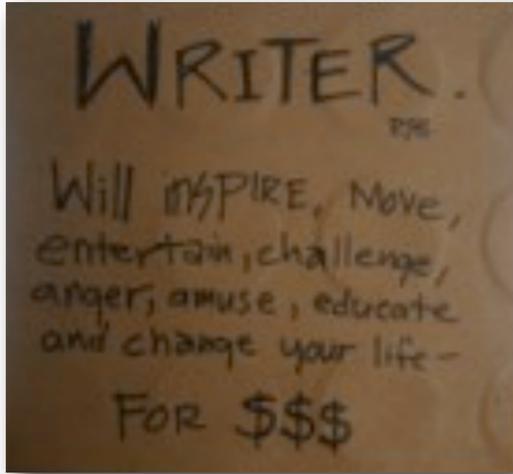


Copy Writing Tips from the homeless

*By Becky Blanton
TED Global Speaker
on Homelessness*

A homeless man with a beard and a black beanie is holding a cardboard sign. The sign has the following text written on it in black marker: "FAMILY KIDNAPED BY NINJAS NEED \$ 4 KARATE LESSONS". The man is standing outdoors, and a blue metal railing is visible in the foreground. In the background, there are some buildings and utility poles.

FAMILY
KIDNAPED
BY NINJAS
NEED \$ 4
KARATE
LESSONS



Becky Blanton is a copy writer, blogger, author, journalist, ghost writer and story teller.

After being homeless for over a year herself, she now travels, writes and consults with individuals and small businesses who want to use the power of story and words to connect with their audience.

As a former blogger for Change.org on homeless issues, she's also working with StandUpForKids to raise awareness of issues around homelessness & kids.

She believes the homeless are not people to be pitied, but people to be mentored, taught, encouraged, supported and held responsible for their actions and inactions, just like anyone in society.

You can read more of her story at the end of this booklet, follow her blog, or hire her at:

Why use homeless signs to teach copywriting? (1) Because these signs are brilliant examples of copywriting headline do's and don'ts. (2) They're real, not hypothetical. Readers immediately respond to the message and the example. (3) It raises awareness of how powerful words truly can be.

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Personalize Your Message

Nothing says “authenticity” more than stating the unspoken obvious or dealing with the “elephant in the room.” More importantly, incorporating HUMOR into your message when conveying a socially difficult or potentially embarrassing message helps ease donor apprehensions and fears.

Expressing a need for social acceptance or acknowledging a medical or cosmetic need will often touch those who suffer from the same condition.

- Baldness
- Obesity or Hunger
- Medical or Housing Crisis

are all potential topics for authentic pleas.





Numbers & Lists Capture the Imagination & Our Attention

I'm not sure why numbers and lists capture people's attention - but they do. Anytime you can use numbers in a headline (or sign) do. Numbered lists, as in "50 Sign Writing Tips for the Homeless," are always a good way to get people to read. Everyone likes tips - especially if they're good ones.

Make sure your lists and the context make sense. While 16 wives and 25 kids and "still horny" may carry a consistent theme readers can follow, throwing 7 hungry dogs and 3 thin cats into the mix confuses the message. There is enough content for two signs here - one to attract animal lovers - or the SPCA - and another that might generate compassion from Tiger Woods.



Use Theatre, Magic and Humor

Magic - or, the age old use of distraction - is a wonderful tool. Magicians use sleight-of-hand, motion and props to direct their audience's attention away from the reality of a situation.

You must use words to do the same. Don't deny the obvious. If Bill Clinton had said, "I'm a red-blooded, American man. Of course I had sex with that woman. Look at her! Wouldn't you have done the same?" He would have saved the country a lot of time, heartaches and money simply by admitting the obvious with humor.

An elderly alcohol driven senior evokes pity or embarrassment. An alcohol driven Gandalf makes us laugh, and distracts us from the reality of the situation long enough to donate. Gandalf, the beard, the magic staff and hat all scream "Serif!" font to me - and red lettering is a bonus.



