

Erasing Decades of Confusion about Copywriter Fees: An Exclusive Interview with Chris Marlow, author and publisher, *2005 Freelance Copywriter Fee & Compensation Survey*[™]

Take note, Chris Marlow is about to blast onto the national copywriting scene. Not for being one of the nation's top copywriters for software, or for having won a Pioneer Award, two ECHO Awards, and a regional MAXI Award during her 22-year career. Instead, Chris is becoming widely known for her groundbreaking *2005 Freelance Copywriter Fee & Compensation Survey*[™]. This survey, the first in-depth, statistical report on freelance copywriter income and economics ever published, is a one-stop resource on copywriter earnings, demographics and marketing.

Andrea E. R. Weckerle: Welcome Chris. I've been hearing a lot of buzz about your survey lately. Let me ask you directly, what impact do you think this survey is going to have on the freelance copywriting industry?

Chris Marlow: I'm convinced that the survey is going to take the guesswork out of fee setting once and for all. For the first time, copywriters will be able to compare what others in the field are charging for particular jobs and price their work accordingly -- without underselling. This is big, big news.

AW: Where did you get the idea for the survey?

Chris Marlow: The question of what fees to charge clients is always a big issue for freelance copywriters. This is certainly the case with novices, but even experienced and seasoned copywriters are known to agonize over "pricing right." No copywriter wants to lose a job because he overbid, and no one wants to get that sick feeling from having found out they underpriced.

AW: Isn't copywriter fee information already widely available?

Marlow: No, not in as detailed and extensive a form as in the **2005 Copywriter Survey**. You've got to remember, copywriters don't have their own professional association that collects data and shares information. And because it's a competitive industry and the variation in copywriter skill level can be quite high, copywriters are sometimes reluctant to share with other writers the exact fees they ask for. That makes it hard for others to gauge where they fall on the fee spectrum. So for many writers, naming fees is part guesswork and part chutzpa.

AW: You sound like you're speaking from personal experience.

Marlow: Absolutely. When I first started out as a freelance copywriter, I was just trying to get by. I had plenty of motivation and skill and knew the mechanics of direct mail copywriting, but I knew nothing about setting fees.

AW: What was your personal approach to quoting a job when starting out?

Marlow: Well, I didn't really have an approach. My "secret formula," if you can call it that, was to figure out the minimum amount of money I needed to bring in every week to buy groceries and pay the rent. Over a year after going solo I finally found out why I'd been struggling so hard...it turned out I'd been undercharging by \$30 an hour. I lost thousands of dollars of income, and back then that was an absolute fortune to me!

AW: What did you do to prevent that from happening again?

Marlow: I decided that I'd never again unintentionally undercharge. I became obsessive about collecting any information I could find on copywriters' income and eventually had a thick folder of both anecdotal information and individual copywriters' quotes for certain projects. I thought that if I was frustrated with not having a resource for figuring out how to price, others must be too. That became the idea for the survey.

AW: Chris, let's talk a little bit about your background. You've been a copywriter for over 20 years now. How did you get started in the field?

Marlow: My copywriting education began while I was still in college, when I used to spend weekends at Powell's Bookstore in Portland, Oregon, devouring everything on advertising I could get my hands on. I discovered icons Dick Benson, Herschell Gordon Lewis, and Bob Stone and fell in love with direct response copywriting.

AW: And after college?

Marlow: I tried freelancing straight out of college. As I said earlier, I didn't know anything about setting fees and lost a ton of money because of that. So because I was barely scraping by, I decided to try the agency route. After making all the mistakes most freelance copywriters make, I was relieved to get hired by direct marketing agency Rosen/Brown in Oregon. I worked there for eight years before going freelance again in 1997.

AW: What made you decide to leave the safety of an agency and become a freelancer?

Marlow: First let me say that I wouldn't trade my agency experience for anything. But after eight years I was tired of the punishing work load and the office politics. I figured that I'd rather work with clients directly and pocket the difference in fees I'd been making as an in-house copywriter versus what I could make as a freelancer.

AW: How has your career evolved over the years?

Marlow: I've expanded my copywriting services into offering information about the business aspects of copywriting as well. In addition to being a copywriter, I publish a

monthly newsletter called *Freelancer's Business Bulletin* that gives freelancers information they can use in building their own business. I'm also a business coach and teach corporate and freelance copywriters how to improve their copywriting and business skills through my consulting service, The Copywriters Coach.

AW: Let's go back to your *2005 Copywriter Survey*. How long did it take you to create it?

Marlow: Well, I'd had the idea of creating a fee and compensation survey for several years now. But in terms of how long it actually took me to create it, I spent the second half of 2004 drafting the survey questions, collecting and analyzing the data, and then turning it into a comprehensive report. The report contains data on a total of 62 copywriting questions, 20 of them fee-related. What's important is that this is the first time an extensive survey of copywriting fees, marketing and demographics like this has ever been done.

AW: What was the most surprising thing you found out when compiling the survey results?

Marlow: Before analyzing the results, I thought I'd confirm my suspicion that fee setting was the most stressful part of a copywriter's job. But in fact, I discovered that finding clients is the first concern, and fee setting came second. Which makes sense when you think about it. A full 30% of respondents said that finding clients is the most difficult part of their job, and 22% said that knowing what to charge is.

AW: Anything else?

Marlow: Yes ... 81% of the copywriters surveyed feel that they undercharge for their work. That's a huge amount! This goes directly to my belief that novice and early-career copywriters are incredibly insecure about marketing their services. Despite the fact that copywriters are excellent at promoting their clients' products and services, they have to make a giant mental leap when it comes to marketing themselves.

AW: Based on your survey findings and your work as a coach, is there anything you believe that copywriters forget to do when launching their own copywriting business?

Marlow: You just said it ... "copywriting business." Today's copywriters don't just have to know the mechanics of writing targeted sales and promotional materials, they also have to know how to run a business. Copywriting is a business, a potentially very lucrative and rewarding one. The first step to success for copywriters is recognizing that they have to be market savvy.

AW: Based on the survey's title, it seems that you're planning to publish this survey annually.

Marlow: Yes, that's right. Each year I'll add updated statistical data and expand the survey to address those issues of greatest importance to copywriters. For example, respondents of this year's survey want to see information on pricing for other types of writing added, such as feature articles, speeches, and annual reports. So that's what I'll do in 2006.

AW: So each year you'll provide the newest information on copywriting fees, marketing and business management. How do you stay informed about what copywriters' most pressing business issues are?

Marlow: Because I am a practicing copywriter and also a copywriting coach, I have to be on top of the latest trends and issues affecting the business side of copywriting. I talk to a lot of copywriters, both novices and seasoned professionals, and have a solid understanding of what their work challenges and concerns are. Also, I'm encouraging copywriters to e-mail me at chris@chrismarlow.com with questions or issues they'd like to see addressed in subsequent surveys.

AW: Where can your survey be purchased?

Marlow: The survey is available online at www.FreelancersBusinessStore.com. And as a special bonus, I'm also offering for free my industry classic, *How to Structure Your Copywriting Rates*, when someone orders the survey.

AW: You recently participated in an American Writers & Artists Institute's teleseminar on "Establishing Your Reputation as a Top Copywriter in Your Field."

Marlow: That's right.

AW: Would you say that publishing a groundbreaking copywriter survey is one way to establish one's reputation?

Marlow: [Laughing] Yes, I suppose it is.

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