

Tape 10 - John Carlton

Gary: I've had the great honor of working with a lot of talented and honorable people. But unfortunately my next speaker does not fall into that category. I'm going to introduce you to perhaps the most demented mind I have ever come across. And actually he's been my creative partner, and if I had to hire somebody to write copy to save my life other than me, it would be him. But he and I have been through a lot of wars together and Mr. John Carlton is going to come up here and talk to you on the subject of nightmare clients. Come on up John. Let's give him a big hand. John asked me to thank me for skipping the stuff about his social diseases, so you're welcome, John.

John: I was busy doing my charity work for the widows and orphan fund. I don't know who that was out there but. I'm going to talk about a couple of things and I'm going to be winging most of it, so I want you to stay with me. Like Gary said, I've been with Gary for a long time. I've been in the business for about twelve years and I'm a copywriter by trade. I do some consulting with people, I've got a client right now I've kind of taken by the hand, helping them through everything they need to do to not only get the piece written, but to get it out.

It's one of the best clients I've had and I'm going to talk about some of the worst clients I've had too. And I'm going to talk about a few other things, and we'll see where this takes us. Has anybody here not worked with a copywriter before? Can I see a show of hands? Okay, how many people have worked with a copywriter? Those of you that haven't worked with a copywriter, you all know what a copywriter is, I hope? I have had people call me and I've talked to them for five minutes on the phone before I realized they thought I was doing copyrights for patents.

Gary calls himself a salesman in print, and that really describes what he does. I consider myself a sales detective. You hire a guy like me to come in and look for the sales kicks or details of your business that I can then put into copy and then you will either run as an ad or mail as a direct letter and we'll bring in the business. I say I'm a detective because one of the most common things I find when I deal with people who haven't worked with copywriters before is they take so much of their business for granted that they assume that everybody knows everything they know about their business. They assume that everybody knows that poodles require a ten minute bath instead of a twelve minute bath that the Dobermans need and that the widgets are all made in West Germany and not Japan.

Often the details that I find from clients I don't get until after I've interviewed them several times, and then we start getting into what I consider the meat and they consider almost irrelevant stuff. When you work with a copywriter the best thing you can do is be absolutely upfront about everything, and don't let the little governor in your mind say, "That's irrelevant" or "That's not a sales point." Let the copywriter decide that. That's what we're trained to do. Typically when we do things called bullets, the major part of any letter first you want to get somebody's attention in the letter, you want to get them reading what you're doing, and then you want to deliver your sales pitch as succinct as possible, but you want to break it down, and the typical way that I do it is by doing it in bullets. A bullet is a little dot next to a sentence or a statement. Gary and I sometimes have written letters where we have six pages of bullets.

I notice that a lot of advertising out there consists of essentially one bullet, most of the TV ads you see for car commercials, for example, are essentially just one fraction of the sales pitch, which I think is really dumb. One of the things that Gary and I talked about doing, we wished we could have gotten one of the accounts for General Motors or something and they would have given us a chance to use our sales techniques to sell car, but it'll never happen. They're way too stupid is one way to put it. You said there's more incompetence in advertising than there is any other field except possibly psychiatry. It baffles me. What really hurts is that these guys get so damn much money for it, too. If I could just get a fraction of the GM account, if they did direct mail, they don't do direct mail -- I have a friend I grew up with in high school who now runs a major agency out of San Francisco, and he won't talk to me because we're essentially on opposite ends of the spectrum of advertising. He looks down on direct mail. He does stuff where they have little slogans. That's essentially what his ads are, nice pictures of people romping at the beach and a little slogan, and that can be for anything from a bank to a car to hygiene products.

