

An Interview With Fundraising Master Kimberly Seville

Kimberly Seville is a master-level copywriter in the fundraising industry. She has 20 years of experience with a variety of prestigious organizations, and regularly speaks at AWAI's annual [Bootcamp](#). Today she shares how current events are affecting the fundraising market and how you can get started as a fundraising copywriter.

CI: Let's start with how you became a copywriter.

KS: That goes back almost 20 years. I was working as a client services manager for a company that does organizational development and managerial training for major corporations. A colleague that I worked with there left the firm to work for CMS, an agency that specializes in consulting to non-profits on their fundraising programs ... primarily direct mail.

She recruited me to work for them. I started out as a researcher. This was before the Internet, so it required visiting non-profits to collect information from them in addition to doing library research. I was an information resource for the entire creative department. From that, I was asked to start taking a look at copy for typos and basic editing. I began doing it on the side, and from there was snapped up by the founder and chairman of CMS. He put me into a training program to become a copywriter.

I wrote copy for several years, and then moved up through the agency to become creative director. I was still writing copy at that time, and also had responsibilities for overseeing all the creative for the company and clients for a variety of non-profits, including Amnesty International, Habitat for Humanity, and Christian Children's Fund.

Then, about three years ago, I left CMS to go independent. I'm still doing some creative consulting for a variety of non-profits, and also working directly with several different agencies and doing copywriting all the way around for all of those clients.

That, in a nutshell, is my story.

CI: So you went into your freelance career with established credentials and a lot of contacts. Once you're established, can you expect to get a steady flow of work even without doing much self-marketing?

KS: Yes. Assuming your work performs and your clients are not only pleased with it in terms of working with you, but that it works for the purposes of raising money. I would say that's something that can be judged pretty quickly. Within an agency setting, you're usually surrounded by an entire creative department and the non-profit who's actually mailing your copy has no idea who you are. But because I was the creative director of a very prominent agency and met the clients personally, I had a lot of exposure.

CI: Can you tell our readers a little bit about some of the challenges that are unique to the fundraising market from the copywriter's perspective?

KS: There are a lot of them. Getting quality information – and by that, I mean good stories – is one of the big ones. It's a challenge not only for the copywriter but often for the agency or the development professional at the non-profit. Fundraising is driven by stories. Non-profits that are savvy in understanding how best to raise money and how direct marketing works will invest a lot of time and energy in making sure they have quality stories that illustrate the work that they do.

Take Habitat for Humanity, for example. They build houses for people in need. So for every house that's built, there's a story to tell about how that family was living before they got involved with Habitat and how their lives have changed as a result of having a Habitat house. Habitat takes the issue of finding stories very seriously, not just for the purposes of fundraising but also for documenting the impact of their work. You can find stories on their website – and they spend a lot of time and effort making sure they have good outreach programs with their local affiliates so they are able to generate those stories.

Other non-profits are less successful at that, but a good fundraising copywriter will do pretty much whatever it takes. I have been up all hours of the night calling hither and yon, all over the globe, to interview people by phone. For Christian Children's Fund, for example, I made a call at 2 a.m. to program staff in Sierra Leone to find out what they were doing to help displaced children.

Getting the story is a really big challenge in fundraising, one that probably doesn't exist in the commercial market where you have access to the product and to people who can tell you everything and anything you want to know about it.

But a non-profit's product is the intangible of making the world a better place one way or another. A little different ballgame.

CI: Before we "officially" got started with this interview, you mentioned that there are many different kinds of projects that a fundraising copywriter might expect to work on at one time or another. Can you give us an overview of some of the most common ones?

KS: Copywriters who are interested in fundraising should really come to the Master class I teach at AWAI's Bootcamp to get a better idea of this, because there's a lot to understand. But I'll try to briefly describe it here in a way that makes sense.

In the broadest terms, fundraising involves two things: "acquiring donors" and what most organizations call "donor development." Donor development is the process of re-soliciting donors to get additional gifts from them following the first gift they make.

