

# A MARKETING PRIMER FOR FREELANCE MEDICAL WRITERS

Lori De Milto

Writer for Rent™, Sicklerville, N.J.

**Y**OU may write with the precision of Hemingway, the imagination of Twain, or the poignancy of Rand, but if you don't know how to market yourself, you won't succeed as a freelance medical writer. Effectively marketing your business isn't difficult; it just takes some basic knowledge, a willingness to invest in yourself, and hard, sometimes tedious, work. Within a year and a half of starting my freelance medical writing business—with little previous medical writing experience—I had a steady flow of work and was earning more than I had in my salaried writing position. This primer explains how you, too, can successfully market your business.

## DETERMINE WHO YOU WANT TO BE

Before you can market your services, define your capabilities and goals. Freelance medical writers fall into two types: marketing communications and clinical/scientific. Your education and background may determine which type of medical writer you are; people with Pharm.D. or Ph.D. degrees typically do clinical or scientific work, whereas people with English or journalism degrees typically work in marketing communications. There's little crossover between the two, because the knowledge base and skills required are quite different.

Next, decide how to target your business among the wealth of medical writing opportunities. As your business grows, you can begin to pursue any opportunity that appeals to you. Initially, however, narrow your focus to properly develop your marketing materials and tactics. Clients of freelance medical writers include academic medical centers; associations and foundations; continuing medical education organizations; hospitals and healthcare systems; medical advertising, public relations, and marketing agencies; multimedia companies; on-line publishers; pharmaceutical companies; the popular press; and other publishers. Many organizations work with both types of medical writers. For example, a pharmaceutical company might hire a marketing medical writer for newsletters and feature articles for corporate communications and a clinical medical writer for NDA summaries for the regulatory department. The AMWA "Scope of Medical Communications" workshop offers a great overview of opportunities available to medical writers. Pick a few areas to start with, and research them for your mailing list (see "Build, Maintain, and Use Your Mailing Lists").

## NAME YOUR BUSINESS

The first thing that prospective clients and other contacts will see is your company's name. Make it count. Create a memorable name that in some way reflects what you do. For example, at AMWA's Annual Conference in Vancouver, many people commented on my company name, "Writer for Rent™." One woman who received a mailing from me more than a year ago remembered the name when we met.

Consider developing a tagline, a catchy phrase that appears under your company name that adds impact to your message. My tagline, "Targeted copy. On time. Every time." immediately tells people that I can write to the audience's level and meet deadlines. To really increase the impact of your message, create a logo—a graphic symbol that represents your company name. My logo, a target with an arrow in the bull's-eye, emphasizes targeted copy and draws the reader's eye to my message (Figure).

## ACT LIKE A BUSINESS AND BE PREPARED TO MAKE INVESTMENTS

Freelance writing is a business. Although you're engaged in creative work, think and act like a businessperson at all times. All businesses require capital to succeed.

Be prepared to invest in developing professional marketing materials and implementing your marketing tactics.

Professional presentation of your marketing materials can make the difference between getting the assignment and having your unread work deposited in the “circular file.” Costs include hiring professionals to design, and in some cases write, your marketing materials and using high-quality printing processes to reproduce them. Costs of implementing your marketing tactics depend on which tactics you choose but typically include items such as postage for direct mail, membership in professional associations, attendance at meetings or conferences, and advertising.

### LAY OUT YOUR MARKETING TACTICS

Marketing tactics that work well for freelance medical writers include direct mail, membership in professional associations, sales literature, article writing, public speaking, teaching, and advertising. Referrals are a great way to get business, but generally you need to be fairly well established before you start to get them.

Robert Bly, author of *Secrets of a Freelance Writer*, finds direct mail to be the most effective tactic; I concur. It’s relatively inexpensive, allows you to microtarget your audience, and is less time consuming and nerve wracking than making cold calls. You can send out anything from a sales letter to a flyer to a complete information kit, in any quantity you want. Direct mail is covered in detail under “Build, Maintain, and Use Your Mailing Lists” and “Creating Marketing Materials With Impact.”

Professional associations such as AMWA and, for clinical or scientific writers, the Drug Information Association, offer a myriad of networking and other marketing opportunities. The AMWA monthly Job Market Sheet contains a section on freelance opportunities; the Freelance Directory, which will go online in 1999, provides another great opportunity to market yourself. I’ve done quite well with the Job Market Sheet and know several freelancers who receive many calls from their directory ads (I missed the 1998 edition but plan to advertise in 1999). Attending annual conferences and getting involved with the local chapters (where applicable) enables you to make great contacts and build your knowledge base.

Your sales literature, including a brochure and sales letter, is crucial in responding to inquiries and, in some cases, soliciting business. These are covered in more detail under “Creating Marketing Materials With Impact.”

