My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

A Virtual Copywriting Sample Book

BY RICHARD ARMSTRONG
NOTE TO THE READER: When I first came up with the idea for doing a "virtual" sample book of copywriting samples, there were two little problems I didn’t anticipate. The first was file size. As it turned out, there’s simply no way I can reproduce the full text of all the direct-mail packages and magalogs I wanted to show you. So I’ve had to be content with showing you the envelopes and a page or two of letter copy or body copy, in most cases.

I also didn’t realize that it would be so difficult to reproduce these old (in some cases antediluvian) samples with a scanner in such a way that they would be easily readable. I briefly considered typing out all the text, but then you’d lose something by not seeing the original. If it’s any consolation, I’ve found it helpful to use the “Zoom In” feature of your PDF viewer to make the samples more readable.

And if you really insist on reading something in full, email me at Richarm1@aol.com … and I’ll see if I can’t find a way to get it to you. (Prospective clients only, please.)
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INTRODUCTION:
Warning: This Book Is Dangerous When Wet!

I once had a client drop my direct-mail sample book into a bathtub. She handed me my precious, one-of-a-kind direct-mail samples—all water-logged and marked with Head & Shoulders stains—and sheepishly said, “It slipped out of my hands while I was taking a bath.”

Just about every copywriter has a story like that. Clients who misplace their sample books. Clients who wait months, sometimes years before returning them. Clients who stain them with shampoo…or worse.

Hence, this e-book.

Fortunately, we have the technology nowadays to put an end to lugging our big leather portfolios around town, grimacing when a client says: “Can you leave it with me for a few days?”

“Well, er, uh, um…”thinking about when the rent is due...“yeah, sure, I guess that would be okay, I really need it back, though.”

“No problem! I usually take my baths on Saturday night, so I can get it back to you on Monday at the latest.”

Thank God those days are over!

It’s not a perfect trade-off, of course. The one-page PDF scans in this e-book aren’t quite the same as having an actual direct-mail package in your hands. You can’t feel them, unfold them, or even read them, quite as well as you
could if you were holding the letter. On the positive side, I can show my samples
to a lot more clients and colleagues than ever before. And you can keep it for as
long as you like.

There’s one other difference between this sample book and every other
抄写者’s portfolio you’ve ever seen before. I’m going to share a few of my
failures with you, as well as my successes. There are two reasons for that:

First, if I only included my successes, it wouldn’t be nearly as long. Just
kidding! (Sorta)

Second, you don’t learn as much from your successes as you do from
your failures. Because whenever you have a big success, the usual reaction is to
say, “That really worked great, didn’t it? I wonder why. Hey, let’s grab a beer!”

But when you have a failure, you go through something akin to the five
stages of grief—shock, disbelief, denial, anger, and acceptance. Plus, there’s a
sixth stage. You usually sit down and spend some time trying to figure out what
the heck went wrong. So, in a weird sort of way, I’m just as proud of my failures
as I am of my successes. And I’ve got a few doozies to show you here.

Winston Churchill once said the key to success in life is to go from failure
to failure without losing your enthusiasm. It just so happens one of the biggest
failures I’m going to show you in this book involves Winston Churchill in a very
personal way.

So I hope you enjoy this sample book, which might be called “MY LIFE IN
JUNK MAIL.” It’s 38 years of Johnson Boxes, BRE’s, money-back guarantees,
and saying, “But wait… there’s more.”

I only ask one thing of you. If you read this book in the bathtub, keep a
firm grip on your laptop computer. I like to think my samples are shockingly
good…but I wouldn’t want you to be electrocuted by reading them!
CHAPTER ONE:
How I Fell in Love with a Little Old Blue-Haired Lady

My first job in the direct-mail business was rolling up giant life-size photographs of Richard Nixon and stuffing them into cardboard mailing tubes.

It was a dirty job, but somebody had to do it!

Laugh if you want, but if you’ve never spent eight hours a day, five days a week, staring into Richard Nixon’s face—don’t tell me I haven’t paid my dues!

You see, I was working in the mailroom of the Republican National Committee in the summer 1971. And it was there that I happened to become the nation’s first Watergate criminal.

One day, somebody at the RNC—somebody I’d never seen before and never saw afterwards—came up to me and said: “Young man, I want you to take all the names and addresses off these envelopes and transcribe them onto a yellow pad. When you’re finished, give the yellow pad back to me. Then take all the envelopes out the dumpster in back and burn them.”

“Burn them?”

“Yes, burn them. Oh, and one more thing, don’t tell anybody else in the office what you’re doing.”

Of course, everyone else in the office kept asking me what I was doing. That’s when I coined the following phrase:

“I am not allowed to reveal that information at this point in time.”
Two years later, everyone in Washington was saying that!

I’ve always been glad I started out in the mailroom. Other than being a door-to-door salesman—which is probably the best background for launching a career in direct-mail copywriting—working in the mailroom is an ideal way to get started in this business. Why?

Because it’s where the proverbial rubber meets the road. Opening incoming mail, in particular, is the equivalent of a graduate-level education in direct marketing. By touching the envelopes as they come in, looking at the checks, and reading the occasional pieces of “white mail,” you learn a lot about your customers. These are real people we’re writing to, after all, not just names on a mailing list. They are people with passions, emotions, fears, interests, and opinions. A lot of them are angry. Some of them are afraid. Many of them are (surprisingly) glad to have received your letter and eager to communicate with you. They’re older for the most part. And they are predominantly female.

Yes, it was in the summer of 1971 that I began my love affair with a lonely 87-year-old blue-haired lady…and 40 years later, that romance is still going strong. She’s certainly been good to me over the years, and I hope I’ve dealt with her fairly, too.

I must’ve impressed my boss at the RNC, because when I graduated from college in 1974, he hired me to work in his new direct-mail agency…as an office boy.

The agency was called National Direct Mail Services, and we specialized in fundraising for Republican candidates around the country. My job was to stuff envelopes, operate the photocopier, and run out and get coffee and doughnuts for the important people in the office.

I was damn good at it, I must say! But I was a little bored, too. I had just graduated from one of the top liberal arts colleges in the country and I felt a little…well, underutilized. So I spent most of my downtime reading the letters I was stuffing into envelopes and muttering under my breath that I could do better.
One day I got the chance. An account executive was tearing his hair out with a severe case of writer’s block after having been assigned to write a fundraising letter on behalf of a bright young candidate for Governor of Illinois named James R. “Big Jim” Thompson.

“Why don’t you give me a shot at it,” I said. “I can write a bit.”

It was a measure of his desperation that he said yes.

So I sat down to write my first direct-mail letter. And here’s what I came up with.

I’m a little embarrassed when I read it now because of all the things I would do differently today. But gosh, it was successful at the time. It made a ton of money for the Thompson campaign. So much so that the governor himself thanked me for it when I had occasion to meet him a few years later.

“Richard,” he said, “Whenever we were running low on money, I told my staff: Mail that darn letter again!”

When I read this letter nowadays, I’m struck by how incredibly short it was. But that’s the way we wrote ‘em back in 1976. We were convinced that people were much too busy to read letters longer than one page. We’d just as soon slit our wrists with a rusty knife as we would let a direct-mail letter spill over to the back page.

But over the next few years, we learned an interesting lesson. Some copywriter whose name is lost in history did allow his letter to spill over to the back page and—lo and behold!—it pulled a higher response. As a result, we discovered that two pages generally work better than one. Then we found out three pages work better than two. We were shocked to learn shortly afterwards that four works better than three, five works better than four, six works better than five, and so on.

Will it ever stop?
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

Well, I recently wrote a magalog promotion that came out of my printer at eighty-seven manuscript pages. So I suspect the answer is no, there’s really no limit to how long a direct-mail letter should be—as long as you don’t run out of important and interesting things to say. Yet to this day, I still have clients who say to me: “This is 2009, people don’t have time to read long direct-mail letters anymore!”

Yeah, right! The funny thing is, you can go back to reading issues of Printer’s Ink, the precursor to Advertising Age, and hear people making the exact same comment nearly a century ago: “This is 1923 for heaven’s sake! People are much too busy nowadays to read long advertising copy! Keep your copy short, short, short!”

Some people never learn, I guess. Indeed, when the Internet first began to be used for advertising a few years ago, everyone was convinced the Web was a short-copy medium. Some people are still convinced, even though they’ve been proven wrong many times. “People surfing the Web have very short attention spans,” goes the conventional wisdom. “They want their information fast, and they’ll click away from your page in a heartbeat if they don’t get it. So keep you copy short, short, short!”

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

If you still need to be convinced, read my friend Gary Bencivenga’s online promotion for his $5,000 copywriting course. It’s probably the best online promotion ever written:

www.bencivengabullets.com/b100dvd.asp

If you’ve got a few hours on your hands, go ahead and print it out. If your printer doesn’t break down, it’ll come to more than 80 pages!

Does that mean you have to read the whole letter in order to buy? Of course not! Many times I’ve seen a direct-mail letter or Website and made the decision to buy within the first few seconds. Haven’t you? I might keep reading
for a few minutes to answer certain questions I may have: Does it come with a guarantee? Is it compatible with my software? Does it come with a carrying case? Etc. etc. So all that stuff has to be in there, even if you don't have to swallow it all in one sitting.

Tom Collins, the co-founder of Rapp & Collins, once told me that a direct-mail letter is like a smorgasbord. Nobody sits down and eats a whole smorgasbord. No, you wander through and pick out the things that interest you or appeal to you. That's exactly the way a direct-mail letter works, too.

**LESSON LEARNED:** Long copy generally works better than short copy, no matter what the medium. But only if you can keep it interesting and entertaining by continuing to present your reader with features and benefits that will improve his life.
June 4, 1976

Mrs. Vanderkildon, Sr.
Box 179
Antioch, Illinois 60002

Dear Mrs. Vanderkildon:

If you can’t afford higher taxes.
If you’re afraid to walk the streets at night.
If you’re sick and tired of corrupt government officials.
If your children aren’t getting the education they deserve.

Then you don’t need a Governor appointed by Chicago’s City Hall. You need a Governor of your own choice. A Governor who answers to nobody but the people -- nobody but you.

1976 should not just be a year for fireworks and parades. It should be a time for the people of this state to hold on dearly to what is rightfully theirs - the right to govern themselves.

I’m trying to run the most broad-based, honest and open campaign in the history of this state. And I would like you to join me in that effort.

To get my message to the people of Illinois is going to take a great deal of money. A contribution from you and thousands like you of $15, $25, $50 or perhaps $100 is what’s needed to do the job.

Don’t let Chicago’s City Hall decide who should be the Governor of Illinois. Don’t let this campaign -- your campaign -- fail because others refuse to contribute to a candidate who makes only one promise -- a promise to do the very best job he can.

It’s not their decision. It’s yours.
Make the right decision. And, please, make a contribution to my campaign today.

Sincerely,

Jim Thompson

A copy of our report filed with the State Board of Elections is forthcoming. Available for purchase from the State Board of Elections, 1220 South Spring, Springfield, Illinois 62701.
CHAPTER TWO: The Ultra-Simplified Tax Form

Back in those days, I was writing so much political fundraising copy that I started to get a little punch drunk. I’d try all sorts of crazy stuff, most of which didn’t work. But occasionally something did.

You’re generally advised not to use humor in direct mail, for example. One of my mentors, the great Milt Pierce, summed it up by saying: “There’s no more serious surgery in the world that separating a man from his money!”

But every now and then, humor is okay—especially if it makes an important point. My “Simplified Tax Form” for the Ohio Republican Party is a good example. Our research uncovered the fact that the Democratic governor of Ohio at the time, Richard Celeste, had actually doubled the state income tax. So I came up with what I called “The Dick Celeste Ultra-Simplified Tax Form.” It contained only three simple steps:

1) How much money did you make last year?

2) Double it.

3) Send it in!

The darn thing actually worked pretty well. No less a personage than the great Richard Viguerie—the man who literally invented conservative political direct-mail fundraising—noticed it and summoned me to his office. “You’ve got some ability, young man,” he said, “Let me know if you’re ever looking for a job.”

But I was happy with what I was doing at the time and didn’t follow up on it. It was one of many career mistakes I’ve made over the years, because the
Richard Viguerie Company launched many notable careers in direct mail—including the superb copywriter Mark Johnson and one of the most successful direct marketers of all time, Tom Phillips, founder of Phillips Publishing.

Oh, well…

LESSON LEARNED: Contrary to popular advice, it’s okay to make some judicious use of humor in direct-mail copy as long as you make sure it’s always in service of the prime directive: Namely, showing your reader how your product, service, or organization can improve his life. The big mistake is using humor for humor’s sake, like so many Madison Avenue television commercials do. This often leads to the reaction: “Hey, that was a funny ad. What was it for again?”
1040C DICK CELESTE SIMPLIFIED TAX FORM 1983

For the taxable year January 1, 1983 through December 31, 1983

Print or type full name and address.

Your Social Security Number:

Spouse’s Social Security Number:

Your occupation:

Spouse’s occupation:

ATTN. TAXPAYERS: NEW SIMPLIFIED DICK CELESTE OHIO STATE TAX FORM

THREE EASY STEPS

1) How much state tax did you pay last year (before temporary surcharge)? ........................................ $

2) Double it ........................................................................................................ $

3) Send it in .......................................................................................................... $

WHERE IS ALL THIS EXTRA TAX MONEY GOING?

☐ Primary and Secondary Education  ☐ Mental Health  ☐ Higher Welfare Benefits

☐ Higher Education  ☐ Medicine  ☐ More Welfare Recipients

Where would you like it to go?

☐ Primary and Secondary Education  ☐ Mental Health  ☐ Higher Welfare Benefits

☐ Higher Education  ☐ Medicine  ☐ More Welfare Recipients

Where do you think it will actually go under Celeste’s Executive Order?

COMPARE ABOVE, THEN LOOK AT ANSWERS

1) Primary and Secondary Education? No, Celeste wants to cut it by $192 million.
2) Higher Education? No, Celeste wants to cut $39 million.
3) Mental Health? No, Celeste is calling for an $8 million cut from Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.
4) Medicaid? No, Celeste is asking for $18.3 million cut in reimbursements.

ANSWERS:

STOP THE CELESTE TAX RIPOFF

RENEW YOUR SUPPORT OF THE OHIO REPUBLICAN PARTY.

YOU CAN HELP. YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Your 1983 contribution to the Ohio Republican Party will be used to:

1) Increase GOP strength in the state legislature to stop further tax increases.
2) It will give us the necessary power in the legislature to institute future tax cuts.
3) It will help us produce the advertising we need to mobilize public opinion against the Celeste budget and force Celeste to back down next year.
4) It will enable us to mobilize public opinion against welfare increases and for increases in vital state services.
5) It will allow us to lay the groundwork for the defeat of Dick Celeste in 1986.

☐ Yes, I want to renew my membership in the Ohio Republican Party for 1983. Please use my contribution to fight the Celeste budget program and to fight for future tax cuts. I enclose:

☐ $20  ☐ $25  ☐ $50

☐ $100  ☐ $ _______ (Other)

Please check the label on the opposite side to make sure we have your current and correct address. Detach this portion at the perforation and include it with your contribution in the enclosed postage-paid envelope.

Richard Armstrong 13
CHAPTER THREE:
The Hundred-Dollar Letter That Made Millions

My very first freelance job wasn’t really freelance at all. It’s what used to be called “moonlighting,” although you don’t hear that term used much anymore. One of our account executives at National Direct Mail Services had left the agency to take a job with the USO. She thought highly of my abilities as a copywriter, so she hired me to write a fundraising letter for her new employer.

She paid me a grand total of $100.

And I was thrilled to get it! A hundred bucks was a lot of extra spending money for a 25-year-old kid in 1977. So I sat down and dashed off the letter while eating a TV dinner one night and handed it back to her the next day. (I couldn’t wait to get my hands on that C-note!)

Frankly, I lost track of what happened to that letter until I ran into the woman many, many years later when I was living in New York City.

She told me the letter had remained in the control for the USO for more than a decade and made millions for the organization.