For most organizations, acquisition is primarily done through direct mail. Prospecting for new donors is an investment for a non-profit. They deliberately lose money to acquire a new donor, expecting that, over time, additional gifts by that donor will pay back the investment and then start generating revenue. But it takes one year, two years, three years, even five years before that new donor becomes really valuable to the organization.

So, on the acquisition side, you have to understand how much money the non-profit has available to acquire new donors and what their investment ratio is in terms of how quickly they need that donor to pay them back for that investment.

On the donor development side, some non-profits have really simple re-solicitation programs. There are not a whole lot of differences in the offers that they have or the types of mail they send out. There are other organizations that have incredibly

sophisticated, very well established programs that will have special appeals and annual renewals.

CI: Can you give us some specifics on how this might translate into various types of copywriting jobs?

KS: Many organizations solicit new donors with a membership offer ... membership in Amnesty International, for example, or the American Civil Liberties Union. Then, to get them to renew their annual support, they might have a new membership card in one of the packages.

Organizations that deal with humanitarian aid send out special appeals to take advantage of a recently emerged opportunity or to address a crisis, like the earthquake in China or the horrible situation in Myanmar. They might send a very urgent-looking package to their donors saying, "There's a crisis. We need emergency help, so please make an emergency gift."

Special appeals are also used to promote events that the organization sponsors. Habitat, for example, holds what they call "Blitz Build" every year. They build a whole bunch of houses over the course of one week, usually in one community or a handful of communities. Picturing hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of volunteers working very quickly to raise a house from the ground up in seven days has a very dramatic impact on donors. So Habitat might go out to their donors and ask for a special gift to make that year's Blitz Build a success.

Then there are mailings that include premiums – Christmas cards or a calendar, for example. The copy you would write for a premium mailing has less to do with telling a story and more to do with telling the donor, "Thank you for your support. As a token of our appreciation for everything you do, here's this little gift."

There are also monthly giving programs. So you might be asked to write a sustainer invitation or monthly giving invitation. (Monthly donors are often called sustainers, which is why I use that word.)

There are monthly pledge packages, too, that get sent to sustainers to remind them to make their gift. Some organizations only have automatic giving by bank draft or credit card, so they don't send notices to their monthly donors. Personally, I think that's a mistake. By sending monthly notices, they would get even more money. People giving by credit card or bank draft might be moved by the story you tell that month and make an additional gift above their monthly commitment.

And that's not all. In the world of monthly donors, there are packages sent out when payments lapse and people stop giving. There are cultivation packages sent to bond with the donors. Those mailings won't have a solicitation in them. They won't ask for money. They'll merely provide information or convey some sort of message of appreciation to the donor.

At Bootcamp, attendees can see good examples of all these different types of fundraising packages. I also go into a lot more detail about different types of offers used.

CI: With the economy moving into a downturn ...

KS: Yes, it is. And I wish the media would just stop talking about it. In the world of fundraising, there's something we call donor confidence, and it typically follows consumer confidence trends. So as people cut back on their spending for non-essential items, they also cut down on donations.

The more the media talks about problems with the economy, the more it hurts fundraising. From what I'm understanding right now from my clients, there is a little bit of a softening. But it's hard to tell because, with the Democratic primaries dragging out between Clinton and Obama, there is a *ton* of political mail out there that is sucking all the oxygen out of the fundraising market. It's a competitive time.

CI: When the fundraising industry softens, do organizations tend to send out more mailings or do they scale back a bit?

KS: It depends on whether or not the organization has reserves. If, for example, you're an organization that raises 50, 70, 80, 100 million dollars annually, a 20 percent downturn for you is absolutely devastating. But when your budget's that big, you can handle the blow and keep sending out mail. In comparison, a 20 percent downturn for a small non-profit that might have an annual budget of only a million could mean cutting staff. And a lot of organizations will choose to cut back on the mail before they cut back on staff.

