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# barefootWriter

Celebrating 10 Years of Helping People Find Freedom Through Well-Paid Writing



**Direct Marketing Giant and Titans Founder Brian Kurtz shares his passion and knowledge of the science of persuasion and long-term writing success.**



**“Everything is a side hustle...  
You can compound your side  
hustles into a career.”**

— Brian Kurtz, Titans Marketing Founder,  
Author, Direct Marketing Expert

## By Mindy McHorse

**H**e may not officially be a “copywriter,” but you’d be hard pressed to find anyone in the industry with more passion and knowledge about direct marketing than Brian Kurtz. With a career spanning more than 40 years, Brian has had a front row seat to some of the largest promotions and best copywriting packages ever created.

As the head of Boardroom Publishing, he worked side by side with copywriting giants like Gary Bencivenga, Jim Rutz, Mel Martin, and Richard Armstrong (to name just a few). With each project, Brian found himself fascinated — and slightly obsessed — with the people he was selling to. Who were they? What was motivating them to buy? It turns out, having a deep and intimate understanding of your audience is one of the most important aspects of copywriting.

In this special chat, you’ll get to hear about the seven characteristics that make a great copywriter. (You’ll be surprised where “good writing” falls on the list.) You’ll also get to hear Brian’s thoughts on creating a living legacy, and he’ll share an educational resource that might just be the most inexpensive — yet valuable — writing resource you can find... well, anywhere! Regardless of what kind of copywriting you enjoy, you’ll definitely benefit from this chat with direct marketing expert Brian Kurtz.

# interview with a barefoot writer (continued...)

## **I'm curious... What did you initially want to be when you were growing up?**

I had three possible careers that I wanted to pursue. I was an English major, so I thought, *Okay I'll go to grad school, I'll get a master's and PhD in English and become an English professor.*

The second path was to become a film critic. That's because I was the film critic for my college newspaper — I loved movies. I went to college in New Jersey, so I used to go to the city for screenings of new movies and write reviews.

And path three was to become a professional baseball umpire.

## **That's quite a variety.**

They're all very different. And I tell you all that because I did none of the three.

Instead I graduated and just hit the pavement in New York for publishing jobs. And I basically mapped out a route for myself every single day in New York City, like where the publishing houses were. This is 1981. I ended up getting so many rejection letters that I was going to wallpaper my room with them.

So then, one of the places I walked into was a play publisher, Samuel French, which is the number one publisher of scripts and plays. And they offered me a "job" on the spot. I say job in quotes, because it was \$9,500 a year. I was living at home. They had me start with amateur leasing. So if a high school teacher in Dallas, Texas, wants to do *The Odd Couple* for the spring show, they have to get the royalty rights from me. That was the job.

## **How did that transfer into a career in direct marketing?**

I stumbled into it, of course, like everybody else does.

There was a headhunter who took a shine to me, who was actually recruiting for Boardroom. Boardroom was an entrepreneurial publishing company, direct mail, direct marketing... but direct mail at the time, mostly.

He said, "This guy Marty Edelston, he's the founder of Boardroom, he'll love you." And the job that came up was in-house list management.

## **Can you explain to our readers what it means to work in list management?**

Boardroom did not take advertising — we had newsletters. But we had a list... a powerful list that everybody wanted, because it was people who bought subscriptions and books through direct mail. They were executives. They were affluent.

The profile of the list was so good that everybody used the Boardroom list, whether it was *Money* magazine, *Consumer Reports*, everybody.



Brian and his daughter, Maddie.

## interview with a barefoot writer (continued...)

I got the job as a list manager there, in-house list manager. And learning direct marketing from that perspective was so valuable and why I ended up loving it so much. It was fascinating.

I dug deeper and I said, “How did he get this or that name on the list?” Well, you got it through this mailing piece, you got it through this email, you got it from this TV ad, whatever. I really was obsessed with researching the source of names. Because names — lists — are people, too.

### **You wanted to know which gate different people came through to find Boardroom.**

Yeah. I wasn’t at the beginning of direct marketing by any means, but I was at the beginning of it growing by leaps and bounds. I used to make a joke: “I was voted most likely in my high school yearbook to become a list manager.”

