

# Chapter

## Write This Way

*There's something I've been trying to say to you/But the words get in the way.*

—GLORIA ESTEFAN<sup>1</sup>

Marketing literature recommends that consultants write and publish reports, articles, and case studies so they can dazzle clients with their brilliance and attract business. But like most conventional marketing wisdom, publishing can backfire and leave consultants with little or no return on their marketing investment.

To benefit from writing and publishing, you must make a long-term commitment to publishing *continuously*. You must also concentrate on your area of expertise and carefully aim your writings at your target audience. Your publishing efforts may improve your writing skills but if they don't bring in new clients, it's not worth the effort.

Publishing one or two pieces may produce short-term results and those shiny reprints look good in brochure folders, but for guerrillas, that's not enough; guerrillas publish to get client leads.

### ■ WHY PUBLISH?

Clients call consultants as the result of referrals, but they also find consultants as a result of materials they read. It only takes one good idea to motivate a potential client to pick up the telephone and ask for help. And your record of thought leadership can make the difference between winning and losing the job.

### GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: WHY PUBLISHING MATTERS

Publishing is a great way to *demonstrate* your value to clients in a nonselling manner. Do you wonder if publishing that white paper you've been thinking about will yield results? According to a report by Bitpipe and Forbes.com, 77 percent of corporate and IT executives pass on white papers to colleagues, and 68 percent use them to contact distributors and vendors.\*

#### Six Reasons to Publish

1. Establish your expertise with prospective clients.
2. Enhance your relationships with existing clients.
3. Generate leads for work from new and existing clients.
4. Improve your name recognition.
5. Demonstrate your competence.
6. Build your stockpile of intellectual assets for future use.

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\*Statistics on use of white papers is from "2004 Forbes.com and BitPipe Study: Readership and Usage of White Papers by Corporate and IT Management," p. 2.

Being published gives consultants instant credibility; it automatically qualifies them as authorities. It's natural for clients and prospective clients to be attracted to consultants who are thought leaders in their fields.

Strangely, the flood of information we receive has intensified, not satisfied, the demand for high-value information. Clients are always hunting for objective insights into how their performance and business operations stack up against others and what the future holds for their industry. Publishing your work, though time-consuming, is a cost-effective marketing tactic you can use to give clients the value they seek.

Guerrillas view writings and published pieces as fungible, reusable assets that will provide an ongoing return on their investment. A consultant's writings can be used to support future proposals, press releases, media kits, zines, and Web site content.

Shape your writings for multiple purposes. Write pieces that can be converted into speeches, white papers, books, audios, or videos. Think of your writings as a database that you can reconfigure and tailor to a variety of needs.

## ■ A PUBLISHING STRATEGY

With so much information circulating these days, a one-shot or scattergun approach to publishing won't even register in your targets' minds. Publishing an article in an industry journal once or twice a year won't attract many clients.

Establish an ongoing presence by publishing frequently each year. Make sure that your writings target an audience that will enhance your consulting business; otherwise you'll be spinning your wheels. Don't scatter your pieces all over the place; concentrate on submitting them only to those outlets that reach your target audience.

To build name recognition, visibility, and attract clients, commit to writing a regular column or pieces for a newspaper, magazine, or for a Web site that your clients are likely to frequent. Your objective is twofold: to build a following of readers who will be your advocates; and to amass writings that convey the value of your ideas to clients and become assets for future use.

A systematic and continuous publishing strategy is the best way to both build your base of intellectual assets *and* exhibit them. When properly implemented, a well-planned publishing strategy will give you clear guidelines on what to publish where and for which audience. A systematic approach will also carry you through the sometimes agonizing process of writing and publishing because you'll have your goal firmly in sight.

