

Can Honest Copywriting Succeed?

By Shel Horowitz

Abstract: Honest copy is more effective than "hype copy" if it treats the reader as intelligent. Readers will believe honesty but see through hype. And yet, a good honest marketing piece can be just as captivating as hype, with none of the negative baggage.

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(593 words)

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I confess--I'm a marketing heretic! I've built my career on breaking all the rules--and one of the rules I break is that I don't hype.

Do I put the best possible "spin" on the truth? Of course! But I refuse to deceive my readers into action.

What are some of the common copywriter tricks that I *leave on the table?*

Here are a few to start:

- * If you order in the next 24 hours, you get... (face it. If you come back tomorrow, the offer will almost always still hold)
- * Get all these bonuses, valued at \$2999, for FREE with your \$100 order (yeah, right! And who set the value of these gifts? And are they for sale, anywhere, on the open market at these prices? Is anyone actually buying them?)
- * Here's the information you requested (a GREAT statement--IF it's true--but I get five or six a day in my e-box, from companies I've never heard of)
- * Hi there, long-lost friend (and you sent it BCC?)

So why don't I like the copywriter's lies? And how do I write copy without resorting to these deceptions?

Well, first of all, I believe that if I want my words to sell a product, that product should be strong enough to do so without tricking the buyer. I know that if I trick someone, I may make a sale--but I've lost a customer for life! Whereas if I show the merits, back up my claims, and focus on the way this product solves a problem, eases a hurt or fear, or satisfies a need, I will build that lifetime relationship.

Oh, and one more thing. I like to look in the mirror and see someone who is doing good for the world--and I don't think lies and trickery will accomplish that. I happen to have a gift for writing, and I use that gift to make the world better. That includes being honest with myself

and with my readers.

About half the work I do is in the publishing industry. And here, the competition is fierce. 181,189 new books were published just in the U.S., just in 2004. Most of them will fail. My job is to help my clients' books stand out in this dense crowd.

Example: I wrote a press release for a book on electronic privacy issues. Here's my headline and lead. (Another rule I broke--never use the headline as the lead sentence. It's the only time I've ever done it that way, but in this case, I think the repetition made the point stronger. Names have been changed to protect the author's privacy.)

<release lead>

It's 10 O'Clock--Do You Know Where Your Credit History Is?

HIBBING, MN: It's 10 o'clock--Do you know where your credit history is? How about your employment records? Your confidential medical information?

How would you feel if you found out this sensitive and should-be-private material is "vacationing" in computer databanks around the world--accessible to corporate interests who can afford to track down and purchase it, but not necessarily open to your own inspection.

According to electronic privacy journalist and technology consultant Mortimer Gaines, this scenario is all-too-common...

</release lead>

No falsehoods, no hype--but a whole lot more captivating than the usual "New Book on Electronic Privacy Released by Publisher."

Without tricking people, I want to capture interest...move the reader to action...and still feel good about myself in the morning.

Yes, it can be done! I do it for clients every day, and have done so for more than 20 years.

Shel Horowitz, author of **Principled Profit: Marketing That Puts People First,** **Grassroots Marketing: Getting Noticed in a Noisy World,** and five other books, offers affordable, effective copywriting and strategic marketing planning to clients on three continents. He is the originator of the Ethical Business Pledge Campaign to change the World at <http://www.business-ethics-pledge.org> . His sites at <http://www.frugalmarketing.com> and <http://www.principledprofit.com> offer hundreds of useful articles for entrepreneurs and marketers, including the complete back issues of his FREE Monthly Frugal Marketing Tips. Shel will be glad to help you create your next press release, sell sheet, web site, or other marketing material. He can be reached at shel@principledprofit.com, 800-683-WORD.