

An Interview with Alternative Health Copywriter Donna Doyle

Donna Doyle entered the freelance market as an alternative health copywriter just eight years ago, and now makes a consistent six-figure income. Today, she joins us with advice on how to break into and succeed in this high-demand field.

CI: How did you become a copywriter?

Donna: I kind of fell into it. I was always interested in writing, and had a flair for it ever since I was a child. I graduated from college with an English degree, but didn't know quite what to do with it. I worked for an advertising agency for a while, and didn't like it. I was an account executive—I wasn't doing anything creative.

I got into the publishing business. I worked as a promotion manager for a trade magazine publisher. And that's where I started getting into writing. I would write and design sales brochures and editorial calendars for our magazines.

But I really got into my heavy-duty, alternative health experience when I joined Prentice Hall. A lot of people know Prentice Hall for their textbooks, but they also have a large division that sells books through the mail. I got a job there as a copywriter, and I worked in their health and self-improvement book division. That's where I got started—selling alternative health books through the mail. I was there for eight years, and that's where I learned direct response and how to write a good headline and how to do the format of a letter. Then I went to another company, Medical Economics, where I did some writing and design and promotion.

In April of 2000, I finally decided to go freelance—and I've been freelancing ever since.

CI: What is it that sets the health and wellness industry apart from other industries for you as a copywriter?

Donna: Direct-response techniques are the same across the board. But health is a subject I am really interested in and passionate about. I don't think you can be a good writer if you're not passionate about your subject. And with health, more than any other subject, you really have to understand the emotional hot buttons of your audience. The health prospect, by and large, is someone who's older, someone who's afraid of losing their independence, someone who is probably in pain or very tired. You have to home in on those emotions—more so than if you're writing a promotion for something like a financial newsletter. Yes, you always have to get to the emotional hot buttons of your reader, but in health that's more true than in any other area. If you don't connect with your audience, your promotion is just not going to work.

CI: What are some of the techniques that work to connect you with your audience?

Donna: Creating empathy, understanding pain—that's a hot topic for health people. Low energy and low stamina—that's another theme that resonates with health prospects. Digestive problems. That's another one. And really getting into their minds and understanding those problems. Plus understanding that mainstream medicine doesn't have all the answers.

As a health copywriter, you also have to understand FDA compliance rules, which get into the kinds of health claims you can make. It's very challenging to write health copy now, more so than when I first started, for the simple reason that more and more supplement products are under scrutiny by the government. So you have to be really careful and conservative with the claims you make. Fifteen years ago, 10 years ago, you were able to say something like, "This vitamin will eliminate your pain in three days." Now you can't use the word "eliminate." And you can't use a timeframe. You can't say "immediately." You can't say "three days." You can say "quickly." You can say "soon." It's a challenge—figuring out how to say things more conservatively and yet still sound compelling.

CI: How do you recommend copywriters keep up with the government's rules?

Donna: The FTC website and the FDA website are a help. But how far you can go also depends on your client. Some clients, truthfully, are less conservative about their claims than others. I have had clients say, "We're perfectly happy to push the envelope with the FDA. If they send us a cease and desist letter, we'll worry about it then." And that's great, because you can automatically make your copy a little more compelling.

On the other hand, some clients are very strict about legal compliance, and they'll send your copy through a barrage of lawyers who really water it down. So you have to be aware of what the lawyers will let you say. You can't name diseases. You can't say "arthritis," but you can say "joint health" or "joint problems" or "joint aches." A lot of that comes from studying health controls out there to see how they handle disease claims.

The FDA and FTC don't do much about telling you what you can and can't say about specific diseases. The best way to learn is to get a good health swipe file together and study what other copywriters have done. Get guidance from your client, as well.

CI: Good advice. Now you mentioned you've been freelancing for eight years. How did you go about establishing yourself as a freelancer?

Donna: Wow, that's a very good question! I thought establishing myself as a freelancer was going to be a lot easier than it was. I had 10 years of writing experience under my belt with two very good companies. I had controls—some of which are still mailing to this day. But it wasn't easy because, in some ways, you have to build your reputation all over again. The best way to do that is by prospecting. By pounding the pavement and sending out prospecting letters to hundreds and hundreds of companies. It's getting that first "yes" that will get your career going. Once you have your first yes, you'll get your second yes that much faster. Even so, you have to constantly market yourself. It can take clients six months, even a year, to call you back.

I started freelancing in April. That's when I officially hung out my shingle. I landed my first client in August. My first year as a freelancer I made \$15,000. But I was able to double that the following year and triple it the year after that. Within four years as a freelancer, I was making into the six figures. But it was from a lot of prospecting, and a lot of work. And having good client relations, too.

CI: If you don't mind naming names, who are some of the clients you work with?

Donna: I work with Think Right Now International, a self-improvement company. I've worked with Healthy Directions. Swiss Labs. Golden Health Products. I've done some work with Rodale. Bio-Nutrigenics. So I have some big and small clients that

I've worked for consistently over the years.

CI: When you contact a prospective client, it's important to know *who* to contact. How do you go about finding that person?

