

# Bob Bly Shares His Secrets to Finding Clients and Succeeding as a B2B Copywriter

Bob Bly is a legend among copywriters. He is a prolific writer with many books on how to become and succeed as a copywriter. Bob started his writing career as a freelance B2B copywriter—there is no one better to learn from in the industry.

**CI: I'm just going to dive right into the focus topic of our interview, which is B2B copywriting. How does business-to-business copywriting differ from writing to consumers?**

Bob Bly: The key question that people have of course, or the argument that goes on, is "Are B2B and B2C fundamentally different, are they fundamentally the same, or is it 50/50?" I think there are many similarities, but there are also some major differences and that's what I'll focus on.

One of the differences is that the business buyer wants to buy. Consumers don't want to spend money. Nobody really wants to spend \$200 on a stock market newsletter. What you want is you want to have a portfolio that beats the DOW. If you could get that without paying Philips or Agora \$100 or \$500 for their advice you would do it, but their copy convinces you that you'd be better off getting their advice. So they don't want to buy your product, but they do want the benefit.

In B2B, often we have customers that need and want to buy our product. Like when I was a chemical engineer and I worked in a plant, we wanted to and had to buy valves all the time. We didn't just want the benefit. We needed the valve. If our old valve was broken and we were building a new processing unit, we needed to put valves in it. So the business buyer wants to buy and regularly buys. The proof of this is that many businesses have one or more employees whose title is purchasing agent whose job is to do nothing but buy stuff.

So, the business buyer wants to buy.

The second thing is most consumer decisions are made individually. You or I see a Burger King commercial at lunch and we think, "At lunch today, maybe I should get a dollar Whopper." You don't call home to your significant other or your spouse and say, "Hey honey, do you think it would be a good idea to spend a dollar on a Whopper?" You just do it.

But in business, most decisions are committee decisions. The average business buyer is authorized to spend only a very limited amount of his company's money without consulting others. Often, for even more senior executives, this limit is a little as a thousand dollars. So, if you're selling a \$2500 digital printer, he's going to have to or she's going to have to meet with a group or committee. So it's a committee buy versus an individual buy. There're multiple decision makers.

The third thing is with a lot of B2B, especially with bigger ... the higher the price ... a lot of B2B is a multi-step buying process where most consumer purchases—not all—it's a one-step buying process. Going back to the Burger King example, you see a commercial, you pass a Burger King, you go in and you buy it.

But if you were trying to sell someone that \$2500 digital color printer, you'd run an ad in a magazine maybe. They're not going to buy it off the ad in the magazine. They might call the toll free number and ask for a sales brochure. You send them a sales brochure. Then your sales rep or your inside sales force calls later to follow up: "Did you get the brochure?" "Can we come out and give you a demonstration of the unit?" "Can we send you one to use on inspection or for a trial in your office?"

It's a multi-step buying process.

So those are the three key differences. Business wants to and has to buy—the consumer doesn't. Consumer is an individual buying decision—a business is usually a team or committee. Business-to-business is usually a multi-step buying process—consumer is a single-step buying process.

**CI: I want to focus my next question on your second point—that businesses buy in committee. Now a lot of times, the different people on the committee will have different things that they are looking for ...**

Bob Bly: Absolutely. The classic example, an easy one to understand, is selling enterprise software to corporations. The user—let's say it's a system that is involved with supply chain management. The user, who might be a manufacturing manager, wants to know that this software system—it might cost \$10,000 or \$100,000—they want to know that it's going to do everything that they want it to do. That it will manage the inventory and streamline the order process. They just want to know that it will work and be efficient and give them all the benefits that they want. The IT person, though, has this completely different concern. Sure, they want it to do what the user wants, but the IT person wants to make sure it works with their existing infrastructure, that it's compatible with their servers and their other legacy systems, that it can be integrated with the other software that they use that would have to feed data into it. So they have a technical issue that the end-user doesn't. Then, in addition to the IT department who we might say is the technical buyer and the end user who is the business buyer, then there's the financial buyer. The company's CFO might get involved and say, "Wait a minute, you want to us spend \$100,000 on this system—you guys in IT and manufacturing—to make your lives easier. But from the company's point of view, we're not going to do it if it's only going to save us \$20,000. We'd be losing money. On the other hand, if it's going to cut our costs by \$100,000 in six months, then it'll pay back double its cost in a year. Then I'm okay with it." So there's a financial influence. And then there may be others, but those are the major ones.

**CI: What advice would you give to a copywriter for identifying the different motivators and potential objections of the different people who are going to affect the decision?**

Bob Bly: Well, I mean unless you're a copywriter who's actually working in the field, you're going to have to ask others ... there's a number of ways to do it. One of them is to ask the client, which is what I often do. I say, "Who do we have to reach? What are they interested in? And, what would be the reason that they might not go ahead with this or might not show interest?"