LESSON LEARNED: Nowadays, I try to build a little incentive compensation into my contracts with clients. A royalty, a bonus, a box of chocolates…some little sweetener if my package beats the control. Unfortunately, I seem to have an incredible knack for having my biggest successes when I’m on a flat fee…and my biggest failures when I’m on a royalty. C’est la vie!
Dear Friend:

Please take a minute and imagine yourself in this situation:

You're 18 years old and you're away from home for the first time...

You're in a foreign country and you don't speak the language...

Your "best friend" is a smart-alec who always teases you about being from Dubuque...

You're scared and you're alone...

Does that sound familiar?

If you were in the service, it does. I know it sounds familiar to me because I've met thousands of kids like that. Those kids who signed up to serve their country, lonely kids who have only one place to turn for wholesome entertainment, personal guidance, friendship and a helping hand...

The USO

And if it seems strange to hear someone talking about the USO in peacetime, I want to tell you the USO is about the only thing that doesn't seem strange to a young serviceman overseas.

For close to forty years, the USO has provided American servicemen in war and in peace with the one thing they've needed most -- a friend.

A friend to turn to when you're lonely and afraid.

A friend who can help when you're confused about living in a foreign country, who can tell you where to shop and where not to, who can show you how to get the most out of your new home without spending your time lounging in a backstreet bar or lying on your bunk staring at the ceiling.

A friend who cares.

And to the over 2,000,000 American men and women in uniform today the USO is that friend.

Will you contribute $15 or $25 to help make sure the USO is always there?

(over, please)
CHAPTER FOUR: 
Beat Your Own Control!

One of my many mentors in this business, John Francis Tighe—famous in his day as the self-proclaimed “Second Most Successful Freelancer”—used to write a terrific column in Direct Marketing Magazine called “Beat Your Own Control!” It was a wicked little column filled with all sorts of fun gossip about people in the industry, with an occasional piece of copywriting advice thrown in for good measure. But it hardly ever contained any advice about how to beat your own control. Why?

Probably because it’s an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. In fact, in 38 years I’ve only done it only a handful of times. Unless you’re simply trying to beat the control by coming up with a new teaser for the envelope or a new headline for the cover of a magalog, it usually requires a brand new copywriter with a completely different take on the problem in order to beat a strong control in its prime. (After the package begins to fatigue, it’s another matter.) When you’ve written the control yourself, the temptation is too great to repeat the things that worked the first time. Most often when I’ve been asked to beat my own control, I tell the client I’m too busy to accept the assignment. I wish them lots of luck, *while I secretly wish them lots of failure!*

But here’s a case where I actually pulled it off:

My control for the ASPCA, which featured the “10 Most Unwanted List,” was unbeatable for many, many years—although I never really liked it. The headline is too clever by half and doesn’t really address the issue of why someone might want to give money to the ASPCA. No less an authority than the great Herschel Gordon Lewis criticized it in one of his books about copywriting
and used as a perfect example of what NOT to do. (I don’t think he realized how successful it had been, or he might’ve tempered his criticism a bit.)

But people don’t give to the ASPCA for intellectual reasons. They give because they love animals and they hate to see them abandoned, sick, or in pain. So that’s how I came up with the idea for “DOES IT MATTER WHAT HAPPENS TO THIS DOG?” It not only beat my previous control, but it too lasted for many, many years as the ASPCA’s “unbeatable” control.

**LESSON LEARNED:** This is probably the most fundamental rule in marketing: *Find out what people want and give it to them.* When it comes to the ASPCA, they want to help abandoned animals. So that’s what I gave ’em!

By the way, Herschel Gordon Lewis isn’t the only copywriting guru to reprint a longstanding control of mine in a book and use it as an example of what not to do. Michael Masterson did it again just this year with my control for *Practical Sailor* (which has survived for 13 years under a barrage of constant testing). I’m not sure what the moral of that story is, but I guess it’s this: *Don’t believe everything you read from so-called copywriting experts.*

Including me!

No, especially me!
CHAPTER FIVE:
“Wash Your Hands Before Opening”

The ASPCA assignment came to me from a direct-mail fundraising agency called Lautman & Company. Following the old 80/20 rule, there are just three clients who have accounted for nearly 80% of the business I’ve had in my career as a freelancer, and Lautman & Company is one of them. (The others are Belvoir Communications and Rodale Press.) The owner of the agency, Kay Lautman, was among my most significant mentors in this business and one of the greatest direct-mail fundraisers who ever trod the earth. Her book, Dear Friend, is the definitive text on the subject.

Back in 1989 or so, Kay landed a very plum client. The Smithsonian Institution wanted to build a new museum honoring the culture and history of Native Americans. It was to be called the National Museum of the American Indian. Kay hired me to write the fundraising letter that would launch this exciting new venture.

I came up with what I believe (in all humility!) to be the very best envelope teaser I ever wrote:

OPEN CAREFULLY!
YOU MAY UNLEASH A POWERFUL SPIRIT!
I can’t claim complete credit for it. One of my other beloved clients and mentors, Donn Smith of Belvoir Communications, had told me a story about sitting next to the great copywriter Bill Jayme at an industry luncheon years earlier. Apparently, it came out in conversation that Jayme had an envelope teaser in mind which he desperately wanted to use for some project, but was never able to do so. His never-used headline was:

**WASH YOUR HANDS BEFORE OPENING!**

Donn and I had a good laugh about that, but I never quite forgot it. I wondered if I might come up with the right project for that headline someday. (I’m not above stealing from other copywriters, by the way—especially if they’re Bill Jayme and especially if the copy was never actually used before!)

When the National Museum of the American Indian came along, I realized it might be just the kind of project where a headline of that nature would work. After all, the artifacts in the museum were believed by Native Americans to be imbued with powerful spirits. I wondered if I could write a letter that warned people to be careful opening the envelope for fear of *releasing* those spirits, then pay it off inside by talking about the “spirit” of this great new museum.

It worked! The mailing pulled like gangbusters and raised gazillions for the new museum. But then Kay Lautman had an idea for a test. She said, “What if we tried it without the teaser?”

“That’ll never work,” I said. “The teaser is integral to this package.”

 Trying a teaser-less envelope, of course, is a very common test and it often works, but I was convinced that in this particular case it couldn’t possibly win.

You know where this story is going, don’t you?

You’re right.
The envelope without the teaser won the test. And that’s how it was mailed for the many years it continued to be the control.

So Bill Jayme, may he rest in peace, finally got to see a version of his teaser tested—albeit from that great big Post Office in the sky. And it got beat by a blank envelope!

LESSON LEARNED: A blank envelope will sometimes (but not always!) beat an envelope with a teaser. It’s always something you should test. Generally speaking, however, it’s been my experience that envelopes with strong teasers which begin the sales argument on a solid footing usually will out pull teaser-less envelopes.
CHAPTER SIX:  
Why I Owe My Career to a Sea Turtle

A few years before the National Museum of the American Indian project, Lautman & Company hired me to write what we thought at the time would be a rather routine fundraising package for the Center for Environmental Education.

It seems there was a problem developing on the beaches of Florida where bright lights from beachfront property were distracting hatchling sea turtles and causing them to die before they could crawl from their nest to the ocean. The Center for Environmental Education created the Sea Turtle Rescue Fund to help address the problem.

The solution was mostly a matter of public education. If people who lived on the beach could be persuaded to turn off their lights, the baby sea turtles would be okay. Our direct-mail package asked folks to help pay for full-page newspaper ads throughout the state of Florida encouraging people to turn out their beachfront lights.

So I created an envelope with a baby sea turtle hatching out of his egg and saying:

“Will the last person to leave the beach at night please turn out the lights! (And help save my life)”
Inside, the letter showed an illustration of a bunch of baby sea turtles headed for the waves—except for one little bastard who gets distracted and starts wandering toward the bottom of the page. In fact, he wanders all throughout the four-page letter, over the margins, around the sub-headlines, and so forth, he until he winds up joining a few companions—all quite dead, I assure you—under the light of a beachfront street lamp on the last page. The letter began like this:

**Dear Friend,**

Will you consider the desperate plight of the baby sea turtles to your right?

Imagine, if you will, that this piece of paper is a Florida beach. And imagine that it is a dark and moonless night.

At the top of the page is the shoreline – the Atlantic Ocean. At the bottom is “civilization.” Condominiums. Highways. Hotels. Parking lots.

To the newly-hatched sea turtle, heading toward the top of the page means heading toward safety. Heading toward the bottom means heading toward death.

And so on and so forth. Well, the package did extremely well in the mail, and since it was kind of an unusual piece, I decided to enter it in the 1988 International Caples Awards.

And that’s when all hell broke loose.

A week or so before the gala Caples Awards ceremony, I got a phone call from the late Andi Emerson, who was the doyenne of the Caples Awards from its
founding until her untimely death in 2008. Andi and I knew each other because we'd done some business together over the years.

“Richard, I’m not supposed to be calling you.”

“Why not, Andi?”

“It’s a secret.”

“What’s a secret?”

“You won.”

“I won what?”

“You won everything!”

“Everything?”

“Yes, your sea turtle thing. It won first prize in the direct-mail category.”

“That’s great!”

“That’s not all. It also won the Maxwell Sackheim Award for best in show.”

“Wow!”

“I’m not supposed to be telling you this. But I wanted to make sure you came to the Gala, because it would be embarrassing for us if you didn’t.”

“Where is it?”

“The grand ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria. Oh, and bring some bags.”

“Some bags?”

“Yeah, you’re gonna have a lot of hardware to haul home.”

I brought two big black plastic trash bags with me, because, as Andi said, there was a ton of hardware—trophyes for the client, for the agency, for the artists, and for me. Not just first prize trophies, but the Best-in-Show trophies,
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too, which were even more ornate. I walked out of the Waldorf Astoria with the bags slung over my shoulder like Santa Claus.

Needless to say, the publicity from that event was enormous, and in many ways, it made my career.

I’ve always agreed with those who criticize award ceremonies on the grounds that they’re really not relevant. When it comes to the Oscars, for example, it’s no more meaningful to say one actor is better than another than it would be to say Picasso is better than Rembrandt. When it comes to direct mail, of course, the most important award is a high response rate and a healthy bottom line.

But these critics miss the point. The reason we have such award ceremonies, the reason why they continue to be worth entering, is because they’re good for business. And the Caples Awards were certainly good for mine!

LESSON LEARNED: What made the sea turtle package work so well? In retrospect, I think it got so much attention because it used a technique that we don’t use as often as we should in direct-mail copywriting—drama! When you read the letter, it’s like seeing a little soap opera playing out right before your very eyes. Reading this letter is almost as effortless as watching a movie. Combine that with the fact that this was a very clear-cut problem, with a very simple solution, and the donors naturally responded with enthusiasm.
Dear Florida Neighbor,

Will you take a moment to consider the desperate plight of the baby sea turtles to your right?

Imagine, if you will, that this piece of paper is a Florida beach. And imagine that it is a dark and moonless night.

At the top of the page is the shoreline -- the Atlantic Ocean. At the bottom is "civilization." Condominiums. Highways. Hotels. Parking lots.

To the newly hatched sea turtle, heading towards the top of the page means heading towards safety. Heading towards the bottom means heading towards death.

These baby sea turtles have just scratched their way out of the sandy nest where they've spent the past two months incubating in the warm sun. It took several days and it was hard work, so they're close to exhaustion. But the worse is yet to come.

Instinctively, the tiny hatchling knows to wait until dark before making his break from the nest. The sand is cooler at night, and there are fewer predators looking for an easy meal.

But he has a serious problem.

A sea turtle is terribly nearsighted on land. And on a dark night like this one, he can't see the shoreline, even though it's only a few feet away.

Fortunately, after a hundred million years of evolution, Mother Nature has provided the hatchling sea turtle with instincts on how to find the ocean:

Follow the light.

Even a moonless night, the wide expanse of sky over the sea is much brighter than the dark horizon on the landward side. And the little turtle knows that if he follows the light he will find the sea.

He starts out in the right direction. But wait ...
CHAPTER SEVEN:  
Advertising Age Finds Me Boring

As part of the fallout from the Caples Awards, Advertising Age—the major trade publication of the advertising industry—saw fit to publish a feature-length profile of me.

The reporter was a woman with whom I was slightly acquainted because she specialized in covering direct marketing for Ad Age. But this didn’t prevent her from being deeply disappointed in our interview.

Apparently she came into the interview with the pre-conceived notion of writing a piece about a revolutionary young creative genius who scoffed at convention, shattered the hidebound rules of direct marketing, and boldly chartered a new course for creativity in direct mail.

That couldn’t be further from the truth, and I told her so.

She wanted me to tell her, for example, how I had broken all the rules of direct mail copywriting in order to write my sea turtle package.

“To the contrary,” I said, “I always try very hard to follow the rules of direct-mail copywriting. I don’t break them unless I have a very good reason to do so.”

She asked me for the secret of my creativity.

“I don’t think of myself as being particularly creative,” I said. “The sea turtle package was really very easy to write. We had a clear-cut problem with a clear-cut solution, and we simply asked folks to help us out with a contribution.”
She grimaced.

“But it shattered all the old formulas, didn’t it?”

“No, not at all. In fact, if you look at it carefully, you’ll see that it follows the AIDA formula to the letter.”

She bit on her pencil until it broke in half.

Then she asked a leading question about the history of direct mail.

“Don’t you think copywriters like John Caples and Maxwell Sackheim, the men whom your awards were named after, represent the old school of direct marketing and that it has to change with the times?”

“Not at all,” I said. “I wish I could write like Caples or Sackheim. They’re my role models.”

At this point she closed her notebook, set the two halves of the broken pencil on top, and said:

“This isn’t going the way it’s supposed to.”

When I asked her why not, she basically accused me of not being interesting enough. She told me about having recently interviewed a creative director at one of the big Madison Avenue agencies who was so flamboyant he actually threw a chair out of a window when a client tried to change his copy, nearly missing a pedestrian in the process.

“You want me to throw a chair out the window?”

I glanced over my shoulder. My office was located at 57th and Broadway at the time, and I knew the carnage would be considerable.

“No, but I wish you were more…well, interesting.”

The interview didn’t go too well after that. I explained to her that a creative director who throws a chair out the window is someone who is scared to death of
his own job. He works for a big Madison Avenue agency, gets paid $400,000 a year, has a lifestyle based on that income with a Park Avenue co-op and a big Mercedes in the parking garage...and he goes to work every morning in a state of abject fear. Why?

Because he has no idea what he’s doing, that’s why! And he’s afraid that at any moment he’s going to be exposed as an imposter.

That’s the problem with Madison Avenue. No one there knows anything about advertising. They’ve never read a book about advertising. They don’t know the history of advertising. They don’t know if their ads are working or not. So they respond to the situation in a perfectly rational way:

They throw chairs out the window!

I’m sorry. But when it comes to copywriting, I feel the same way about breaking the rules as Robert Frost felt about writing blank verse:

“It’s like playing tennis without a net.”

LESSON LEARNED: The Ad Age reporter actually made a mistake we copywriters often make. She was a good writer, but she came to the project with a pre-conceived notion about how it should go. It’s true we often get our best idea about how to approach an assignment within the first few seconds of working on it (see Malcolm Gladwell’s excellent book Blink), but it’s very important not to get locked into that idea. Try to keep an open mind throughout the project. Because sometimes you don’t get your best idea until you’re almost ready to turn it in!
Direct marketing, once thought of as the wretched domain of junk-mail jockeys, has gained respectability. Copywriter Richard Armstrong is one of the new breed. From his tiny one-man Manhattan office, he's honing his reputation as the man to call if you want to save baby sea turtles or sell Maseratis.

Back in the late '70s, the Pittsburgh Zoo had a problem finding a spokesman for a new fund-raising campaign. Zoo officials, local celebrities and others were considered, but no one seemed appropriate. Then a young creative director at National Direct Mail Services, the zoo's Bethesda, MD-based direct-mail agency, had an idea. Richard Armstrong suggested sending out a solicitation signed by one of the animals. It began with the greeting, "I bet you don't get many letters from hippopotami, but then we don't write many." In one sentence, Armstrong distilled the importance of the appeal. It mattered to the animals, in hundreds of packages since.

Armstrong has built on the importance of personal appeal in an oft-beaten, sometimes humorless, always engaging style. He's won direct marketing's most prestigious awards, including the Direct Marketing Creative Guild's Caples Award in 1982 and '83 and the Maxwell Sackheim Award (1986) for an outstanding contribution to direct marketing (awarded only twice this decade).