Donna: It's very simple. I call the company's main phone number, and ask who their marketing director or their creative director is because I have some correspondence I'd like to send to them. And 99 times out of a hundred, they will provide me with that person's name and title.

You're not always going to be able to get a name to address your prospecting package to, but I try.

CI: After you've sent your prospecting package, how do you follow up?

Donna: I follow up, usually, about every three to four months. There are some people that you follow up with once or twice, and you can see that they're just not interested. There are other people who may contact me directly from my prospecting letter, saying they'd like to see more samples or they want more information or they'd like a quote. Those are the ones I will continue to follow up with. Three to four months seems to be about the right amount of time. If it's too often, you'll be a pest. If it's not often enough, people will forget about you.

CI: Our readers are always interested to hear about setting fees. How do you go about doing it?

Donna: I work more on a project basis. A lot of my decisions about setting fees are based on what I've heard throughout the industry. There are some good reference books that can help, but you also have to take into account such things as your experience level and the type of client. For example, I normally charge anywhere between \$16,000 and \$18,000 when writing a magalog. But eight years ago, when I was starting out, I would be able to get about \$9,000 for a magalog.

There are some really good copywriter message boards out there. If you're not sure what to charge, you can go on those boards and say, "Hey, I have a quote from a client, and this is what the job specs are. What's a reasonable price?" People are usually pretty good about coming back with, "You should charge this" or "What he wants to pay you isn't enough."

One way to look at it is to take into account your overhead, how much salary you would like to make, your health insurance, and your taxes. Say it comes out to about \$60 an hour. If that's the case, you can't charge less than \$60 an hour. Another way to do it is to estimate how long a project will take and then figure out a fee based on those hours.

It's not an exact science. In fact, I still find it hard to price projects even to this day.

CI: Is there one piece of golden advice that you'd like to share with our readers?

Donna: The most important thing, whatever type of copywriter you are, is to work well with your clients. Be easy to work with. Be accommodating. Be accessible. There are a lot of people in this industry who are prima donnas, who do not take constructive criticism well. You can be a great writer, but if a client does not like working with you, they're not going to use you again—no matter how great they think your copy is. If you make it painful for them, forget it. They're not going to use you.

One of the advantages I have is that I was on staff with companies for a long time, and I was actually in a position where I hired and fired freelancers. I knew as a client what kind of freelancer I would want working for me. So having that knowledge under my belt made it a lot easier for me to get clients to use me again and again and again.

CI: That's good advice. But how do you diplomatically deal with a client who wants to make changes to your copy (and not for legal reasons)—changes that you know will weaken the copy?

Donna: Every writer runs across that. What I do is listen to their rationale, really listen to what they have to say. Then say, "Okay. I can see what you're saying. However, I think if you give the copy that type of focus it will not be as compelling ... and here is why I think that." You will, of course, have clients who say, "I don't care. Do it my way." And you know what? You do it their way. Let's face it, they sign your pay check. The client is always right.

You will run into difficult clients. You will have clients who, when you turn in a terrific first draft, will totally change the copy. And then, when it mails and it fails, they'll turn around and point the finger at you. There's not a lot you can do when this happens. But then again, one of the nice things about being a freelancer is that when you reach a certain level of success, you can actually fire clients you don't want to work with.

CI: Any parting thoughts?

Donna: The best way to become a success in this business is to build a good swipe file and really study those promotions. That's how you'll know what's working and what's not working.

[Ed. Note: Donna Doyle has been a direct-response copywriter for over 15 years, specializing in the alternative health and self-improvement industries. She has created results-driven copy for some of the largest direct-marketing companies and publishers throughout the U.S. and Canada. Named "2006 Copywriter of the Year" by American Writers & Artists Institute (AWAI), she is a Partner of 3Chix, (<http://www.3chix.com/>), a seminar and information publishing company. Donna is also a sought-after copywriting coach. Sign up for her free e-zine, "The Inside Track," at <http://www.copybydoyle.com/>.]

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6 Responses to "An Interview with Alternative Health Copywriter Donna Doyle"

This is very informative and exciting. I have been putting writing off for a while simply because of finding a Niche as a Nurse. Any suggestions will be greatly appreciated. I am ready to et started! Thanks.

Esther Otim – over a year ago

As a fresh health copywriter myself, this interview has been pure gold.

The section where you explained how to keep abreast of govt regulations and compliance was simply brilliant.

Thank you soooo much for sharing!

Donald C Obii – over a year ago

I appreciate the Golden Advice: Be easy to work with. Be accommodating. Be accessible. Your article was very informative. Appreciate the Golden Nuggets. Thanks much!

Patrick P – over a year ago

This is a very interesting and helpful interview with Donna! I have been writing articles about health and nutrition on my Wordpress blog for many years and my challenge is to find a client to start copy writing. It would be helpful if I can see some samples of Donna's work.

Thank you very much!

nutrobalance – over a year ago

Thanks Donna for the valueable insights!

Ani Breeze – over a year ago

Very useful discussions -- FDA requirements and dealing with clients.

WriteOn – over a year ago

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