Pushing the Envelope

I JUST FOUND OUT FOR SURE who killed Vince Foster, and if you'll read on, I'll explain how you can prevent the senseless slaughter of hundreds of golden retriever puppies while you effortlessly double your annual income.

HOW'S THAT FOR an envelope teaser? I'm trying to more than double my own income by breaking into the Fright Mail business. Here are people that hunt and peck on a keyboard for a living just like I do, but who get to swim in their own pools and drive Lexus cars as though they have real jobs with a real income. They read the *Wall Street Journal* because it's relevant to their lives. They make enough money—well into six figures is not unusual, I'm told—to have a personal stake in capital gains tax reductions. So I'm thinking that a career reorientation may be in order: to learn how to be one of the few, the proud, the junk mail copy writers.

First off, a slight attitude adjustment is required. Ornery self-righteousness won't get me anywhere in my new professional clime, so I'm going to have to learn to not be so ethically uptight. "I have very loose morals," explains Huey (not his real name), an enormously successful 20-year veteran of direct mail copywriting and one of three Washington, D.C.–based specialists who have agreed to show me the ropes. In this ghoulish trade, every day is Halloween, and we direct mail writers are like professional trick-or-treaters. "We manipulate people's darker motives," Huey says. "The objective is to raise money and the way to do that is to get the recipient's emotions involved." What about appealing to people's hopes? I ask meekly. A gush of laughter reveals that I'm not yet catching on. This is real money—roughly billions and billions raised every year. "I can't say that the upbeat, Pollyannaish approach never works, but it's certainly been my experience that we're more effective if we can get someone really wound up about an issue."

Enough contemplative musing; I'm eager to get down to shop talk—the actual mechanics of fright. The envelope teaser, I'm told, is paramount. "Half the battle is getting the person to open the letter," explains Dewey (also not his real name), my second guide. "Something like, 'Information You Requested Enclosed,' or 'Will Bill Clinton's Bosnia policy bring more young soldiers back in a box?' Something like that."

IT DOESN'T MATTER that the recipient hasn't actually requested any information, of course. Theirs is a game of make-believe, a giant costume party at which you, the direct mail recipient, always play the fool. I ask Huey and Dewey if they've seen my current favorite envelope teaser making the rounds: the faux-personal "The Favor of a Reply Is Requested," intending to pry the envelope open by calling up some disassociative guilt in the recipient's mind? Oh yes, they know that one. "That has proven to be an effective technique," Huey says. "We're always looking for the next gimmick."

In case a new one doesn't come along, though, there are plenty of old standbys such as the fishing expedition. "This technique is to give somebody so much bait that they can't resist it," explains Louie, fright writer number three (coincidentally, also not his birth name). "That pushes one of three great motivating but-

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