

Interview with a Barefoot Writer: Kim Krause Schwalm

By Mindy McHorse

"I started to realize that the copywriters doing the acquisition-based direct mail were making a ton of money ... I'd think, 'Wow. People actually do this, and they work like 20 hours a week, and they make huge, six-figure (or even seven-figure) incomes. This is sounding pretty good.'"

— Kim Krause Schwalm, Six-Figure Direct Response Copywriter and Marketing Consultant

If you're looking for a good dose of inspiration to help you get your writing career off the ground, our interview with Kim Krause Schwalm is just the thing. Kim has been writing multimillion dollar controls for top direct-marketing companies as a freelancer for over 16 years. She's written dozens of high-performing sales letters for companies like Soundview, National Geographic, and Boardroom, along with many other companies both in the U.S. and abroad. She was also one of the main masterminds behind the launch of Phillips Publishing's multimillion-dollar nutritional supplement business, Healthy Directions, who continues to be one of her top clients.

Yet she came into copywriting in an unusual way.

I spoke with Kim from her home in Maryland where she candidly shared her secrets for both launching and excelling at a profitable freelance writing career.



Kim Krause Schwalm

Most powerful about Kim's message is the fact that there's more than one way to break into the writing world, and copywriting in particular. She offers easy-to-implement tips on getting your writing business up and running, as well as how to send it into high-earning territory.

Plus, don't miss her advice on the importance of developing your reputation — whether or not you're starting from scratch, along with a simple way to establish your up-front value and leverage existing connections.

You got started as a copywriter after working as a marketer for several years, correct?

Yes — I was always a marketer that could write, and I always knew I wanted to get into Marketing. It started when I was a senior in high school, outside of Dayton, Ohio. I went to a career fair at my school, and they had these different booths with parents of students from the school who worked in different fields. They had the doctor booth, and the lawyer booth, and they had all these long lines for each of those. Then there was this one booth that had a sign that said, "Marketing," and nobody was

in line to talk to this very nice, friendly-looking man. I felt kind of sorry for him, so I went up to him, and said, "Tell me what Marketing is." And he worked for Mead Corporation, which, at the time was a big paper product company.

Right, they make notebooks and paper reams.

Yes. It was a company based in Dayton, Ohio, and he was a Product Manager. So he starts telling me about the process, how you get this idea for a product, and you do all this market research, and then you have a team of people who actually develop the product, and then you figure out all the marketing for it. Then he talked about what a great feeling it was when you went to the store, and there was your notebook for sale. And something just clicked in me, and I was like, "That's what I want to do!"

So I came home, and my parents asked, "What did you decide you want to do?" And I'm like, "I think I want to do Marketing." And they said, "Marketing? That's sales, and that's not a good field for a woman to go into." And they were saying all of these things that are really misconceptions about what Marketing is.



Unfortunately, some of those misconceptions still hold true today.

Yes, that's true. So I ended up going off to college, and I started to major in Accounting, and for various reasons I ended up switching to Math and Stats, but I always knew that I wanted to get into Marketing. I figured "Math/Stats ... I'll learn how to solve problems." That applies to anything. I started off with a couple of different companies, and then landed at Blue Cross Blue Shield, with the goal to eventually get into the Marketing Department. So I was working in the Actuarial Department doing SAS programming, and it was my programming skills that actually got me into my first Marketing job, which was a newly-created position for the company that targeted the consumer market.

There was just one person that made up this department, so when I joined it doubled in size, and it was such a great opportunity. The guy I worked for was a really strong direct marketer, and he was bringing this thing called "direct mail" to the company for the first time (this was back in the 1980s). He pointed out how we could target prospects with these health insurance programs, and that there was this whole "under 65" consumer

market that could be really profitable. So I got to wear all these different hats. I actually did learn some copywriting as part of the many hats I wore. I remember writing these sales letters, just like a one-page or two-page sales letter and getting it back with red ink all over it and doing it again and again.

But within just a few years we managed to build the consumer business unit into the most profitable part of the company by far. It was a really great place to work; very entrepreneurial. It grew into a separate subsidiary. By the time I reached my late 20's, I was asked to speak at Blue Cross Blue Shield conferences, teaching associates about our success doing direct marketing with health insurance.

How did you make the leap to the publishing world?

