

An Interview with Expert Catalog Copywriter Jay White

Jay White has nearly a decade of experience writing direct-response copy. He started out writing radio commercials, and quickly branched into catalogs. He's worked for many impressive catalogers, including the world's largest outdoor products retailer.

As a freelancer, Jay has worked with high-profile clients like Alex Mandossian and Joel Comm. His growing list of clients keeps him busy, as does his own self-publishing business (he develops and markets information products), but he still has a warm spot for his first love – writing catalog copy.

CI: Let's start with a bit of background information to put your experience in a context for our readers. What first drew you to copywriting?

Jay White: What drew me to copywriting? That's an interesting question. Actually, I never saw myself as a copywriter. Back in ... I guess it was '96 or '97, I was working in the insurance industry in a very high stress situation, and it was tearing me up. I was so stressed out that I was locked up. My back was hurting, my neck was hurting. I had just gotten married, and my wife didn't know what to do with me.

I saw an in the paper – the local paper – for a radio station that was looking for someone to write commercials for them. I thought, "That would be a lot of fun to do, and a lot less stressful than what I'm doing now." So I went in, and I actually got the job. It was a substantial pay cut from what I had been making, but my wife and I talked about it, and I said, "This is going to be a lot healthier for me to do, and I think we can make it."

So I started writing radio commercials, and I had a knack for it. I had a knack for putting together a short block of copy that flows well and has a good intro and a good middle and a good ending. I just knew, for some reason, how to put it all together in 30 or 60 seconds.

It kind of took off from there. That's where it started, though ... with radio spots.

CI: You've worked as a full-time in-house copywriter, and now you've been freelancing for several years. How are those experiences different?

Jay White: It's like night and day. I started as an in-house writer at the radio station, and then went to catalogs. I also worked for an agency where I did a lot of different things. In all of those jobs, I was very limited as to what I could do and what I could write and the hours I worked and the pay I received and the freedom I had.

As a freelancer, all those limitations just go out the door. You can make as much money as you want as a freelancer. You can work the hours that you want as a freelancer. You can work wherever you want as a freelancer. It's just tremendous!

I never saw myself in the role of a freelancer. I always figured I would be an in-house guy. I just thought that's what copywriters do. They go to work for agencies, they put in 60-hour weeks, and they write those quirky little commercials that you see on TV and hear on the radio.

I didn't realize there's such a huge market for freelance writing until just a few years ago. And, needless to say, I'm very glad I chose to go that route.

CI: How did you break into catalog copywriting?

Jay White: After a couple of years of writing for the radio station, I'd made a bit of a name for myself locally. I'd won a few awards for some advertising I'd written, and an opportunity came up to work for a very large cataloger, Bass Pro Shops.

They're headquartered here in southwest Missouri where I live. And they're probably the leading outdoor retailer in the world. They built their business on catalogs, and do about \$200 million in catalog sales every year. I think they send out 30 to 35 million catalogs.

They were looking for a catalog writer, and I was ready to take the next step up in my career. What's interesting is the gentleman who hired me (who eventually became a good friend of mine) thought that because I was coming from a commercial radio background, I wouldn't slide into catalog writing very easily. He thought, this is two different types of copy, two different types of writing. But I'd already started to hone my chops in short, hard-hitting copy. So I knew how to get into a message, hit all the high points, and get out. And that's exactly what you need to do with catalog blocks. Sometimes you get a little more room. And sometimes you have to do it in a very, very short space.

But I had already started to learn how to write copy that way, so I slid into the catalog world easily. I totally blew him away by how fast I caught on, how I hit the ground running.

I was at that company for about five or six years.

CI: A lot of writers who haven't done catalog copywriting think it's the same, just shorter. Is that true?

Jay White: When you're talking about direct-response copy ... copy where you're trying to get someone to make a decision and to do something right then ... there are common elements involved. You have to sell, you have to persuade. The principles of the AIDA formula come in – attention, interest, desire, and action. Those kinds of things are common to both long-form copy and short-form copy.

