

## **HAUNTED BY MISSED PROMOTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES?**

# ***A professional ghostwriter can bring you publicity without pain***

BY SUSANNA OPPER

It's 10:30 a.m. and Charlie decided to take a coffee break. Settling in with the latest issue of his industry's trade publication — *The Widget Maker's Gazette* — he suddenly gasped. There on page 3 was a bylined article by his major competitor — a two-page spread displaying the competitor's newest products and telling the story of their development in excruciating detail.

Charlie read the entire article and had to admit it was really good. "But wait a minute," Charlie thought, "he's a techie like me, and I know he can't write. We were on a panel together at last year's conference, and his abstract was awful."

What's the competitor's secret? He hired a ghostwriter. And so can you.

Like the specters that haunt houses, ghostwriters are invisible. Even though you didn't write it, your byline and picture will be published with the article, newsletter, website, book or e-zine.

Writing is what ghostwriters do for a living, and they work for money not glory. Some ghostwriters will do certain projects "on spec." If you have a possible best-seller, there's a tiny chance you could find someone who will do your writing for a big chunk of the profits. But most books today don't make much money, so don't count on that strategy. Be prepared to spend real dollars.

Today there are more than 8 billion websites, more blogs than anyone can count, and articles, e-zines and flyers galore. It's tempting to declare overwhelm and stay out of the fray. But, as Charlie learned the hard way, if you're not out there promoting what you do, someone else will be attracting attention and getting the business. So it's not just about getting ahead. It's about not getting left out all together.

OK, so you decide to bite the bullet and hire a professional writer. Here are five tips that will keep you from being haunted by mistakes when someone else is doing your writing.

**1. Understand your objective.** Know why you're seeking publicity in the first place. Are you looking for business, promoting your skill and knowledge to colleagues in your industry, or are you eager to stay in touch with the customers you already have? Make certain your writing projects fit into your marketing plan. You do have a marketing plan, right?

Look for the low-hanging fruit. Consider regional publications, local business publications, professional journals, online outlets and other media that seek content from your area — geographic or professional.

**2. Get the right writer.** Chemistry is all-important. You are asking someone else to speak with your voice — translating your ideas into compel-

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ling words and dramatic images. You are literally putting words into someone else's mouth. This is intimate, and it better be a good fit.

If you know what you want to say, any good writer will do. But if you don't, you need a consultative writer — someone who knows as much about business, your industry or profession as you do. Or you can seek an experienced generalist who has worked in a variety of industries and will be a quick study for your problem.

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You want a low-maintenance ghost, but you also need to be available to your writer when she needs you. That means providing required background material in a timely fashion and being responsive to queries when the writing process is underway.

A good ghostwriter will work with you the way you like to work. Would you prefer to put rough ideas down in writing or do you think better in conversation? Do you like to take a project direct from start to finish or will you dribble thoughts out in emails in the small hours of the morning?

Finding a good fit might begin with talking to local businesspeople, others in your field or the editor or publisher of your targeted publication. Get recommendations and review the ghostwriter's work carefully. Or you can do an online search. But in any event, get writing samples. If the writer's style feels comfortable, take the time to talk about what you want done and how you'll work together. Then get on the phone to a few selected references and ask penetrating questions. Is he timely? Does she listen well?

**3. Be comfortable with the fee.** If having a ghostwriter on your payroll is new for you, get accustomed to the idea of paying for writing. Negotiate a fee that fits in your budget and find realistic ways to measure the success of your project. If it's an article for your website, you can track increased hits. If it's attracting visitors to your new retail location, ask people how they heard about you.

Ghostwriters, like other consultants, calculate fees by the hour. Some writers may offer you a fixed fee for a project. Others will quote you an hourly fee and provide an estimate of the total cost. If you agree to a project fee, you may be overpaying. A wise writer will factor in everything that can go wrong before coming up with a fixed fee. Typical hourly rates range from \$80 to \$150. But you'll spend less money with a good, fast writer than with someone who has a lower hourly fee and takes longer. If your writer bills you by the hour and gives you an accurate estimate of the total cost, you might be better off.

**4. Start small, grow big.** Don't try to eat the whole apple in one bite. By now you realize this is a delicate process, so begin with a small, easily defined project that will let you get to know your ghost. Your long-term objective may well be an article a month or a quarterly e-zine, but you might begin with an article for your town newspaper. As you and your writer get to know each other better, and as he learns your style and understands your business, the process will get easier and easier. But when it doesn't work out, you want to cut your losses quickly.

**5. Respect the process.** Almost no one gets it right the first time when it comes to ghostwriting. You should expect multiple revisions, especially at the beginning. Remember that it is always easier to work from something than nothing. Some writers will give you a rough draft just to be sure they're on the right track. Others will do a lot of talking and planning before they write the first word. This is a matter of style, and you both need to be comfortable with the process.

By now maybe you're thinking, "This sounds a bit tricky. Perhaps I should forget about it and do my own writing." That's fine if you love to write and are good at it. But most businesspeople and professionals hate to write.

If you add writing to an overly long "to do" list, it's likely that the writing project will fall to the bottom line. That probably means it won't ever get done, and you won't reap the benefits of having your ideas published. Passing the burden on to someone else will free you up to do what you love to do. And it will also make sure that you get promotional information out on a regular basis. ♦