

The
Adweek
Copywriting
Handbook

*The Ultimate Guide to Writing Powerful
Advertising and Marketing Copy
from One of America's Top Copywriters*

JOSEPH SUGARMAN



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Praise for Joseph Sugarman's Previous Books

You have a real talent for promotion and writing advertisements.

Albert Gore, Former Vice President
United States of America

There are a lot of great copywriters, but Joe Sugarman is the best. He knows how to build a story and close the sale. Anyone who wants to sell better will enjoy Advertising Secrets of the Written Word.

Richard Thalheimer, Founder
The Sharper Image

I have been a fan of Joseph Sugarman's copywriting and marketing ideas for years and have benefited greatly by imitating his long-copy ads. Now he is letting us all in on his secrets in a book that should cost \$2,000 because it contains so much detailed information. Thank you, Joe. I really liked the book!

Jack Canfield, Co-Author
Chicken Soup for the Soul

Every trade has its role models. And for me, there is no better model for ad copywriters or magazine editors than Joe Sugarman.

Ray Schultz, Editor
DIRECT Magazine

Joseph Sugarman is brimming over with creative ideas. That isn't so unusual; many of us are. But Joe's ideas rocket into our marketing consciousness like shooting stars with one triumphant difference: His ideas invariably work. They motivate. They sell. So this isn't a book for theoreticians. It's aimed like an exquisitely polished arrow into the heart of writing to sell. New to marketing? Read this book. Been in the business for 30 years? Read this book.

Herschell Gordon Lewis, Chairman
Communicomp

From Seminar Participants Who Learned What You Are About to Learn

I enjoyed the seminar, and I learned a lot. I am more determined than ever to start and succeed at running a mail order business.

Lee R. Herrington III, President
Herrington's Catalog

Your seminar has really opened my eyes to a realization of what makes effective mail order advertising. I am sure that attending the seminar will pay dividends many times over in the years ahead.

J. M. Robinson
Atlantic Richfield Company

I told you I'd summarize the 6 or 8 major things, new to me, that I got from the seminar. Going over the notes I find it's 36 major things I'll be doing differently.

Gordon T. Beaham III, President
Faultless Starch/Bon Ami Company

Not only did you teach me some fundamental new concepts in space advertising, but you planted some seeds that may well change our marketing program and perhaps even our way of doing business.

Frederick J. Simon, President
Omaha Steaks International

I would recommend your seminars to novices to gain the degree of confidence necessary to write super ads almost instantaneously. Old-timers will also benefit because what they'll learn is that you can help them make their ordinary ads super successful. Although I've been in mail order for more than 15 years I soon found, as a result of your 5-day seminar, that there was more I didn't know than I did know.

Ed Axel
Energy Group of America, Inc.

You did two things right. First, you charged \$2,000. This clever device guaranteed the quality of the participants and assured you of their rapt and undivided attention. Second, you gave them their money's worth. I did only one thing right. I came.

Joe Karbo
Huntington Beach, California

The depth of knowledge and the skill with which you organized and presented it was far above what I anticipated when I signed up for the seminar. But the real payoff was what the course covered that was not in the outline. I feel that the content relating to the philosophy of achieving success in life and the numerous examples you provided to prove this philosophy will have the greatest payoff for us in the long run.

Ed Scofield
Garden Way Associates

When you're a farmer you always worry about the crop. It's growing too slow—you worry. It's growing too fast—you really worry. I find it to be about the same when a farmer gets into space advertising. The orders are coming in so good from our space ads, I'm beginning to worry. A high-class worry, I'll admit.

Frank Schultz
Alamo, Texas

I most enjoyed your openness in revealing, in depth, how you run your company. Few businessmen have the confidence to give away their "secrets" as you did!

C. L. Schaldenbrand
Word Processing Exchange

At times the seminar combined high drama, “made for TV” movie serialization, and mail order technique in an unbeatable blend of education and excitement. It was the best class I have taken since Harvard Business School.