### BREAKING NEGOTIATION STALEMATES



What can be done when a potential client won’t budge from an unacceptable offer?

One approach is to temporarily stop the discussion by asking whether “...we can discuss this tomorrow.” Then prepare a negotiation document that specifies 1) the client’s requirements for the project in detail (the number of pages, format, time schedule, etc.) and 2) the services you are offering (list every step you must take to deliver the completed project, start to finish). This list could easily consist of 8 to 12 steps, such as reviewing background materials, meetings with colleagues at your office, researching, interviewing, traveling, writing a content outline, revising the content outline, drafting the content of the project, revising the content (including the number of revisions), drafting copy for all tables (culling data from spreadsheets), specifying content for figures, discussing content strategies with medical artists or graphic designers, and gathering all referenced articles.

Fax this document to the client, with a note asking whether you’ve accurately described the project. State that you’ll be calling to complete the discussion. This document alone is sometimes sufficient to convince clients of your position. If, however, the initial stalemate remains at the start of the second discussion, turn the negotiation from conflict to collaboration by working with your client on that document. Tell the client that you can deliver the completed project for the fee requested and within the schedule offered, if the client can decide which of the listed specifications or steps can be dropped or reduced. This statement can result in a win-win situation, and the revised negotiation document will form the basis for the written agreement that should follow.

If the client still won’t budge, you know you’ve done your best, and you can decide whether to accept or reject the final offer. Even if you don’t reach an agreement to work together, your client is sure to remember you as a person who is willing to go the extra mile.

This concept is a combination of at least four negotiation strategies: thinking through and preparing a proactive approach to negotiation; turning the discussion from conflict to collaboration; saying what you can do rather than what you can’t do; and offering trade-offs (such as more time or reduced specifications in return for a lower fee). The following book by members of the Harvard Negotiation Project is a useful guide to all kinds of negotiations: Fisher R, Ury W. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. New York: Penguin; 1991.

—RICHARD BERGMAN

To increase your exposure to your target audience, consider writing articles for publications they read (such as the *AMWA Journal*), speaking at events, or teaching noncredit writing classes, seminars, or college classes. Advertising is another marketing tactic, but it's generally expensive and, because it is a mass medium, you pay to reach people who are not part of your target audience.

Choose the tactics that will be effective in reaching your target market and those with which you are most comfortable.

### **BUILD, MAINTAIN, AND USE YOUR MAILING LISTS**

Good mailing lists are essential for staying in touch with clients, inquirers (people who have contacted you but not yet used your services), and contacts and for promoting yourself to prospects. Build and maintain three separate mailing lists: clients, inquirers and contacts, and prospects. This process is tedious and time consuming but absolutely necessary. Like marketing, it is an ongoing effort. Professional directories, such as AMWA's, are an excellent basis for your prospect list. I include people even if I can't quite tell from the entry whether they're potential clients or not; I'd rather waste some postage than miss out on a potential client. Directories of professional associations and foundations, available in most libraries, are another good source but require more work because you have to call for the name of the appropriate contact person. Pharmaceutical companies and their products are listed in the *Physicians' Desk Reference*. Once you compile your mailing lists, keep them up to date and continually add to them.

Stay in touch with your clients and inquirers frequently and with your prospects at least twice a year. Some freelancers use phone calls and lunch dates to keep in touch, but I tend to rely more on direct mail. For clients, I send out holiday gifts and high-quality engraved cards signed by hand; to my surprise this seems to be an unusual gesture and is much appreciated. Inquirers, contacts, and prospects receive cards.

During the year, I mail at least one other gift to clients, inquirers, and contacts; for example, in 1998, I sent out a deck of "52 Ways to Simplify Your Life" cards accompanied by a pen with my company name, tagline, phone number, and e-mail address. Everyone on my lists receives my short newsletter (8.5 x 11 inch back to back), full of useful editing and writing tips, and occasional creative flyers (same format as the newsletter). Both are easy to write and design and economical to print and mail. They are also effective in generating new business and new business contacts.

### **BE PERSISTENT, YET PATIENT**

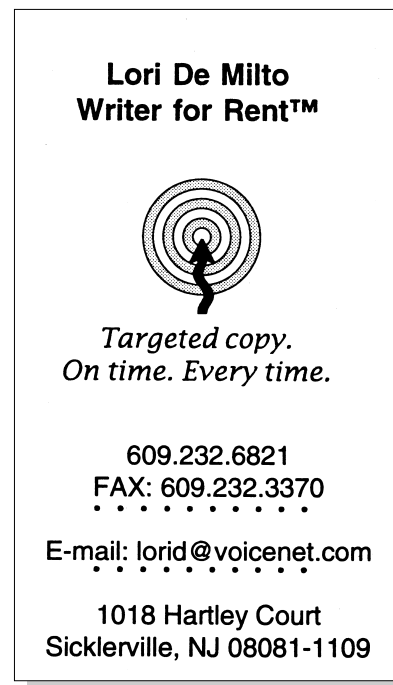
Marketing is an ongoing effort. Sometimes the rewards will be immediate; sometimes they won't. At times, my mailing hits the desk of someone who is in desperate need of a freelance writer and I receive an immediate assignment, but I've also received calls 6 months to a year after sending a mailing. Be persistent in your marketing efforts, but be prepared to wait for results. Good marketing lays the groundwork for your future success as a freelance medical writer.