So, I want to know what they want from it, the benefits, the objections—I say, "If this is so great, why isn't everyone buying it?" And I want to know who we have to reach in the company. Most clients, if they've been in business more than a year, they

know all this already.

You could also learn this by—what I used to do ... I used to do a lot of work in the chemical industry. Not so much any more, but I have still have clients in it. I would go to the chem show every year, and I would see what was selling, and what was on the floor. I would ask questions of the people at the booths. I would wear a fake ID badge, which made me look like I was a purchasing guy for a manufacturer. So, that's another way to learn.

**CI: As copywriters, we learn that consumer copy is benefit-driven. Is there a different balance between features and benefits when writing B2B copy?**

Bob Bly: I always talk about how there's a feature and benefits spectrum. A common mistake that copywriters make is they'll say, "Don't talk about features, just talk about benefits." But you can't do that because your copy will be superficial. What provides those benefits is the features. And it's more than that.

Really there are three or four levels. At the lowest level, there are the features. The features are either what a product is or what a product has. Like, let's say a watering can's feature is it has a spout. The benefit is what that feature does for the user. The spout lets you pour water on the plants you want to water in the amount you want without spilling it or over-watering.

The other thing between a feature and a benefit is an advantage. An advantage is a feature that your competitors don't have or don't advertise. With the watering can, a feature might be the spout. An advantage would be a perforated spout with a cap. So, instead of being an open spout, it has ten small holes in it. And the benefit of the perforated spout would be that it creates a rain-like sprinkle rather than a deluge of water, which is better for plants. I'm making this up ... I don't really know anything about plants.

And then the ultimate benefit, which we call the benefit of the benefit, is not just saving time or preserving water, but in the business-to-business sense what's it going to do for the buyer's status or career in the company. If you've read B2B copy, you must have seen this sentence at one time: "If you do this, you'll be a hero to your boss." That's the benefit of the benefit.

In consumer copy, do you remember those Michelin tire commercials where they showed the baby in the tire? That's the ultimate benefit. Not just—these tires have this construction and grooves and steel-belted double ply radials—those are the features. The benefits are that you can stop better in rain or that it handles better. The benefit of the benefit or the ultimate benefit, which is shown by the baby ... they're saying in a subtle way, if you buy our tires you won't kill your baby in an auto accident.

That's the ultimate benefit. The answer is, you don't always just use one of those in your copy. You span the spectrum. The advantages show how you're different. The features make it credible. People understand how you're able to deliver those advantages. The benefits are the reasons why they buy. And the ultimate benefits are the more emotional or personal reasons why they buy. An ordinary benefit is just a benefit for the business. Like the benefit might be this software helps your business reduce raw materials costs 10 to 20 percent in a year. The ultimate benefit is if you spend a million dollars on raw materials in a year, you're going to save the company 100 to 200 grand—you're going to be promoted to the head of the manufacturing department.

**CI: Now often times when a copywriter is writing for a B2B company, the audience is a little smaller than if you were writing for a ...**

Bob Bly: Oh, it's often significantly smaller. Sometimes it's a little smaller, sometimes it's infinitesimally smaller.

**CI: So, royalties aren't something a copywriter can count on ...**

Bob Bly: Royalties do not have any—almost no business-to-business companies pay royalties. I don't think I've ever had a single B2B client offer to pay me royalties, nor have I ever brought it up with them because it's not relevant.

Once early in my career, I had a guy who wanted a sales letter. He said the target audience was manufacturers of robotic optical vision systems. I asked how many there were. He pulled a directory off the shelf and said there are 300 and here they are.

There's no roll out, so royalties are not something that plays a part in B2B.

**CI: Are there other ways a copywriter can capitalize on a successful package or can they charge higher fees?**

Bob Bly: I would say, not in the sense that you're going toward. Not a bonus or a royalty. It just doesn't work that way. A person could argue, and probably Clayton Makepeace would argue that the best way to increase your revenues would be to find a smaller company where you can become more of a partner and your compensation can be based on a percentage of the sales. But I don't do that, actually, and I've always stayed away from that for reasons I could go into.

So, no. I think business-to-business is basically a flat fee proposition. People who really want to make more money in B2B, the best route—although to me this was never appealing—is to go beyond being a copywriter and become a marketing consultant or an agency of some sort where you offer more services, and you have people working for you in your consultancy or agency. Those are the people who make a lot of money.