From his tiny office on Manhattan's West 57th Street, Armstrong's winning juices from his clients (90 this year) and peers alike. "He probably has a broader range of interests and is more intellectual than most copywriters who rely on short, quick direct-mail styles," says the author of The Copywriter's Handbook, Bob Bly. "He's brave enough to write what's best rather than what the client will accept."

One of Armstrong's bravest packages was his Sea Turtle Rescue Fund appeal, which won both the Caples and the Sackheim Awards in 1986. The letter was sent to raise funds and elicit support for legislation that would save sea turtles from possible extinction. Normally, when turtles hatch on the beach, they instinctively head for the safety of the sea. But they were being drawn away from the sea by floodlights from condominium complexes. Thousands were dying, all because people wouldn't turn off their lights.

The letter's envelope is sea green and white with a line drawing of a very cute sea turtle emerging from its egg. Armstrong offers two teasers. One appeals to curiosity—"Will the Last Person Off the Beach Please Turn Off the Lights (And Help Save My Life)?" The other plays to our vanity, "Will you sign the enclosed release form giving us permission to print your name in major newspapers throughout the state of Florida?"

Inside, at the top of the letter is a drawing of a beach. The reader is asked to follow the plight of baby sea turtles as they head in the wrong direction (down the seashore and away from the sea) to a certain death (at the end of the letter) under a lamp post. The letter itself is an. The letter itself is an.

During the past decade, direct marketing has moved from advertisers' periphery to its mainstream. Gone are fiercely independent shops, the loathed "junk mail" tag and DM's reputation as a craft practiced on the inside of matchbook covers. Direct now has a secure position in the...
CHAPTER EIGHT:
Don’t Cry for Us, Madison Avenue!

The folks at Advertising Age were so sweet to do a profile of me, I decided to repay the favor by writing an article for their magazine excoriating Madison Avenue and everything it stands for.

To their credit, they decided to publish it.

This little article created quite a stir at the time, generating lots of angry letters to the editor from copywriters and creative directors up and down Madison Avenue. But it made me something of a hero in New York direct-marketing circles.

Which was the whole idea!

LESSON LEARNED: It’s always good for your customer to have a positive image of your company. But it’s much better for him to have a positive relationship with it. Madison Avenue is in the business of creating images. But in the direct-mail industry, we’re in the business of creating relationships.

By the way, there’s also a lesson here for freelance copywriters. This article wound up enhancing my reputation and bringing in a lot of new business for me. It’s always better to have prospective clients coming to you than to go to them, hat in hand, with cold calls or mailings. Writing controversial articles in the trade press is a great way to make a name for yourself and get people knocking on your door.
Five Ways to Create an “Image” in Direct Mail
By Richard Armstrong

Ever since Madison Avenue finished its feeding frenzy on the direct-marketing industry, there’s been a lot of talk in the trade press recently about “a new era of creativity in direct response.” With an influx of creative talent from Madison Avenue, so the argument goes, direct marketers will at last learn something about building an image for their clients.

It has been suggested that old-fashioned direct marketers like myself are the advertising equivalent of hit-and-run drivers. In our reckless pursuit of profits, we neglect the long-term consequences of our actions. We would, for example, gleefully print our direct mail on toilet paper if we thought it would cut the cost per thousand.

All this is about to change, however, now that Madison Avenue has taken over the direct-marketing agencies. At last, we junk mailers are going to discover the secrets of Madison Avenue creativity. Specifically, we’re going to learn—fanfare and timpani roll—how to create an image.

Well, speaking on behalf of my fellow direct marketers: Thanks, but no thanks. Or, to put it more bluntly, if the people responsible for Mr. Whipple have something to say about image to the people responsible for L.L.Bean... well, we’re listening.

Meanwhile, maybe there’s a thing or two you can learn from us. In fact, there are five ways direct marketers build an image that general advertisers would be wise to remember:

1. **Direct marketers offer iron-clad guarantees.**

   Nothing builds a company’s image in the customer’s mind better than a good guarantee and a commitment to honor it. Yet general advertisers rarely use this age-old technique. The value of a guarantee was forcefully brought home to me on a recent trip to Maine.

   Nearly every native I met had a story to tell me about L.L. Bean, and most of these tales revolved around Bean’s legendary guarantees. I heard about kayaks returned after 10 years and cheerfully replaced, refunds made for stolen hiking boots and moth-eaten sweaters, all after years of use. Surely some of these accounts were exaggerated, but does it matter? A company whose customers are willing to stretch the truth to convince others certainly doesn’t have an image problem.

2. **Direct marketers go beyond building an image to building a relationship.**

   Does your grandmother have an image? Does your wife or husband? I guess they do. But you actually have more than just an image of these people; you have a relationship with them. Thanks to general advertising, I have an image of IBM. But thanks to direct marketing, I have a relationship with Lillian Vernon.

   Nothing saddens, mind you. But my relationship with Lillian is based on an intimate communication which has been maintained over a period of years. I’ve received letters from her. I’ve spoken with her assistants on the...
phone. I've had my problems resolved, my questions answered, and — in return for being such a good friend — I've received gifts and discounts. As far as I'm concerned, Lilian Vernon's image couldn't be better.

3. Direct marketers seldom change their image; they merely enhance it.

Pepsi-Cola has had about five images in my lifetime. Coca-Cola has had three images in the last month. The "Kiplinger Letter," by contrast — a financial newsletter sold primarily by direct mail — has not only kept the same image for the past 35 years, they've actually been making the same promotion.

Direct marketers take an additive approach to their image to let it grow and sink deep roots in the consumer's mind. General advertisers, on the other hand, take an overhaul approach: When the product's image shows signs of fading, wipe it out and create a new one. Thus the $25 million that a client spends on one campaign will be rendered worthless by the $70 million he spends on the next. In the long run, which approach works best?

4. Direct marketers personalize their companies.

To their credit, general advertisers have caught on to this technique in recent years. But as thrilled as Madison Avenue was with the success of Frank Perdue and Lee Iacocca as spokesmen for their own companies, we direct marketers reacted

with a yawn. We've been doing this for years.

What better way to create an image for your company than to incarnate it in the form of a real human being? From the home-grown pairs of Harry & David to the elegant attire of J. Peterman customers trust the product because they trust the man behind it.

5. Direct marketers create a good image for themselves by maintaining a good image of their customers.

When a company has a good image of me, I have a good image of it. When a company treats me like a fool, my image of it goes down. It's as simple as that.

Direct mail has gotten a bad rap recently and, unfortunately, much of the criticism has come from the hybrid agencies that were spawned by Madison Avenue's takeover of direct-marketing companies. I'm thinking especially of a recent advertisement by Sealli, McCabe, Skoves Direct that attacked "junk mail" for being ugly, insulting, and demeaning to its readers.

I don't agree. I do confess that much of the direct mail I receive contains gimmicky involvement devices — "Yes/No" stickers and the like — but I don't find these particularly insulting. Nowhere near as insulting as "Ring around the collar," for example.

If anything, I find my direct mail treats me as much more of an intellectual than I really am. In recent weeks, I've received mail from The Nation, The New Republic, and National Review which sought to engage my mind on a variety of political, social, and economic issues to which I previously had given scarcely a moment's thought.

Granted, these are upscale products. But even my most downscale direct mail makes certain flattering assumptions about me which Madison Avenue's television commercials rarely do: 1) that I can read; 2) that I can think; 3) that I am capable of making a decision; and 4) that I'm an individual who acts on free will, not a couch potato who mindlessly accepts whatever elections are beamed at him from the nearest Sony.

So, like most Americans, I read or skim almost all of my direct mail. And like most Americans, I consider Madison Avenue's "creative" television commercials to be excellent opportunities for going to the bathroom.
CHAPTER NINE:
The Press Release That Nearly Won an Oscar...
and the Speech That Did!


It was the middle of a terrible recession, I had just moved to a new city without any employment prospects, and I was eager to take any kind of writing assignment that came my way—whether it was in direct mail or not.

One day I got a call from the head of the public relations department at ABC asking if I’d be interested in writing press releases on a freelance basis for $10 an hour. Times being what they were, I took the job.

Thus began a brief fling with the public relations business which lasted from about 1980 to 1989. When I first started work for ABC, I didn’t even know what a press release was. By the time I stopped working for them I was writing speeches for ABC’s top executives. It led to the single most unusual freelance assignment I’ve ever received—writing an acceptance speech for the Academy Awards.

I was mostly working for the ARTS cable channel at the time (which would later come to be known as the Arts & Entertainment Channel) writing press releases announcing new programs. I was assigned to write a release for a remarkable documentary film called “A Portrait of Giselle,” which was about the history of one of the most beloved ballets of all time.
To this day I’m not sure why, but my press release struck a responsive chord with everyone who read it. The film’s producer was ecstatic about it. He called me to his office and literally kissed my hand. (He was a flamboyant guy.) My client at ABC was very pleased. Most importantly, it managed to trigger a feature story about the film in the arts section of the Sunday *New York Times* – which, for a publicity writer, is kinda like hitting a grand slam home run. In fact, the film was nominated for an Oscar as best feature-length documentary.

The producer asked me if I would write his acceptance speech! Which I gladly did, of course—for $10 an hour. I think I charged him $100, although it was less than 15 seconds long and didn’t take me much longer than that to write.

What an exciting time that was! ABC held this grand party to celebrate the nomination—not the award, just the nomination! My wife and I hobnobbed with all the top brass of the American Broadcasting Company, plus everyone who was anyone in the world of New York ballet. It was heady stuff. But then something terrible happened…

The film lost!

My precious little speech was *not* heard by 800 million people around the world. What a disappointment!

Nevertheless, the experience helped me move up from press release writer, or “publicist” (which is at the bottom of the heap in the PR world) to *speechwriter* (which is the top). I started writing speeches for several of the top executives at ABC, and that led to freelance speechwriting assignments at many other companies, including such major corporations as Philip Morris, Westinghouse, and Newsweek.

In 1989, I wrote a speech for the President of a large bank in Pittsburgh called Equibank. Her name was Claire Gargalli, and she was the highest-ranking woman in American banking at the time. Her speech was delivered to the famous Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. It went over very
well. On a lark I submitted it to the *Speechwriter’s Newsletter* contest for “Best Speech of the Year.” And it won!

So my brief career as a speechwriter was bookended by a loss at the Academy Awards and a win for “Best Speech of the Year.”

Why did I give up speechwriting?

Financial reasons. By the late 1980s, my career as a direct-mail copywriter was going great guns. Writing junk mail pays more than writing speeches, pure and simple. I tried to do both for a while, but speeches usually have to be done on a short lead time—four to six weeks at the most from the moment you hear about it until the moment it’s delivered. In direct mail, clients know their mailing schedules months, if not years in advance. So it’s not unusual for a client to book you 12 months ahead of time. As I became more in demand as a direct-mail copywriter, I didn’t have the openings on my schedule to accept speechwriting assignments. So I just kept declining them and declining them, until eventually they stopped coming.

**LESSON LEARNED:** As a freelance writer, should you be a specialist or a generalist? It’s almost always better to be a specialist. For two reasons: First, specialists are more in demand; and second, specialists can charge more. If you get lung cancer, for example (God forbid!), you don’t want to go to some country doctor who has a hand painted sign tacked to his door that says, “Doctorin’ and Healin’: $10 per visit, or fresh chickens.” No, you want to go to the top lung specialist in the world. Not just a lung specialist, but a lung cancer specialist. And if you can find someone who specializes in small-cell tumors of the lower left lobe of the lung, so much the better! *Do you mind that he charges more than $10 per visit?* Hell no! You’ll gladly pay him $100,000 if he can cure your cancer. The same thing is true of copywriting. Clients don’t want a jack of all trades. They want someone who can solve their specific problem.
Having said that, it never hurts to accept new opportunities when they come your way. You learn something new from every different kind of writing you do, and—who knows?—you might just find a new specialty for yourself.
SEVENTY YEARS OF "GISELLE" ON ARTS

What would it be like to see a television show about explorers who've traveled all over the world? Or about the American Presidency? Featuring everything from actual footage of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree to a videotape of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address?

Of course, you'd say that's impossible. And you'd be right. But that's exactly what people in the world of dance saw. A ballet producer, Joseph Vary, when he told them about his dream to produce a film featuring performances and interviews with every great 20th Century ballerina to dance the classic role of "Giselle." That's impossible, they said.

They were wrong. "A Portrait of Giselle," produced by Joseph Vary for ABC Video Enterprises, premiered on ARTS, HeartABC Video Service's cultural cable television service, on March 22.

No one knows for sure what it is about this story of an innocent peasant girl who falls in love with a prince in disguise that has captured the imagination of ballet audiences for more than a century. But for ballerinas, the appeal is obvious. Like Hamlet is for actors or Lady Macbeth for actresses, Giselle is the role every ballerina wants to play. Because Giselle is a dancer, and the story of "Giselle" is a story about dance.

Tamara Karsavina called "Giselle," the only major ballet in which dance is integral to the story. When the peasant girl discovers her true love, Albrecht, is engaged already to another woman, she goes mad and dies. Later, when Albrecht marries for Giselle beside her grave, he is confronted by a group of phantom spirits who seek to exact their revenge against him by dancing him to death. But the spirit of Giselle, who still loves him, takes his place and saves his life by dancing before the other spirits until daybreak when their power is gone.

If the story of "Giselle" has its fairy tale elements, so too does the story of the history of "Giselle," the ballet. Because the ballet "Giselle" was "kidnapped" and taken to a strange land, and not to be seen again for almost 70 years.

"Giselle" with music by Adolphe Adam, libretto based on a story by Heinrich Heine and choreography by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot, premiered in Paris in 1841. Although the ballet was well received by the Parisian critics, "Giselle" soon fell out of favor and was ignored by European dance companies. The Russians, however, took the ballet to their heart and "Giselle" became a part of the great tradition of Russian ballet. So, while Europe gradually forgot that such a ballet even existed, "Giselle" was being immortalized in Russia by some of the most important dance companies in history.

Then in 1910, the Ballet Russe performed "Giselle" in Paris with Tamara Karsavina in the leading role. It was an immense success. "Giselle" was back. And this time, it would stay. The unbroken line of great performances of Giselle that extends from Tamara Karsavina to the brilliant ballerinas of today had begun.

MORE
1988 Contest winner: Richard Armstrong

When we picked last year's speech contest winner, we took
as a guide Conrad's injunction that a good writer makes one
see. This year, we were reminded that good writing also
makes one think. Helping me judge our 1988 contest
speeches were Bill Swedland, former editor of the Region
Report, John Heinz, author of Writing Effective Business
Speeches, and Kathryn Clark, Manager of Public Relations
for AT&T.

The winner is freelance speechwriter Richard Armstrong
for his speech, "Risky Business: How Women Succeed by
Taking Intelligent Risks." It was delivered by Claire Gargallii,
CEO of Equibank, at the Wharton School of Business'
Ninth Annual Conference on Women in Business.

Voice and personality

Says Heinz: "This is a straightforward, unpretentious, well-
organized, clear presentation that I'm sure held the full
attention of the listeners and left them feeling inspired and
enlightened." Adds Clark: "I scored highly those speeches
in which I felt the speaker's 'voice' could be heard—a real
person and a clear personality came through."

Armstrong creates the persona through personal stories.
After an excellent introduction that leads to the theme of
taking risks, Gargallii tells how she left a comfortable job of
senior VP at a big bank poised for tremendous growth for a
job with a bank that had $500 million in non-performing
loans, among other problems.

It was not your classic career move. Yet this was a
risk that clearly paid off for me, just as I think your
risk is going to pay off for you. We cannot improve
our lives, our careers, or our company's profits unless
we are willing to take chances.

Half of Armstrong's business is writing direct mail, and
that's where he says he learned the importance of the
personal touch. "All the literature on direct mail writing
points to the importance of writing personal letters. People
often interpret that to mean use of you. I think it means I.
Then, people feel there's a real person there. If someone
shuts off their emotions, the reader gets a much
better experience. It's the same with business students, or
any audience. Too often, they hear why the interest rates are
going up. What they want to hear are human stories."