Anyway. I used to live in Los Angeles. I live in Lake Tahoe now. It's a point I was thinking about before I was coming up here to speak, the day I left Los Angeles was in August, Santa Monica Bay was polluted with a sewage spill and all the beaches were closed. They just had homicides number 208 to 212, on their way to a record number of 267 homicides for the month of August. That's people poisoned, shot, stabbed and run over on purpose. There were a lot of other people that died from other causes. There was a traffic jam on my way out of town. And there was a smog alert. I was in Los Angeles for ten years. I considered it the center of the maelstrom. I considered it part of the major universe.

It was not only a major part of the Pacific Rim market, but it was also part of the world market. And I consider it a city in decline. I was talking with Gary before, we both have fond memories of Los Angeles, but it's sort of like someone you knew a long time ago, and you had a lot of fun with, and now they're old and tired and they're no fun anymore. The reason why I bring that up is, is there anybody here who does not believe that we're in for a whole rash of social and economic upheaval that's going to make the previous century look very mild in comparison? Including both the world wars we went through?

There's some very serious stuff coming down the pipes and I think the days of being able to tread water and have fun in business and co-exist pleasantly with your competition are gone. There's going to be two classes of people, there's going to be those who make it and there's going to be the rest of the people that don't make it. It's no longer a matter of just making it big time or making it okay, it's a matter of being in the game or not being in the game at all. So you've really got to pay attention to what everybody's saying up here, because it's literally going to be one of your survival skills when you go back.

You've got to make your business be your ticket to surviving in the coming economic collapse. Anyway, to get off that subject, I want to talk about from a copywriter's standpoint, what I consider to be nightmare clients. I've worked with a lot of people in the room here, none of you are on this list. At least I'm not admitting it. The reason I'm sharing this with you is because I think if you do see a little bit of yourself in here you might want to think about the next time you work with a copywriter, and I assume that most of you. Even the ones who haven't worked with a copywriter, at some point in your lives you're going to be working with one.

Even if you're doing most of the writing yourself, if you become successful and you follow all of the things you learn here and you will be successful, you're not going to want to continue to do all the writing yourself. Or you're going to have too much to do. You're going to have to deal with copywriters at some point. So from a copywriter's standpoint, and like I said, I've been in the game for twelve years, these are some examples of what I consider nightmare clients.

The first one I call Mr. Mule. He's a stubborn control freak. The kind of guy who can't let go of any part of his business. When you hire a copywriter to come in, you have to let go. You have to let me do my job. I had one client, we did a mailing for him, it pulled 35 to 1. For every dollar that he spends in the mailing, he got \$35 back. I think Kyle mentioned that a 1 to 1 mailing for a lot of marketers is considered a good mailing. If you have a good backend, just breaking even on mailings can do very well. 35 to 1 is phenomenal. Anyway, this guy would not mail the piece again. That's a basic tenant, if you've got a piece that works you keep mailing it until it breaks even.

When it goes below breakeven then you change your tactic. We begged, threatened and cajoled this guy. Finally he did mail it again about six months later and pulled something like twenty to one or 19 to 1, and then he absolutely refused to mail it again because he just didn't want to do that. It was his way of maintaining control. I have no idea what was going through his head to tell you the truth. I don't make money unless the piece makes money. I deal on a percentage basis. So it's really frustrating for me to come across these guys. And there are a lot of people out there like this.

I finally got my current client to re-mail something, they had pulled 7 to 1. They finally mailed it again, they pulled 4 to 1. And so now they're eager to mail it for the third time. And I think we'll mail it for a fourth time, maybe a fifth time. Another example of a nightmare client is the victim who wants me essentially to recreate his business. A lot of people are so naïve about what's going on, they don't understand the basic sales techniques. It's kind of embarrassing for me to say something that really is just about as basic as you can get and have their eyes kind of roll in their head and it's like they've just been delivered a revelation from God. A lot of times these victims are broke, they don't need a copywriter, they need a business partner. And that's not my job. I can help people to a large degree, but I don't want to get involved in your business. I want you to run the business and I'll come in and try to flood you with customers but you've got to take it from there.