**CI: I'm going to touch back on an earlier point. You had talked about a multi-step buying process. How does that affect the scope of what the copywriter does?**

Bob Bly: Well, it affects it very much. Let's say you're doing direct mail. If you're doing a direct mail package to sell Taipan, for example, or the Oxford Club, it's a one step process. You know, someone's going to get your letter or your mailing and then they'll be asked to write a check for \$79. To do that, there's no sales person involved. The direct mail package does all the selling, answers all the objects, and takes the order. You can't do that in a page. That's why these packages are long. You might do a 16 or 20 page magalog or a 24-page tabloid. But in B2B if you're writing a letter and you're not trying to sell the product, but you want someone to request your free catalog ... you don't need 16 pages. You don't need 4 pages. You could probably do that in one to two pages.

So the individual copywriting assignments in B2B are smaller. The difference is there are more of them. Of course the Oxford Club will test a lot of packages, but basically there's going to be one package that is their control. Whereas the B2B company tends to have a multitude of marketing materials all needing to be created online and off line for the same product. You may be

asked to do one of them or two of them or five of them.

For example, I had a client that I dealt with years ago until they were bought by someone else that was an industrial gas manufacturer, and that sounds pretty mundane, but that's the kind of thing you do and it was interesting to me. They sold gas and compressed—you've seen these cylinders on trucks. You know, helium and hydrogen and carbon dioxide and argon and so on. I would get called in and they would have a new product, so they'd need a brochure and three case studies and two press releases and two ads. Individually, my fee for any one of those things would not be very much, but when you add them up, they would be almost as long as a 16-page Oxford Club letter, and the fee would be equivalent, except there's no royalty.

**CI: I wanted to focus a little bit on writing process. Can you tell our readers a little bit about the research process you go through when writing for a new B2B client?**

Bob Bly: It's not really much different than what anyone would do for a consumer product, with one exception. Normally copywriters who work in consumer direct response tend to specialize in an area. For example, John Forde who writes the Copywriters Roundtable, almost everything he does is for consumer financial. Mike Palmer, everything he does is for the Porter Stansberry group of newsletters. So these guys are very familiar—every time they sit down to write a package they already know the audience, more or less. So they don't have to study up on that. They have to study up on the editor, the system, the product, and its track record.

In B2B, you may, because there's more variety, you may not only have to study on the product, but you have to study up on the audience. For example, a guy called me once, and he said, "I need you to write a direct mail package to sell a subscription to a magazine for pediatricians." I had written for doctors, but I had never written for pediatricians, so that required an education there. So you do have to research not just the product, but you have to research the audience.

You do that, too, in consumer. If you want to write for the Oxford Club selling there back ends, you have to really know the Oxford Club. But here you might be writing to audiences with whom you are not very familiar. Like I used to write a lot of copy to engineers, so I was familiar with them. But if you aren't, you'd have to really study up on them.

So, you have to learn the product and the audience.

**CI: When you actually sit down to write, is there much different in the writing process?**

Bob Bly: I would say that there's not really a terrible ... there's not much difference except that the learning curve with B2B is greater because the subjects are more varied and somewhat complex. Now that's not to say that consumer stuff isn't complex. I mean, if you've ever done financial packages yourself, you know that's very technical stuff. You have to know stock market indicators, you have to know money flow and economics, and the Fed. So many of the subjects we write about in consumer are technical, but they're more familiar.

Also, when you're doing a B2B type promotion, you often have to learn a process or technology that you're not familiar with. It helps there if you happen to be a quick study. I happen to be a quick study. I am technically oriented. That's my leaning. So, I've worked with a lot with technical clients. I got call one day from a guy who wanted me to write brochures to sell equipment used in commercial photo labs. I went down to a local commercial photo lab, met him there, toured it for a couple of hours. I really picked it, and it's not that hard. But there are shortcuts.

I have copywriters call me and say, "I have to write about a company that makes equipment for geothermal energy and I don't understand how it works." I often say to them, "Go to Barnes & Noble or the library and go to the kids section and find a kids book on the topic." You know, there's tons of publishers that put out science books for kids. Get a book on the topic. There's plenty of books out there on geothermal energy with beautiful illustrations that are aimed at high schoolers or middle schoolers ... even elementary schoolers. Get those. Use their explanations. Don't tell the client, but they will just be absolutely amazed at that you learned to understand it that well in so short a time. That's a shortcut that I've always used—get a kid's book on the topic.

**CI: That's an excellent piece of advice. Now for copywriters who are not yet B2B copywriters but who want to become B2B copywriters, what sort of self-promotion should they do?**

Bob Bly: The thing is rather simple. You have to figure out are you going to be a generalist or are you going to specialize in an area or an industry? I knew a guy, I'll call him GW here, and he specialized—he was B2B, but more than that he specialized only in marketing for the printing industry. He didn't market for printer, he marketed equipment and technology that printers would buy and use in their print shops. Consequently, by doing that, he lowered his learning curve because he wasn't learning about ten different subjects or twenty. Everything he wrote about had to do with printing, so he lowered his learning curve. And also, when he walked into a client's conference room, they instantly knew in a minute that he was an expert. So, not only was his life easier, but they respected him more.