### **CONCLUSION**

The tactics outlined above enabled me to become a successful freelance medical writer far sooner than I had

*(continued on page 30)*

### **FIGURE. A LOGO AND BUSINESS CARD ARE IMPORTANT MARKETING TOOLS.**



# Creating Marketing Materials With Impact

High-quality, clear, and legible marketing materials will enable prospects to see your capabilities. Work with professionals: a designer, a printer (not a copy shop), and, in some cases, a marketing writer. Use clear copy, accentuated by design that sets the right tone, is graphically appealing, and makes the copy easy to read. You should be able to write your own copy, but if you're a clinical or scientific writer, it's reasonable to hire a copywriter to do this for you.

Nevertheless, do not succumb to the temptation to sit down at your computer and design your own marketing materials unless you have considerable training and experience. Your efforts will look amateurish and unprofessional. In addition to professionally designing your marketing materials, your designer will also recommend appropriate colors and paper and can refer you to a printer or work directly with the printer on your behalf. Most of your marketing materials should be printed in two colors; this provides far greater impact than one color yet is still affordable. Many people choose black and an accent color. All of your marketing materials must be consistent in copy and design. You can't do business without the basic marketing materials described below, but if your budget is really tight, you can wait a bit before moving on to the advanced marketing materials.

## BASIC

**BUSINESS CARD:** The business card, often the first thing a prospect sees, is your most important marketing tool (Figure). Make it count. Your business card should clearly identify who you are and what you do, include your logo if you have one, and provide all of the necessary details of being in business: name, e-mail address, phone and fax numbers, and address. This can be a lot of information to put on a small card, so good design is crucial.

**LETTERHEAD AND ENVELOPES:** The same rules apply to your letterhead and envelopes, except that you have more room to work with on the letterhead. Envelopes (#10) and labels for large envelopes should not list phone, fax, or e-mail information and can be printed in one color.

**SALES LETTER:** Spend some time writing a letter that you can use both to respond to ads and to solicit business. The letter should be no longer than one page and should provide relevant highlights of your background and experience. It needs to be customized to each opportunity, but having a basic sales letter gives you a place to start. It can be printed out on your computer as needed.

**BROCHURE:** A simple six-panel brochure (8.5 x 11 inch paper folded in thirds) should provide prospects with all of the information that they need about you. The headline on the cover should make a strong statement about what you can do for your clients. Continue to write with a client perspective, highlighting the benefits your services provide. Include information on your services, education, background, professional

affiliations, and any relevant awards and honors. You can include a client list, although I prefer to place my client list on a separate sheet as an insert so that I can customize it. Consider including a short testimonial or two from satisfied clients. Be sure to include all of the information on your business card. I prefer not to include information on fees in my brochure, primarily because they vary considerably by client. For instance, many of my clients pay flat rates; if my written fees had appeared too high or too low, I might not have gotten some assignments I was interested in. Or if my written fees were lower than those a client normally pays, I might have been paid less than other writers. Also, an hourly rate (which is how I bill) does not mean much per se. Most of my clients who do not pay flat fees request a written estimate up front.

**PRESENTATION FOLDER:** Prospects generally want to see writing samples before hiring a freelance writer. To create a professional impression, invest in high-quality presentation folders with customized labels. I put my letter, business card, brochure, and client list in the right-hand side of the folder and my writing samples in the left. Together, these items compose an information kit with impact.

## ADVANCED

**DIRECT MAIL:** Direct mail is very effective in marketing freelance services. You can choose from a variety of formats. Self-mailing flyers (no envelope needed), postcards, and letters are the most common and economical. Postcards are a little cheaper to create and mail, but they provide less

space for your message. I prefer flyers to letters because you can incorporate graphics into the message, can be more creative, and don't need to stuff and seal envelopes. Whatever format you choose, direct mail must be clever. Basic principles of direct mail include a tagline on the mailing panel or envelope to entice prospects to read further, a clever headline, strong marketing copy, and a good offer. I've created two successful flyers: "Rx for Targeted Medical Marketing Communications" with a theme of providing relief from too much work and too many deadlines; and "40 Great Stress Busters" with 40 health tips on reducing work-related stress, including hiring me.