An example was this guy had poured his life savings into his business, and I found out he was going to have to borrow money to pay my fee. When I found that out I refused to work with him. The best thing I could tell him was that at this point maybe it's best for you to go bankrupt and start over again. Sometimes that's hard to hear. At these seminars sometimes we've got people coming up with products that the best thing they could hear from the experts is, "It's a bad idea. Drop it." And it's real tough for someone to hear, especially if they've been working on it for five, ten years or all their life. And especially if they're banking their entire future on this product. They think it's going to be their magic pill. If a guy who is very experienced in his business tells you it isn't going to work, I suggest you heed that advice.

The third nightmare client. I call him Mr. Stencil. This guy is like the computer nerd with tunnel vision. He has to work backwards. I had a client who was mailing for years a piece that had no

letter in it. It was four colors, very gaudy, mailed it third class, and it was essentially a foldout brochure type of thing that you had to unfold this way and this way and pretty soon it came out to the size of a bed sheet. He had the same copywriter for several years who was writing the copy, and when he came to me he wanted me to write copy - he essentially wanted the same format, he just wanted different copy. He said, "My copywriter is kind of tired, they're not coming up with any good stuff, and I need to revitalize my business and my mailing."

But he wanted me to stay with that 30X40 foldout brochure. And he had three price breaks on the order card. Well, for his product, I came up with a first class piece on a four page letter selling only one item rather than the three he was selling. He fought me all the way on this and we finally mailed it and the sales went through the roof. And he kept mailing it. He mailed it for a year and a half I think. But he hit one bad period where the piece didn't pull very well and there was some possibility that the mailing he had maybe didn't make it to the people. It might have got dumped by the post office. The numbers didn't seem to make sense, but he latched onto that and said, "Hey, it doesn't work anymore, John, I need something else, can you write me something for a 30X40 brochure?"

And he hasn't mailed that piece since. I talked to somebody else in the office and they say the order takers, the girls in the office, they're used to taking the orders the way they had them before. It was three orders, three price breaks and it caused a lot of concern in the office and the accountant was little upset about the piece that I wrote. The accountant. So, you know. There's a special place in hell for that guy.

Another type of client is Mr. No Guts. If you've been reading Gary Halbert's letter and the pitches that we've been sending out over the years, I have written a lot of the copy with Gary, you know what we tend towards the sensational. To call a spade a spade. There are people that seem to worry that the way we write will somehow harm their reputation or something. It's kind of hard for me to understand because you won't have a reputation if you don't have a business, if you don't have any money.

Actually, I have dozens of examples of this. It happens all the time. People fight me on the wording I sue. I write words like gotta, G O T T A. Ain't. We use words like scum a lot. We had one guy who told us essentially, "John, your piece is great, it's just great, but my wife doesn't like the word 'scumball' in the headline." She wants to change it to, "Person or persons inversely inclined to non-benevolent behavior." [Laughter] I hope he rots in hell too.

Copywriters don't come cheap. There are cheap copywriters out there, but most of the guys here, we're essentially making a living wage. We're worth every cent because the money that you spend on a copywriter or for any professional help you get, you're going to get back and your first money back is going to pay for that and more. If he does his job. It's ridiculous to hire somebody and essentially it's the same thing you do after you hire a plumber. What's a plumber make these days? \$150 an hour in the Metro Areas? And then go and sit there and try to tell him how to do his job. It's ridiculous.

You want him to get in and get out as soon as possible and you want him to do the job he was paid to do. That's all we ask as copywriters, Let us do it. I tell people that want to change my copy, you can change it, you can do whatever you want, but it's in my contract that you have to

mail out what I write, the way I write it, the way I want it sent out. You can test your idea against that, you can change the headline, you can do whatever you want, but you've got to test my piece. That usually quiets the protest down a little bit.