But I say it tongue in cheek, because if I knew about it and someone explained it to me, I’d say, “That would be an interesting job,” to think I could really dissect the audiences and really get into the crux of how people behave in the marketplace.

### **You might be one of the first people I’ve heard talk so passionately about the science and the art of direct response.**

That’s why I was obsessed with things like *Breakthrough Advertising* and other copy-writing books, because it really dissected the audience and what it meant to sell to an audience and how people behave.

So anyway, I always incorporated the things from the three careers I didn’t go into in my life. The English professor stuff, I mean, I basically have always loved writing. Every Sunday, I blog, and I just love writing, and I love thinking about writing.

### **And you taught as a professor at one point, didn’t you?**

I did... adjunct, of course... I wasn’t a full-time professor. But I went back to my alma mater at Rutgers in 1989. Eight years after I graduated, I went back and taught a full semester of direct marketing. I also would teach, through the educational foundation of the Direct Marketing Association, the new students coming out into the industry.

Teaching was in my blood, so that was how I connected to the English professor thing. The film stuff was about writing more. And I still go to the movies — I still love movies.

### **I see your posters behind you. You really love a wide variety.**

*Pulp Fiction*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*... The one over there is *Midnight Cowboy*. So yeah, it’s still a big part of my life. Not my vocation, but a big part of my life.



Brian with his wife, Robin, at Citi Field Stadium in Queens, New York, for a New York Mets game in 2016.

## interview with a barefoot writer (continued...)

And umpiring — this evening I'm going out to umpire a Little League district tournament game.

I've done Little League tournaments, I've done a World Series, I umpire high school varsity baseball. So umpiring is still part of my life, although not professionally.

### **You're still honoring your interests and your loves.**

There's a lesson there, especially for people thinking about freelance copywriting as a career... or as a side hustle.

I always say that everything is a side hustle. Everything...

You can compound your side hustles into a career. And you have to have one basic place where you make money. It could be something that you're passionate about, could be something that you're not completely passionate about but might be a little passionate about.

But you can bring those other passions in through other things that you can do. I believe that, and that's why I do it. I look for opportunities to teach, to write, and to umpire, even though I'm doing direct marketing all day.

I always say this, and people give me a hard time about it, but I'm not a copywriter. AWAI has had me speak every other year for 10 years, and it's a copywriting conference and I'm not a copywriter. However, I make jokes all the time that I'm a copywriter's best friend. And I've worked with every great copywriter who's been alive in my work career.

### **Not only does it make you a better marketer and writer, but I think you enjoy your job more when you understand all the wheels that go into it, including what different people bring to the table.**

Since 1981, any copywriter who was working in direct response at the highest level, I probably worked with at some point.

And that includes Gary Bencivenga, Jim Rutz, Gene Schwartz, Mel Martin, Jim Punkre, and now more currently Parris Lampropoulos, David Deutsche, Arthur Johnson, Richard Armstrong. I mean, I can just keep naming them and naming them... Carline Anglade Cole, Kim Krause Schwalm... I've worked with all of them... Marcella Allison.

### **Did you notice any similarities among all these greats?**

Everybody has a little bit of these characteristics, but the best of the best, the A-listers,



Brian has long been a popular speaker at AWAI's annual Bootcamp conference in Delray Beach, Florida; shown here speaking to attendees in 2014.

## interview with a barefoot writer (continued...)

all were 10 out of 10 on specific characteristics. I observed them, and it's basically the seven characteristics that make a world-class copywriter.

Writing is one of them, but it's number seven.

I'll just rattle them off: It's hunger, it's insatiable curiosity, it's where to go and how to get feedback loops. It's passion, it's direct marketing smarts — of the basics, at least. It's humility, and then it's about doing the writing and actually showing your work.

And the beauty of my role with them, and even though I'm not a copywriter, man, I knew the list. I knew the audience, and I could give a copywriter a star kit.

**You really made the copywriters' jobs easier, or at least you helped them shine by giving them such an incredible step up with that initial information about the list. I feel like your superpower is really just about digging deeper, and then deeper again, and peeling back the layers.**

One of the other keynotes I've given at AWAI was "Creative and copy is the least important element of any promotion, until it's not."

