

# An Exclusive Interview with Self-Help Copywriter Catherine Cairns

Catherine Cairns completed the AWAI copywriting program in 1999, and has gone on to success in the lucrative self-help industry. Today, she shares her secrets.

**CI: When you finished the AWAI program, did you say to yourself, "Okay, I love self-help better than anything else, that's all I want to do" – or was it by accident that Nightingale-Conant became your first major client? In other words, how did you get into this niche market?**

Catherine: I took a business class here in my town, and it helped me find what I wanted to do. I love self-help. I was buying books on spiritual things. I love Anthony Robbins. I have an Anthony Robbins program, and I saw the name Nightingale-Conant on it. I was getting their mail, and I thought, "Oh my gosh, I'd love to write for them!" So I went right after them and I was fortunate. I just knew it was a market I loved. I was a customer of the market, and I thought what better way to combine my copywriting service with a product that I also would enjoy learning about.

**CI: If someone wants to identify potential copywriting clients in the self-help and business opportunity field, everyone knows Nightingale-Conant – but how can they find out where the other good potential clients are?**

Catherine: I find I like the things I get in my own mailbox. So, for example, being on Nightingale's list, I do get other offers – and every now and then, I find something I really like. I put it aside because I think it's a client lead that I can find out more about, and I then self-promote to them.

That's basically how I started. I've been so busy, I haven't had a chance to self-promote for quite some time, but that's what I do when I see a new client I want. Get on those mailing lists and the client leads will come to you – then it's just a matter of going after them.

**CI: How did you reach out to Nightingale-Conant? They didn't know you. You didn't know them. So how did you make the first contact?**

Catherine: I studied their packages. They used a direct-mail format. At the time, I had no experience, so I decided to write a self-promotion in a direct-mail format. It helped me prove that I could write direct mail.

I also found a unique angle to come from. I focused on Gene Schwartz and his selling techniques. I recommend that to other copywriters. If you find a technique you really like, highlight that in your own marketing materials. It helps you stand out a little ... it just gives you a bit of a unique edge. Instead of saying "I'd like to write copy for you," you can say, "I can help you increase your sales through such and such techniques." For example, if I want to contact publishers who sell their products through magalogs in the future, I'll put together a self-promotion in a magalog format. By promoting myself with a magalog, even though I have never written one before, they'll see that I can do it.

**CI: You started out with Nightingale-Conant because you'd purchased self-help materials from them and had received**

for?

Catherine: First, I think a copywriter could succeed in any niche – even if they're not active in it. But I find that it's much more fun and fulfilling if you're working in a niche you enjoy.

Before I was a copywriter, I was a customer of self-help. Now, as a copywriter, I get all kinds of self-help material, for free, and I'm *paid* for it! I get to learn so much ... grow as a person ... and run a career at the same time. I look forward to every project – and because I'm excited about what I'm learning, that passion comes across in the copy.

And I think that being a customer of self-help helps me understand my customer better. Plus, I feel authentic. If I'm writing about a product I believe in, I feel so much better about myself. I can't sell anything I don't believe in.

**CI: You do a lot of self-promotion ... a cornerstone of staying steadily busy. What tools and techniques do you use for self-promotion?**

Catherine: Actually, I have not self-promoted myself for five years. Once I landed work with Nightingale-Conant in 2002, I have not needed to. I have had periods without work – and I've used some of that time to work on a new self-promotion. It's still not done though, because once I get a paying project, I put my self-promotion aside so I can focus on the project at hand.

Since 2002, I've had a lot of repeat work from Nightingale-Conant. When potential clients hear that I work with them, it leads to work. For example, at my first AWAI Bootcamp, it was announced that I was working with Nightingale-Conant. Well, Agora followed up with me and gave me a project.

I also go the extra mile for my clients. I put my heart and soul into every project. I work hard. I also choose to work with publishers. Publishers are constantly creating new products – which means that, if you do good work, you're almost guaranteed future projects.

**CI: You recently began working with The Jack Canfield Companies. How did that come about?**

Catherine: In August, Nightingale-Conant hired me to work on Jack Canfield's program, *The Success Principles*. I always contact the creator of a product I'm working on, ask them questions and ask them to review my work.

In this case, I was not in contact with Jack Canfield, because his schedule is really busy. I was in contact with Jack's Vice President of Marketing. She thought the copy was "brilliant." So I asked for her testimonial, and asked if I could include it in any self-promoting I do.

I had done a really good job. My work spoke for itself. And asking for a testimonial (which let her know I was a freelancer and available for work outside of Nightingale-Conant) opened a door.

I get to work with amazing people, and I've started to get into the habit of asking them for testimonials. My intention is to include the testimonial next to a sample of the copy I wrote for their product in my self-promotion package.

In fact, in December/early January, I got to work on Michael Masterson's Nightingale-Conant *7 Years to 7 Figures* program. After reviewing my work, Michael said I was a very good copywriter, and I asked if I could use that as a testimonial. He said yes! I knew I had come a long way when Michael Masterson gave me such positive praise about my work. To have his testimonial is just amazing.