You should commit at least one-third of your marketing budget to publishing. That may seem high, but your strategy must comprehensively cover every element in the publishing process:

- Finding hot topics
- Researching those topics
- Writing, editing, and rewriting
- Finding the right publisher
- Marketing your work

Publishing has drawbacks. Writing and publishing can detour you from your core business. It's easy to get bogged down with necessary evils like editing, meeting deadlines, and coordinating with sources, editors, printers, agents, and publishers. And it may be a challenge to find time in your already insane schedule.

Most consultants think that the writing experience they have gained from project work is sufficient for writing articles. But their writing may not be in the style or voice appropriate for

most publications. Don't assume you can just transfer your client writing skills into polished prose that will satisfy an editor. It rarely happens.

For example, redundant words creep into consulting prose like vines in rainforests. In his classic book, *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser calls clutter “the disease of American writing” and says that we are “strangling in unnecessary words.”<sup>2</sup>

Consider these bits, drawn from consultants' writings: “a 5 percent positive revenue increase”; “two parallel paths”; “Your satisfaction is our main priority.”

You are writing to draw readers to your practice, so look for help if you need it. By working for even a short period with a writer or editor, you can learn how to eliminate jargon and consultant-speak and to write clear prose that readers can easily grasp.

The fear of writing for publication prevents many consultants from ever getting started. Writing—like most disciplines—can be learned, but it usually takes effort and practice. It doesn't help that having pieces rejected is a standard part of the publishing business. But guerrillas take rejection in stride and eventually break through to become published authors.

## ■ PUTTING FINGERS TO KEYBOARD

You can make writing easier for yourself by mastering the following steps.

### ► **Focus**

Consultants are famous for advising clients to focus on those things they do best and leave the rest to others. The rule of focus applies equally to writing. Before you begin to write, identify a topic that you're truly qualified to write about, focus on exactly what you plan to write, and develop your point of view on that topic.

Don't start writing if you only have a vague or general idea and hope that the central theme will emerge. Start only when your focus is clear and when it's something you're ready to share with the world. Then plan how to go about it.

### ► **Maintain a Clippings File**

Create a clippings file where you can save articles, quotations, reports, and other information that you cut or copy from newspapers, magazines, and newsletters. Also include information that you print

from the Web. Make sure that each clipping has the date and name of the publication. As your collection of clippings grows, organize it by subject matter.

### ► **Outline**

We all cringe at the thought of outlines with Roman numerals, sub-points, and other creativity-sapping techniques. Even so, it's imperative to begin with an outline of some kind. Find a method you're comfortable with, whether it is mind-mapping or writing key words and phrases. Don't stick with Roman numerals just because Mrs. Kelly, your seventh-grade English teacher, said that's how it's done.

Whatever technique you use, make a list, in no particular order, of all the important points you want to cover. Write either key words or complete sentences (whatever helps you identify essential ideas). Then organize the entries you compiled in the order that you plan to address them. If you feel that you have too many items for the article or for your target publication, consolidate or delete.

### ► **Give It a Name**

When you've completed your initial outline, name each section and under each, list in detail the information you want to discuss. Identify all facts, information, or leads that you need to research or check further. Jot down where you would like to include a quote, anecdote, illustration, sidebar, or other device. At this stage, you should be able to create a brief abstract of the piece that potential publishers can review.

### ► **Identify Targeted Publications**

The old saying "all dressed up and nowhere to go" applies to unfocused, nontargeted articles. As you put together your thoughts, identify the publications that might be suitable for your piece. The rules and schedules for submitting articles to publications vary. Some require you to submit a query letter asking if the article is suitable for publication; others don't. Some publications have yearlong lead times for publication; others can get you in their next issue.

If you understand the rules of the publications that you target, it will make your job as an author easier. Contact publications to obtain their requirements for submissions—what type and what subject matter they accept, the style and format required, and their return policies. Determine which publications accept pieces from freelance writers, who owns the rights to published works, and if the staff prefers to communicate by e-mail or postal mail.

Numerous resources can help you identify appropriate publications. One useful reference is *Writer's Market*, which is available in print or online and includes information on thousands of editors.