From there, I went to work for Phillips Publishing in 1992, and they were just exploding with growth, having just gotten in early on the whole Alternative Health band wagon with the launch of Dr. Julian Whitaker's Health and Healing newsletter a year earlier. My first six months there, I was basically scouting out products that we could market via inserts in the newsletter for this huge subscriber base they suddenly had. That was really fun. It was almost like our own "alternative health product test lab." We'd ask ourselves, "Okay, what works in this totally brand-new, emerging market, and what doesn't?" We were encouraged to try many different things, so I was doing everything from figuring out where to find products, or developing products in-house, and from there we'd create the marketing materials, write the copy, and then put it out there and hope for something that worked. If not, we'd learn from it.

What we found after about six months is that people really wanted Dr. Julian Whitaker's recommended nutritional supplements, so I actually helped launch the Healthy Directions supplement business. I actually came up with the name Healthy Directions. I also wrote all the launch copy, and the product label copy, and basically handled all the marketing. I helped run that business for about three years and grew it into a multi-million dollar subsidiary.



Sounds like you really loved it.

It was like that light bulb that went off in my head back in high school. I really loved giving birth to these new products. A lot of times, even today, when I write, say, a 24-page catalog, I feel like I'm giving birth again. Same thing goes for promotions, especially when you finally get that printed sample, or you see it in the mail in your mailbox, and you're like, "Hey, that's my promotion."

Just recently I had the pleasure of working with a client in London who markets an upscale superfoods greens product. I worked on all the packaging copy, and she now has it for sale in the world-famous Harrods department store. I was so excited when she sent me a photo of "our" product on Harrods' shelf! It was just like what the Product Manager at Mead described to me when I was a senior in high school.

So in your jobs you were part of the copywriting process, but that wasn't your main focus?

Yeah, so I kind of worked on copy throughout all my marketing jobs. It's always been part of what I did, but it wasn't the main thing. At Phillips, particularly during the time that I worked there, being a good copywriter was very valued. And part of the total package for what they looked for in a strong marketer was that you could also write copy. During that time, I started to realize that the copywriters doing the acquisition-based direct mail were making a ton of money. Of course, these were very top-tier copywriters — people like Clayton Makepeace, Gary Bencivenga, and others. So copywriting was always on my radar, because I'd think, "Wow. People actually do this, and they work like 20 hours a week, and they make huge, six figure (or even seven-figure) incomes. This is sounding pretty good."



How did you transition from in-house marketer to sought-after, freelance copywriter?

I developed a reputation at Phillips for being a good copywriter, first of all. Eventually when I decided to take that leap, I think it was a lot easier for me than it is for a lot of people starting out, because I already had a reputation established. I had great connections. Even just coming from Phillips, other companies wanted to hire me to do projects since it was (and still is) such a wellrespected company. It took a while to break into acquisition direct mail though. I had plenty of work as far as back-end copy and catalog copy and inserts and website copy, things like that, but to get into the royalty-based stuff, I had to break my way in just like anyone else.

It seems common for even established copywriters to have to prove themselves before working on the acquisition side. It's like the Holy Grail of copywriting.

Exactly. It's a much bigger investment for the company. And it's just harder to write acquisition copy. Because you're writing to these names who don't know you, and the competition you're going up against is fierce. You have to have a really good package, and there's just a lot more cost involved for the marketer — not just the up-front fee that they're paying you, but all the cost to print it, mail it, or whatever.

Do you feel like it's just as hard to get in on the acquisition side of Internet marketing?

No, I don't think that's as much of a hurdle. Although you still have design costs when you're dealing with a long-copy web page.

Plus all the web infrastructure costs and advertising costs.

Yeah, but it's definitely less than printing and postage and all that kind of stuff.

What should a new freelance copywriter do to get started, especially if they're coming into the industry without existing contacts and a reputation like you had?

Good question. Some things are really different today from what I was able to take advantage of back in 1998, when I first started doing this. For starters, I think the AWAI Bootcamp, and all the different resources there, are incredible. There was nothing like that when I was going off on my own. I remember actually sending myself to various conferences, you know, at my own cost. I would try to find some copywriting workshops through DMA [Direct Marketing Association], or other types of organizations, but they weren't as focused on this niche, and especially the longcopy niche I wanted to break into and establish myself in. So I think the networking and the Job Fair at AWAI's Bootcamp are really great.

That's where I got my start, so I definitely agree! What else?