What I mean by that is that if you start with great creative — well, great creative to an audience that's not interested — you get zero orders. And I'm talking about online, hanging out a shingle saying, "We're an online marketer, I have a product, I'm going to sell it, I'll get the best creative." If you don't have the right list or audience, it's not going to sell anything.

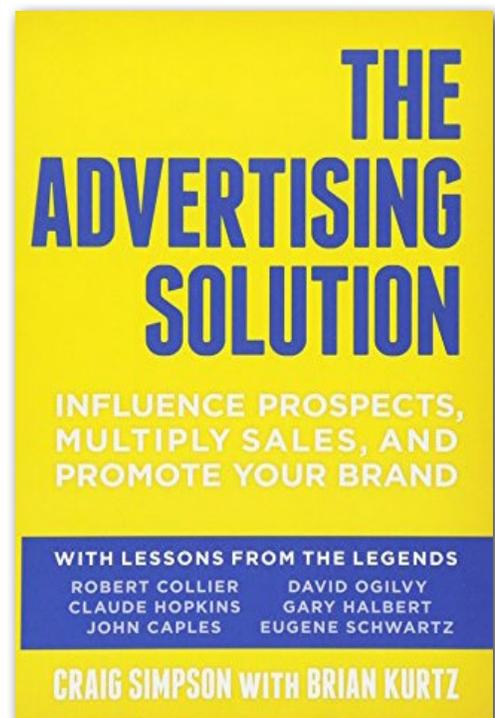
The opposite, though, if you have a completely targeted audience — list — that is perfect for your offer and your product, and you use kind of like half-assed creative, amateur, B-creative, it won't be great, but you'll make some sales.

That's why the creative becomes the most important when you've got your list and your offer dialed in. And that's why the biggest breakthroughs I've ever had in my career were always based on the creative, and the copy, and the messaging.

**Tell me about Titans Marketing and what you do with them.**

Jay Abraham was one of my mentors, and wrote the foreword to my book *Overdeliver*. He always said, "If you've done it, you have a moral responsibility to teach it."

He always drilled that into me. When I decided to leave Boardroom, I decided that I wanted to create a direct marketing educational business. What does that mean? It's a euphemism for mastermind, and high-end coaching.



Along with his coauthor, Craig Simpson, Brian distills and extracts million-dollar lessons from legends in advertising and copywriting in their book *The Advertising Solution*.

## interview with a barefoot writer (continued...)

I could be a great coach, because I was coaching people my whole career. I looked up to my mentors. When someone calls me their mentor, that's one of the most satisfying things in my entire career.

So Titans Marketing started off with a high-end mastermind. In online businesses of coaching and all this other stuff, it's usually an ascension program, right? You start with a \$47 something or other, and then do a \$1,500 coaching program, and then you do a \$20,000 mastermind, something like that. I started with the \$20,000 mastermind. I figured at that point I had 34 years of experience in the business. I figured I could get 30 companies and people to join a mastermind with me for \$20,000 and that would be the foundation of my business.

In a few months, after I left Boardroom, I had 23 or 24 companies sign up for my Titans Mastermind. That's three live events a year with guest speakers and hot seats, and that's been going on since September of 2015.

### Wow.

So I've been doing that for seven years. And then off of that, I did a descension model. Not everybody can spend \$20,000 for what I was offering. So then I did the Titans Masterclass, which was a program with two live events a year, and that was \$11,500. That wasn't a sweet spot. It was very successful, but I bagged that, and then I moved down to Titans Accelerator, which is \$2,000 a year, no live events, virtual. I'm really proud of myself, because I launched the virtual mastermind in December of 2019.

### Excellent timing there.

Yeah, right before the pandemic. Like, perfect timing.

So I'm really proud of both groups. I have masterminds, I sell books, and I have [Eugene M. Schwartz's] *Breakthrough Advertising* and *The Brilliance Breakthrough* [on my website]. I created some swipe files. One of the great copywriters, Bill Jayme, who was more of a magazine copywriter — people in AWAI should know him and study him — I have a swipe file of his that I sell.