However, the thing about catalog copy is that you have to do it so much quicker and so much faster, and in such a hard-hitting way ... because you don't have much space to do it in. I tell my students that it's 10 lines versus 10 pages. With sales letters, you get 10 pages. With catalogs, you get 10 lines ... so you can't go off on tangents about this bullet and this sub-bullet and this sub-topic.

You have to get in. You have to hit the hard points and the high points. And you have to get out. And you have to sell them in that 10 or 15 lines, or even five lines.

So, it's more challenging in a way – especially if you have a history of long-form copy experience. But to me, it's easier. It's easier because that's how I came up as a copywriter. That's where I got my experience, writing the short stuff.

An interesting note: When I first started writing sales letters, I would sit down and write a page and a half and say "I'm done." Then I'd read other people's sales letters, and they were 15 and 25 pages. I'd think, "I don't have anything else to say!" But that was my experience coming through. That was me saying, "Just get in and say it, do it, and get out."

So that's been my challenge ... going from the short stuff to the long stuff. I've been able to do it pretty well, so far, but it's been interesting.

CI: Another common perception among writers who don't have catalog experience is that it's always going to be 10 or 15 or 25 lines. But there's quite a bit variety to it, right?

Jay White: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

It depends on who you're writing for. For example, think about the catalogs you get at home, especially at the holidays. At the holidays, we get inundated with catalogs. And think about the copy that's inside those catalogs. Some of it is only two or three lines. And some of it is hundreds of words long. Sometimes, get only one product on a page, and there'll be a major, major catalog block there.

Many times, it depends on the price of the product. If you want to sell, say, a \$1,500 product, you're going to need a lot more copy to get somebody to whip out their credit card than if you're selling a \$1.99 product.

It also depends on the product selection and the target audience for the product. There are a lot of catalogs out there aimed at very high-end type people. Cigars and wine and things like that. You usually have more copy in catalogs like that, because you're talking to a very specific audience and you have to convince them in a different way. But with a party supply catalog, you want to fit as many products as possible on the page so you can make a profit from these very low-end products. So you might have one line of copy to sell half a dozen party streamers.

CI: What is the best way to quickly connect with your audience when you're writing catalog copy?

Jay White: I teach my students that when they're looking for catalog work, they should start by focusing on catalogs that sell things they're passionate about, because the passion will come through in their writing.

For example, I worked for Bass Pro Shops. They're primarily about fishing, but also about hunting and boating and camping and other outdoor activities. As a person who is passionate about those things, I slid right into my role. I knew who the customer was. I knew what he wanted. I knew what he didn't want. I knew what hot buttons would make him buy, and I knew what would make him turn up his nose at a certain lure or boating product or type of hunting clothing. I knew how to talk to him.

That helps tremendously in making the sale.

CI: Good advice. It's always good for a copywriter to be a member of his own audience. Now let me ask you another question: How closely do you work with the catalog designer?

Jay White: When I was working in-house, I worked with the designers more than I do now. They would design the page. They would put in their pictures and make it look as pretty, leaving spaces for us to fill in with copy. Then they would send it over to us. That's the way that particular company worked. But it's not the way all companies work. Some start with the copy and then they design pictures and graphics around it. I prefer it that way, because, as the copywriter, I feel the copy is extremely important to the design process.

You have to think of a catalog page as a very limited amount of real estate. Unlike an online website, where you can go on and on and on and on and on ... you can't go beyond the edge of a catalog page. So everyone's fighting to get a piece of it. The designers want to make their graphics bigger. And the copywriters want to have more lines to sell their products. So it's always something of a struggle. You have to dance with each other in a lot of different ways. Sometimes that dance is very fluid, and sometimes you're taking swings at each other.

But as a freelancer, I rarely deal with the designer. They send me the product information sheet and say "We need this in 80 words or less." I write it in 80 words or less, and I send it back to them. Occasionally they might want me to shave it down a little or even add a little bit more. For the most part, though, I don't even see the final catalog until it's out in print.

CI: What steps should a copywriter take to land their first catalog client?

