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Confessions of a Fundraising Copywriter

Chapter 2

Writer-for-hire Rick Grant is back, and this time he untangles a website.

By Richard DeVeau

I was sitting in my office, working on my third cup of coffee, absorbed in "[Blink](#)," the latest book I was reading. I'm a writer for hire. It's a living. It pays for my books. If I stick to paperbacks.

I was reading a paragraph about the [Vienna Philharmonic](#) when the phone rang. I picked it up and in my deepest voice and best Italian accent said, "Rick Grant, writer-for-hire's office." At the other end a woman's voice I didn't recognize said, "Mr. Grant, please." Still in character I said, "*Un attimo, per favore*," and then in my normal voice, "Hello?"

The voice on the phone said, "Mr. Grant, do you really expect to fool anyone with that type of nonsense?"

I said, "Want to hear my Michael Douglas?"

"Perhaps some other time. My name is Christine King. Denise Doherty gave me your name. I assume you recall her."

"Often," I said.

"She speaks very highly of you. When I told her my problem, she suggested I call you. Can you take my case?"

"Let me check my schedule," I said. She laughed briefly. "Your attempt at humor is much too involved for you to be busy. "Busted. I'm reading a book about the power of thinking without thinking," I said.

"You shouldn't leave come-back openings like that. It's a good thing we just met. But isn't thinking about not thinking actually thinking about it?"

"My head is starting to hurt. What can I do for you?" I said.

"I'm the development director for a nonprofit organization here in town. Do you have much Web experience?"

"Al Gore and I are *likethis*," I said.

"Great. I'd like you to conduct a website audit. I'm getting very few online gifts, and I'm hoping you can tell me why. How much do you charge?" I told her. She gave me her URL and sent an e-mail with her latest Web traffic logs. We agreed to meet at her office in a week.

I showed up at her organization's headquarters at our arranged day and time and was ushered into her office by the receptionist.

"Mr. Grant, how nice to finally meet you. You look just as Denise described you," she said as we shook hands. "Nice to meet you, too. And if Denise had described you to me I might have shaved."

She gestured to one of her guest chairs as she made her way back around her desk, sat down and looked at me for a moment. "Denise mentioned you had worked at several consumer advertising agencies in the past. I can see some of the scars. Is what you do dangerous?"

"Some risks come with being a word slinger," I said.

"What kind of risks? Do tell," she asked.

"Well, I've lost count of the number of sentences I've fractured. I've been hit by my share of dangling participles. Split a few infinitives. And I've been knocked out by several direct and indirect objects. I even lost my active voice for a while."

"Oh, my ... and you still do it ... why?"

"It's all I know. I guess I like staying in touch with the regular verbs. And it keeps my feet planted in concrete nouns ... but enough about me. Let's talk about your website."

"OK. What did you find out?"

"Let's start with what I think is working. It's a nice, clean design. Great photos. You've kept the copy short, direct and on-topic with a strong mission statement and compelling case for giving, which means you've communicated very well who you are and why people should support you."

And I bet you're also getting good search engine results."

"We do rank pretty high when you [Google](#) us," she said. "And I would think all that should translate into more online gifts. Go figure."

"That's why I'm here. So let's start with these Web reports you sent me. See these page-view stats? Visitors come onto the homepage, then review these internal pages, including your donation page. These are all pretty close in number. But look at how many exit your site on the donation page."

"Wow," she said. "Most of them."

"Exactly. Narrows the problem to the donation page itself. Let's start with the content. There's no case for giving here. You need to restate some of the great copy you have covering this in your other pages."

"That all?"

"Not really. Your information-collection form is the biggest problem. It's much too long and complex. You don't need to collect all of this information here. This is not the time or place to be conducting market research. This is the time to close the deal and encourage people to donate."

"So what should be here?"

"You want this form to be as quick and effortless to complete as possible. All you need is the donor's name, basic contact information, including e-mail address, and credit card data. That's it. But here's the

biggest issue. You send visitors to a completely different page to select from a complex list of giving designations."

"Why is that bad? We want our donors to have the freedom to choose where their money goes."

"While your intent is good, the methodology is flawed. You should never send a visitor off the donation page. That alone means you'll probably lose her. On the Web we all have the attention span of a caffeinated finch. You gotta keep 'em focused and make it quick."

"You also have way too many gift designation options. You should be able to condense these into a few broader categories. But if you don't want to do that, you should still place this list in a pull-down menu right on the giving form itself. Ideally, you'd be better off with non-designated gifts. You can then decide where the money would be best used. If your donors feel strongly enough about where they want their gifts to go, they'll let you know."

She said, "So, sending them off the donation page and giving them a complicated information form are the causes for our low number of gifts?"

"Yes. One more suggestion. Lose the range of ask amounts. Don't use gift strings online. Unlike direct mail, online you have no idea what your site visitors are capable of giving. If your low-end amount is too low, you could be leaving money on the table. And if your high-end amount is too high, it could be very off-putting."

"What should we do instead?"

"Simply use a dollar-sign blank box. Let your donors decide how much to give. If you do this and all these other things I suggested, I believe you'll not only see your number of online donations increase, you'll also see higher average gifts."

"Wow. Denise was right. You're good."

"Thanks. But this is nothing. You should see me leap tall stacks of books with a single bound."

She was still smiling when I left her office. And I was still thinking about her smile when I got back to mine and started a fresh pot of coffee and a new book. **FS**

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, websites and integrated campaigns at [Richard DeVeau Creative](#).