John E. Groman
Epsilon Data Management

On my way back, on Friday night I stayed at the Sheraton Centre Hotel in New York. My two bags with my clothes were stolen in the lobby of the hotel. I don’t care about the clothes, but I can’t tell you how much I regret the loss of the seminar material, which is of inestimable value for me, and which was also in the bags.

Herman Van Hove
Brussels, Belgium

It has given me a fresh perspective and the insight I had sought when I first decided to attend your seminar. I now have a much clearer picture of why our successful promotions succeeded and our failures failed.

Richard J. Guilfoyle
Limited Editions Collectors Society

The
Adweek
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Adweek and Brandweek Books are designed to present interesting, insightful books for the general business reader and for professionals in the worlds of media, marketing, and advertising.

These are innovative, creative books that address the challenges and opportunities of these industries, written by leaders in the business. Some of our writers head their own companies, while others have worked their way up to the top of their field in large multinationals. But they all share a knowledge of their craft and a desire to enlighten others.

We hope readers will find these books as helpful and inspiring as *Adweek*, *Brandweek*, and *Mediaweek* magazines.

Published

Disruption: Overturning Conventions and Shaking Up the Marketplace, by Jean-Marie Dru

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*The Ultimate Guide to Writing Powerful
Advertising and Marketing Copy
from One of America's Top Copywriters*

JOSEPH SUGARMAN



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To Mary Stanke, whose support through three-and-a-half decades has been instrumental to my success.

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By Ray Schultz, Editor, *DIRECT* Magazine

Every trade has its role models. And for me, there is no better model for ad copywriters or magazine editors than Joe Sugarman.

Bandleader Artie Shaw had a standard question for musicians who wanted to join his band: “Who do you listen to?”

A similar question might be asked of writers applying for work: “Who do you read?”

Sugarman is the guy who sells BluBlocker sunglasses on TV. He also happens to be one of the most amusing and prolific writers in the United States, as I discovered when I started reading his JS&A catalog in 1985.

He was totally out of the box. He cracked me up with the sheer exuberance of his copy approach.

He offered readers \$10 for every spelling error they found in his copy. (“Please don’t correct my grammar.”)

He offered “loaner” watches to customers as part of a service guarantee.

He offered a \$6 million home for sale in the airline magazines, accepting American Express, Visa, MasterCard or any negotiable hard currency.

He sold a \$240,000 airplane in a single mail order ad.

And he did it all with a very special tone. It’s like Nelson Algren said about John Cheever—that he was the one writer you could identify “without turning the pages of *The New Yorker* back to see who wrote it.”

Not that Sugarman is the most colorful rogue ever to write great mail order copy. There were others. Louis Victor Eytinge, a convicted murderer who learned how to write in prison. Or Gene

Schwartz, the art collector, who made his living writing stuff like “She Fled the Table When the Doctor Said Cut Her Open.”

But Joe surpassed those guys in a few very important ways—the sheer volume of his writing, the trends that he set and my favorite, the personal catalog, one in which the copy and the product reflect the quirks of the owner. And Joe has a lot of imitators who have personalized their catalogs using Joe’s catalog as their inspiration.

How did Joe learn his trade? He claims he learned it from his failures and not from the mail order greats who preceded him. Greats like David Margoles, who sold 4 million garlic crushers in the 1950s.

Then there was Max Sackheim, co-founder of the Book-of-the-Month Club and another great pitchman who lived by his wits. As Lester Wunderman in 1996 reflected about Sackheim, “When he talked to clients, he promised a breakthrough—not as we have now, minuscule improvement.”

Then there was John Caples, who entered American folklore by writing “They Laughed When I Sat Down at the Piano.” The late Larry Chait asked Caples why he stressed the social benefits instead of just selling the virtues of the course.

“You don’t understand,” Caples answered. “Learning the piano is tough. You can’t sell that. But you can sell the idea of social success and overcoming whatever deficiencies you have in order to become popular.”

Though he may never have met them, Sugarman knows on a gut level what these guys knew. And that’s important, because he’s one of the last of a breed.