Make Your Point and Close the Sale

When time, attention and space are limited your message must be the same.

As Nike says, "Just Do It." Short. Simple. Sweet and actionable.

- Be bold
- Be simple
- Call for action
- Convey expectations
- Close the sale

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State Secrets

As we've all learned from Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, state and governmental secrets can generate huge donations from the right audience.

- Use timely, current news.

While this sign may have generated more income immediately post 9/11, the chances of it appealing to current audiences is much lower. Knowing the location of "People of interest" to law enforcement or governments is best sold to a few select individuals and not to strangers on a street corner.

Target your audience. Unless you're panhandling in D.C. chances are not many will be interested in this niche offer.



Be Friendly

Any exchange with the public in which you hope to separate them from their money - particularly in this economy, demands a smile - an honest, friendly and sincere smile.

Humor levels the playing field and if you can combine humor, friendliness and a gentle solicitation for funds you'll be more successful.

- Be friendly.
- Smile.
- Use humor.
- Don't be aggressive.
- Don't be rude.
- Even if rejected, smile and nod.
- Don't give up. Someone WILL like your message and "buy" from you.





Invoke the Name of Famous People

People are fascinated by the rich and famous, or simply the famous. Incorporating the name of someone famous, along with their signature slogan if appropriate, can often stop readers long enough to get their attention.

As you can see, graphics, even simple black and white ones, can contribute to the intent and message. In this case the copywriter made his intent clear by including line drawings of real change - the monetary kind, with his slogan. The irony of his sign is priceless. (My pun intentional).

- Associate your cause with famous people.
- Associate your slogan with famous timely, or news relevant slogans.



Don't Be Afraid to Admit Defeat

Whether your product or service has suffered a defeat, a blow, a set-back - don't be afraid to admit it publicly.

People prefer honesty and transparency and a believable explanation rather than public relations spin or hype.

- Stuff happens.
- Accept it, admit it and move on.
- Keep your explanations simple and to the point.
- Don't blame, but do explain.
- Don't whine, but do ask for what you need.

Identify With Like Minds

If you share a history, experience or commonality with your audience, don't be afraid to use that commonality in your pitch, even if it's in a niche market or group. Chances are, the fewer the numbers of a group, the fiercer their loyalty to any group or organization who shares their history.

War veterans, members of individual branches of each of the services, survivors of a crusade, military or even religious action from anywhere in the world often go to great lengths to find and join groups or support a business or organization that they feel or have experienced a bond with.





It's Possible to Be Too Honest

While honesty can attract a certain audience, being too honest can also offend or turn off an audience as well.

Be aware of the words you use to convey your truth. Let your audience deduce the meaning, or read between the lines.

Use of the word “hooker” for instance, will alienate 99% of women and studies show women give the most money to panhandlers.

“Need to buy flowers, beer and burgers to help celebrate my girlfriend’s birthday,” might do more to get you money from passers-by and less attention from the police who are waiting to see where you buy your hooker and pot.

Never Make a Threat or A Promise You Can't Keep or Back Up

Never make a threat you can't carry out. Never make a promise you can't keep. Those are not only verses in the military bible of conflict, but also in the copywriter's bible.

There are times when it's better to list the consequence rather than the benefit, but unless the consequence is guaranteed - better to list the benefits.

Nothing kills a bad product faster than good advertising. Sure, people will try it once, but if it can't meet the hype - they'll never try it again and they'll tell everyone they know about what a failure or loss it is.

- Under promise.
- Over deliver.





Share Negative Insights and Advice

Often a well-placed or expressed negative word, a bit of advice, or a timely warning can be all you need to make your point - particularly if it involves a celebrity who is currently in the news.

Audiences like to draw their own conclusions and even to judge others or kick them when they're down. It makes them feel smart, smug and informed.

Negative advertising, such as the constant onslaught of political mudslinging, can be productive if you follow up and close the sale by asking for funding, the vote or support.