Another client is Mr. No Glory. Comes after No Guts. The guy that can't handle success. This is a Gary Halbert example, it's so great I stole it. A guy called him up one time and said, "Gary, the piece you wrote sent my office into chaos. The phones are ringing off the hook and my office is in turmoil." And Gary's reply was, "Look, you didn't hire me to solve that kind of a problem, you hired me to create that kind of a problem." That's really the truth. It's amazing how many people come back to me and tell me that the piece is – if I can calm down the piece or somehow taper it or something.

The last nightmare client I have here is The Dunce. The guy who never learns, never listens, and he's never prepared. People like this often become vampires. I give a lot of free advice. I'm always open on the one. I'll talk to anybody. And it's frustrating for me, though, to talk to people who want to seem to get everything I have to offer up to a point and then they never follow through on anything. The Dunce is the 20% of the population that takes up 80% of your time. I'm sure if you're in business you have these people in your life too. I gave one guy a phone consultation. I figured out his marketing problem and he begged me for copy ideas. I went into my copywriter mode which is my mind kind of clicks into - I think all copywriters do this, we just kind of click into another mode and we just start rattling off this stuff.

I talked for twenty minutes to this guy, I gave him a dozen headlines, I gave him his opening lead paragraph. I gave him bullets, I gave him how to do his pitch. I did all this. It just went on and on and on. I was smoking, actually. And then I stopped and he said, "John, this is great. This is just great. This is really wonderful." And I said, "Great, did you get all that written down?" And he said, "No, didn't you?" He said, "Could you do that again please?" This was a freebie too, by the way. I politely hung up on him. More customers isn't going to help this guy, he can't sell what he has to who he's already selling it to.

There are a lot of people up here who sell stuff in various ways. All of us that are speaking are salesmen in one way or another, and one of the basic things you need to do is to keep up. Gary's talked about it for years and he keeps hammering it home and I think people don't pay much attention to it. I think people have a bad attitude towards salesmen, but it's really true that Gary coming from an encyclopedia salesman background just really helped him as a salesman in print. Jay Abraham says the same thing, he did a lot of sales when he was younger. What was I talking about? Oh well, it was a great point. Like I said I was up late writing charity copy for the Widows and Orphans Fund.

Anyway, you should learn as much as you can about sales. I have helped a lot of writers come up. My phone is open to anybody that wants to learn how to be a copywriter, because for some reason the pipeline has been drying up lately, and it's kind of alarming. When I came up twelve years ago there were a lot of guys around trying to learn and hanging around. Now there's a dearth of people who want to be copywriters. It's a great life. I work at home. I don't even meet my clients.

I haven't met these guys I've been working with for over a year. We deal strictly on the phone. My phone number is 702-832-5355. Lake Tahoe. And 5357 is the fax. I'm a night owl, so if you call before noon you'll get my machine. That's what drove me into working for myself, was that eight to five stuff just didn't cut it. Half the day I was asleep anyway. My point was I help a lot of people coming up. Gary has found a gem in Evan, who I think is going to speak today or tomorrow. But he's become a rarity now. A young guy who is willing to do the work that needs to be done to become a good copywriter. It takes long time, you've got to read a lot of books, you've got really get up on stuff. It's very very tough. That's why I recommend hiring copywriters, by the way.

I recommend you try to do it yourself, but then I also recommend that you work with a copywriter. Like I say, they pay for themselves the first time the ad goes out. But I've found with the writers that I have worked with, it's much easier for me to teach someone who is a high school dropout to write good sales copy than it is to take someone who, say, has a PhD in English Lit to learn how to sell. So I get a lot of people saying, "I can't be a copywriter because I'm not creative. And I can't write well." I've been spending the last twelve years learning how not to write well. I have a college education and I've been trying to downsize myself to get to Gary's position, which is essentially about third grade level I guess.

But it's really, really true that it's the salesmanship in the writing that does the work for you, not the writing. I'm sure you've all seen our pieces, it's amazing to me that people are amazed at the way that Gary writes. You get letters all the time saying, "How can you have such bad English. Your grammar was wrong." It's ridiculous.

Gary: I went to the Dan Quayle school of writing.