**ADVERTISING SPECIALTIES:** Giveaways such as pens, coffee mugs, mouse pads, and literally thousands of other items imprinted with your company name, logo, and relevant information can be an effective way to spread your message. These tend to be expensive, however, and you need to ensure that your advertising specialties are appropriate for your business; for example, a water bottle wouldn't be a very good promotion for a freelance medical writer. Also, consider how you'll distribute the specialty item before you order. If you plan to use mail, you need something that is lightweight and easy to package. I invested in high-quality pens that I routinely send with my information kit and in other promotions.

**EVERYTHING ELSE:** Marketing is an art, not a science. Use your imagination to develop other marketing materials; if they are appropriate for freelance medical writing and professionally produced, they'll be effective.

thank you

anticipated. I continue to use them to maintain and further develop my business. They can work for you too; just put on your marketer's hat and get to work!



## RECOMMENDED READING AND RESOURCE LIST

### BOOKS

Bly, Robert W. *Secrets of a Freelance Writer: How to Make \$85,000 a Year*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company; 1997.

Bly, Robert W. *Selling Your Services: Proven Strategies for Getting Clients to Hire You (or Your Firm)*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company; 1988.

Floyd, Elaine. *Marketing with Newsletters*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books; 1998.

National Writers Union. *National Writers Union Guide to Freelance Rates & Standard Practice*. New York, NY: National Writers Union; 1995.

Writer's Digest. *Writer's Digest Handbook of Making Money Freelance Writing*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books.

### PERIODICALS

*Today's \$85,000 Freelance Writer*. BSK Communications and Associates, PO Box 543, Oradell, NJ 07649. E-mail: bskcom@tiac.net. www.masterfreelancer.com. Bi-monthly newsletter.

*American Medical Writers Association Journal*, particularly the column "Freelance Forum." Included with membership in the American Medical Writers Association.

*Writer's Digest*. Monthly writer's magazine; deals primarily with writing rather than marketing. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest.

### RESOURCES ADVERTISING SPECIALTIES

Amsterdam Printing and Litho. Imprinted pens, calendars, coffee mugs, etc. Amsterdam, New York. 1-800-833-6231.

### DESK TOP PUBLISHING AND PRESENTATION PRODUCTS

Paper Direct. Presentation folders and coordinated papers for invitations, brochures, business cards, newsletters, note cards, post cards, etc. Seacaucus, New Jersey. 1-800-A-PAPERS (1-800-272-7377). www.paperdirect.com.

Available on-line at discounted prices from MASTERFreelancers: www.masterfreelancer.com. Other resources for writers also available.

Available on-line from Writer's Digest: www.writersdigest.com. Other resources for writers also available.

## CORPORATE SPONSORS 1999

The American Medical Writers Association expresses its gratitude to the following corporate sponsors for their continued support:

### BENEFACTORS (\$5,000)

JANSSEN RESEARCH FOUNDATION  
KELLY SCIENTIFIC RESOURCES  
PROCTER & GAMBLE PHARMACEUTICALS

### PATRONS (\$2,500)

BAYER CORPORATION, PHARMACEUTICAL DIVISION  
HOECHST MARION ROUSSEL, INC.

### SUSTAINING MEMBERS (\$1,500)

GLAXO WELLCOME, INC.

### SUPPORTING MEMBERS (\$750)

ABELSON-TAYLOR, INC.  
COVANCE, INC  
GREENBERG NEWS NETWORKS  
MERCER RESEARCH LABORATORIES  
PHARMACEUTICAL CAREERS, INC.  
PLACE MART PERSONNEL SERVICE  
PRO ED COMMUNICATIONS, INC.  
RESEARCH PHARMACEUTICAL SERVICES  
SANOFI RESEARCH  
TOTAL LEARNING CONCEPTS, INC.  
TRILOGY CONSULTING CORPORATION  
WYETH-AYERST RESEARCH

## MANAGING WRITER'S BLOCK

Here's a three-step approach to managing writer's block:



**STEP 1.** Train yourself to realize that you've begun blocking as soon as you find yourself fixating on that blank page.

**STEP 2.** Realize that a likely cause of the block is your need for a perfect first draft. So relax your critical faculties and allow yourself to rapidly write a sloppy first draft.

**STEP 3.** Assume the role of critical editor (rather than hypercritical writer), and refine that sloppy draft. The result will be the good first draft you were after, and you won't be stymied by writer's block.

An alternative approach after Step 1 is to stop trying to write. Do anything else that needs to be done or that you enjoy doing: go to the grocery, cook, call clients or friends, listen to music, walk, exercise, etc. The inactive mind sometimes incubates problems during these escape activities, allowing you to become productive once you return to work.

—RICHARD BERGMAN