Use Color to Your Advantage

Color coding your words, using bright **borders** around your message and linking colors to meaning, such as **RED** to danger, and **GREEN** to money, are simple, clever ways to get your point across.

If you're not sure your audience will understand your message, use simple graphics to help convey the next action (arrows for instance, to help move their eyes from one word to the next). Exclamation points can emphasize the urgency of your message if you use them sparingly.

- Use odd numbers in your copy.
- Keep it short and simple.



Share Your Vision

If you have a plan, or a vision, don't be shy about sharing it with your readers or audience.

If your project or cause requires donations or participation from your followers or audience, make sure you let them know what your plans or vision is for the funds you're raising. Don't be afraid to be honest or factual about negative events that caused or led to the request for funds.

- Invoke a fearful image and consequence to stir strong emotions in your audience.
- Be specific about what you plan to do with any donations.
- Share your vision.
- Be honest about your needs.



No One Likes to Be Cheated

Don't promise what you can't deliver. Don't pretend to be or do something you aren't. Being ethical, honest and real in person is great, but your copy should be just as authentic.

Don't tell a story about a product or person simply to make a sale. Don't pretend to be someone you're not to get something you haven't earned or don't deserve.

Work with what you have and work for what you want. Cheating, lying and stealing from others affects you as much as it does them - just not usually as quickly or obviously.

"What goes around, comes around." It's not just a saying, it's a law of the universe. Heed it.



Sex Sells

Sex sells. It's usually pretty girls who are doing the selling, but utilizing an unexpected character or circumstance, such as a frog and a princess, or an elderly gentleman often appeal to the part of us that believes we all want and need love.

Subtle references to the act, or to intimacy are sexier and funnier than outright crude photos or expressions of an intimate act.

Write your copy in a way that allows the reader to imagine the encounter in their own way, using their own powers of visualization. Don't forget to tie romantic copy to the season of love - June weddings, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day and events when we're all primed to be loving and emotionally focused.



Deny Negative Associations or Assumptions About Your Cause

Politicians and wrong-doers are constantly denying association with criminal or negatively associated events. Why? Repeat a lie often enough, or deny involvement often enough and people begin to believe it - particularly if you give them a distracting explanation for why you're denying what seems to be the truth about something.

"I did not have sex with that woman," is a famous distraction and denial from a President.

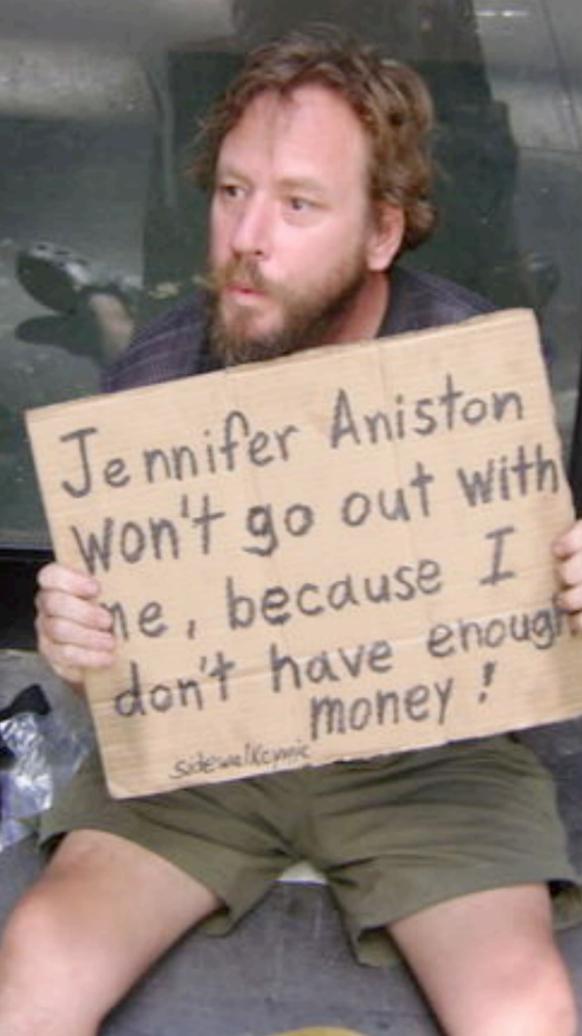
If you are telling the truth, make sure that you are defensive about any assumptions so readers, buyers and customers realize you are indeed telling the truth. Liars explain, truth tellers deny - but then of course liars know that and that's why they too deny.



