



March 3, 2010

Confessions of a Fundraising Copywriter

Writer-for-hire Rick Grant takes on a lapsed-donor case

By Richard DeVeau

My name is Rick Grant, writer for hire.

I was in my office with my feet on the desk. I had poured a second cup of coffee from a fresh pot, and it was warming my hands. I drink a lot of coffee. What can I say? I'm a wordslinger. It's a living. It pays for the coffee.

I was brooding over my last case. It was an acquisition job. I had written a direct-mail package that beat the control by 165 percent, and the client never said a word. No "wow." No "thank you." Not a peep.

I was staring out the window, watching the rain rivulets race each other down the pane, when I heard the knock.

"It's open."

She breezed in like she was floating on a cloud. Her heels were that high. She was wearing a dark business suit, white blouse and carrying a burgundy briefcase under her arm. Her red hair was pulled back into a tasteful bun. She had a thin, sharp face, like a runway model. She closed the door and turned to me with a hard eye.

"You Rick?"

"And proud of it," I said.

She looked at me aggressively and didn't say anything. I smiled pleasantly. I was beginning to feel like my hero, Spenser. Well, more like his creator, the late Robert B. Parker.

"You being a wise guy?"

"Only for a moment," I said.

"I don't like this," she said.

"Well, it's a start."

"And I don't like funny either," she said.

"That's OK. I'm not always this funny."

She glided into my guest chair.

"My name's Denise Doherty."

"I love alliteration."

"What?"

"There I go again."

"Look, mister, if you don't want my business just say so."

"I don't want your business."

"OK," she said.

She stood and walked toward my door. She opened it, stopped and turned around. Her look softened.

"I came on a little strong," she said.

"I noticed that."

She closed the door, came over and sat back down in the chair in front of my desk. She looked at me for a time. No aggression. Just taking notice.

"Ever work in any consumer advertising agencies?" she said.

I nodded. "The nose?" I said.

"More around the eyes."

"Very observant," I said.

"The nose has been broken," she said. "I can see that, but it's not flattened."

"I got out before it got flat," I said.

She glanced at her briefcase a few times before opening it, reached in and handed me a couple sheets of paper.

"I need you to help me find someone. Well, actually, several thousand someones."

"Who's missing?"

"Our donors. They're lapsing. A lot of them. And we want you to help

us get them back."

"What have you done so far?" I asked.

"We just keep mailing them our regular appeals," she said, "hoping they'll eventually give."

I glanced at the spreadsheets she handed me and noticed a couple of things right away.

"Listen," I said, "I can help. But I don't risk my neck like this for free."

"What do you charge?"

I told her my rates and she agreed.

"Have you done any predictive modeling,?" I asked.

"No."

"I'd like to start there. I've got a guy. He'll handle it."

Her eyes widened, "He's not going to hurt the file, is he?"

"Trust me. He'll cut your file into segments, but they won't feel a thing. The segments will have scoring trends. We can then reduce or eliminate mailing appeals to the lower-scoring segments."

"Do we then delete them?"

"No," I said, "We should send a couple of planned-giving appeals to the whole lapsed file."

"Planned giving?"

"Sure. Not all lapsing is bad, you know. Some of your donors could be newly retired, living on fixed incomes and, despite your charming personality, still love your mission and want to support your organization."

"And put us in their wills?"

"Exactly."

"Then what?"

"Then I work my magic. We can begin to test offers. I can also add some versioning for lapsed donors to your best-performing packages. Have you ever offered a matching grant?"

"No," she said, "but I have been thinking about doing one and I already know a few donors who would be willing to pony up the dough."

"Then that's where I'll start. Matching grants work well for reactivating donors. I'll write a heartstring-pulling, purse-string-opening letter the likes of which you've never seen."

"You know," she said, "I don't know why I didn't like you at first, but I'm really warming up to you."

"That happens a lot," I said.

"Buzz on the street is you really have quite a way with words."

"Thanks. I've been told I play a mean alphabet."

"How about a drink? My place?"

I pointed to my wedding ring. "Happily married. Don't want to raise anything but funds with you, Denise. Sorry. Really appreciate the offer, though."

"Oh, well," she said, "can't blame a girl for trying. So when can I expect to see the letter copy?"

"Have it to you in a week."

"OK," she said, "here's my card. My e-mail address and number are on it."

"What an unusual place to put them," I said.

She smiled, reached over wrote another number on the card. "Here's my cell. Just in case you change you mind."

"The only mind that will change will be that of your donors."

"Too bad," she said. She got up without saying another word and left my office. I picked up my coffee. It was cold. But my heart was warmed by the thought of another chance to help one more worthy nonprofit organization raise more money to do more good.

Sure, I'm a hired pen. Lots of people think all I want is another notch on my Mac. But I learned a long time ago that life is never like the brochure. I know because I wrote the brochure. But since I started writing for nonprofits, I have no problem sleeping at night.

I poured myself a fresh cup, sat down, turned toward the window and put my feet back up. It had stopped raining. And I was no longer brooding

over my last ungrateful client. I had a new case now. I had some missing donors to find and was already writing the letter in my head: Dear Preferred Name ...

When [Richard DeVeau](#) isn't living a double life as writer-for-hire Rick Grant, he can be found in his office above the pool hall, next to the honky-tonk, penning fundraising appeals and integrated campaigns at [Richard DeVeau Creative](#).