Now for the good news. He’s passed the tradition down in this handbook, the best book ever done on the subject of mail order writing.

Besides the advice on selling, it stresses basic truths about writing, in language anyone can understand. I’ve even given the manuscript to my new reporters to read.

I’m sad to report that Sugarman doesn’t write as much copy as he used to—no more catalogs and very few space ads. He’s followed the money into infomercials and home shopping.

Until they reissue old JS&A catalogs (the way they've reissued the 1909 edition of Sears, Roebuck), this book will have to stand as Joe's legacy in print. But it's a fine legacy.

So here it is. Enjoy. As Walter Winchell said when he introduced Damon Runyon, "The next act is better."

Ray Schultz is one of the top writers and editors in the direct marketing industry and editor of DIRECT magazine, a Cowles Business Media publication.

Many people have contributed to my copywriting skills and to the creation of this book, and to all of them I am very grateful. Mary Stanke, president of JS&A Group, Inc., whose direction, commitment and 35 years of service allowed me the creative freedom to express myself through my writing and who helped me build a substantial business in the process. My ex-wife, Wendy, and our two children, April and Jill, for their understanding and support during the many seminars we held—always behind the scenes, but their presence was very important and always felt. Judy Sugarman, my sister and copyeditor for 25 years—always there to correct my spelling, undangle my modifiers and give me very candid feedback.

I also wish to acknowledge the thousands of customers who gave me a tremendous education and for whom I have an unwavering respect. I wish to acknowledge my many competitors, too. I hated it when they copied me, but in the process of trying to outwit them my copywriting skills grew even stronger. There are hundreds of other people I could mention—too numerous to list here—who have played a vital role in my success and growth.

A special acknowledgment to all my wonderful seminar participants who learned from me and went on to create or build successful businesses—all through the power of their pens. I learned a great deal from them. Finally, I wish to thank, with humility and gratitude, all who have exchanged their hard-earned money for this book. May you, too, learn and prosper.

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The truly creative mind in any field is no more than . . . a cruelly delicate organism with the overpowering necessity to create, create, create—so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, his very breath is cut off from him. He must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency he is not really alive unless he is creating.

—Pearl Buck

This is a story about a seminar. It was a copywriting and marketing seminar I presented starting in the 1970s during a time when I was actively involved in both writing copy and marketing a range of products that included everything from electronics to collectibles—from Bone Fones to Picasso tiles.

I was a prolific writer, often writing complete catalogs, print advertisements and direct mailings. And I owned the company, JS&A Group, Inc., that sold these products, so I experienced the direct consequences of my successes and failures.

Failures Outnumbered Successes

My failures far outnumbered my successes. In fact, I have yet to find anybody who has experienced the number of failures I experienced during the early stages of my career. But it was through these failures that I received a very costly education that to this day has guided me through a successful career in advertising and direct marketing.

To the public, I was a big success. Babe Ruth is remembered for his home run record and not for the fact that he also held the record for the most strikeouts. And so it was with me.

Most people just saw my successes, as they were quite visible. And they just saw my successful innovations because they were the ones that worked. So to the general public and to others in direct marketing, it appeared that I had the Midas touch.

I didn't see myself running seminars. I was busy enough running my business. And to share my secrets with the industry was only asking for competition. But it was a series of coincidences that prompted me to offer seminar courses and I'm glad I made the decision to do them. And many of my participants are glad, too—people whose seminar experience made an enormous difference in their lives.

My seminar was different. First, I was an actual practitioner—not an educator or a consultant who never had to make a major marketing gamble or cover a payroll. I was out there on the firing line, making sure each day that the copy I was writing and the marketing decisions I was making were going to be accepted by the marketplace.

Second, it was during a time when my success was reaching a peak. Our mail order ads were appearing everywhere. They appeared in newspapers and magazines and on airplanes and with such regularity and frequency that the format was attracting a great deal of attention and creating an entire flock of imitators.