Jay White: Like I said, start by targeting catalogs selling products you're passionate about. Because your copy will be much better than copy written by someone who doesn't know anything about them. You can't go to a company that sells, say, quilting supplies and say "I don't know that much about quilting, but I'll write your copy for you." However, if you grew up with quilting in your life – if it's your hobby and you know about patterns and you know about needles – then your copy is going to blossom.

And there are so many different catalogs out there! The last time I checked, there were 17,000 different catalogs in the U.S. alone. Around 11,000 consumer catalogs and around 6,000 business-to-business catalogs.

The catalog industry is a niche within a niche within a niche within a niche. If you can't find something within that entire realm of catalogs that you're passionate about, then you are not passionate about very much. They are so narrowed down to specific audiences that it's just amazing.

So target catalogs on the subjects you're most passionate about. Then do your research. Find out who the contact person is – the person who is the decision maker as far as hiring is concerned. Contacting that person by email first, and make sure they know you are adept at writing catalog copy for their particular target audience. Knowing their audience – that's what's going to make you stand out, even if you don't have as much writing experience as another candidate for the job.

CI: When you work with a catalog client, how much input do you have on things like special offers or premiums that can boost sales?

Jay White: As a freelancer, not much. It's usually "Let's work out the deal ... here's how much copy we need from you ... we'll send you product sheets ... turn it around in 24 to 48 hours, and send us the copy within our word limit." The offers, the actual marketing, is usually left out of it. Okay, I'm talking about bigger catalog producers, bigger books. With a smaller catalog producer, there is probably more opportunity for you to get in with the owner, to get in with the president, and to really help them market their products and become an integral part of the whole process.

But I've always contracted with bigger books, and they've got loads of people who make those marketing decisions for them.

So on a smaller level, I'd say, yes, there's opportunity to get involved with special offers and premiums. On a larger level, not so much.

CI: Once you've worked with a client and things have gone well on the first project, how often do you follow up with them? Is there a strategy you recommend for keeping in touch and landing future projects?

Jay White: When a company finds a copywriter that they like – one who's delivered on what they promised with good copy, sharp copy, copy that sells – they grab on with both hands, dig their fingers in, and won't let you go. A good catalog copywriter – someone who understands their customers – is hard to find. I tell my students that all you have to do is get that first job and wow them. After that, they will come back to you again and again and again and again.

For example, one of my first freelance gigs was with the SkyMall catalog, the one you read on airplanes. They looked at my experience and at some of the samples I wrote for them, and said "Yeah, we'll give you a try." Apparently, I did very well ... because for the next year and half they were coming back to me about every six weeks with another project. It was easy work for me. I could crank out those things pretty quickly, and it paid very well. I'd just write it and send it back to them and, boom, they'd send me a check.

So while I was trying to get my direct-response freelance career going, I could still do this stuff on the side ... and make a good living. As I said, once they find you, they will grab on to you, and you can almost write your own ticket.

I tell my students to follow up with the clients they're most interested in. If it's somebody you feel so-so about, don't worry about it, because there are too many other ones out there that are looking for good copywriters.

CI: When you say you can make a good living as a freelance catalog copywriter ... how much money are we talking about?

Jay White: That's probably the question I get asked most.

There's no reason why you can't make six figures a year writing catalog copy. What that entails is getting out there, getting your name in front of people, and continuously marketing yourself – because you're not going to get every job, and every person you contact is not going to hire you. But it's like fishing. The more poles you put in the water, the more chance you have of landing a

fish ... a big fish. So put as many poles in the water as you can on a consistent basis, and pretty soon you're gonna land somebody. And once you get that one client, they're going to come back to you and hire you again and again and again.

For example, in my first year as a freelancer, one client paid me about \$20,000 for catalog copywriting. That was one client. If you can get five clients like that, you're making six figures a year. Out of 17,000 different catalogs, you think you can't land five clients?

The numbers are staggering. But you have to work at it. You have to get your name out there and your self-marketing system down. I've had students who've landed gigs with their very first contact. They email me "Oh my goodness, it works!" And I say, "Yeah, it works. Duh."