And then I also have another swipe file of Jim Rutz. Jim Rutz was one of the first magalog writers. He and Gary Bencivenga basically spearheaded the magalog movement. That's what Titans Marketing is, in a nutshell. But it's a direct marketing educational business that includes products and coaching masterminds. It keeps me busy, but it doesn't stress me out too much most of the time, and it's a fun business, and I'm still having fun doing what I'm doing.



Brian and his wife, Robin, at the dedication of a classroom donated by Titans Marketing to the Sanimarco School in Kenya. The classroom was named, "Titans of Kenya."

## interview with a barefoot writer (continued...)

**That's what matters. It seems like the way you've approached it, it's such a beautiful tribute to legacies like Gene Schwartz and some of the other greats.**

It's funny you say that. I'll share this with you, a little more intimate, but I had a near-fatal stroke in April 2019. In fact, it was the day after my book was released, *Overdeliver*.

That summer was rough, 2019. The reason why I brought that up is not to make anybody feel sorry for me. But when I woke up, I was just happy that I was alive. The neurosurgeon said, "I didn't expect you to survive."

My whole right side was paralyzed when I collapsed. I couldn't even lift my arm, and then I just passed out. When I woke up, I was in the hospital for a couple of days, and I thought about the concept of legacy...

Because legacy, to me — legacy implies death somehow. Remembering is different.

I put it in the context of the movie *Coco*... a Pixar film.

It has a song called "Remember Me," and it's about Dia de Muertos, a Mexican holiday. It's all about celebrating and honoring the dead, not mourning the dead. And that there's a final death, according to *Coco*, that you're finally dead when you're no longer remembered.

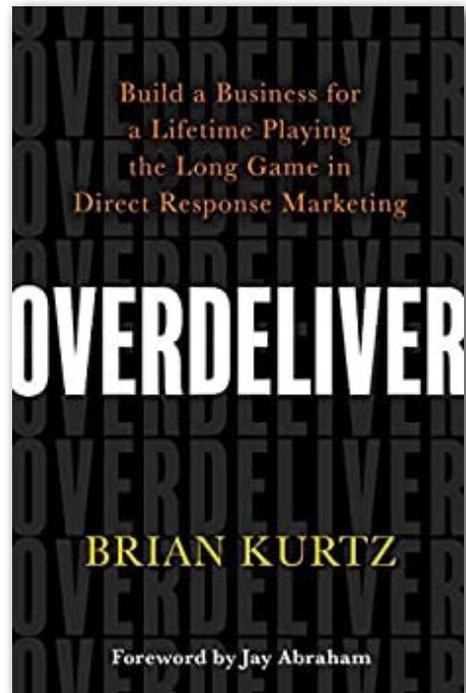
All that said, when I had my stroke, I was thinking, *What was my footprint?* I didn't want to say "legacy," if I had died. And I realized that it wasn't even my book, which had just come out. It was actually the resource page for my book, which is at [overdeliverbook.com](http://overdeliverbook.com).

**Your resource page was like a living legacy?**

Sort of. See, you go to [overdeliverbook.com](http://overdeliverbook.com), and there's a lot of great information from great people... It starts with a tribute to me, in a way, all the people saying what a great guy I am. Mark Ford is there, and Bill Bonner is there, and all these greats of direct marketing saying that I'm a smart guy.

But beyond that, I created a bonus package. If you buy the book off the site, [overdeliverbook.com](http://overdeliverbook.com), instead of going directly to Amazon, you go to Amazon through the site, and you get access to these 11 bonuses that are outrageous. Like one of the bonuses is 19 keynote speeches that Jay Abraham made.

[There are] two PDFs of the best direct mail books ever written, Dick Benson's *Secrets of Successful Direct Mail* and Gordon Grossman's *Confessions of a Direct Mail Guy*. There's a swipe file from Dan Kennedy that he created for my Titans of Direct Response event in 2014. So it's just amazing, amazing bonuses, a swipe file of promotions going back to 1900, a 400-page swipe file.