Finally, I realized what people were willing to pay just to hear me as a speaker or talk to me as a consultant. Bernie Pargh, an entrepreneur and owner of B.A. Pargh, a business equipment sales company, flew from Nashville to Los Angeles one day just to hear me speak to a direct marketing group. “Joe, I’ve spent over \$1,000 just to hear you speak for 45 minutes,” he told me.

I would also get calls from people who had marketing problems and would want to fly to visit me in the Chicago suburb of Northbrook, where our company was based, just to sit and talk to me for 15 minutes.

The Fateful Visit

But the seminar would never have taken place had it not been for a small vacation I took up to northern Wisconsin to visit my sister and her family.

It was during that trip that I discovered the beauty of the

north woods and made the decision, with my family, to find a second home there. The home I eventually found was a 10,000-square-foot, two-story building on a 16-acre site overlooking one of the most beautiful lakes I had ever seen. The property was filled with virgin timber—tall, stately pines and oak trees that had escaped the lumbermen who cleared most of the trees from northern Wisconsin during the 1800s.

But the home was costly and at the time something I couldn't afford. The price in 1977 was \$350,000 and I couldn't really justify it until my lawyer and close personal friend, George Gerstman, suggested I could use the facility as a seminar site. "Hold marketing seminars at the place, turn it into a business and you could write off the entire property and even make a profit," he suggested.

The idea really appealed to me. It was a very unique setting. It was isolated and quiet, and the fresh northern Wisconsin air at Minocqua was stimulating and invigorating.

I spent a great deal of the summer going up there with my family and furnishing the facility for a seminar. I cleared away a number of the odd buildings that dated back to the 1800s but were in such disrepair that I had no choice but to remove them. My wife at the time, Wendy, helped pick out the furniture and dishes. She also hired a cook, housekeepers and the support staff needed to run the seminars while Mary Stanke, my operations chief at JS&A, assisted with registering the participants and preparing all the materials for the seminar. And so within a few months the facility was transformed into an enchanting seminar site—a learning center that I called "Nature's Response."

The Most Expensive Seminar

Back in 1977, I was charging \$2,000 for five days—a price that made it, at the time, the most expensive seminar in the direct marketing business. For my seminars 10 years later, I charged \$3,000. I announced the seminar in *Advertising Age* and *Direct Marketing* magazines in the format of one of my typical ads. And the response was immediate. If Bernie Pargh was willing to spend \$1,000 to fly to Los Angeles to hear me speak for 45 minutes and several people were willing to fly from different parts of

the United States to talk to me for just 15 minutes, I had a value that certainly was worth \$2,000 for five full days.

Within a few weeks, I had a full class with participants from all over the world. We had somebody from Germany, several from California and quite a few from the East Coast. We had a farmer from Texas and a dentist from Carmel, California. Richard Viguerie, the conservative Washington fund-raiser, enrolled and of course Bernie Pargh attended. I actually had more participants than I wanted so I created a reservation list for my next seminar.

To get to Minocqua, the seminar participants had to fly to Chicago, board a commuter plane there and fly to the town of Rhinelander, Wisconsin, where they then took a bus for the 40-minute ride to their motel. To get to the seminar site, the participants took a pontoon boat from the motel and landed at our boathouse where they walked up a path to the house.

And at the house, they would find several rooms outfitted as classrooms, a large dining room, a kitchen and a very large wooden balcony where they could look out at the lake, relax and enjoy the clean north-woods air.

It was an idyllic setting in a remote part of America—a place where my students would learn a form of copywriting and marketing that they could not learn anywhere else.

The Book Contains Many Lessons

This book shares many of the lessons and experiences that were taught at these seminars. You'll learn how to mentally prepare yourself to write copy, how to write effective copy, and how to present your product, concept or service in a novel and exciting way. You'll learn what really works and what doesn't and how to avoid many of the pitfalls that marketers fall into—and much more.

I convey my unique approach to copy by demonstrating my thought process on everything from how copy should flow to the elements every ad should have—from the psychology of copy and its motivational triggers to the emotions generated by words. But the seminar was certainly more than learning about copy and marketing.

