

**Persuading on Paper: The Complete Guide to Writing  
Copy That Pulls in Business**

**by Marcia Yudkin**

**Author, 6 Steps to Free Publicity and 14 other books**

**[www.yudkin.com](http://www.yudkin.com)**

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## Chapter 20 Articulating What's Special About Your Business

While I was working on this book, a young actress named Nancy Sosnowski wrote to me from Chicago, appealing for help with her cover letters to agents and casting directors. “As you can see, they are quite boring,” she said. “I want something that will pop out and make them notice me. I don’t want my headshot and résumé to go into the garbage.” I couldn’t help but agree with her assessment of the letters. Whereas her letter to me was alive, her official letters contained nothing that popped up with personality. For instance:

*Hello:*

*Enclosed is my photo and résumé for consideration for casting in “Eulogy for a Love Affair.”*

*I am a hardworking and dependable actor. My experience has been mainly with community theater, but I have done on-camera and voice-over work for a local cable company.*

*Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule to read this and review my résumé. I can be reached at \_\_\_\_\_. I hope we will have the opportunity to meet. Until then, have a wonderful day.*

*Sincerely,*

*Nancy Pynes Sosnowski*

I couldn’t find enough clues in her résumé on how to perk up the cover letter, so I wrote back with ten questions designed to elicit comments that could help attract the directors’ attention. One month later she wrote back with answers to less than half of the questions. “I’ve been having a hard time with this,” she confessed. “This may seem strange since most actors are self-centered, but I’m not good at talking about myself and my accomplishments.”

If you identify with Sosnowski’s difficulty, you and she are not alone. Many who excel at their hobby or profession fall short when it comes to describing how they do it or how their work differs from others’. Don’t jump to the conclusion that you’re showing some shameful gap in intelligence, because four other factors may account for the difficulty. First, everyone has thousands of competencies they can’t put into words. Ever try to teach someone to tie their shoelaces without a hands-on demonstration? The ability to do something and to articulate the process don’t automatically parallel each other. Second, when you do your work, you may be too absorbed to be conscious of the steps involved. Engrossed, you work in a kind of spell that precludes observing what you’re doing. Third, you may be suffering from a deficit of self-confidence. You can’t say what’s special about you because you don’t believe in yourself. Finally, other people may not share your problem only because they’re more conventional—what they do neatly matches society’s stock labels and phrases. The more you’ve invented a career or working method for yourself, the more you may need help figuring out a way to present it verbally.

When you can’t easily convey what you do in words, your marketing materials undoubtedly aren’t representing you well. A dangerous state of wordlock may show up in

these symptoms:

- You've evolved far past where you were when you last wrote a brochure or company bio, and you keep making excuses about why you're not producing an updated version.
- You feel overwhelmed at the mere idea of putting together your first or new marketing materials.
- You hear or read—and envy—other people's characterization of themselves or their business.
- People don't get it when they read your materials.
- You're relying on in-person forms of marketing but they're no longer bringing in enough business or the kind of clients you want.
- People who get to know your business tell you that it isn't what they expected from your materials.
- Like Nancy Sosnowski, you know your stuff on paper can't hold a candle to what you do.

In my observation, the inability to explain what they do especially plagues pioneering, talented consultants. Carroll Michels adds that most artists have a dreadful time putting anything about their work into words. Whatever your profession, however, you don't have to let the problem eat away at your business success. Your condition has numerous cures.

### **Cures for the Wordlocked**

*Ask clients and customers to tell you what you've done for them and how you did it.*

Printed evaluation forms can give you useful phrases you can adapt to describe your work, in addition to providing blurb material. One at a time you can also ask people who have benefited from your work for comparisons, descriptions, reminiscences and summaries. Brian Starr and Mark Barnard of Bos'n, Inc. essentially got a client to write their brochure after they'd been operating for some time without one. When a client who'd already bought their training program said he needed something in writing for the people upstairs, Starr asked what he could have said on paper that would have done the job.

