

## Audio Interview:

# A Copywriting Lesson from the "Godfather" Himself *By Robert Rice*

Herschell Gordon-Lewis is known for two major things — direct-response marketing and gore.

Believe it or not, Herschell lived a double life as a film producer and copywriter. He invented what is now known as the "splatter" genre — horror films with oodles of blood. They might have been low-budget productions, but his watershed movie, *Blood Feast*, which he lovingly refers to as "an ancient piece of junk," is still shown in theaters today around Halloween.

Herschell approaches both industries the same way: he aims to evoke a very specific reaction from the target audience. In film, it was shock. In copywriting, it's getting the reader to buy.



This direct, no-holds-barred approach has led him to create some of the biggest blockbuster promotions of our time, such as his control for Omaha Steaks. He's also written countless books on copywriting and marketing, including the classic, "On the Art of Writing Copy". And he's always pushing himself to stay on top of trends.

Recently, Herschell shared his valuable insight on success in copywriting. He gave us his strong viewpoints on the role of a copywriter, the incredible benefits of that profession, and the power of words (when used correctly).

Here are five standout bits of wisdom from the conversation:

## The True Role of a Copywriter

Herschell is no-nonsense about his view of what a copywriter does. "Our function is to convince the recipient of our message to perform a specific positive act as the direct result of exposure to that message."

He goes on to skewer the notion that copywriters are artistic types. "... when you tell copywriters they are sales people, they resent it. 'No, no, we're creatives.'

I beg your pardon, good people, we are sales people and that's why we are the living core of salesmanship. And any copywriter who is simply a describer, I welcome as a competitor, because that person simply doesn't recognize what our function is."

# Why Film Is Like Copywriting

Similar to his stance on copywriting, Herschell believes filmmaking to be purely business. He always kept major direct-response principles in mind when creating films.

"The purpose of what I'm doing, both in motion pictures and in direct response, is to direct the person who opens his eyes or her eyes and sees what's on the screen or sees what's on the page to do what I want that person to do, not just to do something, *to do what I want them to do.*"

And the reason for being so direct? Getting the most out of your efforts.

"The trick is maximizing the use of the money that you have on hand to create whatever it is you're trying to expose the world to. If I spend a dollar to send you a mailing and I get back 99 cents, it's a loser. If I get back a dollar and one, it's a winner."

## On Staying in the Loop

"The day I quit working and the day that I retire, you may attend my memorial service, because I'm going to be lying there in a box."

Herschell firmly believes in staying in the know. Keeping up with trends and hanging out in lively environments spark new ideas. That's why he loves going to Bootcamp.

"At an event such as this, where you have people who have both enthusiasm and talent, invariably I'll learn something.

That forces me to be competitive. I'm not going to sit back and go, 'Well, this is the way we used to do it.' And I hear that, by the way, from some people who used to be my contemporaries. But now they're just lying back and reading the AARP publication and wondering what's going on in the world.

You can't shut your mind to new ideas. If you did that, we'd still be in a horse and buggy age."

## The Power of Words

"Words are our weapons. And our weapons have got to shake up the person who's looking there. And we really have that power, as long as we recognize, without having our own prejudices get in the way, what words have power, what words have weakness."

When creating and editing copy, writers tend to look for large, dramatic changes that could impact the results. Herschell believes that, if you implement several small word changes, you can achieve the same effect.

"For example, suppose I say to you, 'You'll be among the first to know this,' what does that say to you?

The word 'among' in that line weakens the presentation. And if I simply change 'you'll be among the first' to 'you'll be one of the first,' I've strengthened it by perhaps one-tenth of 1 percent.

And 10 of those increase the strength by 1 percent. And 100 increase the strength by 10 percent."

## Living *The Writer's Life*

Bob Bly was inspired to explore the world of Direct Response when he saw the cover photo of an edition of *Direct Marketing Magazine* with Herschell on the cover writing on a laptop in the pool. Herschell believes this freedom to be one of the greatest benefits of the career.

"As you're aware, one of the great benefits of my — I laughingly call it a profession — is it makes no difference if I am on the tennis court at 11 o'clock in the morning and at the keyboard at 11 o'clock at night, as long as the work gets out.

You can sit at the edge of your pool and enjoy every aspect of life that many of the moguls who have to wear a shirt and tie and show up to conferences in their offices do. [However], they don't have what we have, which is freedom to do what we want to do, when and where we want to do it."

## Education from a Legend

Herschell Gordon-Lewis is truly a living legend. His extensive experience and success in Direct Response makes him one of the "go-to" teachers for copywriters of all levels. He's passionate about the subject and has developed countless strategies to boost your results.

And this Fall, you have the opportunity to learn from Herschell live at AWAI's *FastTrack to Copywriting Success* Bootcamp and Job Fair. He'll be presenting his tried-and-true copy techniques for inspiring your reader to do *exactly* what you want them to do.

That means better conversions and bigger fees and royalties for you. [Find out more here.](#)

If you want to hear more about Herschell's story, you can access our full interview by clicking on this link.

[Listen to Playback](#)

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# 4 Responses to "A Copywriting Lesson from the "Godfather" Himself [audio]"

Terrific write-up Robert!

The importance of 'specificity' is something I learned from the Six-Figure Copywriting course with AWAI.

And you nail it there in the paragraph 'The Power of Words' where you give us Herschell's recipe for improving our writing by 10% - by using specifics.

Loved reading this solid piece. Thanks!

*Mike Searles* – over a year ago

**Thanks, Mike! I appreciate your kind words.**

**Herschell was a great interview :). If you have the time, I recommend listening to the whole thing.**

**I'm looking forward to his presentation at Bootcamp. We can all stand to focus on improving the little things in our writing.**

**Hope to meet you there!**

*Robert R* – over a year ago

Great interview and write-up Robert. Lately I've had the pleasure of looking at some of the books he wrote on copywriting. One that is a course in itself is Copy That Sizzles. Even though it was published in the 90's, it is still relevant and instructive.

*Bob Ett* – over a year ago

I just watched Herschell 2010 Bootcamp presentation. He is an excellent teacher and motivator. Looking forward to seeing him at 2014 Bootcamp. Thanks for the article.

*Guest (LaDeana Wilke)* – over a year ago

**American Writers & Artists Institute**

220 George Bush Blvd, Suite D

Delray Beach, FL 33444

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