### ► **Create a Research and Writing Schedule**

A consultant's to-do list is usually overwhelming and your desire to research and write often falls to the bottom of the list. There never seems to be enough time. Consultants often find it difficult to write for publication simply because they don't set aside enough time for this task.

It's usually preferable to complete all your research before you write. With the Internet, however, you may be able to do both simultaneously. For most people, writing goes more smoothly when their research is complete. But proceed according to your own preference and style.

Block out the days and hours that you'll actually write and what you plan to accomplish in those time blocks. Build in sufficient cushion for editing, which invariably takes longer than expected, and the many other delays that always seem to arise. They include postponed interviews, difficulty getting crucial materials, those pesky client commitments, and the unavailability of others on whom you depended. And frequently, you have to go back and do additional research and fact checking.

You can write anywhere, so seize on all opportunities. If you're waiting for a flight, standing in a supermarket line, or attending a meeting, take a few minutes to jot some notes or organize your thoughts. Although it's nice to have multihour blocks of time, you can train yourself to write effectively in short intervals.

### ► **Be Flexible**

As you're writing, you may find that one of your key concepts no longer holds true, that your organizational structure misses the mark, or that a celebrity's quotation, around which you built a major point, is simply too stupid to print. Be prepared to make necessary adjustments that will maintain the integrity of your original idea and the value you're trying to deliver.

## ■ THE WRITING PROCESS

Noted journalist Gene Fowler once commented, "Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank piece of paper until drops of blood form on

your forehead.”<sup>3</sup> While we have more writing tools at our disposal today than Fowler could have imagined, writing hasn’t changed all that much. What has changed, though, is how readers actually read.

In your writings, provide practical information in an easy-to-read format: “Five Ways to Lower Group Health Costs,” “A Foolproof Quality Control System,” or “Reasons to Always Promote from Within.”

Compose headlines that will capture readers’ attention and make them want to read further. Don’t try to say everything in the headline, but try to find a clever or interesting way to convey what your article reports. Follow up your headline with a lead sentence that reveals the most important information and then elaborate on those points in subsequent sentences and paragraphs.

Most business readers scan rather than read. Usually, they glance at the headline and lead sentence and race through the remainder in search of key words or phrases. When they spy those keys, they read in more depth, but often only for a sentence or two.

Assist readers by bulleting key points. This device quickly summarizes your important content and signals readers when they should read further or more closely. When you build a reputation as a writer, readers will scan less; they’ll dive right in because they want to learn your views.

Keep your language simple and your sentences short. Try to inject humor and enthusiasm, but above all make your writing clear. Never forget that your goal is to communicate, not to show off how many multisyllable words you know or how poetic, clever, or funny you are.

Freely provide examples that illustrate your points. Examples make lessons come to life. Whenever possible, include case studies

### GUERRILLA ALERT: NO HORN-TOOTING ZONE

In writing for publication, eliminate self-promotion. Many editors won’t publish pieces that they consider commercial. At the end of your feature, include only your name, firm, telephone number, e-mail, and Web addresses. If readers feel that your piece is self-serving, they will stop reading it. Furthermore, blatant self-promotion will diminish you in their eyes and could ultimately prove harmful to your practice.

If you get a byline or are otherwise identified as the author of your work, readers will get the message loud and clear. They will judge you on the quality of your ideas and if they are top rate, you and your practice will be regarded accordingly.

that describe the situations under discussion. Case studies are an excellent device to help readers retain information.

Keep your writing as brief as possible. Eliminate unnecessary repetition; assume that you're writing for intelligent readers who lead busy lives.

Avoid dense pages by including lots of white space. Thin margins and tightly packed pages intimidate readers and don't provide convenient havens where they can stop to comprehend what they just read. Break up your text with headings and subheadings that inform readers what is to come.