Brian's book, *Overdeliver: Build a Business for a Lifetime Playing the Long Game in Direct Response Marketing*, is about applying the fundamental principles of direct marketing to the channels of today.

## interview with a barefoot writer (continued...)

So anyway, I realized that for me, sharing all their lessons was really a tribute to my own mentors. The resource page. So that was my footprint. And then I realized what my purpose was: to remember all of my mentors so that they continue to live... Because I don't want them to have a final death. So, in a weird sort of way, that's the living legacy that I hopefully created.

**It underscores the power and the depth of direct mail and how it really goes a lot further than just the surface of trying to get people to buy stuff.**

Oh yeah. I don't like to say the cliché of "I stand on the shoulders of giants," but the fact is, I do.

**You've made me fall in love with direct mail all over again.**

But it's not just direct mail either...

**Well, the art of marketing.**

Yeah, yeah. But that's where I cut my teeth...

Now there are people that have made the transition to online. I'm one of the few people from the direct mail list industry that made the transition to online and email and all of that. The internet was too confusing to them. It was confusing to me. I mean, I was a dinosaur. However, I really embraced it as an educational pursuit.

I'm a perpetual student. And the best teachers are always students... You have to be a student and a teacher all the time, both.

**That's a powerful message for our readers. Thank you. ■**



Brian and his wife, Robin, hiking the red rocks of Sedona, Arizona, which they consider their "happy place."



# Contributing to **Connect**

**By Brian Kurtz**

**A**s I was preparing recently to head out to one of my favorite masterminds, and then saw my latest flight get canceled — I should have been relieved.

What a great excuse to stay home, watch a good movie, and avoid all the extra gluten and sugar that is part of every airport's fine cuisine.

But I am bummed.

Maybe it's the fact that I have a terminal disease called FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)... although I happen to have a more acute version called TOMS (Terrified of Missing Sh#t).

However, I believe the real reason I wanted to get on that plane is that I am a mastermind junkie, a people junkie, a lifelong student... but as you may know, I'm also a guy who still hates "networking," so that was not one of the reasons my TOMS kicked in.

"Contributing to connect" is what fuels me... and it's much better doing that in person than via email or phone... although until I get a new flight, I'll do my best hunkered down in my basement, computer and phone at the ready.

I was reminded of a piece I wrote not too long ago called "The compound interest from relationship capital."

The root cause of my FOMO/TOMS disease is that I can never get enough great content from great people and also that I can't begin to calculate the value of being a lifelong student and the friendships and relationships I've developed over almost four decades living with this wonderful disease.

And then there's all the frequent flier miles I've accumulated, too.

Those of you who are mastermind/content/people/learning junkies know what I'm talking about.

"Contributing to connect" is very different from "networking," as I said above... Let me explain.

One of my earliest blog posts from 2014 was a response to many people asking me after the Titans of Direct Response event:

"How did you get all of those guys to speak?"

For those of you who are not aware of the lineup of speakers, there were some pretty big names who showed up.

I can admit to you now that making those requests was completely painless (and incredibly gratifying).

How did that happen?

I could simply chalk it up to the fact that I'm a nice guy, always appreciative and respectful.

But I knew it had to be more than that.

The event was a tribute to my mentor Marty Edelston. His stature in the industry as a legendary contributor didn't hurt on getting folks to step up.

And at the time I actually chalked it up mostly to that, which made a lot of sense to me.

But since then, as I have brought together some of the most amazing direct-response marketers and copywriters as members of my two mastermind groups, and then brought guest speakers to those groups who are equally accomplished, I suspected there was something more here.

It's called relationship capital.

You may find this hard to believe, but this form of capital is way more valuable than any bank account, bond, or equity portfolio — or even your latest investment in Bitcoin.

Relationship capital is forever, and what you "buy" with it does not have to be stored or displayed... although it needs to be nurtured... and it is an investment for a lifetime.

It also has nothing to do with getting rich quick. It's about getting rich slowly.

Another bonus: Relationship capital travels well, and it is accepted everywhere.

So how does this very special currency get deposited into your personal account and then accumulate compound interest over time?



First, let's explore how it doesn't happen.