There are also people who have to try for quite a while before they land a big one. Still, there's no reason you can't make six figures a year at this. But you've got to keep trying, and you cannot under-price yourself. You have to price yourself at a level that you feel good about and that is acceptable to potential clients. A lot of catalogers will try to low-ball you – especially the smaller books, because they don't have a big budget for copywriting.

But when you're writing for people who have been in this business for a while and know how it works and know how much money there is to be made ... they will pay for good writing. Those are the people you want to try and attract. You want to try to get those one or two plum clients that will pay you a good fee to do work for them. And it just takes off from there. Amazing.

CI: Can you share one or two tips or techniques that you use to write catalog copy?

Jay White: Catalog copy is a lot like any other copy in that it's features-and-benefits oriented. You tell what the feature is, but then you've got to come right in with the benefit. You've got to come in and tell the prospect why they should have it. Not just that this jacket has double-pleated seams – that doesn't mean anything to a hunter or fisherman – but double-pleated seams that hold out the rain or stay tough and durable for years. That means something to them.

I teach my students that if you're in a catalog block and you're stuck for a way to relay the product's benefits, think about the five senses. In other words, get your prospect to actually see or feel or smell or taste or hear the product.

For example, I once wrote about fish-cookers. A fish-cooker is basically just a big pot. You heat it up with some oil in it, you drop the fish in, and it comes out cooked. But that isn't the way you sell a fish-cooker. You attack the prospect's stomach. And his nose. You talk about the golden brown fish coming out of that pot. You talk about how flaky and delicious it is. I'm telling you, when I was writing about those fish-cookers and throwing in all that sensory imagery ... within 30 minutes, I was starving. I was absolutely starving, because I'd been smelling and tasting that fish for half an hour.

Of course, the senses you tap into depend on the product you're selling. If you're selling audio equipment, you want the prospect to hear the crisp, clear highs and the deep, booming lows. If you're selling clothing – which is a huge catalog industry – feeling is a big thing. So you don't just say that the jacket is made of soft leather. You put their fingers on it. You say it's buttery-soft sheepskin leather. That says so much more than soft leather.

By talking about benefits in terms of the five senses, you'll never, ever go wrong in a copy block, because you'll be putting the product in their hands, on their bodies, on their feet, on their heads, in their homes, in their stomachs ... and that's what sells

them. You make that connection, and they say, "I want that. I want to feel that way."

CI: Before we wrap up this interview, Jay, is there anything you'd like to add?

Jay White: Let me give you an idea of the amazing opportunities waiting for you out there in the catalog market.

As I said, I left a good in-house job with benefits and the whole works to go freelance. And I didn't have any clients. I was just going by my gut and on a lot of prayer.

On my second day as a freelancer, I thought, "I'm going to target the catalog market and see if I can get any business there ... because that's what I know."

So, at nine o'clock that morning, I sent out an email to 11 catalog producers. It basically said here I am, here's what I've done, I'm available, let's talk. And by noon, I already had three replies from people wanting to see samples. In three hours. And by the end of that week, I had landed my first catalog gig. It was about a \$6,000 job.

It was tremendous. It made me wonder why I'd been holding myself chained to a desk job when I could have been working from home.

[Ed. Note: If you'd like to learn more about the catalog market from Jay White, check out his program, [Catalog Copywriting Secrets](#). It goes into great detail on how to market your services, and even includes a list of potential clients every month.]

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Jay, Thomas Arillotta, here. Love your article. I'm going to be taking your "Email Marketing" course, but I have to wait until we have some kind of special here for Christmas at AWAI.

Take care, Tom

Thomas Arillotta – over a year ago

Jay, I'm new inside AWAI and to copywriting. Your insights into shorter project formats are very helpful. Both catalog and email fit by personality better than long formats. Thanks for helping.

P.S. Now I have to go eat some golden brown flaky fish, because you made me hungry.

Bruce Kirkberg – over a year ago

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