When appropriate—and only when it's actually how you feel—be provocative. Controversial writings garner more interest than those that echo collective wisdom. Express a strong point of view and don't be afraid to take a different angle or position. If most recent articles warn about the dangers of debt financing, set forth the advantages. Taking an uncommon or unpopular position will attract the attention of editors, agents, and readers. It will also be of interest to the many independent thinkers in positions of power and influence.

Provide an explicit call to action that tells readers what to do with the information you have provided. If you have proposed a new way to reduce factory overhead costs, be sure to include a three-step program for getting started. If your article extols the virtues of new tools that speed the delivery of customer orders, be sure your readers know how to find them. Calls to action confirm that you understand the problem, especially its practical aspects, and that you have solutions.

#### GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: TEN ATTRIBUTES OF A GREAT ARTICLE

1. Informs, educates, and entertains the reader
2. Has a distinct point of view
3. Is jargon-free
4. Is easy to read
5. Solves a problem or saves time
6. Is simple, but not simplistic
7. Can be used for other purposes such as speeches or special reports
8. Contains a call to action
9. Has a way for readers to contact you
10. Creates interest in your other work

**GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED**

Consultants are used to being surprised by client requests, scope changes, and client “emergencies.” Writing and publishing will also bring the unexpected. The best-laid plans, the tightest outlines, and schedules must be changed when new information emerges and major changes occur. A publisher may delay your piece, edit it beyond recognition, or even ask for a complete rewrite if there have been changes in your topic since the original submission. When it comes to writing and publishing, *nothing* is written in stone.

Adopt a consistent format for all the writings on your Web site by using similarly designed pages. Design each page to be consistent with your firm’s overall visual identity, business cards, and promotional materials. Create templates so that all your pieces have a uniform format when printed or displayed on the reader’s computer. If all your articles have the same look, they’ll be suitable for binding, which will extend their life. Consistency with your visual identity will help you look professional and promote your brand.

You need to maintain uniformly excellent quality and content in your writings. If your articles are not vastly superior to the usual run-of-the mill stuff, you will be wasting your time. Anything less than first-rate work will damage your reputation and defeat the purpose—growing your business.

**■ MARKETING WHILE WRITING**

Finding time to conduct research and prepare items for publication is always difficult when you must balance those activities with a tough client assignment. Guerrillas take advantage of this apparent dilemma by including clients in the research and development process. Once you’ve worked out a core set of ideas, discuss your emerging concepts with clients and solicit their feedback. They may help solidify your ideas, add a dimension that you missed, or give you quotable examples and statistics.

If your piece is about a new way to organize a sales force, seek opinions from several clients who are involved in that part of their business. Clients usually welcome the opportunity to help, and most

appreciate being quoted. Plus, you get to show clients that you are always thinking of ways to help them, and you have an opportunity to explore any other issues that may arise during the conversation. By involving your clients in the writing process, you remind them once again about you, your firm, and your interest in their company.

## ■ SELLING WHILE YOU SLEEP

Guerrillas are always on the lookout for a return on any investment, including the time and effort it takes to develop intellectual assets. One possibility is to offer your particularly valuable material for sale. Some consultants offer premium content to clients for a fee by permitting special access to in-depth reports, collections of articles, and other tools that clients find helpful. The consulting firm, McKinsey & Company, makes this service available to clients and others with great success.

Other consultants compile articles, speeches, and even videos into a cohesive package on a relevant topic and offer it for sale through their Web sites. One sales consultant offers an advanced sales training package of three videos, a workbook, a three-CD audio program, and an e-book on his site.

The revenue from these sales can be substantial and, assuming the material is of the highest quality, consulting assignments often follow quickly.

## ■ THAT'S THE IDEA

In the past, a well-designed brochure, a good sales pitch, and a respected reputation were all it took for consultants to reel in new clients. Well, those days are gone.

The consulting business is based on ideas and solutions; writing about and publishing your ideas can reinforce your expertise with existing clients and attract new clients. Whatever the size of your consulting practice, publishing great ideas is a competitive equalizer in the market that will help you win projects for your firm.