

Interview with a Pro:

John Carlton Reveals the Secrets Behind His Letter for "Sex: A Man's Guide" *By Scott Haines, Editor of Monthly Marketing Genius*

Master copywriter John Carlton has been in advertising since the late '70s. He began as a commercial artist but always wanted to get into the copywriting end of the business. Armed with a copy of John Caples' "Tested Advertising Methods," he started doing some writing and taking on some clients. The rest, as they say, is copywriting history.

Last month Monthly Marketing Genius interviewed John and did an in-depth study of the promotion he wrote to sell a book titled "Sex: A Man's Guide." In addition to beating the original control, John's package mailed for 5 years to 30 million names ... despite constant attempts by other top writers to knock it off.

MMG: John, what is it that actually kick-started your copywriting career?

JC:: Answering the ad for Joe Karbo's, "Lazy Man's Way to Riches" just kind of got me going into the biz. I went out into the freelance world with a beat-up Olivetti manual typewriter, one tank of gas left in my car, enough money to pay the rent for one more month – and really nowhere else to go. It was about 1984, I believe, and it turned out to be a classic time in direct response in Los Angeles. Ogilvy and Mather had just opened an office. I happened to meet up, by accident, with Jay Abraham, who lived just a few miles away from me. Through Jay Abraham, I met Gary Halbert. After working with him, I just kind of went off on my own.

MMG: What did you do to prepare yourself for freelancing?

JC:: I took a speed-reading course and went down to the Torrance Public Library and read everything in the Dewey Decimal System from, I think, 600 through 800, which included sales, marketing, copywriting, advertising, all of that kind of stuff. I "speed-read" my way through it in an attempt to "catch up" with where I figured everybody else in the advertising world was at. What I found, when I went out freelancing, was that that put me far ahead of everybody else.

Most people who were working as professional copywriters or copy chiefs or designers or even running the agencies in Los Angeles had read very few books about the craft. Really, most of them learned at the knee of another guy who knew the craft and they didn't try to expand beyond that. They were doing the minimum possible. They disliked branching out and doing edgy marketing, even though it was clear to me, early on, that edgy marketing was the stuff that worked. So I was being snuck in the back door of these agencies to do the work their creators couldn't pull off – the kind of outrageous things that have been working since Claude Hopkins' days.

MMG: Tell us about the first direct-mail letter you did for Rodale. They were called Rodale Press at the time, and specialized mostly in alternative health, gardening, and other books aimed at specific markets. I think they're still the largest direct-marketer of books in the world.

JC:: I don't know how they got my name, maybe through Gary Halbert. They had a big stable of copywriters, both in-house and freelance – and they knew pretty much what each one could do.

Rodale was a very conservative eastern-Pennsylvania company. But, somehow, they decided that a big part of their health market would be interested in a book on sex. Now, we're not talking about a lurid book on sex, but rather an educational book a parent might give to their child in lieu of having that conversation about the birds and the bees.

They created the book – and then found that their top copywriters couldn't make the piece sell very well. So they decided to go out and find somebody a little edgy. And, of course, my name must have been at the top of that list.

MMG: How did you approach the assignment?

JC:: Their current control happened to be by their top writer at the time. It was a decent letter but it was written the way you would sell a book on arthritis or gardening. Some of the other samples they showed me were so far off that they were obviously written by younger copywriters who didn't have a lot of life experience. At the time, I was in my early 40's and I DID have a lot of life experience (both good and bad).

I remembered a piece of advice Gary Halbert had given me: Just sell the damn book! So I didn't go through a lot of rigmarole. I just sat down and wrote a letter that started out "Hot New Book Reveals ... The Astonishing Sex Secrets Of The Most Satisfied, Most Knowledgeable And Most Respected Lovers In The World." The sub-head was "Learn to enjoy the best sex of your life at any age with the amazing secrets and discoveries in this just-released 'for men only' book that is dramatically changing men's (and women's) lives literally overnight." And then I got into the letter.

MMG: You got right to the point.

JC:: Right. And by the end of the first page I had written seven bullets along the lines of: how to guarantee your partner an over-the-top orgasm every time you make love, how to make heart-pounding intimacy last forever; how to increase your animal attractiveness to the opposite sex; how to make love all night long; how to win the undying love and devotion of an exciting woman; and so on.