John: Let me tell you about the one dream client. And like I said, I'm lucky enough to have stumbled on one right now. The dream client is ethical. He's informed about marketing techniques. He's up on his competitors, and he has realistic goals. Sometimes it's hard to get realistic goals. It helps to talk to experts. It helps to listen to people and it helps to immerse yourself in your business and also in other people's businesses. Learn all about the oranges if you sell apples.

The dream client lets me do my job. Works with me and then he acts. There's a book out called *Ready Fire Aim*. That's a good philosophy to have. Action will solve a lot of problems and a lot of headaches that you'll have worrying about whether a piece is going to work. Worrying about if you priced it right, if you're in the right market or whatever. You can worry about that stuff for years and you're never going to get an answer. It's never going to happen. Mail the damn thing. See what happens.

The dream client understands the importance of investing in his marketing. He pays top dollar without complaining -- and I want to underline without complaining -- for creative help. And he'll cut his costs everywhere else but there. Your creative help, the guys doing the writing, that's your life blood.

Gary: I want to make a point about that.

John: Sit down

Gary: It's like someone selling you a billboard and they said you can get it for five bucks a year. On Sunset Boulevard, its costs 20 grand a month. The only thing is the billboard's in the middle of the Amazon jungle. That's the same as getting creative help on the cheap. It's not how much it costs, it's whether it works or not. Good, creative help is free because it makes you way more money. Bad creative help becomes an expense.

John: that's an excellent point. I see that I've written down here I've described my dream client, which is really these guys I've been working with. This guy called me, didn't quibble about my fee. I get a lot of people quibbling about my fee. I am not real expensive. Gary is not really expensive, although sometimes you have to hold your breath when you hear how much we want right off the bat, it's not expensive. We've been in the business a long time and we're not charging fees to shock anybody. We're not charging fees to do anything other than to - we know what we need to make and what we're worth, because we've been doing it for so long.

This dream client I have he let me interview him, and he opened up his business to me. He told me things he would not tell anybody else. And in fact, he told me things that if I told his competitors, it would have harmed him. I don't recommend that you just start opening up your heart and your life to people until you trust them. This guy trusts me because I happened to have known him for several years also. But by doing that, I came up with some sales points that went on pieces.

We've got several pieces now pulling 7 to 1, 8 to 1. We're doing some dynamite stuff. And I couldn't have-

Gary: Does anyone not know what that means? Some people may not know that John.

John: I explained it in the beginning. The 1 is for every dollar you spend. So the term will always be "whatever number to 1." A 1 to 1 mailing would be a breakeven mailing, you get a dollar back for every dollar you spend. And that dollar you spend includes everything you paid to the letter shop. Plus the postage. The printing. Everything to get out. Whatever it takes to get out a letter, and the letter can cost you anything from fifty cents to a dollar on up. Gary sent out dollar letters, with dollars stapled to them, so his costs would be up.

And then whatever money you get back would be the money. So these guys are getting back \$7 in orders for every \$1 in costs that they send out.

Audience: Inaudible

John: After awhile it would, not on the first mailing. Because after awhile my fee just disappears because it's a one-time thing. I also work on a percentage, so, like I said, if the piece works I get paid I make a lot of money.

Audience: What do you charge?

John: It kind of depends. I used to have a flat fee and I don't have a flat fee anymore, because it didn't make sense. It depends on the product. There are different kinds of products to sell. There are high-price products, there are low-price products, there are products going out to a vast market that are going to mail in the millions that are products that are going out to markets that

are very very small and will not mail a lot. I used to have a per piece percentage and it was for every letter you sent out I would get a little bit. I also can do a percentage of gross. I'll be glad to talk to anybody, but I don't have a fee that I can really just throw out. How much you got? (Laughter) Okay, that's that part of the speech. Do you want me to keep going? I have another part.

Gary: That's okay [inaudible]

John: Okay, that's my little spiel. Thanks a lot. Appreciate it.