Leverage Your Connection With Famous People



- Invoke the name of a celebrity someone with money might recognize.
- Imply you know this famous person and have influence.
- Babies - even the mention of them, often works as well as a photo of one.
- Use a well-defined, highly visible "Buy" button or repository for money so your donor knows exactly where to contribute their donation.



Pity Doesn't Play Well

Pity is often believed to be a great way to attract attention and support for our cause, but it rarely achieves the level of response people think it will. We've all played the pity card - but try not to. No one likes a loser, but people do like an underdog. Underdogs fight. Losers whine. Rather than appeal to people to feel sorry for you, demonstrate how you're taking control of your life or situation to get back in the fight or the game.

Saying, "I'm raising money for my date with Jennifer Aniston." would go farther than whining about why she won't go out with you.

- Be proactive and upbeat.
- Pity doesn't work. People don't like losers, whiners and cry-babies.

Medical Research and Humanitarian Causes

Medical research and humanitarian causes are often accused of using emotional arm twisting and manipulation to separate people from their money. Be factual , authentic and matter-of-fact when writing copy for Humanitarian and Medical Research Copy.

- Bonus for authenticity.
- Respect your audience's intelligence.
- Use simple words like "research."
- Medical research appeals to the generosity in socially conscious donors.
- Give your donor a chance to be a part of something larger than themselves.
- Appeal to causes that benefit humanity.





Use Jargon Where Appropriate

Not everyone understands technical terms, but if your audience is technically gifted and understands references to things like “flux capacitor,” and “string theory,” then utilize jargon unique to your profession.

- Appeal to the technically gifted.
- When going after high dollar donations, don't limit yourself or your donors to a number.
- Dress the part.
- Identify yourself so others from your tribe (time traveler) recognize you.



Confessions Can Be Profitable

Many readers like to feel superior and nothing helps anyone feel more superior than hearing another's confession, unless it's a confession about something involving a politician or celebrity.

Incorporate humility, honesty and the facts into your copy.

Appeal for understanding, forgiveness, and help.

- Be authentic
- Be transparent
- Be real
- Name names when appropriate

Associate Your Cause with a Well-Known Organization

If your cause is connected to a large, well-known association or organization, reference them in your copy.

Credibility, understanding and a history of past positive associations with that organization will go far in helping you establish credibility, trust and appreciation for your organization as well.

- Introduce yourself to your audience (Hi, I'm Harry).
- Smile when greeting potential donors
- Make sure donors and readers can see that you honestly do have a legitimate connection to a larger organization.





Never Underestimate the Power of Popular Culture

- Never underestimate the power of popular culture
- Dress the part
- Make it easy for your potential audience to believe your claims
- The brilliance of this poster is that he appeals to the "insider" - to those who understand what it means to be a Jedi.

He's not begging, but he's obviously in character, using his connection to "the force" to attract spare change. Appeal to the magic in your audience.

Write About What You Know



- Be believable
- Challenge your audience to act
- If suggesting violence or a military themed campaign, dress the part to show you mean it
- Make your challenges achievable
- Keep the price of admission low
- Make the potential for success high

Should I give money to panhandlers?

It's your choice. I personally would not give money to aggressive panhandlers, or panhandlers who come up to me on the street. They're too likely to grab you, your wallet, bag or purse and run. Just because someone is homeless doesn't mean they're not a stranger or they're not dangerous.

Panhandlers who are seated, passive, have a sign, are busking (performing or entertaining for change) I do often give money to. I know they're not likely to come out of a cross-legged stance, upset their coin bowl and come after me.