It has nothing to do with trying to build the largest LinkedIn or Facebook account... and it doesn't happen by contacting people only when you want something or need something.

And it doesn't happen by accident.

Here's how it does happen:

Being committed to consistent communication... always thinking about contributing to the other person first... and always being interested, not interesting.

Without playing a long game of contribution first, "new deposits" into your account might as well be Monopoly money.

There's no "interest" accumulated when you are simply playing a numbers game with your contacts, only going a mile wide and not thinking about how you can go a mile deep with each one.

Note: You can think about the clients and customers that you only communicate with electronically or as a large group this way as well... Relationship capital can be accumulated even with people you will never talk to or meet.

The best marketers I know are very often folks with the most relationship capital. They are "interested" all the time whether they are selling or not.

They are also "interested" in helping, giving advice, interning for little or no money... basically giving with no expectation of a return immediately.

The benefits of living life this way will show up... maybe not immediately... but they will show up when you least expect it.

Success leaves clues.

It's no wonder that the most successful people we all know have the most relationship capital... and they never have to recalculate or check their balance. It's there because they have this philosophy.

I know how hard it can be to maintain focus on the other person, given the conversations going on in our heads all day about the most important person in our lives: ourselves.

Those are the voices we hear all day telling us how interesting we are... the "legends in our own mind" thing.

That's why I recommend that you have people around you all the time who will make you accountable... and tell you to shut up when "it's all about you."



I talked in the past about making sure you have true friends and mentors who make you accountable so you don't always assume your next idea is your best idea ever.

Today I will add that making requests for accountability from your closest friends, advisers, and coaches regarding how you are showing up for people is also critically important — that is, getting some checks and balances on when you are overdoing it on the “interesting over interested” scale.

Being quiet once in a while is always a quick way to get back on track.

That's one I've been told I need to do more.

Put more succinctly, there are two things that I suggest you eliminate for maximum yield on your relationship capital:

Complacency and arrogance.

If you are too complacent (not engaging and being interested in the other person) or if you are arrogant (being a bit too interesting and having it all be about you), you need to be slapped around a bit.

I surround myself with people who have permission to let me know immediately if I am becoming complacent and/or arrogant.

You can't invest in relationship capital if either of those things is getting in the way of how you contribute to everyone around you.

I know from experience that these two things (and I'm sure you can think of others for yourself) will stop you from creating a bigger future for yourself.

And since I don't trust myself 100% to be aware all the time if either of those two things are creeping in, I surround myself with people who have permission to let me know immediately (and loudly) if I am becoming complacent and/or arrogant... with love never leaving the room while they are letting me know.

Here's the quick prescription for building your “relationship capital account,” which automatically includes compound interest:

1. It's always about what you can contribute first to the other person, not what you can attain from them.
2. Be appreciative and respectful always... I guess that's pretty obvious... but good manners never go out of style.
3. Don't come out of nowhere with your communications to anyone... Be consistent... and certainly don't come out of nowhere with an “ask,” no matter how small.
4. Have people around you to let you know when you are being complacent... firmly... and without beating around the bush.

5. Have people around you to let you know when you are being arrogant... firmly... With this one, a kick in the head might also be in order.
6. Do your homework when entering into any new “investment” (i.e., relationship)... You probably ask a ton of questions before investing your money... Why wouldn't you ask as many (or more) when bringing another awesome human into your world?
7. Whenever you are stressed, go to “blessed”... and always start from a place of gratitude, not envy.

I wrote in the past about how “envy kills,” and I repeat it every Thanksgiving. It's too important to not repeat often.

And love everyone around you and truly care, whether it's a holiday or not.

A relationship capital account that has the highest value doesn't happen easily, and it doesn't happen without putting in a lot of time and effort... and it must be valued as a privilege and not simply an asset.

Cherish it and nurture it as you make additional “deposits” every day.

With all the analogies to relationship capital as something with the highest value, I need to repeat this again:

“Your relationship capital is not an asset but a privilege.”

Good luck with your investments! ■

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## Bootcamp is coming!

If you're looking to launch or grow your writing career and need a dose of rocket fuel, Bootcamp is the way to go.

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