The Gargallii speech also goes beyond platitudes about
risk. It outlines for the audience the five things one should
know in assessing whether a risk is worth taking. The
outline is clearly articulated, each step briefly and carefully
explained. An illustration or image begins each explanation:

The first thing to know before taking a risk is to know
yourself. Athletes often say it in terms of "playing
within themselves." To a baseball player, this may
mean trying to hit singles instead of home runs. To a
weekend golfer like me, it means using a nine-iron instead of a
five-iron—even though Arnold Palmer would probably use the
five-iron. When I first arrived at Equibank, we had a lot of executives
who thought they were Arnold Palmer. They were playing the
game with five-irons instead of nine-woods.

"It's important to have a speech for the audience to be able
to comprehend the structure so they don't get lost," says
Armstrong. "They need to know where they are. I saw five
progressive points in my head, then I went through my notes
and started planning. Everything I write is very solid
structurally; my outlines are like scientific documents."

The speech also shows a wide variety of resources. And
Armstrong translates his research into one of a speech's
greatest persuaders: examples. In a sequence that describes
companies that failed by not taking risks, Gargallii mentions
Decca Records deciding to sign the Beatles, Western Union
passing on Bell's patent for the telephone, and the Remington
Arms Company refusing to buy the patent on the
typewriter. Each example is fleshed out with a pointed, one-
line quote. The sequence ends with a longer anecdote.

"In the old days, I spent 2 percent of my time research-
ing and 98 percent writing," Armstrong says. "I used to
read my notes when I was writing the letter, and it is a
brilliant idea, and literally run with it to the typewriter. Now, it's the reverse. I spend 98 percent
of my time strategizing, planning, and researching—and the
continues on next page
CHAPTER TEN: 
From Maseratis to Magazines

By the middle of 1980s, my career as a direct-mail copywriter was beginning to gain some serious traction. But I was dissatisfied with one aspect of it.

I was still locked into the fundraising business, and I wanted to get into commercial direct mail. Specifically, I wanted to get into the world of publishing, because that’s where the action was. It was, and still is, the highest-paying area for freelance copywriters, the most competitive, and the most prestigious. It was the area where all my idols worked: Bill Jayme, John Francis Tighe, Hank Burnett, Ed McLean, Milt Pierce, Ken Scheck, Don Hauptman, and the great Gene Schwartz. But I couldn’t break out of fundraising.

Up until that time, I had only written one commercial direct-mail package in my life. It was a letter for a Maserati dealership in Washington, DC, which actually succeeded in winning a Caples Award, but did not succeed in launching me into the world of commercial direct mail. I was still known in the business primarily as a fundraising writer. In fact, Denny Hatch referred to me in an issue of Who’s Mailing What! as “Richard Armstrong, the superstar fundraising copywriter.” I called him up and said thanks a bunch.

Finally, I found a crack in the door. As someone who had a lot of experience in conservative political fundraising, I was a natural to write copy for conservative political magazines. There weren’t that many conservatives among the leading circulation copywriters—with a few notable exceptions like Ken Scheck—so the competition for these assignments was somewhat less intense than it would be to write for Consumer Reports or Vanity Fair. I put together a
package of my best samples and fired them off to my favorite magazine, *The American Spectator*.

The result was probably the best direct-mail letter I ever wrote—even though, technically speaking, it wasn’t a winner. (Can something be the best if it didn’t win?) I decided to sign the letter myself, write it in the first-person, and talk candidly with the reader about my experience of reading back issues of the *American Spectator* in preparation for writing a direct-mail letter.

How did it do? It indexed exactly 100 against the control. In other words, it was a dead heat, a photo finish. So they mailed it again. And it indexed 100 again. So they mailed it a third time. Indexed 100. Finally, they gave up and stopped mailing it. The control, after all, wasn’t exactly chopped liver. It was one of the most successful direct-mail letters ever written and was reproduced in many anthologies and books about copywriting. But my package accomplished something the control never did:

*It got fan mail!*

Yes, every time they mailed my letter, a dozen or so “white mail” letters would come back gushing about what a wonderful letter it was. One guy said that *American Spectator* should pay me twice whatever I was asking and put me on staff immediately.

So I had a stack of fan letters, like some kind of junk-mail movie star, but I still didn’t have a winner in the publishing business.

That came shortly afterwards.

I parlayed my near-miss with the *American Spectator* into an assignment from one of its competitors, *Reason Magazine*, which is the voice of the libertarian movement in America.

I’m actually a libertarian myself, so this was a project near and dear to my heart. And having been a libertarian, I know exactly how people react when I describe my political philosophy to them. They always say:
“Richard, you’re nuts!”

So I came up with the following teaser for my outer envelope:

CONSERVATIVES AND LIBERALS AGREE...

YOU’RE NUTS!

But I’ll bet you a free copy of REASON magazine that you’re not half as crazy as everybody says you are!

Bingo! I finally had my control package in the area where I wanted to work most, circulation-promotion for magazines. From there it was a simple matter to land a few other prominent conservative political magazines. Like this one for the most prestigious of them all, National Review.

That one, by the way, beat a longstanding control that was written by none other than William F. Buckley, Jr. himself.

But did I play dirty to get the win?

Who’s Mailing What! thought so. They called it a “truly disgusting” piece. That’s a little harsh, don’t you think? Okay, maybe it’s not completely kosher to use a teaser on the outer envelope that says:

WE’RE SENDING YOU THIS LETTER ON THE ADVICE OF OUR ATTORNEYS

But all’s fair in love, war, and junk mail. Don’t you agree? Maybe you don’t.

By the way, the brilliant longtime circulation director of National Review, Ed Capano, made some changes in the Buckley letter and re-mailed it a few months later. It won. So mine was a very short-lived control. But I was now
armed with two prominent controls in publishing, and it all culminated with what was probably the most successful newsletter launch of all time:

*The Limbaugh Letter.*

Yes, Rush Limbaugh’s newsletter went from a standing start to being the most widely-circulated newsletter in America, and even though I wrote the launch package, I deserve exactly *none* of the credit for it.

I’m sure my envelope teaser probably raised a few eyebrows out there, just like the *National Review* envelope did:

**YOU HAVE TESTED POSITIVE FOR E.I.B.!!**

(By the way, for those of you who are not Limbaugh fans, “E.I.B.” stands for Excellence in Broadcasting – which is Rush’s tongue-in-cheek name for his own radio network.)

But envelope teasers aside, I think I know the real reason why this package did so well:

There was a man on the radio with 30,000,000 devoted fans who would do anything he told them to do, and he told them to subscribe to his newsletter.

*That almost always helps lift response!*

**LESSON LEARNED:** If you can arrange to have someone on national radio tell his 30 million rabid fans to respond to your letter—with a virtually unlimited amount of free airtime in which to do so—chances are, your mailing will work very nicely. You can even hire a dope like Richard Armstrong to write it for you, and he probably won’t screw it up too bad. (Although, they hired Ken Scheck a few months later and he beat it! Ken’s letter is still mailing 15 years later, by the
Incidentally, I never met Rush in connection with this project, although I certainly worked with a few folks who knew him well. They all said he’s an utterly charming guy, exactly the “harmless fuzzball” he claims to be!

By the way, a little sidebar about National Review. Prior to working for NR as a direct-mail copywriter, I had actually written an article for the magazine itself. I got a nice handwritten note on a little blue postcard from William F. Buckley, Jr. that said “Terrific job, Mr. Armstrong,” which I treasure to this day. I later expanded the article into a book called *THE NEXT HURRAH: The Communications Revolution in American Politics* which was published by Wm. Morrow & Co. in 1988 and is still one of the few books you’ll find anywhere on the subject of political direct mail.

At any rate, when Buckley died in 2008, I saw a bunch of NR’s favorite freelance writers interviewed on the Charlie Rose show. Each of them talked about receiving a handwritten note from Buckley on a little blue postcard whenever one of their articles appeared in the magazine. Apparently, Buckley did this as a way of making up for the fact he was paying so little money.

And I thought I was the only one!
Mr. George T. McCoy
Atkinson Gay F Co.
10 W. Orange Avenue
San Francisco, California 94080

Dear Mr. McCoy:

One of a kind. Is that phrase a little trite?
I used to think so until I tried to find you.
Now I know what "one of a kind" really means.
The process of finding your name and address was the advertising equivalent of panning for gold.

The problem: How do I find the kind of person whom I could ask to test drive (at their own home) the new Maserati Quattroporte?

How do I find the uniquely discriminating individual who would say "yes" to an offer of a complimentary bottle of French champagne ... and the unparalleled experience of driving a one-of-a-kind automobile?

The solution? Well, I hope the solution is you.
Are you the type of person who would buy a Maserati?

People who choose the Maserati luxury sedan aren't the kind who buy the most expensive car they can find. Because the Maserati isn't. It's only about half as expensive as a Rolls, for example.

And people who choose the Maserati aren't the kind who are looking for a status symbol either.

Why buy for status when only one out of every thousand people you pass on the street will recognize what you're driving?

No, the Maserati owner is someone whose appreciation of a fine car goes beyond considerations of money, status and even mere looks. This is an individual who truly appreciates automotive quality.

Like an excellent champagne on the sensitive palate of a connoisseur, the Maserati offers pleasures which are, to be honest, lost on most people.
I just paid $24.00 for a one-year subscription to THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR
now I'm offering you ten issues for $11.95
(so much for insider prices!)

Dear Friend,

I've just had a rather bizarre experience that I'd like to
tell you about. But maybe first I should tell you who I am.

My name is Richard Armstrong, and I'm a direct-mail writer.
You probably call it "junk mail." But we don't use that term in
our business. I once had a boss who said, "Don't call it 'junk
mail'; call it 'informative correspondence.'"

Yes, I'm the guy who's been cluttering up your mailbox all
these years, especially if you're a conservative. If you belong
to a few political organizations and subscribe to a few conser-
vative publications, you've probably received more letters from
me begging for money than you've gotten from your own relatives!

But I digress.

I started out to tell you about a bizarre experience I've
had:

I just finished reading the last 12 issues of a publication
called The American Spectator.

Yes, I sat down and read all 12 of them in a row, cover to
cover, stopping only for meals and sleep.

(please don't attempt to replicate this stunt
at home. I am a trained professional, and I
know what I'm doing.)

[over, please]
Now, in and of itself, this feat is not so unusual. Whenever I get an assignment to write a direct-mail letter for a magazine (and yes, The American Spectator is paying me to write this letter to you) the first thing I do is read through a year's worth of back issues.

But this time it was different.

Because this time, instead of getting the usual nostalgic sense of looking into the past at the personalities, fashions, and fads that have titillated the American public for the past twelve months... well, this time I got an eerie sense of looking into the future.

Case in point. In an article written shortly after our great moral leader Gary Hart announced his candidacy for president (the first time), I discovered this incredibly prescient paragraph written by the Spectator's editor-in-chief R. Emmett Tyrrell:

"The only question is when will Mr. Hart's handlers carry him off. When they do an agrieved Mr. Hart will condemn the press, for in the end it is the press that will finish him off. His recriminations will be understandable but wholly unjustified. He has used the ingenuity of the press corps brazenly, and when they catch on they will take offense. It is the nature of their art."

Spooky, huh?

But that was only one of many such extra-sensory perceptions I encountered as I paged through 12 months of The American Spectator. Time and again, I found myself musing at sharp insights, incisive observations, uncanny predictions. "How did they know that?" I wondered. "That's exactly right," I exclaimed. "How come no one else was saying this back then?" I asked.

After a while, I began to realize that this was no ordinary magazine I was dealing with here.

Every magazine I've ever heard of prides itself on being on top of the trends, ahead of the pack, first with the news. But this was the first magazine I'd ever encountered that was able to report the news before it happened. It wasn't just on top of the trends, it was about a year ahead of them.

The Spectator seemed to have a devilish ability not just to look at events, but to look right through them. It could see behind the trendy, the faddish, and the fashionable to find what was true, and real, and permanent in our lives, in fields ranging from politics to books to movies to art to ideas.
Now, I'm going to be honest with you. I didn't know The American Spectator from a hill of beans before I got the assignment to write this letter. I mean, I'd heard of it, of course. I knew it was a conservative journal of opinion. I knew it was edited by Bob Tyrrell. And I knew that the people whom I respect—people like Bill Buckley and Fred Barnes—respect The American Spectator and quote from it amazingly often.

But until I got this assignment, I had never actually read a copy. (Of course, this is nothing new for me. I've been discussing Atlas Shrugged for years, and I'm still not past page three.)

Like you, I consider my politics rather conservative. But I also consider myself something of an intellectual. By that I mean after four years of an expensive private education I still like to sprinkle my speech with phrases like "chilling effect"—as in "the INF Treaty will have a 'chilling effect' on our Western European allies." I guess I'm not so much an intellectual but more like what The American Spectator has dubbed an "intellectual aid."

At any rate, reading 12 back issues of The American Spectator had a chilling effect on me.

It also had a tickling effect. An angering effect. An explosive effect. It did strange things to my body. It made me lift my eyebrows in amazement. Double over in laughter. Spit in disgust. Draw my breath sharply in horror. It made steam come out of my ears. It made my hair stand on end. My toes curl. All in all, it was better than a visit to the chiropractor.

In an article about Norman Lear's disingenuously-named "People for the American Way," I learned the truth about this vitriolically anti-conservative organization. Did you know they've even managed to sucker a few well-meaning Republicans to do their dirty work for them?

I learned that acid rain is really a non-issue of colossal proportions... that gassy Arthur Liman had been practicing for his role as an Iran/Contra inquisitor since his college days... that Paul Trible ("Senator Jello"), whom I always assumed to be a good conservative, is actually just another expedient sellout willing to attack the Administration if it suits his sleazy purposes. (I even learned useful little tidbits like the fact that Jesse Jackson does not wash his hands after using the urinal.)

But more so than the articles, I think, it was the departments, the regular columns and features, I enjoyed most. As I put down one issue and reached for the next, I found myself diving for these departments first:

"CURRENT WISDOM BY ASSIGNED JACKASSES": Here, with a straight face and a minimum of comment, the editors simply

(over, please)
quote verbatim from the latest examples of stupidity, pomposity, and asininity in the media. My all-time favorite? Here's what Scotty Reston had to say about Nelson Rockefeller a few hours after he died and a few hours before the truth came out:

"It should probably be remembered that Nelson Rockefeller died at his desk late on a Friday night after almost everybody else had gone home for the weekend. He was a worker, a yearner, a builder to the end."

"THE CONTINUING CRISIS": A wrap-up of the past month's insanities and inanities in the news, delivered with a razor-sharp wit aimed straight for the jugular. Example:

"The Rev. Carl Thitchener of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Amherst, New York, distributed modern condoms during a church service. . . . The Rev. Thitchener's other accomplishments include, according to UFO, a 1958 indecent exposure charge, a 1962 streaking incident . . . and at least two drunk driving charges. All of which suggest that the time has come for developing a condom to cover one's entire body."

"FORENOSES": And speaking of people you'd like to roll up and flush down the toilet, here's a column that turns America's sacred cows into rump roast. Now come nobody ever criticizes Russell Baker, for example? The American Spectator did. And they also fried up such noted posturers as Sam Donaldson, Alan Alda, and Rep. Janie Whitten, the pork-barrel king of Congress.

"LIFE AMONG THE INTELLECTUALGODS" chronicles the latest half-baked opinions and superficial observations that pass for deep thinking nowadays. If you're tired of the kind of pseudo-smart pablum dished out by the heavy thinkers of the Left, here's a column to give you the warm feeling of knowing you're smarter than they are, even on a bad day.

"PRESSWATCH"—In a society where Navy sealores hand over combat codes to the Russians and The New York Times prints classified documents on the front page, it was up to Bob Tyrrell to come up with a new definition for "Top Secret": namely, whatever the press refuses to report. In its "Presswatch" column, The American Spectator keeps a sharp eye on the sins of both omission and commission perpetrated by our liberal friends in the Fourth Estate.

"THE GREAT AMERICAN SALOON SERIES"—my favorite. Where else can you find a magazine with a regular column devoted to the great watering holes of America? From Bobby Short's urbane Cafe Carlyle to a joint named "Harry's" where real
men drink boilermakers and don’t eat guiche, this column is the ultimate guide to drinking yourself under the table in style.

