for a charity or start-up firm. Team up with a graphic designer, also starting out, and either approach those same type entities together or "create" a portfolio with pieces for real or fictitious companies. You might choose to streamline your marketing (and boost your credibility) by using an online portfolio to showcase your work (check out [www.writeinc.biz](http://www.writeinc.biz) - my commercial site).

### **How Much Can You Make?**

Rates for corporate freelancers range from \$50-125+/hour. I started out at \$50, and am now billing at \$100. In the commercial arena, \$50/hour will faze no one except you and in most larger markets, anything lower will have clients wondering how good you really are. For those starting out, once you've built up a decent starter portfolio (or "book"), making \$30-40K just isn't that difficult. Get reasonably aggressive about getting the word out and you should start getting into the \$50-70K range. Build a good reputation, start getting a lot of referrals and who knows? A healthy number of writers in this business gross \$100K annually.

### **The Prosaic Truth**

But doesn't commercial writing entail becoming, in essence, a corporate *shill* – compromising one's morals, filthy lucre and all that? Contrary to some widely disseminated notions...no. My current clients and projects: A mortgage company (brochures, direct mail pieces, sales letters and web content). A graphic design firm (brochure). A residential security firm (brochures and web content). A sales training organization (web content). Not exactly soul-selling stuff.

In a nutshell, commercial writers help companies highlight their strong suits and put their best foot forward in marketing materials. It's about talking in language that will resonate with a reader and move him or her to take action. It's selling an idea. It's not journalism. It's not literary masterpieces. It's not supposed to be objective.

### **The "Commercial" Downside**

But, isn't commercial writing b-o-r-i-n-g mind-numbing stuff? I don't romanticize the field. You won't get all your creative fulfillment here. That said, I've worked on plenty of projects over the years that have been fun, challenging, interesting and personally satisfying. And sure, plenty of others were just jobs. But all of them paid well – and provided nice lifestyle benefits.

And if you're coming from a journalism, English or MFA Creative Writing background, you're almost certain to have the requisite writing skills for the commercial arena, where mid-to-high five-figure earnings (and higher) are well within reach. They just need to be channeled and refined for a different arena.

Whatever your goals or your circumstances, the commercial field offers a lucrative and growing opportunity for those with even moderate talent and drive. I'll leave you with this. Bob Bly, author of "Secrets of a Freelance Writer" (and 50+ other titles) and a 25-year veteran freelance commercial writer, says of this field: "I know of no other arena of writing so lucrative, yet so easy to get started in."

Peter Bowerman is the author of *The Well-Fed Writer* (2000), an award-winning Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and its companion volume, *The Well-Fed Writer: Back For Seconds* (October 2004). A commercial freelancer and columnist in Atlanta, Georgia since 1993, his client list includes Coca-Cola, BellSouth, IBM, UPS, Cingular Wireless, American Express, Mercedes-Benz, Junior Achievement and others. He has published over 250 columns and articles and leads seminars on writing. [www.wellfedwriter.com](http://www.wellfedwriter.com).