Don't give if you're worried about where the money will go. It will probably go to alcohol or drugs. However, it may go to food or a hotel room, or a bus ticket, or medication or gas for a vehicle.

If it doesn't matter where your money goes, then give. Give because you want to give; don't give if you don't want to encourage, support or enable a suspected donation. Your choice is your choice. **I just advise people not to forget personal safety or common sense when giving.**

If you truly want to help the homeless, donate to a local shelter, soup kitchen or organization that you know honestly helps the homeless. Learn all you can and do what you can. Sometimes a gift of socks or a gift card to a fast food place means more than money.

Ultimately your personal safety comes first. If it means not giving to a panhandler, then don't, and don't feel guilty about it.

About the Author
Becky & Koko





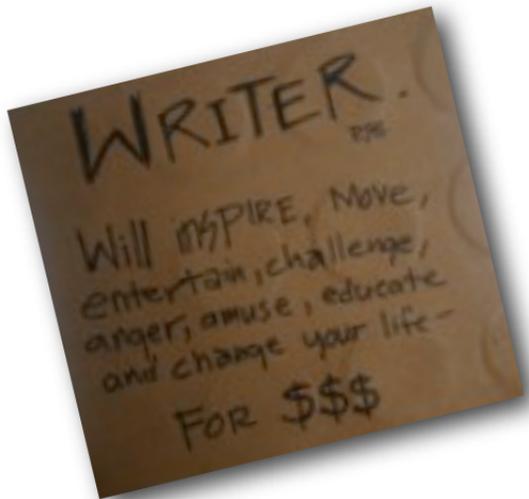
When my father died of a brain tumor in 2006 I quit my job as the newspaper editor of a small town outside Denver, Colorado and moved into a van with my Rottweiler and my cat.

The plan was to travel (the only thing my father said he regretted not doing) and freelance along the way.

My freelance job ended after a month and I had to get a temp job. Unable to find affordable housing without giving up my animals, I chose to live in the van, work and look for more freelance work so I could travel.

That decision turned into more than a year of homelessness for me - not my description of it, but society's description.

After hearing myself described as "that homeless woman" by mean-spirited co-workers I began to believe it myself and started believing I was homeless, horrible, unworthy, stupid and not valuable or worthy or talented.



Between van repairs (it was a 1975 Chevy) and putting the animals in “doggie day care” so they weren’t impacted by the heat, I had no money to travel.

The physical and mental toll of just living, eating and avoiding police

harassment left little to no time for planning an escape back to Tennessee.

Eventually I borrowed gas money from my brother and drove back to TN, got another job, won some journalism awards, got off the street, into an apartment and eventually realized that homelessness is an attitude, a way society forces us to think about ourselves when we fall below a certain income level.

Homelessness is not about having a home or a house. It’s about poverty and being poor. When a couple with \$250,000 in savings and \$25,000 in their bank account sells their house and lives in a van it’s called “Full time RVing.”

When I lived in a van with \$10 to my name, it was called “Homelessness.” I worked 30 to 60 hours a week at temp and freelance jobs the entire time I was living in the van. I didn’t pan-handle (I created my sign (previous page) for a blog post I wrote in 2009).

In 2008 I won a contest held by author Dan Pink - first prize - a trip to [TED Global 2009](#). I pitched my homeless story to TED and was selected to speak at **TED Global** in Oxford as well. In three years I went

from living in a van at the Highlands Ranch Walmart in Denver, to speaking at [TED Global in Oxford](#).

As I said in [my TED talk](#), “Hope always finds a way.” This is just one of a series of books to help raise awareness of homelessness.

There are others - free booklets and ideas anyone - poor, homeless, struggling, can use to make money, create a business or find hope.

If you or someone you know is homeless, ask them to check out: <http://WeAreVisible.com> for tips on how to set up a blog, email and a twitter account (FREE INFO), and a social community of homeless.



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