Obviously you would need to get some samples going, and I think most people are coming out of some kind of other job into this one, so think about whether there are opportunities for you to do any freelance copywriting work for the company you work at now, or were previously employed at, or within your industry. Because just getting a few samples is extremely helpful, so you have something you can show people. They need to know who you are and how you write. So getting samples is key.

And one other thing I would've done, potentially, if I really felt like I needed to do it to drum up business, is establish myself as more of an expert, or authority, early on, whether it's contributing to blogs or having my own blog and website, or going to conferences and being the speaker. I think things like that, where you can get your face out in front of people, and say, "Hey, I know how to do this ..." Even though you may not even have much of a portfolio, I think you could easily establish yourself as some kind of expert in that area.



That's where a lot of people get tripped up, because they don't feel like experts on anything.

It's tricky, because, how can you really be an expert? But, for example, let's say that you start an AWAI copywriting program, and you've got some training, but you came from a completely different field, like nursing. So maybe you can find some ways to apply copywriting to the nursing profession, and you could write an article for a nursing magazine, or do something for the American Nurses Association. Just find ways to use your previous work experience, and combine it with the knowledge you're gaining in copywriting, and take advantage of opportunities to be interviewed, or write articles.

I remember early on I was a member of the Direct Marketing Association of Washington, D.C. I used to go to some of the meetings, and honestly I never really got any real work out of it, but I guess my name was somehow out there as a copywriter, and I think someone referred me once to a job. I did write some articles on copywriting for the monthly newsletter, and they're always looking for help with that. They're almost desperate for people to write these articles. So there are some good ways to get your name out there.

Even putting up your own website and publishing a blog can be a major credibility booster.

Yeah, if you can have a website, I think that's really good. It doesn't cost that much to have a website, and it just puts you on the map. I like what Wes Murph is doing. He was obviously a very successful entrepreneur, and knew a lot about business building and copywriting before he became a freelance copywriter, but he's got a great website and he actually interviews other people. He's kind of established himself as an expert.

You transitioned to freelance copywriting about the same time that you had a baby, correct?

Well, it wasn't so much of, "Oh, I just had a baby, and I want to stay home and still do this." Because I had actually gone back to work after I had my baby. And I was put in a different division of the company, and there were some changes going on that I wasn't happy with, and I felt like if I was ever going to make the leap to freelance copywriting, this would probably be the time to do it.

I actually started looking at other full-time marketing positions since I was ready to transition out of the company at the time anyway. But then I became aware of another company right in my area that was a nutritional supplement company. I think I hooked up with them through a mutual friend. And they really needed somebody to write copy, and to handle some of their marketing. So I got myself a six-month retainer arrangement set up before I handed in my resignation.

So you already had one foot in the door before leaving your job.

It was an ideal situation, because it was going to take only about half my time, but it was guaranteeing me like 90% of the salary I had at Phillips. So I was able to just walk into that right from the get-go, and then the client I was doing the retainer arrangement with referred me to another client, and I did some copywriting projects for him. So I still was working less than I was full-time, and right out of the gate I made about 50% more the first year I was a freelancer.



That's incredible.

It really was the ideal situation. I had already hired a full-time nanny when I had gone back to work at Phillips, after my three-months of maternity leave. But I kept the nanny even though I was working at home, because, don't fool yourself. If you're going to be really serious about writing copy full-time like I was, it's not something you do while taking care of a baby. Because anybody who's had a baby knows it's a lot of work to take care of a baby!

In fact, I had my baby in the summer, and it was our first child of course, and I was like, "Oh, let's get some new deck furniture." I just envisioned myself having this leisurely summer during my maternity leave, hanging out on the deck with my baby, and just soaking up the sun and enjoying life. But I think I was just so crazy-busy between nursing and napping and pumping and everything else that probably two months had gone by before I realized I hadn't even stepped foot on the deck!

I think a lot of new parents can relate to that!

[Laughter.] It's a really busy time, right? It's funny, because sometimes I felt like I got this attitude from people who would say things like, "Oh, you get to work at home and watch your kids, you're so lucky." And maybe this is the difference between being a female copywriter versus a male. For me, I knew I wanted to keep working and have a career, and switching to copywriting was mostly driven by the financial opportunities beyond what I was already earning in my six-figure job at Phillips, but the flexibility was great. Because for a lot of women, flexibility just means having more time to fit everything in. You know what I mean?

Completely.