And finally, of course, there are the book reviews. Each issue contains at least seven of them. Not the once-over-lightly you’re accustomed to reading in other magazines, but thorough, incisive, thoughtful reviews that ask the right questions, draw the right conclusions, offer the right criticisms.

Again, I was startled by the Spectator’s uncanny ability to pick the same books that I had read or (more often) intended to read. And I’m not just talking about the usual conservative tomes either—the latest Buckley tribute to sailing while intoxicated or George Will’s most recent bout with Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations.

No, the Spectator reviews the important and self-important books from the other side of the fence, as well. Like this penetrating critique (by P.J. O’Rourke) of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter’s modern classic Everything to Gain:

"I don’t know what the hell the book’s about. I mean I read it and everything, but I haven’t the faintest idea. It just sounded like a couple of prissy old ratchet jaw kocks yammering away about nothing until you wanted to stuff them headfirst through the outhouse seat."

Now, that’s what I call incisive literary criticism.

So what’s the first thing I did after reading all twelve issues of The American Spectator and before I sat down to write this letter to you?

I grabbed a copy and pulled out one of those annoying little subscription cards in the middle. (In our business, we call them “bind-in cards,” by the way. The really annoying ones, the ones that fly out and land in your soup, are called “blow-in cards.” The Spectator doesn’t use those, and that alone should encourage you to subscribe.) And I ordered a twelve-month trial subscription to The American Spectator.

Now I’m asking you to do the same thing.

But here’s a real kick-in-the-pants:

YOU’RE GETTING A BETTER DEAL THAN I DID!

By responding to an ad inside the magazine, I paid $24.00 for the next twelve issues. But the publishers of The American Spectator have authorized me to give you the next ten issues for (over, please)
only $11.95. That's more than $1? less than I paid! So much
for insider prices!

What's more, this offer is being made entirely at their
risk. If you don't like the first issue or the second Issue or
the third, you don't have to swallow all twelve of them like I
did. All you have to do is notify the publisher and they will
promptly send you a check for all the unmailed issues.

But speaking as someone who has just devoured twelve issues
of The American Spectator in a single sitting, I can assure you
that you'll never take advantage of that guarantee.

Sure they paid me to do it, but I had so much fun I would
have done it for free.

After all, isn't that what Ethel and Julius Rosenberg said?

Sincerely,

Richard Armstrong
for The American Spectator

P.S. It just occurred to me that I've been assuming throughout
this letter that you're a conservative. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe
you're one of them. Well, don't worry. We can still be friends.
Let me tell you a secret. I subscribe to some of your publica-
tions, as well. I subscribe to Mother Jones, The Atlantic, and
The New Republic. Why? Well, certainly not because I believe
what I read in them. No, it's because I like to know what you
are going to be thinking six months before you start thinking it.
I believe it gives me a definite advantage. Let me give you a
hint. If you want to find out what we conservatives are going
to be thinking six months before we start thinking it, you could
do no better than to subscribe to The American Spectator.
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

We are sending you the enclosed letter on the advice of our attorneys.

RUSH LIMBAUGH
DOCTOR OF DEMOCRACY

YOU HAVE TESTED POSITIVE FOR EIB!
CHAPTER ELEVEN:
In Which Our Hero Blows His Biggest Chance

Slowly but surely I was cobbling together a reputation as a direct-mail copywriter who could be counted on to write a competent circulation-promotion package. One day I got a phone call that was roughly the equivalent of winning the lottery in that field.

I picked up the phone, and the voice on the other end began talking without engaging in the trivial formality of saying hello:

“I know all the top copywriters in New York. How come I’ve never heard of you?”

“Who is this???”

“Benson.”

It was Richard V. “Dick” Benson, the *uber*-consultant in direct-mail publishing. If you’ve never read Dick’s book—*Secrets of Successful Direct Mail*—by all means stop reading this one and buy it on Amazon immediately. It’s one of the two or three best books ever written on direct marketing.

“Saw your package for the National Trust,” he said. “Where’ve you been hiding?”

The National Trust for Historic Preservation is a non-profit organization that’s kind of on the cusp between fundraising and publishing. Because when you contribute to the Trust to help preserve old buildings, they also send you a
beautiful monthly magazine called *Preservation*. The National Trust had recently hired me to write a direct-mail package, and I came up with one of my favorite envelope teasers of all time:

**WE’RE LOOKING FOR PEOPLE WILLING TO STAND IN FRONT OF BULLDOZERS**

The package bombed. (There I go again! It seems I always write my favorite copy for packages that fail.) But even though he knew it hadn’t been a success, the package caught the eye of the Trust’s direct-mail consultant, Dick Benson.

“So how come I’ve never heard of you before?” he repeated.

If I had a nickel for every time I’ve been asked this question during the past 38 years, I’d be a wealthy man. Over the years, I’ve developed a snappy response:

“I guess you’re out of the loop.”

But I couldn’t say that to Dick Benson! For one thing, I’d only known him for 10 seconds and he already intimidated me half to death. For another, there was never anyone in the history of direct marketing who was more *in the loop* than Dick Benson. He literally knew everyone in the business, and everyone knew him—either personally or by reputation.

“I don’t know, sir. I keep a low profile, I guess.”

“I want to hire you to write for my *Berkeley Wellness Letter*. Got time to do that?”

“Yes, sir!”
“Okay, someone will be in touch with you.”

Click.

“Hello? Hello? Mr. Benson?”

I didn’t know it at the time, but Dick was famous for this. He didn’t believe in saying hello or goodbye on the phone. It was disconcerting, to say the least. Personally, I think it was a deliberate strategy to keep his clients and his vendors on their heels. I heard a few people over the years say that he was really a sweet guy, but I never saw that side of him!

Dick Benson invented the concept of publishing a health newsletter under the imprimatur of a famous medical school or hospital. *The Berkeley Wellness Letter* was his first, then he followed it with the equally-successful *Johns Hopkins Health After 50 Letter*. Since then there have been scores of imitators from the Mayo Clinic, Harvard Medical School, the Cleveland Clinic, and so on.

So—*here I go again!*—I write one of the best envelope teasers of my life. It’s a big picture of Winston Churchill with a headline nearby that says:

**He ate too much, drank too much, and smoked too much...yet he lived to be 90 years old. What are YOUR chances of pulling off the same trick?**

When Benson read the copy, he didn’t call me. Instead he called literally everyone he knew in the direct-marketing industry and told them that he’d discovered the world’s next great copywriter. He read my copy to everyone over the telephone and told them they’d better call to get on my schedule before it was too late.
For weeks afterwards, I was getting calls from a *Who’s Who* of people in the magazine publishing business saying, “You don’t know me, but I’m a client of Dick Benson’s. I wonder if you’d be available to write…” etc. etc.

I was on top of the world for about 3 months. Which is exactly how long it took to get this package produced and in the mail. Then one day the phone rang.

“You remember your Churchill package for the *Wellness Letter*?”

“Hi, Dick. I’m fine, by the way, how are you?” I was getting used to his greeting-less greetings by now. “Yes, I remember the Churchill package. What about it?”

“Bombed.”

Click.

Dial tone.

I was still holding the phone. Slowly, I put it down and lowered my head into my hands to cry. Suddenly it rang again.

“Hello, Richard. It’s Joe Blow, Dick Benson’s client. Remember that project we scheduled with you about three months ago? Well, it turns out we’re not going to be doing that mailing after all, so we have to cancel. Sorry.”

For the next three weeks, I fielded *those* telephone calls. And I was pretty sure I’d never work in magazine publishing again.

**LESSON LEARNED:** I learned one important secret from Dick Benson which he never mentioned in his book *Secrets of Successful Direct Mail*. During the time we worked together—and he did hire me for a few other projects before he passed away—he never once expressed *any doubt about anything*.

That doesn’t mean he wasn’t wrong from time to time, because he was. He was wrong about my Churchill letter, for example. He thought it was great,
and it turned out to be lousy. But he never expressed any doubt. I never once heard him say, “Well, on the one hand this, but on the other hand that.” This is a very important lesson for copywriters and especially consultants. Part of what companies are paying consultants for is to provide cover for the decisions they make. When the project bombs and the suits come back and say, “Why did you do it like this?”…they want to be able to say, “Dick Benson told us to do it like that.”

The folks who work for large corporations are…well, a certain kind of individual. They’re not big risk takers. Sure, they want to make a profit. They want to have successful projects. They want to make money. But what they really want more than anything else in the world is to keep their jobs. Confident copywriters and consultants help them do that. That’s why it’s sometimes more important in this business to be confident than it is to be correct!

*Why was the Winston Churchill package such an abject failure?*

Twenty years later, I’m still not sure. But I suspect it was because I got so carried away with telling the Winston Churchill story that I forgot this was a promotion for a health magazine. People probably took one look at that photo of Old Winnie and thought it was a letter from the History Book of the Month Club. What did it have to do with their health? Not much. That’s why it bombed.

And did it ever bomb! Dick’s partner in the newsletter business, Rodney Friedman, told me candidly the results were so bad he personally went to the Post Office to make sure the mailing went out!

Believe it or not, I’ve had a lot of clients say that to me over the years. I don’t get these teensy-weensy little failures like Index 97 or Index 98. I get TITANIC FAILURES like Index 21 or Index 13. I get the kind of failures where there’s very serious doubt about whether the mailing even went out. I take a certain amount of pride in that.

Oh, let me tell you one other little secret I learned from Dick Benson. Now that he’s passed away, I can share this with you. Dick was never in the publishing business. He was in the list-building business!
He sold subscriptions to those newsletters for just ten dollars a year! In the process, they became the most widely-circulated newsletters in America. (Other than Limbaugh’s, of course.) But Dick didn’t really give a damn about the newsletters. He hired Rodney Friedman to manage the editorial and business side of the venture. All Dick cared about was the lists. In other words, he literally gave away the newsletters in order to build up gigantic mailing lists of subscribers which he could rent to other mailers at an enormous profit.

When you understand why he did that, you understand how direct marketing really works.

HE ATE TOO MUCH,
DRANK TOO MUCH,
AND SMOKED TOO MUCH

...YET HE LIVED TO BE
NINETY YEARS OLD

WHAT ARE YOUR CHANCES
OF PULLING OFF THE
SAME TRICK?

Winston Churchill
(November 30, 1874—January 24, 1965)

INSIDE: A Free Offer That “Old Winnie”
Probably Would Have Declined
‘Round about this time I got a call which really changed my career for the better. It was Donn Smith, a copywriter whom I had never heard of before. Not many people had. Because Donn was like Tom Hagen in *The Godfather*—he had a special practice, just one client. The client was Belvoir Publications, and even though he was listed as Belvoir’s Senior Vice President at the time, a major part of Donn’s job was writing circulation-promotion copy for all of Belvoir’s many excellent newsletters.

In a way, Donn was the victim of his own success. Because he hadn’t found many copywriters over the years that could do the job better than he could do it himself. When I started working for him, Donn held the controls for nearly all of Belvoir’s newsletters—despite having hired some of the best copywriters in the world to try to beat them.

Over the years, I’ve probably written more packages for Belvoir Publications than any other client. In the process, Donn became kind of a mentor to me, and I’m not ashamed to say I imitated his style. In fact, there was a time in the early 1990s when our work was almost impossible to distinguish. Take this package for Practical Sailor, for example.

I found 10 copies of it in the box where I keep my samples, so I’m 99% sure I wrote it. But if Donn called me and said, “Hey, I wrote that one!”…I wouldn’t be surprised. Our work during this time is as hard to tell apart as the
paintings of Picasso and Braque in the 1920s. (A somewhat overblown analogy?) But it’s only because I admired him so much.

In the early 1990s, Donn hired me to work on a brand new newsletter called John Lyons’s PERFECT HORSE. Lyons was a well-known horse trainer—the original “horse whisperer”—and while he had written a few books and magazine articles on the subject, this was his first venture into the newsletter business.

For my package, I reached back deep into the history of direct marketing to emulate an ad that has been called the best advertisement of all time—Maxwell Sackheim’s print ad for the Sherwin Cody School of English, featuring the headline:

**DO YOU MAKE THESE MISTAKES IN ENGLISH?**

The advertisement ran for 40 years and is considered a classic in the history of direct marketing. Applying this to Perfect Horse was a proverbial no-brainer. John Lyons was an expert at fixing a horse’s faults and bad habits, so I wrote the following teaser on my outer envelope:

**DOES YOUR HORSE HAVE ONE OF THESE 7 BAD HABITS?**

There’s a legend in the history of direct marketing—perhaps apocryphal—which says Sackheim originally wrote this headline as “Do You Make Mistakes in English?” and it failed miserably. Only when he added the word “these” did it become a huge success.

Why?
Because the word “these” lifts the ad out of the realm of a normal, empty advertisement and implies that it’s an article filled with valuable information. The reader, in other words, thinks he’s going to learn something useful simply by reading the ad. As such, it follows one of the most fundamental rules of direct-mail copywriting: *Give your advertisement intrinsic value.*

How did this package do?

When Donn called me to give me the results, I almost dropped the phone. It was not only the highest response rate I’d ever received, it was the highest I’d ever heard of. I’m not allowed to tell you how high. But that’s okay. You wouldn’t believe me if I did.

This next package for Belvoir also was a huge success, and it illustrates yet another way of making your advertising valuable. I always like to give away something free just for opening in the envelope. In this package for a newsletter based on the *Antiques Roadshow* television program, I offer a free “Pocket Appraiser” inside. But only after having whetted the reader’s appetite with three juicy stories about people making millions when they accidentally discovered valuable antiques in their attics.

Of course, you may recognize another important factor in the success of this particular piece. It’s just like the *Limbaugh Letter*. If you can arrange to have your direct-mail package supported by a national television show that millions of people faithfully watch three times a week, it’s usually gonna do pretty well.

And so it did.

I’ve worked with Belvoir Publications for more than 20 productive years now, and I hope we enjoy another 20 years together. It’s a great client. The bad news is that Donn Smith took early retirement from Belvoir to become a freelance copywriter, so now we’re competitors!
LESSON LEARNED: Always give your prospect some kind of reward for reading your direct-mail package—whether it’s some giveaway inside (called a “freemium”) or, better yet, valuable information that can improve his life. Later, I’ll show you the ultimate example of this technique in a package I wrote for a wine-of-the-month club.

For freelance copywriters, there’s a lesson to be learned in how I came to work for Belvoir Publications. Donn was urged to call me by an artist we both knew, Jon Rettich. The lesson? Be kind to your artists! They are like the honeybees of this business, flying from flower to flower, pollinating them with referrals and recommendations. Some copywriters I know treat their artists in a very high-handed, arrogant manner. But I try to be kind to my artistic colleagues, especially when they’re looking for work. Over the years, they’ve often returned the favor.
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

Practical Sailor

IT'S "THE BEST KEPT SECRET" IN THE WORLD OF SAILING!

FREE ISSUES

And the Next Two Issues Are YOURS FREE!

DOES YOUR HORSE HAVE ONE OF THESE SEVEN "BAD HABITS?"

See the List Inside...

FREE ISSUE

And Toss Your Lariat Around a FREE ISSUE of a Bold New Magazine for Serious Horse Owners!

Richard Armstrong  
62
Wouldn’t It Be Wonderful if ANTIQUES ROADSHOW Came to Your House?

DATE: 05/02/01

Announcing Antiques Roadshow Insider:
The Premier Issue Is YOURS FREE!

Gladle
6060 York Rd., Ste. 105
Baltimore, MD 21217-2600

Jun 02 2001.

DISCOVER THE “HIDDEN TREASURES” IN YOUR HOME!

WHICH OF THESE VALUABLE PIECES OF “JUNK” ARE HIDING IN YOUR ATTIC?

One man purchased a bad painting of the Titanic in an antique shop. The painting was worthless. But the original menu from the Titanic he found on the back was worth more than... (See the shocking number inside)

Purchased at auction in a “mystery box” for $95, our appraiser said this silver spoon was nearly five hundred years old and worth up to... (Look inside)

She bought this old card table at a garage sale because it looked interesting. Little did she know it was made by John Seymour and was worth more than $200,000! (But look inside to see how much she paid for it)

FREE POCKET APPRAISER ENCLOSED!
CHAPTER THIRTEEN:
A String of Pearls for Rodale…and One Diamond!

