

Alan Serinsky on Writing Great Copy for Supplements

Alan Serinsky has used his copywriting skills to build a successful supplement business, Vitalmax Vitamins. Today, he's going to share his insider secrets on what propels supplement copy toward success.

CI: As I understand it, you write a lot of your own copy – and you basically consider yourself to be a copywriter who became a businessman.

Alan: That's correct. Copy is my thing – the thing I enjoy doing the most.

CI: So if you have a control, whether you wrote it or someone that you hired wrote it, and you say, "Today I'm going to sit down and work on this product" – how do you go about it? What's your thought process in looking at a promotion that's doing well and coming up with a way to beat it?

Alan: Well, I try to look for something that's specifically unique to the formula that maybe somebody else hasn't talked about. To do that, you need to be able to "seed" yourself with all your competitors so you can get their mailings and see what they're saying.

I remember a long time ago ... we were doing a prostate product and everybody was talking about saw palmetto berries. So we looked at our formula, and we had lycopene in it. We started researching lycopene, and found out that it is a very strong ingredient for helping prostate health, and we decided maybe that should be our big story. We took our control, which was focused completely on saw palmetto, and rewrote it. We made lycopene our big-picture focus, and we must have had over 20 percent increase in response rate. It just killed the control.

CI: Do you remember what your headline was?

Alan: I think it was something like "Your prostate's a ticking time bomb," and we talked about a new breakthrough, lycopene, that could restore your prostate and help your symptoms. That promotion really showed how picking something unique that no one else is talking about can make a big story – and when it comes to selling supplements, you need a big story.

You need some breaking news, something that everybody hasn't heard about. Customers in the health product area receive a lot of mail. They get a lot of different types of promotions, and a lot of them are selling the same story for the same health problem. They want something different ... because I can guarantee you that, after a period of time, they're going to feel they're not getting the full benefit of the product they're currently using. When that happens, they are going to look for something that has a different promise, that has a different ingredient.

I keep looking around for something I can tell people that hasn't been told before. I think that's a very important marketing strategy in the health industry.

CI: So you look for the unique selling proposition or, really, the point of differentiation.

Alan: Yes, very important.

CI: Let's talk for a moment about what the regulatory agencies allow you to say in healthcare copy (and what you should never say). What restrictions are you under?

Alan: Well, lately the FDA's gotten very strong on direct-mail vitamin nutritional supplement promotions. So we've gone through a change. We now try to have all our copy be as much in compliance with the FDA as possible, which is a little bit different than what the FTC requires. The FTC is concerned with making false advertising claims – and that applies to all direct-mail marketing. But when the FDA steps in, they have a lot of different concerns.

We can't make cancer claims, we can't make prevention claims, and we sometimes even have trouble listing symptoms. The FDA has gotten very strict. It's become quite a challenge to write good copy.

But I never give up, because there are always ways of saying the things you need to say without upsetting the FDA. I think the customer gets it. For example, it's pretty widely known that once men get past their 40s, four out of five have prostate problems. You don't have to hit them over the head with the word "cancer." They know what you're talking about. The trick is to figure out how to use different words that mean the same thing.

CI: How do you make sure your writers know the boundaries they have to work within?

Alan: I don't tie their hands. I try to give them some guidance up front, and I say, "Listen. You know, you've got to substantiate everything." That's what seems to be the main thing. If you're making a claim, you have to substantiate it. In other words, there's got to be a study saying that this ingredient in your product is going to provide this benefit.

I tell them that if they see a study that's going to add credibility to the piece, go ahead and use it. Pull the abstract out of *PubMed* (which you can find on the Internet). Just be cautious. If the study's talking about 600 mg and your product only has 300 mg, you can't use it.

CI: Let's say you're going to hire someone who's a starting copywriter, maybe an AWAI graduate. It's their first or their second assignment, or maybe their fifth assignment but their first with you. What kind of assignment would you start them out on? Would it be a direct-mail package? A headline test? An insert?

Alan: I wouldn't want a beginner to go ahead and dive into a 16-pager or a magalog or something of that sort. So what I usually do is give them a small package, a four- or eight-page package – and I ask them to do the head and the lead first. In other words, give me a page or two. Let me make sure you're on the right track, because there's a lot you've got to be concerned about. Are you telling the story we want you to tell? Do you have a big promise upfront? Do you have the right voice? Health supplements often have doctors that endorse the product. Does your copy sound like it's coming from a doctor?

CI: Though you usually start beginners with something small – like a four- or eight-pager – is that a format that you typically use?

Alan: Every nutritional supplement company has its own look. The formula that usually works for us is a self-mailer. Sometimes we have a picture of one of our doctors on the front, along with a big header and a promise. And it usually runs about 12 or 16 pages.

CI: What's a reasonable fee for writing a direct mailing to sell a nutritional supplement? Can you give our readers a range?

Alan: It differs with the number of pages. At least, that's how we do it. If you're doing a four-page package, that's an easy write. If you're doing a 16 pager, it's going to take some work. For someone new to the health field or just starting out as a copywriter, I would say anywhere from \$1,500 to \$3,000. Sometimes with royalties, sometimes not.

It's very important for all new writers to do some work at very low cost or even at no cost. You want to get a successful piece in the mail, because that's going to be your ace in the hole. If you get a successful piece, you're going to be able to go to other clients and say, "Listen, I have a successful piece in the mail that's making someone lots of money." They're going to want to see it ... and that's going to be your selling tool.

In the beginning, your priority is to get a piece that's working in the mail, not the money you're going to get for writing it. Think of it as an investment – one that's going to pay off in the end.

So take jobs that you think you can handle. Even if it may not be what you're most interested in at the moment, take the project anyway if you think it might lead to a good opportunity for you.

CI: Earlier, you talked about the importance of finding a USP for your product. But then what? What's your secret for writing a strong package around that the USP?

Alan: There is a structure we use that works for us. So I tell my writers, stick to the structure. You have to have all the components in your piece. I also tell them to use subheads, because when you're talking about nutritional supplements and ingredients, it can get very technical. Subheads help to keep pulling your reader back into the story.

Next, they need to find the voice. The voice is very important in writing health. We use a doctor to endorse our products, so our promotions have to sound like they're coming from him.

Customers put a lot of trust into the doctors who are behind nutritional formulas. So not only does writing in a particular doctor's voice help you build a loyal customer base, it also makes your customers feel like somebody with a lot of knowledge in his field is talking to them with authority.

CI: Not all supplement clients use doctors to endorse their products, but a lot of them do.

Alan: Right. And I tell my writers that they need to place themselves on the other side of the doctor's desk. Imagine yourself in the doctor's office. He's sitting in his chair and leaning across his desk, talking to you like you're one of his patients. You want to make your copy sound like it's coming right out of his mouth, that he has an understanding of your problem and sympathy for

what you're going through.

On your first page, you have to state the problem and make a promise. Make your reader feel comfortable with the doctor. Make him feel that there's a connection – that the doctor's got solutions for the problem and that he's going to explain why these solutions are better than anything you'll find at the corner store.

If you build that story and you keep that pitch going through the whole promotion, by the time the reader is done, he's going to feel compelled to buy the product.

CI: One last thing. What do you think works better in copy to sell health products? Fear or hope?

Alan: I work them together: problem/solution. I give them the fear of the problem and then I give them the hope of the solution. They go hand in hand.

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American Writers & Artists Institute

220 George Bush Blvd, Suite D

Delray Beach, FL 33444

(561) 278-5557 or (866) 879-2924