MMG: What kind of challenges have you faced in your career?

JC:: Well, let me put it this way ... I'm not a natural-born salesman. I was not invited into the business world and, in fact, I kept getting spit out of the normal corporate world – and that's one of the reasons I wound up as a freelance writer. I have a problem with authority (as you may be able to tell) and I don't like wearing ties. I REALLY don't like wearing ties. It bothers my neck.

One incident stands out.

I was working for a big corporation – as an employee – and, because I'm kind of a night owl, I was working 'til midnight. I think I'm the only one in the building, but then the V.P. of marketing comes bursting in. He stared at me and said, "What are you doing here?" And I said, "Well, we've got a big deadline tomorrow and I just thought I'd stay and finish some stuff up." And he said, "Oh, well, make sure you lock up before you leave." And he split.

The next morning, I came in at 8:45. He charged into the art department, stood right next to my desk, and yelled at me for 10 minutes about being 15 minutes late. He said, "I don't care how late you work at night. I want you here with a tie on at 8:30 in the morning." And something snapped in me at that point because it was clear that appearances meant more to him than substance.

MMG: Did that help propel you into a freelance career?

JC:: What it really did was make it clear to me – when I did go out on my own – that I had to make it work, because I really didn't have anywhere else to go. I couldn't go back to the corporate world. I had burned a lot of bridges. It was kind of like when Cortez invaded Mexico. He took all the soldiers up on the beach, had them turn around, and showed them that he had torched all the ships. He said, "Now, we've got two choices: Die here or conquer the continent." And that was kind of the way I felt out in the freelance world. I subsequently realized that's the best mindset you can have.

I call what I did "gun-to-the-head" copywriting. I knew I had to make the first pieces I wrote work, so I examined every sentence, every word, every tactic I used and thought, "If I had a gun to my head, would I use that? Would I send this letter out like that?"

Everything I write still has to pass the gun-to-the-head test. If it doesn't, it gets tossed. I have written 17 or 20 different versions of letters to make them right. It's a hard mindset to get into, but once you're there, all of the B.S. just kind of falls away and you're left with the stark reality of coming up with the best possible sales pitch. What that means is making the letter read like it's just me and you sitting there and having a beer and I'm telling you a story – a story that's riveted right to your emotional sweet spot. I've got something exciting that you really want ... and here it is.

MMG: You have a very unique lifestyle. Tell us about it.

JC:: Well, I just turned 50 a year and a half ago and decided that it was time to settle down. But up until that point, for about 15 years, I structured my work in a way that enabled me to take off massive amounts of time every year – as much as six months in a row.

Quality of life has always been very, very important to me. I figured I didn't want to wait until I was 65 to enjoy my retirement – I was going to start doing it in pieces. So I always made sure I had a financial cushion. I had my "screw you" money put aside and, whenever I got ahead, I just made plans and took off. I sometimes wasn't able to take off the whole half-year, or even a quarter a year – but I would manage to take off four days out of the week.

I still take off massive amounts of time, but for now I've decided to give myself a couple of years of working really hard – nose to the grindstone type of thing.

MMG: Any final words of advice?

JC:: As a writer writing advertising copy, you are a salesman in print. You've got to put on your salesman's hat and sell. That means you don't brag, you don't preen, you don't show off, and you don't try to entertain. You stay in the pocket of the reader's emotional sweet spot. If he's into golf, you talk about golf. You never let him sit back and say, "What has this got to do with me?" Every single line, every word, every sentence you write makes him think, "Oh, wow!"

Once you understand salesmanship, that's when the fun really starts – because then it's all about understanding the psychology of human behavior.

A lot of people who read ads I have written get so worked up that they can't sleep. They can't wait until morning when they can pick up the phone and order the product. They get wound up about it because I get right into their sweet spot and nail it. I am giving them exactly what they want – it's just that they didn't know they wanted it until they read my letter.

[The above interview is an excerpt from last month's Monthly Marketing Genius. In the complete interview, students learn more about what made John's package a winner and a great deal more about things like client-copywriter relations. They also see John's letter thoroughly analyzed secret-by-secret by Master Copywriter Scott Haines.

Understanding and learning how master copywriters write packages that bring in millions of dollars could hold critical answers for you in your own career and business. For more information on how you can profit from these secrets and move your own efforts forward, [click here.](#)]

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