As I mentioned earlier, there have been just three clients which have accounted for 80% of the work I’ve done in my career. I’ve already discussed Lautman & Co. and Belvoir Communications. The third company is Rodale Press, the publishers of Prevention Magazine, Men’s Health, and many other fine magazines and books on natural healing. Rodale is one of world’s premier companies in direct marketing, and I’m very proud of our 20-year-long association.

When young freelance copywriters ask me for the key to success in this business, I always give them a piece of advice that’s perfectly true…but perhaps not all that useful:

“Try to get a winner on your first time out with a new client.”

Great advice! Just not so easy to accomplish. But on a few occasions in my career, I’ve been lucky enough to write a winner on my very first try with a new client, and this usually means they’ll continue to employ me for many years into the future—even if they have to suffer through a lot of losers along the way. In Rodale’s case, I wrote the following winning package on my first at-bat, and I’m still working for them 20 years later.
In the early 1990s, we began to see a new format making inroads in the world of direct mail. It was called a “magalog,” and it was a direct-mail piece that was written and designed to look just like a magazine. Up until that time I had only written conventional, inserted direct-mail packages, and I looked askance at this new format.

I’m embarrassed to say now that when I saw my first magalog in the mail, my initial reaction was, “This’ll never work.” I thought it would be far too expensive to compete with a regular direct-mail package. What I didn’t realize is that if you do it right, magalogs actually cost less to produce and mail. When magalogs didn’t disappear after a few months, I decided they were a fad or a trend—like double postcards, which were big in the 1980s—and they’d eventually fade away. So I continued to avoid working in this format.

But as control after control fell to the mighty magalog, I became a believer. Now I realize the magalog works because it’s the embodiment of the very rule I discussed in the last chapter: They make your advertisement seem valuable!

When you receive one in the mail, you don’t think it’s another lousy junk-mail letter. Instead you think, “Ah, here’s a free magazine filled with lots of great information!” At least that’s the way it’s supposed to work. And it did work like
that at first. Now it’s getting harder because everyone is using them. Some of my clients like Rodale and Boardroom hardly ever mail anything else.

So if I wanted to stay in the business, I had to learn how to write magalogs. Believe me, it’s not easy! Some of these babies come out of your printer at 50 manuscript pages, 75 pages, even 80 pages or more! It’s often been compared to writing an entire issue of TIME magazine…by yourself! Only it’s harder, because the editors of TIME aren’t trying to sell anything.

Here’s a string of winning magalogs I’ve written for Rodale over the years:

**MY FIRST MAGALOG**

I think this was my very first attempt at writing a magalog. Not so bad. As I recall, it won the test. I love the look on the model’s face, don’t you? It looks like she’s watching a man undress. That was the whole idea!
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

TOTAL MAN
Cool Stuff You Never Knew...That Just Might Change Your Life!

BUILD BIGGER BICEPS WITH Fewer “Reps!”
See how it’s done on PAGE 4 inside.

Men Can Have “Multiple Orgasms,” Too!
The secret revealed on PAGE 6.

FOODS THAT FIGHT FAT AND FEED MUSCLE!
Turn to PAGE 16 for news about a free gift!

Tame the “Man-Killer” Diseases!
Plus many more longevity secrets on PAGE 14.

The “Lazy Man’s” Way to Lean!
Great news for couch potatoes on PAGE 10.

Where the Women Are!
Their “hideouts” revealed on PAGE 17.

Richard Armstrong
THE MAGALOG THAT MADE ME CRY

Did I mention that writing magalogs was hard? Writing this package actually made me cry! It wasn’t so much the length of the project, but the subject matter that drove me crazy. I knew nothing about sewing, and as I got into the project I couldn’t work up any enthusiasm for it. This was unusual for me. I usually like working on projects that are different from what I’ve done before, because I enjoy the process of learning something new. That’s why I accepted this assignment in the first place. But sewing left me utterly cold. Writing every single word of this promotion was like getting a root canal without anesthesia. I remember my mother called me in the middle of working on it one day and said, “How’s your work going, hon?”

I burst into tears!

So it bombed, right?

Nope, it was a big winner.

Go figure.
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

Rodale’s Secrets For
Successful Sewing
The Magazine for Women Who Love to Sew!

Now you can
Turn Ordinary Patterns Into Stunning Originals—With Any Machine

The 7 “Excuses” that Prevent Good Sewers from Becoming GREAT Sewers! PAGE 4.

Unleash the HIDDEN POWER of the Sewing Machine You Already Own! PAGE 6.

“IMPOSSIBLE!” Said My Friends When I Described Those Embellishments.

“UNBELIEVABLE!” They Said When They Saw the Dress!
(Story Continues on Page Three)

Projects that Once Took Weeks of Hand-Sewing Now Become WEEK-END WONDERs! PAGE 8.

What Your Mother NEVER Told You About Sewing! PAGE 10.

Find out inside why your chances of winning this $1,000 SERGER — FREE! — are better than you think!
Men’s Health magazine was such an enormous success for Rodale that they decided to follow it with a health-magazine just for women. They hired me to write the launch package. When I asked them how it was doing in the mail, they answered with one word:

“Gangbusters!”

Get a load of that model on the front cover, by the way! After this was printed, I kept it propped up on my desk and stared at it worshipfully every few minutes. I don’t know if I was in love with the model…or in love with my own copy!
MY FAVORITE MAGAZINE

Here’s another spin-off of *Men’s Health*. This time for older men. Again, Rodale asked me to write the launch package, and it was a big winner. It also won an Echo Award.

I loved the magazine, probably because it was written for my own demographic group. Unfortunately, it was a victim of the recent recession. Rodale decided to pull the plug on *Best Life* in 2009, mostly because of poor ad sales.

Take a look at the artwork on this piece, though. It was done by Rodale’s brilliant art director at the time, Christopher Farrell. Who says you can’t use beautiful artwork in direct mail and still have a winner?
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

Best Life
Special Report
For Men Only

What is the True Purpose of My Life?

"If I’m so successful, why don’t I feel satisfied?"
— Page 2 —

“What can I do to put a spark in my sex life?”
— Page 6 —

“How can I improve my relationship with my kids?”
— Page 7 —

“Am I working too much?”
— Page 8 —

“How many good years do I have ahead of me?”
— Page 9 —

“Will I have enough money to retire?”
— Page 10 —

“Don’t I deserve to enjoy the finer things in life?”
— Page 11 —

“What am I doing that really makes a difference?”
— Page 14 —
A TALE OF TWO CELEBRITIES

Here’s the “Limbaugh Effect” at work again! Both of these packages were winners. But I’m not sure how much credit I deserve. In each case, we had our product supported by celebrities.
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

Heloise has a great idea!

Why Not Put 2,647 of Her All-Time Favorite Hints into One READ-IT-WHEN-YOU-NEED-IT Book?

Heloise has an even better idea

Why Not Let You Try It Free?

- Sheets that iron themselves. Pots that scrub themselves. Plants that water themselves while you’re away! (Page 6 inside.)

- Give Your Good China a "Milk Bath!" And make unsightly cracks disappear. PAGE 16.


DOZENS MORE FREE HINTS INSIDE!
Can Cookies & Cola

Cure the Conditions that Concern YOU the Most???

Find Out How “sweet” Good Health Can Be!

- Coconut Cookies for Diarrhea? See PAGE 5
- Soda Pop for Arthritis Pain? PAGE 13
- Bilberry Jam for Better Vision? PAGE 6
- Fast Relief for earaches with Bubble Gum?? True! PAGE 14

Plus Hundreds of Other Healing Miracles FREE INSIDE Our “Home Remedy Mailbag!”

Richard Armstrong
BUILD YOUR BODY WITH YOUR BRAIN

I probably know less about body building than I do about sewing. One look at my body and you’d understand! But somehow I found it easier to wrap my mind around this project than the sewing magalog. This is one of several successful bodybuilding projects I did over the years for Men’s Health Books. One of the best known direct-mail artists of all time, Marty Davidson, worked on this one with me, by the way.
BUILD YOUR BODY WITH YOUR BRAIN!
(Not with Your Brawn!)

FLIP THE SWITCH INSIDE YOUR BRAIN that tells your body to start building muscles like mad!

5 MUSCLE-MAKING MYTHS that may be holding you back.

BUILD THE MUSCLES SHE LIKES BEST! And turn all your trouble spots into "hot" spots!

FREE POSTER!
20-Minute Abs Workout
(Details Inside)

SEE RESULTS FASTER THAN YOU EVER THOUGHT POSSIBLE!
A MONUMENTAL MAILING

Rodale only had to stick with me for a mere 15 years before I finally came up with a winner of monumental proportions. This magalog for a book about blood sugar called “The Sugar Solution” has been mailed in the gazillions.

Needless to say, I wrote it on a flat fee rather than a royalty! Just my luck. If I’d been on a royalty, I probably wouldn’t be writing this sample book right now. I’d be living in a villa in the south of France and sipping a Mojito. Oh, well. There’s something to be said for continuing to work into your old age.

So there you have it. A string of pearls for Rodale Press…and one diamond!
“What in the World Is Wrong with Me?”

- “I can’t lose weight no matter how hard I try.”
- “I feel so sluggish all the time.”
- “I’m so forgetful. I think I’m losing my mind.”
- “I find myself craving food between meals.”
- “I don’t sleep as well as I used to.”
- “I’m a happy person, but sometimes I feel so blue.”
- “My vision is not as sharp as it used to be.”
- “My mind feels so ‘mushy’ all the time.”

Even Your Doctor Is Mystified. But Scientists Now Believe That What You Might Have Is This...
(Turn the page)

The Editors of Prevention Want You to Preview an Important New Book on the Most Amazing Weight Loss and Nutritional Breakthrough of the New Century
LESSON LEARNED: What made the Sugar Solution magalog so successful? In all humility, I think it did a really great job of burrowing into the brains of people who are having blood-sugar problems. They have all these weird symptoms, and they don’t know why. They’ll do anything to find a solution. This is where every copywriting project should begin: Drilling deep into your prospect’s mind and trying to figure out what she really wants, what really frustrates her, or what really frightens her. Once you have the correct answers to those questions, a successful promotion literally writes itself!
CHAPTER FOURTEEN:
The Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Everlasting Control

There’s one area of the direct-marketing industry that a lot of freelance copywriters don’t know about. Thank God for that, because those of us who work in that area have had it pretty much to ourselves.

I’m talking about membership organizations and the financial products and services promoted to them. Remember when I said how Dick Benson built up his health publishing empire for the sake of his lists?

Well, the membership business is somewhat similar. Take the American Association of Retired People (AARP), for example. The size of the AARP’S membership roster is second only in America to the Roman Catholic Church—nearly forty million people. They own a building in Washington, DC that takes up an entire city block. They are the most powerful political lobby in America. And they did it all with people mailing in membership fees of just ten dollars a year!

But it’s not the measly $10 that made them so rich and powerful. It’s because they own a mailing list with 40,000,000 names and addresses on it, which is the mail-order equivalent of owning a goose that lays golden eggs. So you sell these folks life insurance…and you sell them health insurance…and you sell them credit cards…and you sell them travel deals…and so on and so on, ad infinitum.

Why?
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

Because as Willie Sutton said, when asked why he robbed banks, “That’s where the money is!”

This business, which is sometimes called affinity marketing, is so big it makes the newsletter publishing industry look like peanuts. Yet there only a handful of freelance copywriters who work in this area, and I know most of them personally. Because I’m one of them.

Two of the most successful membership copywriters are my friends John Nicksic and Richard Potter. Between them, they probably hold 75% of the controls among the major membership mailers. They slug it out against each other like two bull goats in rutting season. Nicksic sets the control, then Potter beats it. Then Nicksic comes back and beats Potter. And so on.

In these titanic struggles, I’m like an ant on the ground: I usually get crushed. But over the years, I’ve managed to write a few winners in this area, and none more successful than my everlasting control for the Good Sam Club.

The Good Sam Club (short for “Good Samaritan”) is a gigantic membership organization for people who own recreational vehicles. The best way to describe it is to say it’s like a AAA club for RV owners. It has more than a million members, which means it’s a mail-order monster that mints money in much the same way as AARP, except on a slightly smaller scale.

Sometime back in the mid-1990s I got a call from the man who was (and still is) the Dick Benson of the membership business—James R. Perdiew. He’s the leading direct-mail consultant in this field and has all the top clients. He asked me if I’d be willing to write a package for the Good Sam Club.

“The good whaaah?” I replied.

He explained what it was.

I wasn't impressed. This was not the kind of client I was a-hankering-fer at the time. I wanted to work for Playboy, The New Yorker, Consumer Reports, Newsweek, all the big names in magazine publishing.
“Well, I gotta tell you, Mr. Perdiew. I’m awfully busy. I’m not sure I could squeeze that in this year. Or next, for that matter.”

“They’ll pay you more than you’re currently charging any of your other clients.”

“When can we get started?”

Here’s the package I wrote for the Good Sam Club. It remained the control for more than 10 years, mailing in the tens of millions and beating back all challengers—including Nicksic and Potter, several times. I rank it among the best letters I ever wrote.

LESSON LEARNED: What made the so-called “Cussing” package for the Good Sam Club so successful? Simple. It’s written in a first-person voice with a strong narrative pull. That’s fancy-pants literary talk for a damn good story told by the guy who lived it.

Ever since John Caples wrote “They Laughed When I Sat Down at the Piano,” this technique remains one of the world’s best ways to write a direct-response advertisement. That is, if you can pull it off. Not everyone has a knack for this kind of writing.

Over the years, just about every package I ever wrote in this style became a winner. And it only took me about 30 years to notice it! So after 30 years of accidentally doing this, nowadays I do it on purpose. If I can possibly sign a letter with my own name and tell a story in my own voice, I will. Because it hardly ever fails.

Jesus always spoke in parables, after all. And if it’s good enough for the Guy from Galilee, it’s good enough for me!
"I guess it was all the fussing and shouting that woke me up. My wife 'suggested' I go outside and see what all the ruckus was about. And what I found there was not a pretty sight... (Continued inside)"
Dear Friend,

I guess it was all the fussing and shouting that woke me up.

My wife "suggested" that I go and see what all the ruckus was about. So I pulled on my jacket, grabbed a flashlight, and went outside. What I found there was not a pretty sight...

It seems that some guy with a 25 foot motorhome had pulled into the site next to ours in the middle of the night, and now he was having a heck of a time hooking up his power and water. He had wires going every which way and had given himself a nasty shock.

"We got lost on the road," he said. "Been driving all night to find this place. Now I can't get this damn power line hooked up."

"Here, let me take care of that," I said. And in a few minutes, I had him all hooked up. Power on. Water running. Even his cable television was on line.

"Hey, you're good," he said. "You must be an old-timer when it comes to RVs, huh?"

"Naaah," I said. "Only been doing it a couple of years. But I got some tips out of a magazine called HIGHWAYS that makes hookups a cinch."

'A magazine for RVers, eh? Well, that sounds interesting. But it's not for me because as soon as I get back home, I'm going to sell this rig and buy something sensible — like a sailboat. This is our first trip in an RV, and believe me, Mister, it's going to be our last. We've had nothing but trouble the whole time."

Well, by now I was pretty much wide awake. So while his wife and kids were getting things settled, I invited him to come over and have a cold drink. We popped open a few cold ones under my awning and listened to the crickets and bullfrogs in the distance.

After we told each other where we were from, what we did for a living and all that stuff, he apologized for waking me up.

"I'm really sorry about all the noise," he said. "But I'm so frustrated I could spit. When my wife and I bought this rig, we

please continue...
thought it was going to be so much fun. But it's been nothing but headaches the whole time."

"Mechanical problems?" I asked.

"That's the only kind of problem we haven't had," he said. "No, the motorhome's worked fine. But we haven't been able to find half the campsites we planned on visiting, and the half we did find turned out to be rotten. Our mail from home is all screwed up. The propane gas is costing more than I expected. The other day, we had a flat tire, and we waited all day for someone who could change a motorhome tire. And that's just the beginning."

I listened patiently while he continued his tale of woe. Finally, when it seemed like he'd vented all his anger, I spoke up:

"Well that's pretty much what happened to us when we first started RVing. But that was before we joined the Good Sam Club."

"The good what club?" he asked.