*Invite a would-be Barbara Walters or Bob Woodward friend to interview you*

Some people's tongues become golden when someone else prompts them and listens. Even without a shining performance, you can get the information you need by asking your reporter friend to tell you after your discussion what he or she learned. An entrepreneurial support group can serve the same function, says Barbara Winter, who has spawned "Joyfully Jobless" groups nationally through her seminars and book, *Making a Living Without a Job*. "Ask the group to tell you what your business is as they understand it. You may find that you're projecting the wrong things, or they may give you a better way of saying it."

If friends and associates don't help, a marketing consultant (see Chapter 25) may have the right inquisitiveness and persistence to help you proclaim advantages where you

just saw the same blobbety blob-blob as everybody else's. Advertising wizard Robert Pritikin tells a story about trying to uncover some exploitable advantage of Pureta hot dogs by visiting the factory and cross-examining the company president, who insisted that all frankfurters are the same. "Does the whole cow go into the frankfurters?" asked Pritikin, about to give up. Except for some of the scuzzy parts, the president replied. "Do you mean including the New York cuts, the market steaks, the T-bone steaks?" responded Pritikin, who turned an affirmative reply into billboards, radio slogans and print ads carrying a message the president would never have thought of: "Pureta—There's T-bone steak in every frank." Sales went up, up, up, Pritikin recalls.

### *Interview yourself*

Ask yourself the questions a reporter would, then answer them. Even the questions that seem irrelevant can help you dredge up a phrase or an idea that you can develop as a mini-theme. The following should get you started.

- Why should someone buy your product or service rather than someone else's?
- What's your favorite item in your product line, or your favorite service, and why?
- What's the most characteristic praise that comes your way?
- What can you do that other \_\_\_\_s cannot?
- Have you ever heard people compare your style of service or your product to someone or something else?
- If your mother, spouse or son were boasting about what you do, what would he or she say?
- What's the story about your business that you find yourself repeating most often?
- What do you believe really underlies your success with customers and clients?
- What were some challenges you have overcome in your work, perhaps surprising even yourself?
- If you were retiring and could give one piece of advice to the person taking over from you, what would that be?
- Is there an image or a feeling that best communicates what you are all about?
- What's the biggest myth about your line of business, and how is it not true about you?

From the questions I asked Nancy Sosnowski, the one she related to the most had to do with overcoming challenges. She polished that into a theme to insert in her cover letters, as in, "I am an actor who will do whatever it takes to deliver a professional performance. Whether that means studying sign language, as I did when playing Annie Sullivan in 'The Miracle Worker' or learning about business, as I did when I played Kate Sullivan in 'Other People's Money,' I relish challenges and always go the extra mile to master a role or skill." Much better than "I am a hardworking and dependable actor," don't you think?

### *Try teaching what you do to someone else*

Your pupil will probably ask the questions that bring what you've been missing out into the open. Instruct your pupil in the "why" as well as the "what." Audiotape or videotape your tutoring session, or your sessions with clients and watch or listen as if to someone else. Reuse your best explanations in your writing, and describe what you see or hear going on, using different levels of detail: a one-sentence or ten-second summary of what happened in the session, a one-paragraph or one-minute review and a one-page or five-minute narration.

*Ask someone to observe you at work and present you with an oral or written report*

Two clients hired me to do this, knowing that they had trouble being conscious of what they're doing while they're doing it. You too may find the objectivity, fresh observation and different vocabulary of an outsider valuable.

Give yourself permission to convey the enthusiasm and spice in your written materials that you naturally exude when talking or when writing to someone you know. This proved pivotal for Nancy Sosnowski, who found her breakthrough with cover letters after I showed her how to pick up on a theme in the casting ad she was responding to and write to a real person on the other end. For a children's video, she started her response, "Since I am a kid at heart, your casting notice for your children's video caught my eye. I imagine you will need an actor who loves children, is patient, warm and fun. That's me!" To a casting agent who had just moved his office, she wrote, "I hear you've been on the go again, moving into a more spacious and appealing location. I hope the transition went safely and smoothly. Since I have not sent my picture and résumé to you in the past, I am enclosing it now, hoping that it will find you settled and relaxed in your new environment." For a project called "Dear St. Anthony," she wasn't sure if it was a film or video. "Having gone to a Catholic grammar school," she wrote me, "I know that people pray to St. Anthony when they lose things like their keys or wallet. Can I use that somehow?" Yes, I told her. That's exactly the idea!