

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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tons we humans have: Greed."

The other two buttons, I am told, are Sex and Fear, and I should always aim to push at least one if I expect my targets to voluntarily give away some of their hard-earned cash. "Fear is the one used most in politics," says Louie. "It is a big motivator for most people of most ages. That can be fear of a lot of things: fear of missing the boat, fear of voting for the wrong guy, fear of economic collapse." If you don't open this letter—apocalypse now.

Here's one key American industry that isn't going to get shipped off to Malaysia anytime soon. It's not just a mastery of polished, nuanced English that one needs, I'm beginning to realize. It also requires our cowboy gumption. "I have a little bit of a wild West attitude," admits Huey. Indeed, though he's conservative by temperament, he'll happily work for almost any political cause. "The liberals do the same thing and they do it just as well. Greenpeace is just as *vivid* as the NRA—the rape of the oceans and the merciless slaughter of seal pups and whatnot."

"It's an emotional way of writing," adds the understated Dewey. "Let's say we're talking about the health-care issue. So we call Clinton's plan Socialized Death."

I might hone my craft, build up a reputation for cunning and dread, and eke out a nice living if I keep at this. But I'll never enjoy the luxury of old, the golden days of fright mail, when there wasn't so much clutter and the envelope teaser wasn't even necessary. "This was a time," Huey recalls nostalgically of the days before the desktop publishing revolution, "when people would get very little other than personal mail. Now there's just a ton of junk mail, and you've got to compete with all that other stuff in the mailbox."

ON THE OTHER HAND, modern technology has also been a boon to the industry. You wouldn't throw away a letter from your own grandma, would you? "We can now do laser-printed outer envelopes without any window on them,"

Huey explains, "and make it look like a personal letter—which people will always open first."

Near the end of my conversation with Dewey, he unveils the atom bomb of envelope teasers: the certified letter. Great power, great danger. "If you ever send a certified mailing," he warns, "the first thing you want to say is 'I'm sorry if I caused you any inconvenience. But this is urgent!' because you get a lot of people who have to drive twenty or twenty-five miles just to pick it up. Then when they find out it's junk mail, they can get pretty upset."

Certified mail coercion, fake personal missives, false portraits of economic Armageddon—very wild West. "In the heat of the moment," says Louie, "people often get carried away. They wind up putting out mail that they probably shouldn't. There's a line between scaring people gratuitously and creating a word picture that is based in reality."

There is one venture my three caballeros, who, after all, raise money for legitimate organizations, will not lend their immense powers of persuasion to: the no-cause cause. "These organizations raise money in order to raise more money," Huey says incredulously. "They'll say, 'Please send us twenty-five dollars so we can alert more people to this problem.' Which means mail out more letters. They don't consist of much more than a box of stationery, and yet they make millions of dollars for the agency, the letter shop companies, the production companies, and so on. But the issue—whether it's starving people in India or some right-wing reactionary thing dreamed up by Richard Viguerie—never really gets addressed. That does happen out there, and it's a serious problem."

Blast it all. Those no-cause cause scoundrels are enough to give all of us professional button pushers a bad name.—*David Shenk*

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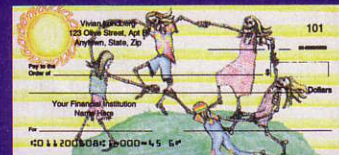
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