"Good Sam Club," I said. "It stands for Good Samaritan. They're the same folks who publish that magazine I told you about earlier. You get it free when you're a member and you get lots of other free stuff too. It's all designed to make RV'ing easier and more fun. It's really a good deal."

"Tell me more about this club," he said.

So I gave him the whole spiel. I told him how it all started about 30 years ago, when a few people got together and formed a little club for RV'ers. They put details on their RV's - a little guy with a halo - so they could spot each other on the road.

"I've seen those stickers!" he said. "I always wondered what they were about."

I smiled and explained how this organization had grown to nearly a million members. And the buying power represented by a million RV'ers means that we get great deals on parts and supplies, insurance, financing, propane gas, camp site fees.

I told him about Good Sam's optional Emergency Road Service benefit. About their mail forwarding service. Their FREE trip-routing service. Their great low-interest rate credit card. I told him about the FREE subscription to HIGHWAYS - Good Sam's member magazine featuring technical tips, ratings, rankings and savvy "insider
“You ever use that optional Good Sam emergency road service you mentioned?” he asked.

“Several times,” I said with a rueful smile.

“One time my wife was driving while I was asleep in the back. She hadn’t checked the fuel gauge for hours and she ran clean out of gas. So she grabbed the cellular phone and called Good Sam’s “800” number. They sent out a guy with enough gas to get us to the nearest filling station...all at no charge. I slept through the whole thing. And she was so embarrassed about it she didn’t tell me what happened until a month later.”

“Then another time,” I went on, “our alternator broke down. We were in Saskatchewan—about a million miles from nowhere—when all the electrical systems went dead. I thought we were up a creek big-time. But I called Good Sam and they sent a special RV tow truck out to us. Wound up towing us 93 miles to the nearest RV service center.”

He whistled softly. “That must’ve cost you a bundle.”

“Nope. The towing was absolutely free. We paid for a new alternator and we were on our way. The cost of that one tow would have been well over what we paid to enroll in the additional RVS benefits.”

“What about the mail forwarding service,” he said. “You use that?”

“All the time,” I answered. “Good Sam has a plan that takes care of all our mail. Every time we check into a new RV park, we pick up our mail easy as pie and the lag time is never more than a few days.”

“How about the trip routing?” he asked.

“Religiously,” I replied. “We used to get lost all the time. Now we never do. I just tell Good Sam where I want to go and when I want to get there and they send me a computerized itinerary and directions. I can even tell them if I want to get there fast or take the ‘scenic’ route. Either way, the routes indicated are all ‘RV friendly’.”

“How much for that?”

“Free,” I said.

“I can even route my own trip on the internet.”
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

But now it was my turn to ask the questions. ‘Mind if I ask how much you’re paying for this campsite?’

‘Twenty bucks a night,’ he replied.

‘Well, I’m getting the same type site as you for $18. That’s because this park is one of about 1,500 around the country that are affiliated with Good Sam Club. If you’re a member of Good Sam, you get a 10% discount. I figure I saved the cost of my first year’s membership in less than a week on the road with this benefit alone!’

So now that we were talking about money, he popped the big question:

‘How much do you pay for membership in the Good Sam Club?’

‘Take a guess,’ I said.

‘Oh, I reckon it’s worth about $300 a year.’

‘Lower,’ I replied.

‘Two hundred?’

‘Lower.’

‘One hundred?’

I was starting to get sleepy again, and at the rate he was going, he’d be guessing all night. So I cut to the chase:

‘For new members, twelve bucks a year,’ I said. ‘That’s just a dollar a month. And for that, you get the magazine FREE. You get the trip routing FREE. And you get more discounts and bargains than you could shake a stick at.’

He polished off the last of his drink and stood up. ‘Well, maybe I won’t sell this rig after all. Maybe this Good Sam Club can make RV’ing as much fun as I thought it would be. At a buck a month, I haven’t got much to lose by trying it.’

‘You’ve got nothing to lose,’ I said. ‘Because it’s guaranteed. Sign up for a year and give it a whirl. Then if you don’t like it—or if you really do wind up selling your rig—you can get your money back. All of it. Even if you’ve been a member for the whole twelve months!’
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

He thanked me for the advice and ambled off toward his rig. I went inside, took off my jacket, and crawled back into bed next to my wife.

"What was that all about?" she asked groggily.

"Oh, new neighbor. Helped him hook up. Told him about the Good Sam Club."

"You gave him the Good Sam Club spiel?" she said with a laugh.

"It must be time for breakfast."

Hey, I admit it. I'm a big fan of the Good Sam Club and so are most of the people I meet on the road. Like my new neighbor, I was just about ready to give up RV'ing before I joined the club. It was too much hassle. Too many headaches. Cost too darn much money.

But the Good Sam Club helped me rediscover all the things that got me into RV'ing in the first place. The freedom. The companionship. The comfort and convenience of having your own home on wheels.

In the past few years, my wife and I have seen more of this beautiful country than we ever knew existed. We've made great new friends. We've had loads of fun. And we've done it all without going broke. Without worrying about breakdowns. Without getting ripped off on gas, repairs, supplies, or campsite fees.

But enough about me! What about you?

Do you have that sneaking suspicion that RV'ing is not as easy as you thought it would be when you first started out?

Are you tired of getting lost on the road? Winding up at campsites that are closed or in lousy condition? Are you sick of paying premium prices for propane, site fees, replacement parts, RV equipment, and insurance?

Do you think your RV'ing would be more enjoyable if you got some fresh ideas about new places to go (and places to avoid)? If you met some new friends on the road? If you had some good advice about making your rig easier to handle? Cheaper to maintain? Easier to operate? More comfortable and convenient to use?

If so, then I'd give you the same advice I gave my new neighbor:

Sign up for a year's membership in the Good Sam Club.

It costs just $12.00 a year—just a dollar a month. Even
less if you sign up for your first 2 or 3 years now. You don't have to send any money ... you can pay with your credit card, or they'll just send you a bill.

For that small amount, you'll get all the benefits and privileges that I told my new friend about ... plus many more that I didn't have time to get into.

Best of all, if you decide that membership in the club is not for you, you can get your money back. Every penny of it. Even if you ask for a full refund on the last day of the last month of your membership. You've literally got nothing to lose.

So why am I taking the time to write you such a long letter about the Good Sam Club? What's in it for me?

I admit I have a selfish motive. If you pull up next to my rig at two o'clock in the morning, I don't want to have to drag myself out of bed to help you hook up and stay up all night telling you about the Good Sam Club.

I've usually got a long day on the road ahead of me. I need my sleep!

Best regards,

Richard Armstrong
for The Good Sam Club

P.S. You can get started on your membership in the Good Sam Club right away! We've enclosed a decal to put on the back of your RV and a personalized plastic membership card you can put in your wallet. You'll get a validation sticker to activate your card shortly after The Good Sam Club receives your activation form.

P.S.2. But please hurry! This offer is for new members only and it won't last long. It's important that the Good Sam Club receives your activation within ten days. There's no need to send money now. You can pay later at your convenience.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN: Frankly, I’m Puzzled

I actually knew the man who invented the lift letter. His name was Paul Michael, and he was working for Greystone Press (a publisher of mail-order encyclopedias) when he came up with a strange idea.

He decided to add a **second** letter to his direct-mail package. It was just a folded one-page sheet, and on the outside it said:

**OPEN THIS ONLY IF YOU’VE DECIDED NOT TO BUY**

Whether you’ve decided to buy or not, of course, opening the note was practically irresistible. Inside, the letter began like so:

Dear Friend,

Frankly, I’m puzzled.

I’ve offered you [benefit, benefit, benefit]...and yet still you say no.

I wonder why?

Could it be because of [common objection number one]

Could it be because of [common objection number two]

Etc.
Adding this little letter invariably seemed to lift response, so it became known in the business as a “lift letter.” In circulation-promotion packages, it was often signed by the publisher of the magazine (while the editor signed the main letter), so in these circles it was often called a “pub note.”

But whether they called it a lift letter or a pub note, it always began the same way, “Frankly, I’m puzzled…” Over time, using that wording began to fatigue. But the lift letter never did. Now it’s considered a standard part of any conventional direct-mail package, as *de rigueur* as the envelope or the reply card.

Paul Michael was a real character. One day he had an idea for an advertisement selling lucky charms through the mail. He quit his job, cashed in his pension plan, and bought a full-page advertisement in the *National Enquirer*.

On the first day he could expect some orders he went to the Post Office where he’d rented a little mailbox. He peered in the little window of the box and saw…

*Nothing!* No envelopes, no reply cards, no checks, nothing at all.

He was crestfallen. He knew he’d made a terrible mistake. He’d spent his life savings on the ad. He’d have to go back to his boss and beg for his job back. He was ruined. But he opened the door of the mailbox anyway, just to make sure there wasn’t something stuck to the sides.

As it turned out, there was something there. It wasn’t a reply card. It wasn’t an envelope. It was just a little handwritten note from the Postmaster. It said:

**Too much mail for box. Please see clerk at window.**

By the way, if you’ve read my novel about the direct-mail business, *God Doesn’t Shoot Craps*—and if you haven’t, good God Gertie, what’s your excuse??!!—you’ll recognize this story. I used it for the back-story of my main character, Danny Pellegrino—a mail-order con man of the first water.
Well, at any rate, by the time I met Paul Michael he’d been in business for himself for many years, selling lucky charms, bingo systems, holy water, all sorts of foolish stuff for gullible people. Was he successful? Well, his hobby was collecting antique Rolls Royces, so that should give you some idea.

Interestingly, he told me the same thing as Dick Benson about the real source of his income. It wasn’t the product, it was the lists. He said he made more than $200,000 a month from list rental. And his lists were very much in demand. They were known in the business as “sucker lists”—people who will believe anything and buy anything. As such, they were enormously valuable lists for a variety of products, and mailers would pay a premium to rent them.

Okay, so maybe Paul Michael wasn’t your most upstanding citizen of the direct-marketing community. But he was a charming rogue, and I liked him. He seemed to like me, too. One day he handed me a book that was wrapped in a plain brown dust jacket.

“Take this, kid,” he said. “Not many people know about this book. But there are a few of us who treasure it. It’ll tell you what you need to know to be a great copywriter. Just make sure you bring it back to me.”

Can you guess which book it was?

It was *Breakthrough Advertising* by Eugene Schwartz.

I took it home and devoured it in one sitting. But before I could return it to Paul, he died! So I guess I inherited the book from him. A few years later, I wrote a letter to Gene Schwartz telling him how much I enjoyed the book and disclosing the unusual circumstances under which I’d acquired it. He sent me another copy, from his own stash, autographed, with a note that said, “Now you can return Paul’s copy to his estate!”

But I kept ‘em both! Because they’re a weird little piece of junk-mail history.

So now I have two copies of *Breakthrough Advertising* on my bookshelf—one was a gift from the inventor of the lift note, and the other a gift from the
author. I recently noticed that *Breakthrough Advertising* was selling on Amazon for $297 a copy, because it’s still so rare and more in demand than ever before. *I wonder what my two copies would be worth on the Internet?* But I’m not selling them. You’ll have to get them from *my* estate!

At any rate, I’ve loved writing lift letters for my whole career, and here are three of my favorites:

**GO GET THAT BUS, DADDY!**

I was working for the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and having a hell of a time coming up with an idea because the organization consists of a bunch of environmental lawyers who bring lawsuits against polluters. Worthy work, I guess, but not very dramatic. Just when I was ready to hang myself from the ceiling out of frustration, I encountered an annual report in which one of the NRDC attorneys talked about trying to explain to his daughter what he did for a living. The result was this really sweet, very effective lift letter.
Dear Fellow Member of NRDC,

Once I tried to explain to my daughter, who was three years old at the time, what I do every day when I go to work.

I told her that I was trying to stop pollution -- the smoke that comes out of buses and that kind of thing.

A few days later, she and I were standing outside when a big bus rolled by. She pointed at it and said, "There's a smokey bus, Daddy! Go get it!"

I wish it were that simple!

It's hard to explain to a child -- it's hard for me to understand -- why changing the laws on something like air pollution takes so long. But it does. It involves many hours, days, weeks, months and years of research, litigation, lobbying and legwork. Tackling a city bus, by comparison, would be a cinch.

That's why the steady and reliable support of the Earth Advocates is so important to NRDC attorneys like myself. Having a dependable, ongoing source of support means that we can take on a difficult project or try an important case, even if we know it may take years to complete.

Like the buses, for example.

After many years of hard work, we finally won. And starting next year, a new generation of cleaner city buses will be hitting the streets.

With your support for the Earth Advocates, I'm confident we can tackle even bigger issues in the future. So to paraphrase my daughter:

"Let's go get it!"

Sincerely,

David Doniger

40 West 20th Street • New York, NY 10011
YOU WERE MENTIONED IN A RICH MAN’S WILL

I was working for *Smithsonian Magazine* and I encountered a story about the founding of the Smithsonian Institution. It seems that a wealthy British industrialist by the name of James Smithson had left a substantial portion of his estate to establish a museum of history and science in the United States of America. It occurred to me that this was almost as if Smithson had left a little portion of his fortune to every American citizen. So I wrote a lift letter with the following headline:

In 1829, an eccentric British millionaire by the name of James Smithson died. As it happens, he left you something in his will…

It’s hard to turn away after you’ve been told you were mentioned in a rich man’s will! That package, by the way, became the control for *Smithsonian* magazine and was a major milestone in my campaign to break into the publishing business.
Dear Friend,

He left you $515,169.00 to be exact.

But before you rush out to call your Mercedes dealer, I should mention that James Smithson left that money to all Americans. And that he left it to create an institution "for the diffusion of knowledge among men."

Disappointed?

You shouldn't be. Because -- metaphorically speaking -- some of your "inheritance" remains intact. In the form of a half-price subscription to SMITHSONIAN magazine. Or what amounts to six issues -- and six months of membership -- for free.

More importantly, Mr. Smithson's generous gift to the American people has been used precisely how he intended it to be -- to create an institution that would acquire and diffuse knowledge about the world around us.

An important part of that "diffusion" takes place through SMITHSONIAN magazine, one of the most widely read publications in America.

So if you're wondering why we're willing to slash the price of a regular subscription to SMITHSONIAN in half, which is like getting six issues free, just think of it this way:

It's your inheritance!

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Ron Walker
Publisher

RW:ab
MY CRAZY RICH AUNT

This is my favorite lift letter of all time. Certainly the best I ever wrote. And—who knows?—maybe the best anybody ever wrote…at least since “Frankly, I'm puzzled.”

I’m not just blowing smoke. This lift letter has the pelts on its pony to prove it. It was part of a control package I wrote for *Kiplinger Personal Finance Magazine* which lasted for nearly a decade under a barrage of constant testing by the world’s finest copywriters. When the package finally fatigued and was beaten by one of those damnable “voucher” or “statement of benefits” packages—*the scourge of the magazine industry!*—the client had an idea:

“What if we drop the ‘Crazy Rich Aunt’ lift letter into the new voucher package?”

Sure enough, the additional letter substantially lifted response. So now it’s *still* being mailed some 12 or 15 years after I wrote it, with no signs of slowing down.

By the way, my aunt—who is still alive and wealthier than ever at age 86—is “not amused” by all the attention. Speaking of wills, I’ll probably be left out of hers!

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**THE AMAZING MONEY-MAKING SECRET OF MY CRAZY RICH AUNT**

Richard Armstrong
Dear Friend,

My Aunt Jane is as rich as sin. And no one in our family can figure out why.

She worked as a librarian her whole life. Her husband, who passed away a few years back, was a tool-and-die maker. They never earned much money in their lives. But, boy, were they ever smart with what they had!

There was a little vacation home they picked up for a song and wound up selling for $250,000. Some well-chosen stocks that soared in value over the years. Mutual funds. Municipal bonds. Treasury bills. Even a vintage Volkswagen "Beetle" that's worth more now than the day they bought it.

Now my Aunt Jane -- who we always thought was just a little crazy -- is a bona fide millionaire!

One day I asked her for the secret of her financial success. "I have three rules," she said:

1) Never let your money sit idle

2) Never pay more than you have to for anything

3) And never pass up anything that's free

Well, my friend, unless you return the enclosed card today, you're going to break at least one -- and possibly all three -- of my Aunt Jane's rules.