The seminar turned into a motivational experience for

many who went on to become quite successful. Others, who were already successful, couldn't wait to get back to work and implement their new knowledge. And they too grew in the process.

You too will understand how to relate what you've learned about copywriting to other forms of marketing and you'll see how many of the same principles apply.

The Goal of Copy

Throughout this book, I talk about the eventual goal of writing effective copy, namely: "To cause a person to exchange his or her hard-earned money for a product or service." It's really as simple as that.

Direct marketing is truly the tool of this century. Using it, you can move millions of people to reach into their pockets for millions of dollars—all from the power of your pen or the message you convey in print, on TV, on radio or on a computer screen.

For most of what I teach in this book I use a print ad as a reference point. Print ads are among the most difficult of all forms of direct marketing. On a single page, in two dimensions, located in a medium with hundreds of competing messages and without sound or motion, you've got to entice a person to start reading your ad, convey the complete story of your product or service and then convince the person to reach for the phone and order. To understand this process and to effectively implement it requires a lot of experience and skill. But once you have mastered the skills, you will have the ability to build a business from just the power of your pen and with very little capital.

When Mike Valentine attended my seminar, he was operating his radar detector company out of his garage. Later, using many of the skills I taught him, he grew his company, Cincinnati Microwave (developer of the Escort Radar Detector), to a \$140 million public company. Jimmy Calano was a young 20-something entrepreneur who had been giving small management seminars when he attended my course. He eventually became a major force in the seminar business with CareerTrack—a multi-million-dollar company. Victoria's Secret sent two of their top marketing people when the company consisted of just two stores and

a catalog. They eventually were acquired by The Limited and became a powerful retail chain throughout the country.

From a UPS driver who had a fascination with direct marketing and came to the seminar with his last \$2,000 to Joe Karbo, author of *The Lazy Man's Way to Riches*, who already was a very successful mail order entrepreneur—they all came with great anticipation and they all left with valuable knowledge that helped them continue to grow and prosper.

17 Seminars Given

I had 312 students attending 17 seminars—from the first one in the summer of 1977 to the last one given in Maui, Hawaii, in the spring of 2000. The rest of my writing and marketing insights come from several years of experience since then in the visual medium of TV—infomercials, TV spots and home shopping.

Regardless of your current educational level or knowledge of marketing, this book will give you fresh insights into the world of copywriting, marketing, human behavior, the Internet, public relations and other lessons taught at my seminar.

Even if you are not interested in writing copy, you'll have a better appreciation and understanding of the copywriting process—so much so that you will be confident that you too can write good copy or, at a minimum, critique copy.

So pull up an easy chair, prop your feet up and sink into one of the most comprehensive contemporary books on the subject of copywriting, marketing and creative expression—a treasure chest of insights that will entertain as it teaches.

Section One

This handbook is based on a book I wrote in 1998 called *Advertising Secrets of the Written Word*. The book consisted of the lessons I had taught at exclusive seminars I conducted beginning in 1977.

My challenge was to take the first book, revise it to make it current and add many of the copywriting techniques to be considered when you write for the Internet, direct mail, public relations releases and other copywriting tasks. In the revision process I had to reread my book chapter by chapter and revise it where necessary. What I discovered in this process was that all the principles remained the same regardless of changes in the way we communicate that have occurred since I wrote it.

The modifications were primarily to update certain facts and figures that had changed over time or to cite a few examples that were more contemporary. Regardless of the media, however, one fact emerged. You should always first express whatever product or service you are selling in a print direct response ad. It is in this format that you can develop the real essence of your product or service.

That's exactly what I do. If I have to sell something on the Internet, in a catalog, or on TV, I first produce a print ad. And from the print ad, if I do my job correctly, I will find the clues and the concepts that best reflect the strong selling points that I can use in any other media.

With a print ad, you won't have the interactive nature of the Internet or the motion of TV images. You'll need to sell your product or service on a flat piece of paper with no sound, no motion—just your words.

In the first section of this handbook, I take you through the step-by-step creative process of writing that print direct response ad. I think you will be surprised at how easy it will seem once

you read the simple steps involved and learn about the thinking process you have to develop.