**CI: With the recent changes in the Web, do you see changes in how self-help products are marketed?**

Catherine: I haven't noticed anything in terms of copy. Everything I learned from the AWAI program still applies. I have just gotten better at what I do. For instance, I used to write super-long headlines. Now, I'm aiming to write headlines with more "punch" – saying the same thing but in fewer words. And I know that ideas that debunk myths or that are contrary to popular belief work well. For example, here are a few strong Nightingale-Conant headlines:

Your Debts Could Make You Rich  
Thinking Big Could Be Making You Fail  
Poor Credit Could Save You Thousands

I've also seen a product format change from cassettes to CDs and now to MP3 formats online. So, in direct-mail kits, we focus on selling CDs. But Nightingale-Conant turns those direct-mail kits into email promotions ... and that is where they can promote the MP3 formats.

**CI: You see some copy for self-help products that is so over the top, especially on the Internet – and then you see other stuff that's very low key. What approach works best today – hypey hard sell, big promise copy, or more subtle, more educated, more professional stuff? Or can you not divide it that way?**

Catherine: That's a hard question – but I say stick to the product. I really get to know the product I'm writing about. I also try to pick up the language of the author so I'm presenting the same tone throughout my package that the customer is going to get in the product.

**CI: What process do you go through when writing a self-help piece? How do you connect with your audience and identify what motivates them to buy?**

Catherine: I start with the product. I read and re-read the transcripts. If I stick to the product – which was hopefully developed based on the customer's wants and needs – then I do well. If I find myself straying from the product, I have to pull myself back.

So, when I research, I try to stick with research that relates only to the Big Idea and unique selling proposition. If I have more time, I'll do more research on the topic in general.

I like to search Amazon.com for the product and read what customers are saying about it. That helps with the core complex. And I like to search the author's website, uncovering ideas, testimonials, and more.

If I'm working on an audio program, I'll order the author's book from Amazon.com (if it's available). The book often goes into more depth, which can help me understand the subject matter even better. Plus, the book often includes testimonials.

With Nightingale-Conant, I ask for a tested concept (which is usually a paragraph or two based on research they've done). This is a guide for me. It helps me stay on course when I'm writing the copy. If I stray, I need to come back to the tested concept and stay on course.

I also listen very closely to what my clients say on the "product launch" call. They have a vision for the product, and I aim to meet that vision with the copy I write. Plus, during this call, clues as to what the USP could be are often revealed.

I have tons of sales kits I can access for quick ideas. I have them organized into "super-successful" (the controls) and other categories (sales and marketing., business opportunity., wealth., health, etc). So if I'm working on a business product, I can review my "sales and marketing" and "business opportunity" categories to help me better understand the customer. And a review of the "super-successful" category will help me focus on winning formats, ideas, and more.

So, sticking to the product ... seeing what people are saying online in places like Amazon.com ... listening to my clients ... reviewing research that has already been done (like the "tested concept") ... having access to controls ... all of that helps me connect with my prospects and understand what motivates them to buy.

### **CI: What are the big mistakes that copywriters make when writing for self-help?**

Catherine: I'm not sure what mistakes other copywriters make, but I know the mistakes I've made. For example, you really need to find the unique selling proposition – and sometimes that's challenging.

A few years ago, I was working on a brain-intelligence program. The benefits were all the same as the benefits of other brain-intelligence programs, and my first attempt at the copy made it sound like all those other programs.

During the revision stage, the producer sent an email to help me. One of the things he said was that the program was like "push-ups for the brain" ... and so, I re-wrote the copy focusing on that unique angle. It worked! And it taught me a very important lesson ...

Your client often reveals clues as to what the USP is. They know their customers. They know the product ... so listen closely. For instance, the USP for my most recent Nightingale-Conant project (for Jack Canfield's *The Success Principles*), was that this program is like an encyclopedia for success. I caught on to those words, and focused my sales kit on that angle.

I thought about encyclopedias ... and how I could compare this program to one. Well, encyclopedias are usually organized alphabetically, A-Z. So, in the copy, I came up with an A-Z success system – your one-stop guide to a better life. My client at Nightingale-Conant was very happy with it. So was the Vice President of Marketing at The Jack Canfield Companies.

### **CI: If you could give only one piece of advice to a new copywriter, what would you say?**

Catherine: Know why you're in copywriting. If you have a "why," the challenges will be easier to conquer. I find deadlines to be challenging. And when I have one that is especially tough and wonder if the stress is worth it, I remind myself of my "why:"

Copywriting enables me to be myself, to feel authentic, and there is so much room for financial growth if I take the necessary steps.

**CI: How do you know what a potential client will be willing to pay for your work?**

Catherine: If I don't know for sure, I'll give them a fee range. For example, with a direct-mail package, I'll say my fee range is \$2,500 to \$5,000 plus a royalty. That gives the client some room for negotiation, and I find that helps. I make certain I can still do well at the low end of the fee range, and the high end of the range keeps possibilities open.

**CI: Does more of your income come from project fees or royalty payments?**

Catherine: Right now, I make more on my project fees. But my advice is to start asking for royalties or bonuses from day one. It took me three years to start asking, and I'm still not asking everyone. I am, however, asking all new clients that come my way.

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## 1 Response to "An Exclusive Interview with Self-Help Copywriter Catherine Cairns"

Thanks Catherine for the very informative article...

I have chosen to write for the Self-Help niche as well, however, I want to focus on writing solely for the web in this niche.

That stated, I just want to be sure I am not leaving money on the table when my focus is to be a Self-Help Web Copywriter.

Although, I'm sure that I am leaving money, I hope the niche is big enough to just write for the web??

Thanks.

*Jay Sutton* – over a year ago

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