Because if you return the enclosed card, you'll get a free issue of KIPLINGER'S PERSONAL FINANCE (Rule no. 1). If you decide to subscribe, you'll get the next eleven issues at a very low price, plus three free bonus gifts (Rule no. 2). And instead of spending the rest of your life working for money, you'll put your money to work for you (Rule no. 3).

I know my Aunt Jane wouldn't pass up a free sample issue of KIPLINGER'S PERSONAL FINANCE.

But of course...

She already subscribes.

Richard Armstrong
for KIPLINGER'S

Richard Armstrong
LESSON LEARNED: The lift letter is one of the most powerful direct-mail techniques ever invented. Even in this age of voucher packages, adding a lift letter still improves results. But nobody has ever improved on the formula Paul Michael created for lift letters many years ago:

1) Write an irresistible headline on the outside;

2) Make the letter smaller, shorter, on a different paper stock, and with a different signatory from the main letter;

3) Use it to overcome common last-minute objections.

By the way, a little sidebar about Eugene Schwartz. Nowadays Gene is finally getting the widespread recognition and admiration he so richly deserved during his lifetime. But when I was a young Turk starting out in this business, my friends and I really didn’t know or care much about Gene. We regarded him as an old-fashioned copywriter who worked the low end of the business—diet books, get-rich-quick schemes, and so forth. I mean, really, his most famous headline was “RUB YOUR STOMACH AWAY!”

Puh-leeze.

As my story about Paul Michael reveals, Breakthrough Advertising was out of print and neither well known nor widely read at the time. The only people who really knew how great Gene Schwartz was were his clients! And they were keeping it a well-guarded secret. Boardroom and Rodale reserved virtually all of his time, paid him a small fortune, and raked in the reply cards while he created winner after winner for them. Meanwhile, Gene’s own mail-order businesses were making so much money he could afford to assemble one of the world’s largest and most prestigious collections of contemporary art.

But our hero back in those days was not Gene Schwartz, it was Bill Jayme! Oh, how we all admired that man. He wrote with such style, wit, and creativity. We memorized his clever headlines. We lusted after his lifestyle—living on a mountainside in the California wine country…writing one direct-mail
package a month...earning about a quarter million a year. (Little did we realize Gene Schwartz could buy a painting for that much without batting an eye.) Bill Jayme was even profiled in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine!* Five glorious pages of text and full-color photos describing this amazing man who had elevated the craft of writing junk mail into an art form. Was there ever a copywriter more famous and more admired than Bill Jayme?

I never had occasion to meet Jayme in person. But one of the highlights of my professional life was one day when I opened a copy of *Direct* magazine and found a long interview with him. Imagine my surprise and delight when I encountered this exchange about halfway through the article. (Forgive me, but I’ve lost the article itself, so I’m paraphrasing it from memory.)

**DIRECT:** Who are your favorite copywriters nowadays? Who are some of the young copywriters coming up in the business whose work you admire?

**JAYME:** Well, Judith Hannah Weiss’s work is terrific. Also, Richard Armstrong.

Wow!!!! That was a red-letter day in the Armstrong household, lemme tell ya. Judy Hannah Weiss, by the way, was probably the best consumer-magazine copywriter who ever lived—aside from Jayme himself—but like a lot of us, her business was hurt by this damnable voucher trend, and she decided to take early retirement.

In truth, there were a few chinks in Jayme’s armor. Many a circulation director over the years told me privately that Bill was the Babe Ruth of the direct-mail business—both the home run king and the strikeout king. For every one of his famous winners like *Psychology Today* (“Do you close the bathroom door when you’re home alone?”), there were dozens of losers.

That’s true of nearly all of us, of course. But it wasn’t true of Gene Schwartz. Gene hardly ever lost.
Nor was Bill Jayme the friendliest person in the world. A great copywriter I know went up to Bill Jayme at an industry function and said, “Mr. Jayme, I just wanted to tell you how much I’ve admired your work. You were the one who inspired me to become a copywriter. I just wanted to meet you in person.”

“Well, now you have,” said Jayme and walked away.

Jayme’s rapier wit was easier to take when it was aimed at more appropriate targets—like meddlesome clients, for example. There’s a famous story about a client who made Jayme sit in front of his desk while he took a red pencil and made all sorts of pointless edits in the copy. When the client was finished, he looked up and said:

“There, Bill, don’t you think that’s better?”

To which Jayme replied:

“Only if it makes you feel better, Tom.”

Yes, Jayme had a sharp wit, and he didn’t much care who got sliced up by it. Gene Schwartz on the other hand was a lovable old coot who responded graciously to praise and was often willing to help mentor young copywriters—including yours truly, in a small way.

I spent most of my career emulating Jayme. But nowadays, in my dotage, I’ve come to realize Gene was the one I should’ve been emulating all along.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN:  
My Brief and Undistinguished Career in Publishing

When I wasn’t writing junk mail, I whiled away my time writing books. (Well, I whiled away a lot of time gambling and watching television, too, but that’s another story.)

If there are any aspiring authors reading this, let me assure you that writing books is NOT a good way to make a living. I’ve had three books published—spent many years out of my life writing them—and my advances have come to a grand total of $17,500. Worse yet, the advances have been going downhill since the first one, which I take as a bad sign.

I once attended a seminar given by a Madison Avenue copywriter who’d written a best-selling novel. When asked why he didn’t give up advertising to write fiction full-time, he said something I’ve never forgotten:

“Writing books is like playing the lottery,” he said. “You can make a million, but you can’t make a living.”

I’ll have to take his word on the part about making a million, but I can solemnly attest to the fact that you can’t make a living.

Nevertheless, there’s nothing quite like seeing your name in print for the first time, seeing your precious book for sale in a bookstore (and surreptitiously moving it up to the table of bestsellers in the front), doing book signings (however sparsely-attended they may be), and sitting for the occasional radio and
television interview. Because these are the little thrills in life that junk-mail writers don’t often get a chance to enjoy.

My first book was actually my mother’s idea. When I moved away from home and got my first apartment, I proved to be so inept at cooking, cleaning, and balancing my checkbook that my mother said she should write a book to help me—and all the other kids my age—learn how to master those important life skills.

Mom and I talked about the idea off and on for years. But one day I actually sat down to write a book proposal for what was tentatively entitled “DON’T POUR THE GREASE DOWN THE DRAIN.” Many months and several literary agents later, it sold to William Morrow & Company, one of the top publishing companies in New York. The book was eventually re-titled LEAVING THE NEST, and it did very well, going through no fewer than six printings and earning Mom and me small royalty checks for many years.

Speaking of television appearances, one of the shows we did to promote the book was a local program in Baltimore called People Are Talking. They liked us so much on that show we were invited back twice! But here’s the kicker. The host of the program was none other than…Oprah Winfrey!!!

The only problem, Oprah had left the show a few weeks before our first appearance. Drat! She left Baltimore to take some kind of job with a syndicated show in Chicago…I’m not sure what became of her afterwards.

LEAVING THE NEST is out of print, of course, but if you’re interested, you can still get a used copy on Amazon by clicking here.

My second book was a complete departure from the first. It was called THE NEXT HURRAH: The Communications Revolution in American Politics. Having worked in the world of political direct mail for many years, I always thought it was strange that there had been so many books written on the use of television in American politics, but hardly any on the subject of political direct mail. I also took note of the fact that no one (at that time) had written about the
political use of cable television, satellites, computers, or many of the other new electronic communication technologies.

THE NEXT HURRAH also was published by William Morrow, and it was a critical success—although I have no evidence that anyone other than my mother bought the damn thing. (Mom comes to my rescue again!) The Los Angeles Times gave it a good review on the front cover of their Sunday book section. But, sadly, no one who lives in Los Angeles can read. Kirkus Reviews called it “the best book on the electronic political process since Joe McGinnis’s The Selling of the President, which was thrilling for me to read, although probably somewhat disturbing for Joe McGinnis. All things considered, writing THE NEXT HURRAH was a great experience for me, although not a remunerative one. So at that point, I stopped writing books for nearly twenty years.

Then one day I had an idea for a novel.

(By the way, if you’re curious, you can still get THE NEXT HURRAH on Amazon, too, by clicking here.)

GOD DOESN’T SHOOT CRAPS was published by Sourcebooks in 2006. It tells the story of a junk-mail con man who sells what he thinks is a bogus craps system through the mail—until he discovers, much to his own surprise, that it really works.

Madness ensues.

I believe it’s the only novel ever written about the direct-mail business, albeit the somewhat seedier side of it. Although GOD DOESN’T SHOOT CRAPS earned the lowest advance of my three books, it was by far the most fun to write and promote. And it did okay in the marketplace, too, reaching #6 on Amazon’s list of comic novels at one point.

Even more exciting, it was optioned for film by the producers of the Broadway show “Xanadu”…which brought me a few hundred dollars and a lifetime of stories to tell at cocktail parties.
Dennis Farina, the well-known movie and television actor, was also briefly interested in optioning the book for film. He and I had lunch to discuss it, and that, too, has provided me with endless cocktail-party conversation.

“Can I get this book on Amazon, too?” you might ask.

I’m so glad you might’ve asked!

Yes, simply by clicking here. And since this book is still in print, I could actually see a royalty check from your purchase someday!
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:
What Have You Done for Me Lately?

As my career in direct marketing nears its fifth decade, I’ve come to grips with the fact that I’m not the best direct-mail copywriter in the world.

Not even close.

But I’m winning more tests than ever these days, so I must’ve accidentally picked up a trick or two along the way. Plus, I’m genuinely proud of a few things.

I’ve continued to learn and adapt to changing times, while retaining a decent respect for the principles of the past. Making the transition from fundraising to publishing was hard for me, but I made it happen. So was making the transition from conventional direct-mail packages to magalogs. (I still know a few world-class copywriters who refuse to take the leap.) Now, I’m struggling with learning about the Internet, and that doesn’t come easily to me at all.

Bob Bly and I started out in this business together. We were neighbors and friends. We both took Milt Pierce’s famous direct-mail copywriting course at NYU together back in the early 1980s. Bob and I were among the first people in our little circle of copywriting colleagues to buy computers, and we agonized over the decision. Because they were darned expensive, but we knew they’d be darned useful to our businesses, too.

“Have you bought one yet,” I’d ask every week or so.

“No, have you?” Bob would reply.
I’m not sure which one of us broke down first, but within a few hours of each other, we were both the proud owners of a Kaypro II—a clunky dinosaur of a computer which no longer even exists.

At any rate, Bob and I were on the cutting-edge of using computers for copywriting back then. But now it’s completely passed me by! I have to hire people to do the simplest things for me, because I’m totally incapable of doing them myself. Sometimes I don’t even know what to ask them to do. Nor am I alone. One of my friends from the old days in New York—a legendary copywriter—actually decided to retire because, in part, he didn’t want to learn how to write for the Internet. It’s not that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. It’s just that sitting in the sun, yawning, and snapping at flies suddenly seems like a much more appealing way to spend your time than wrestling with hyperlinks.

But I’m not announcing my retirement yet. I’m still chugging along, trying to learn new things. I attended Gary Bencivenga’s groundbreaking seminar a few years ago. I faithfully read Clayton Makepeace’s blog and buy his excellent products. I enjoy reading the blogs and e-zines of young whippersnappers like Jack Forde, David Garfinkel, Ryan Healy, Ben Settle, Michel Fortin, and many others. These guys may be younger than I am, but that doesn’t mean I can’t pick up a trick or two from them.

And I’m still cranking out some interesting stuff. Take this magalog I recently did for Boardroom’s Bottom Line/RETIREMENT, for example. It beat a longstanding control from one of the nation’s top copywriters. Do you recognize anything familiar about the publisher’s letter in the front? Yes, it’s an homage—I prefer to use the word homage instead of “rip-off”—to the old Wall Street Journal control by Martin Conroy. So you can see I’m still “stealing smart,” too.
Can you really afford to be...

RETIRED IN A RECESSION?

Which of These
7 RETIREMENT WORRIES
Are Keeping You Awake at Night?

☐ 1. Is my nest egg still big enough? (Page 4)
☐ 2. Can I make my money last? (Page 8)
☐ 3. Can I still afford my dream retirement home? (Page 12)
☐ 4. Will I need to work in retirement? (Page 15)
☐ 5. Will I still be able to travel in retirement? (Page 16)
☐ 6. Will I live long enough to enjoy my retirement? (Page 17)
☐ 7. Will I spend my “golden years” in doctors’ offices, hospitals, and nursing homes? (Page 20)

Stop worrying about retirement and start enjoying it! Bottom Line’s RETIREMENT BIBLE has the solutions to your problems. And it’s FREE!
A TALE OF TWO RETIREMENTS

(Which Kind Do You Want?)

Dear Friend,

About 10 years ago, two of my best friends from high school decided to retire after working for the same large corporation in Connecticut their entire careers.

“Jim” and “Dave” were both mid-level managers at the company, and they had identical retirement packages. In fact, they retired on the exact same day.

But that’s where the similarities end...

Today, Jim spends about half his time in Connecticut and half on the Gulf Coast of Florida, where he has an oceanfront condo. He plays golf nearly every day and travels to Europe twice a year. The last time I saw Jim, he seemed like the happiest man alive.

The last time I saw Dave, however, it was a different story.

He was working part-time at a shoe store in Bridgeport. It turns out he had some medical problems that nearly wiped out his nest egg. To make ends meet, he not only had to take a job, he also had to sell his family home and move into a one-bedroom apartment. Jim also told me his health wasn’t very good, and he seemed depressed.

Two intelligent, hardworking, successful men. Two very different kinds of retirement.

What made the difference?

Lots of factors, I’m sure. But Jim was always the kind of guy who sought expert advice and guidance on

(Continued on next page...)
The folks down at *Southern Living* magazine and their book-publishing division, Oxmoor House, are superb direct marketers, and I’m proud to have had them as clients for many years. Their best-selling book (more than 20,000,000 copies in print!) is the collection of *SOUTHERN LIVING ANNUAL RECIPES*. My recent slim-jim magalog unseated their longstanding control for this product. I kinda like the teaser on the back cover,

“IF YOU LIVE BELOW THE MASON–DIXON LINE (OR WISH YOU DID), WE HAVE A FREE GIFT FOR YOU!”
My First 40 Years in Junk Mail

COMPLIMENTARY “MINI-COOKBOOK”

Courtesy of

Southern Living

FREE

THE
Sweetest
MOST SUCCULENT,
AND SAVORY
RECIPES IN
THE SOUTH!

Now at a Price Less Than
Half What Others
Will Pay!

Six Sensational
Southern-Style
Recipes FREE Inside!
Including this Southern
soda-fountain classic on page 25.

3 FREE GIFTS!
Or take a look at this interesting bookalog I recently wrote for the American Cellars’ Wine Club. It’s the ultimate example of making your advertising valuable. It’s nearly 50 published pages long, and at least half of it is giveaway information about how to choose wine, store wine, taste wine, collect wine, etc. The pitch for joining the club is subtly interwoven throughout the piece. Oh, and get a load of that letter in the front! Remind you of anything?
Dear Friend,

A curious incident happened to me in a restaurant the other night.

My wife and I were out to dinner at one of the fanciest restaurants in town with our two best friends, Michael and Karen. We were celebrating our 23rd wedding anniversary.

The waiter set the thick, leather-bound wine list in front of me. But before I had a chance to open it, Michael reached over the table and snatched it out of my hands.

"I'll take care of this, Richard," he said. "You don't know anything about wine."

"Wait a minute, Michael," I said. "I'm the host tonight. I really should be the one to select the wine." And gently but firmly, I took the wine list back from him.

"Don't ruin my meal with a bottle of mouthwash!"

"Okay," said Michael with a chuckle. "But just don't choose that $1.98 rotgut rosé you used to drink in college, okay? I plan to order a nice meal tonight, and I don't want to ruin it with a bottle of grape-flavored mouthwash!"
Yes, it’s sort of the vintner’s version of “They Laughed When I Sat Down at the Piano.” Thanks again, John Caples!

Everything old is new again. That’s true when it comes to copy, and it’s true of old copywriters like me, too, I guess. Good copywriters should always be re-inventing themselves, right up until the bitter end. Which is why I fully intend to put the following words on my gravestone:

But wait…there’s more!