Interview with a Pro:

Master Copywriter Arthur Johnson Tells All to Michael Masterson, Part 1

Recently, Michael Masterson interviewed Arthur Johnson, a very successful copywriter who has worked for Agora Publishing and many other businesses. In Part 1 of the interview, Arthur spoke about how he got into the copywriting business. He also spoke at length about his specialty – health publishing products – as well as other kinds of work that he does.

MM: Arthur, why don't you begin by telling our students something about how you got into this business?

AJ: I got a degree in English Literature from Oxford University and was all set to go to work for a large bank (as an investment banker, actually) when I ran into a friend at a bar who said, "You never wanted to do that, did you? You wanted to write, didn't you?" And I said, "Yes." And she said, "Well, I know somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody who's quitting a writing job at the Franklin Mint."

Well, one thing lead to another and I wound up writing copy there. For a while, I was writing what we call "collateral copy" – the descriptive brochure that goes along with an item that discusses features and benefits, and identifies additional services the company offers. It's a very good foundation for copywriting because it teaches you how to do your research and how to get your facts right.

Then they put me to work writing promotional copy – and after several years, they put me to work in marketing. Eventually, I became vice president of a couple of different divisions – and found that my copywriting had given me a really good background for developing new products that could turn into good copy.

I stayed at the Franklin Mint for about 12 years, and eventually went out on my own. I've been on my own for about 12 years now. I split my time between copywriting and marketing consulting – and I find that they complement each other well.

MM: During that early transition, when you went from doing brochures to promotional copywriting – were there any surprises when you tried to write your first sales letter?

AJ: I think the hardest thing I ran into was in actually getting inside the head of my audience. I still find that to be the key to writing any kind of promotional stuff. In the case of the Franklin Mint, their typical buyer/collector was in his sixties, and I was in my twenties. I wasn't used to trying to think like other people so that job was great training because it taught me to get in touch with an audience that was totally foreign to me.

MM: How do you do that when you write copy today?

AJ: Well, there are a couple of ways of doing it. One way is to take a look at what they read. I try to find books and magazines that address that same audience. I don't necessarily look for material that I can put into my promotion. Instead, I look for

evidence of their attitude. What do they worry about when they go to bed at night? What do they hope for when they wake up in the morning? If I can reach out to them in a compassionate and understanding way – in a way that makes them feel that I know what they're worried about, that I know what's hurting them, that I understand this and we're going to make it better – I find that if I can do that and incorporate the facts of the product, I've pretty much got it written.

MM: Is it fair to say that, in your view, the buyer of the alternative health products that you write about is interested not only in getting cured, but in having a sympathetic ear?

AJ: Yes, I think so. Nobody wants to hear about your aches and pains, so a health problem is often a very private experience. And the older you get, the more private it gets, because all your friends have aches and pains and yours are the last thing they want to hear about. Also, I think that people who come to alternative medicine tend to have problems that traditional medicine has not found an answer for.

Still, I've found that a lot of the people I've talked to who are some of the biggest believers in alternative medicine have very firm ties to their traditional doctors. They think, "My doctor is great for this, but he doesn't understand that." So one of the things I try to do when I'm addressing an alternative audience is pitch a big tent. While I understand how traditional medicine doesn't have the answer for them, I don't want to say bad things about their doctors because they may still like their doctors.

MM: What are the primary beliefs, feelings, or desires that you run into in the alternative health field?

AJ: One that I think isn't greatly appreciated is that people are just trying to make sense of it all. It's not enough to present them with a solution in terms of testimonials, promises, and scientific proof. It really helps to tell them exactly why a product works. So you make the light bulb turn on in their heads and make it seem like it's actually their idea: "Oh, now I understand. Well, sure, then this thing would work."

MM: So maybe when, as you say, you "make the light bulb turn on" and they feel like they finally understand it, you give them a deeper feeling of security about the solution that you're offering than they would have if it were simply backed up by science.

AJ: Yes, I think so. And I also think, especially today, that there's a little transaction that goes on in direct mail copy. That if somebody is going to devote a half-hour to an hour (or however long it takes) to reading a promotion, you have to give him something in return beyond the sales message. You have to deliver some information – and you also have to entertain him. Obviously, the trick is to deliver that information in a way that sells the product.

MM: I'm a big advocate, and I'm sure you are too, of showing, not telling. The reason I think it's so much better to show information is because of that intellectual process you were talking about. If you show the evidence, let the reader kind of walk his way through it, and give him a chance to have the light bulb go on in his head, he feels as if he owns the decision. He arrived at it, more or less, on his own. It's not so much manipulation, it's giving the prospect buyer a chance to experience what you already experienced when you did your research and came to the conclusion that you came to.

AJ: Yes. And I like that approach a lot because it respects the intelligence of the reader – which I think is especially necessary if you're selling a publishing product. It also enables you to spin out your story in a more relaxed way, because you're actually spinning it out in the same way as when you came to your own conclusion. When you're writing your promotion you try to piece together the process that led you to the conclusion that this is a good product and that this is a good recommendation – and to

spin it out in the most easy to understand and persuasive way possible.

MM: Some of the health promotions I see I would characterize as scary, and some I would characterize as reassuring. Do you have any thoughts as to which is the better route?

AJ: Well, I always prefer being reassuring rather than scary. I think that in the area of health, people are generally pretty scared to begin with. And, yeah, there are some instances when you might find a need to scare people. But I think if you actually tap into your readers' own emotional databanks, all you have to do is address their fears in a very gentle way and they'll be plenty receptive.

MM: The reason I ask that question is because I was just involved in a promotion that was more on the scary side, It was the first health promotion I had done in a while (for a publishing kind of product), and I wasn't really sure about it. We let it out and it didn't do very well. Then, when I picked up the package – and, of course, after the results come in it's much easier to see things that are obvious that were not so obvious before – I looked at it and it struck me as being very negative. I was glancing at some of your packages and when I saw how affirming (I don't want to say "positive") they are, I thought that might be a secret.

AJ: Yes, I think that is a secret. But on the flip side, I think it's OK to talk about their pain – if you can talk about it in a sympathetic way.

MM: Right. But you don't want a lead that says, "If you think you're in trouble now, wait till …"

AJ: No, no, I wouldn't say that. I just want to cozy up to them like the old country doctor and say, "Everything's going to be fine."

MM: Of course, there are exceptions to rules. I'm remembering one successful headline that mailed for some women's health newsletter. Though I think the copy was, in fact, reassuring, the headline said, "Read this or die."

AJ: There are many examples out there – and that one is a great one because it worked so well.

MM: What other things are you doing? Aside from marketing and consulting.

AJ: A variety of things. I'm developing products for the QVC Network, for one thing; I've been doing that for quite a while. There are long-standing ties between the Franklin Mint and QVC. And I'm writing for a broad array of products: health products, financial products. Cooking is one of my favorite subjects. And crafts! I love writing about crafts. Unlike health and financial products, crafts are nuts-and-bolts and aimed at a very visually oriented audience.

MM: You know, it's amazing what you can make money writing about. Our students don't get exposed enough to all those fun things because we tend to focus on more serious areas. But can you make money writing for those kinds of products?

AJ: Yes, there's a big market out there for all kinds of products – both publishing and physical products.

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