I did that in my early career where I working mainly for companies in the chemical industry and other process industries, and I used the fact that I had a background in that field to my advantage.

**CI: As far as contacting B2B companies—email, mail, by phone ... what's your advice?**

Bob Bly: Well, you know, the marketing methods are really the same for any kind of copywriting, but assuming you decide to do what I just said, and you decide to focus on, let's say you are a ... you have experience in, or you're a biochemistry major or a biology major. You might do something in medicine. And maybe you'll decide to work mainly with medical equipment companies—companies that make diagnostic machines that they sell to hospitals. Once you know the industry you're going to specialize in, the easiest way to market yourself ... there are specialized mailing lists with marketing people in any industry that you would care to work in. So you get a list of those people and the easiest way to market yourself is to—there are many ways—but the most basic way is to send a sales letter, a simple letter offering your services as a B2B copywriter and offering to send what I call an information kit. You just don't want to say, "Call me and hire me to write your copy," because most people you contact probably don't have an assignment right that minute.

So if the only choice is I call you to talk about a project or I throw your letter away, most people are going to throw it away. But if you say, "Call me if you have a project, and if not call me or mail the reply card for my copywriting information kit," you are able

to get leads for people who might not otherwise respond. This is the method that I always used and still use today. It works.

So you send out a letter ... for example, I had a friend who specialized in writing annual reports. He would send out a mailing—in his case he used a trifold mailer. On the outer panel, it said, "Is writing your annual report an annual headache?" He offered a kit of samples of annual reports he had written for major companies and a little free guide on how to make your annual report better and his resume. He always had more work that he could handle just from that one mailing piece.

**CI: So what should a copywriter include in their information kit?**

Bob Bly: Basically an information kit is any stuff you could send a potential client who might be a good candidate for hiring you, but does not have an immediate need.

In my information kit, which is posted on the [AWAI Selling Yourself](#) website, I have a cover letter that explains how my services work. It's a four-page letter. I have a one-page bio of myself. I have a reprint of an article, a profile that was written about me in a magazine. I have a page printed on two sides with samples of client testimonials. I have another sheet of paper that's printed on two sides that is a partial list of my clients. I have a fee schedule—a price list of what I charge for various copywriting services. And I have a little form they can fill out and fax or mail back to request a price quote or even hire me.

Then, I customize the information kit with samples that are related to the prospect's area of interest if I have them, and if not then just with general samples that show my copywriting capabilities off in B2B in a good light.

**CI: That wraps up my questions ... is there anything more that you'd like to add.**

Bob Bly: There is one thing. When I started B2B was a rare specialty. The fact that I specialized in B2B totally set me apart when I started freelancing in the early 80s. There were times when I could just sense that the person calling me—and I didn't use the term B2B copywriter, I used the term industrial copywriter. That's an old term, no one uses it anymore. There were times when I felt like the person calling me didn't know where else to turn. They'd either do it themselves or they'd have to get an ad agency, which they didn't want for one reason or another. They didn't know any other writers who could do it. Now, obviously, you see many more copywriters advertising themselves as B2B, so I think if you're going to do it, you should do what my friend GW did. You should try to see if there's a niche that fits in well hopefully with either some of your work experience or your education. Therefore, if your work experience was that you worked your way through college as automotive technician or a mechanic at a gas station, do the automotive industry, and that'll be your credential that no other copywriter can match.

I knew a guy who went to work for a B2B ad agency and they assigned him to a welding account and he took welding courses at night on his own time and money and actually became a certified welder. If I wanted to write for the welders in town that would be the smartest thing I could do.

Acquire knowledge or experience in specialized B2B subject matter or industry and then specialize in that. In my early days when I did just industrial stuff for mostly chemical companies and manufacturers, they'd say, "What do you know about filtration systems? Do you have any background in this? Or do we have to explain it to you from scratch?" I'd just look at them and say, "I'm a chemical engineer." They all smile and say, "Oh, then you know." That was all I had to do.

In fact, when IT started becoming prominent—computer stuff—and I realized more and more clients would ask me to write about computers and software than they would about engineering, I thought, "How can I match my credentials to that field?" I looked around—I don't keep this a secret—I looked around and I found the easiest credential that I could acquire in IT, which was to become a certified Novell administrator. I got that and then I did the same thing. People would say, "Well, what do you know about computers?" and I'd say, "Oh, I'm a CNA."

It cost me thousand dollars to gain that certification, but it was well worth it for my marketing. So specialize and acquire specialized knowledge. That can really set you apart and make success come much easier.

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