Because obviously it's just become so impossible to work full-time, or 50 hours a week, and then commute, and then do everything else that a lot of us women do. I wanted to be the one that took my kids to school, and was there when they got home, and took them to their activities. But then you end up doing all these other things that pretty much full-time moms do, and yet you're also working full-time. Sometimes it just becomes a challenge to just fit everything in, and I think the longer you

do it, the more blurred those lines become.

How did you cope?

It was a lot easier for me in some ways when I first started off because I had very set boundaries, you know? I'd think, "Okay, I'm going into my office, and I'm working, and I have a nanny downstairs, and I'm going to go visit my son on my breaks. I might take him to a Gymboree class, but I'm here, I'm upstairs. My nanny's here, and I'm paying all this money, I'm going to get some damn work done." You know what I mean? So it was a lot easier to keep the boundaries set, but then over time, they just became a lot more blurred.

Especially when the kids get old enough to knock on the door.

Exactly.

Great point, because a challenge in freelancing is how to effectively work from home, keep up with your personal obligations, and still make a lot of money.

Some people don't realize you still have to treat it like a real job if you want to make the money that's possible. You just have a lot of flexibility. But there are other perks. Like, there's not really a glass ceiling for women like there is in some jobs. It's very objective. Because if you're good at what you do, and you're able to get controls, and you can negotiate a good fee and a good royalty arrangement, you'll do as well as any guy will. Women, I think, have some things to learn there. Sometimes they don't negotiate as well as men, or they underprice their work. That's a whole other topic. But if you're good at what you do, and you have successes under your belt, the sky is the limit.

How do you recommend new writers figure out competitive fees?

I think what you can do is find out what the going fees are. What are other copywriters charging for projects? When I first started out, I was writing inserts. I know that when I worked at Phillips, we would pay a copywriter \$3,500 for a 4-page insert, so that was what I charged. I suggest you talk to other writers and ask about their fees. Then maybe aim for something close to those numbers, or maybe for the initial first-time project with somebody you say, "Oh, I'll do this for a one-time reduced fee, but this is what my usual fee is."

To prove your value?

It establishes your regular price. Say, "My regular price is \$3,500, but I'll do the initial project for \$2,500." You know? That way, you establish an up-front value. And just be confident that that's what you're worth.

Besides the great money, what keeps you fired up in this career?

I just really enjoy it. The niche I mostly work in is health. I really enjoy health and supplements. I've been in it for 20+ years, and it's always something new, which I like. I don't get bored. Sometimes I think, "God, what if I was still marketing the same

product for three years?" I think I would be pulling my hair out, you know? So it's exciting. I get to learn a lot of cool things all the time, depending on what I'm working on.

Speaking of change, do you have any guesses about what the next hottest copywriting opportunity might be?

Not really, although I'm starting to get a little bit more involved in online marketing, and there's just a whole lot of pieces to it. More people seem to be wanting



Let's talk about freebies. Have you experienced any major perks or Glicken as AWAI calls it?

As far as ongoing perks, I get a lot of great free stuff, or the opportunity to buy something at cost, such as really fabulous skin-care products. Other clients will just send me supplements and other stuff for me or my family members. Especially if I have the control for the product.

Also, my bookshelves are overflowing with health books, and other great materials I've gotten for free when I'm working on projects. One of my most prized possessions, actually, is right here on top of my desk, and it's a horseshoe that Marty Edelston sent me, personally. He was the founder of Boardroom.

He passed away a year and a half ago, but when I was getting ready to start on a promotion for one of their flagship products, he sent me this. He always used to write little notes on the checks he sent me. Apparently he did that with all the other copywriters too. But he sent this, and with it was a little note wishing me good luck, which I thought was really great.

Can you share any final advice for someone who wants to be successful in the copywriting world?

Just that I think there is still a huge amount of opportunity in this industry. I think you shouldn't expect to be super successful right out of the gate, and that even super successful writers have failures sometimes.

So don't get discouraged. And learn from everything you do, whether it's a failure, or a success. And then after you learn, and get better at what you do, just know that nobody's batting 1,000 in this, even people who have been doing it for a long time. So you can't give up; you can't get discouraged. Hang in there—it's worth it!

This interview was previously published in the December, 2014 issue of *Barefoot Writer*. To read more interviews from fellow Barefoot Writers be sure to checkout [The Barefoot Writer's Club](#).

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