Like I said, acquisition is an investment. So when things start looking not great, non-profits will often have a knee-jerk reaction and stop their acquisition programs. I always advise people to cut back on the quantity but to stay in the mail. The reason you don't want to get off the mail is that you want to keep your control viable. If you're out of the mail for a year, you have no idea what's going to happen when you get back into it. You've also lost the opportunity to get fresh new people to re-invigorate your file. You always need new donors to replace those you lose through attrition – those who get bored and move on to other causes or who are not able to give as they had in the past.

CI: During an economic downturn, would you advise a copywriter to focus more on non-profits that provide humanitarian aid as opposed to organizations that support the arts or cultural causes?

KS: My advice is to target large organizations rather than small organizations, because those are the ones that will probably not be cutting back on their fundraising. But take work wherever you can get it – especially if you are new to the fundraising market and need as much experience as you can get. Take work from anybody ... as long as you believe in their cause, of course. If you're morally or philosophically opposed to a cause, you won't be able to do a very good job.

CI: Does the approach you take in your packages change with economic fluctuations?

KS: It depends on the organization. I just wrote a package for Covenant House in which I brought in the fact that President Bush's economic stimulus checks are going to help a lot of people ... but not the homeless kids at Covenant House. So, we're subtly planting the idea in a potential donor's head that, "Hey, I'm getting this support check from the government for three hundred or six hundred dollars. Why not give part of it to help some homeless kids?"

If the organization is having budget problems due to a downturn in donations, there's a way to talk about it. I might, for example, send out a special appeal that I call the lifeboat. ("It's time for all our donors to get in and start bailing, because we're going down!") Be open about it. But what you say has to be legitimate. It has to be real. You don't want to "cry wolf."

Donors understand that in this kind of economy a lot of organizations they really care about are suffering. As a result, people are not getting the help they need ... or the organizations might be in a position where they have to cut back on some of their

programs. Talking about all of this in direct-mail fundraising appeals is definitely effective.

CI: For copywriters who are not yet fundraising copywriters but who want to begin building a client base in this industry, do you have any suggestions for getting a foot in the door?

KS: Well, they need to study fundraising copy, because it's different than commercial copy. The best way to learn is to do things like coming to AWAI's Bootcamp and taking AWAI's fundraising program. It's also a good idea to donate some money to a few non-profit organizations. Get on their lists. Start getting their mail, and study it. That'll make you better prepared to do a good job when you start working on fundraising copy yourself.

Attend conferences too. The DMA has a non-profit federation that holds conferences in both Washington and New York. I keep in touch with an AWAI-trained copywriter who wanted to break into the fundraising market. Last time I talked with her, she said that's where she gets most of her new clients ... by going to those conferences. She also said she learns a lot from courses offered during the conferences that are tailored toward both the basics and master-level stuff.

There are local DMA branches all over the country that you can join ... no matter where you live or what kind of copy you are writing. The DMA is a good source of information about the direct-response world and what's happening there. It keeps you on top of trends, and attending meetings is a fantastic networking opportunity. Bring a tote bag full of business cards and just start meeting people.

CI: What are one or two main points that you hope our readers will come away with today?

KS: Do whatever you have to do to get the best story. And don't give up. It's hard to break into a new market when you're not known there. Start showing up at conferences. Introduce yourself. Join your local DMA. That will help you both as a commercial copywriter and a fundraising copywriter.

I've told a lot of people that they should try to break into the fundraising market while they're still doing work for other markets. Then, if they decide they want to be a full-time fundraising copywriter, they can ease off the other work as they become more established in fundraising.

CI: Is there anything else you'd like to cover?

KS: I could talk about this for hours. I encourage all your readers to come to Bootcamp this year. It's going to be especially interesting because it will be right after the presidential election. We'll look at how politics affects all non-profit organizations, even those that are non-partisan and non-political. We all live in the same fish tank when it comes to issues that donors and the general public are dealing with.

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You say to join your local DMA. What does that stand for?

Non-profit qustion – over a year ago

DMA - Direct Marketers Association.

In 2018 they were acquired by an outfit called ANA. (Who could really use someone trained in UX to advise them about their website.

After more research than I would have expected, I discovered that ANA stands for Association of National Advertisers.

DBear – over a year ago

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