I take the mystery out of the process and at the same time show you how you can create great copy even if you've never written any direct response copy before.

In fact, the most often heard comment I've gotten from those who read my book is simply "I now realize how easy it is to write great copy."

I have built several businesses from the power of my pen. Being able to write copy for your own business is a powerful tool that will serve you for the rest of your life. And to learn how, let me guide you through the steps you will follow as you quickly master this skill.

The preparation to become a copywriter involves knowledge. There are two types. The first is a very broad or general knowledge and the second is a very specific or targeted knowledge. Let me explain.

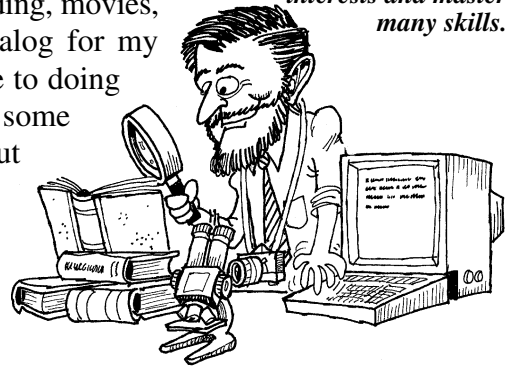
The best copywriters in the world are those who are curious about life, read a great deal, have many hobbies, like to travel, have a variety of interests, often master many skills, get bored and then look for other skills to master. They hunger for experience and knowledge and find other people interesting. They are very good listeners.

Look at my background. I'm an instrument-rated multi-engine commercial pilot, an amateur radio operator, and a professional photographer; I love computers, music, reading, movies, travel, art and design. I've done the complete catalog for my company including everything from setting the type to doing the layout. I've done all the photography and even some of the modeling. (My hand became quite famous, but more on that later.) I've tried many sports—golf, tennis, football, baseball, basketball, scuba diving, skiing, and snowmobiling. I've traveled to every continent on the globe with the exception of the Antarctic and I know I'll eventually get there. I've mastered a second language—German—during the three years I spent with the military in Germany. I've had hundreds of failures and many successes, with each representing a learning experience.

The thirst for knowledge, a tremendous curiosity about life, a wealth of experiences and not being afraid to work are the top credentials for being a good copywriter.

If you examine the lives of some of our greatest writers, you will see that they experienced a great deal and wrote about their experiences. Hemingway, Steinbeck—both lived and then

The best copywriters have a variety of interests and master many skills.



wrote about their adventures. The more we experience and the more knowledge we have, the easier it is to come up with that big copy idea or marketing concept.

But more significantly, it is important to experience as much in life as possible and not to fear failure. It's not whether you win or lose in life that's important but whether you play the game. Lose enough and eventually you will win—it's only a matter of time. Edwin Land, the inventor of the Polaroid camera, said it best when he described his definition of a mistake: "A mistake is a future benefit, the full value of which is yet to be realized."

I can remember when I was very young and would fail at something I had tried very hard to accomplish. I'd often say to myself, "No big loss—it's in my back pocket. One of these days I'll use what I've just experienced simply by reaching into my back pocket, and presto, I will have the answer just when I need it."

Experiences Create Ideas

Our minds are like giant computers. Every experience that goes into your brain—both good and bad—becomes more program material and data to recall and assemble in new ways in the future. Remember when the first Apple computers came out with their big 64K memories? You might also remember the slow speed and the poor graphics compared to the high-powered personal computers we have today. Today's computers are faster, are more efficient, can accomplish more and can interrelate information faster and more easily. So it stands to reason, the more we've experienced, the more we can draw upon when it comes time to relate those experiences to new problems or opportunities.

There is nothing really new in life. It's simply a matter of taking previous pieces of knowledge and putting them together in a unique and different format. Matter is not created and destroyed. Everything on earth that was here a billion years ago is pretty much here now. The only difference is that it has taken new forms.

The more you have stored in your brain from experiences and knowledge and the more you are able to interrelate that