



Voices of Experience

By Heather Haley, MS

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Interviewee: **Brian Bass**

President, Bass Advertising & Marketing, Inc.

AMWA: *What is your education and work background? How long have you worked in medical writing?*

Brian: I received a BA in Communications with Honors from Ramapo College of New Jersey. I have been a professional writer all of my career but simultaneously have also been a media director, creative director, and account manager. My first job out of college was with an ad agency in New York whose clients were all in the performing arts (off-Broadway theaters, artist managements, etc). I was also the head electronics writer at Macy's Herald Square, which has served me better than any other writing experience in my career. I started in medical writing in 1985 with an ad agency whose clients were all in animal health. I left there to open Bass Advertising & Marketing in 1989, immediately branched out in diagnostics, orthopedics, and devices, and came back to pharmaceutical writing on the human side.

AMWA: *What prompted you to create your own company?*

Brian: I have always freelanced, even during college. I always worked for smaller companies because I was probably too headstrong for the bureaucracy of larger companies. At the time [1989], I felt I could no longer work for the present company nor could I work for anyone else. It definitely was not the best time in my family life with daughters who were 11 months and 3 years old, no money in the bank, and a mortgage due in 20 days—but then again there is no good time to strike out on your own. I just needed to do it.

AMWA: *What words of wisdom would you offer to a newer writer with entrepreneurial spirit?*

Brian: As a freelance, keep in mind that your sole existence is to solve problems for people. Find the first person who will take a chance on you and prove to them it was worthwhile. The second time he or she gives you work, prove it was worthwhile again so the person knows it wasn't a fluke. The third time that you prove working with you is worthwhile, this person will know it's standard operating procedure.



Remember, everyone you work with knows someone else. I find every 3 years the industry does a shift to the left, ie, someone at each of my clients moves to a new company. They can bring you along with them, and your business grows.

AMWA: *Is there anything you wish you knew starting out that you know now?*

Brian: Everything I know now I wish I had known earlier, and every day I wake up wishing I already knew what I'll know tomorrow.

AMWA: *How does your current job differ from your first job?*

Brian: I run the show—with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities.

AMWA: *What do you see as the rights, privileges, and responsibilities?*

Brian: The rights and privileges of freelancing are the responsibilities, and likewise the responsibilities are the rights and privileges. I work when I want, as long as I want, as hard as I want. I choose when I go home. I "call the shots." As a freelance, I don't need permission for flex time and there is no dress code. No office politics—I have no tolerance for office gossip. As a freelance, who will I gossip about anyway? Myself? Even with the most difficult clients, I don't have to carry the emotional baggage because I work with them, not for them. Freelancing accommodates being a part of my family's life, or my own life for that matter. When I tell a client I have another meeting, that meeting may be in a school auditorium where my daughter is an elm tree in the Arbor Day play. I have the right to charge as much as I want and make as much money as I want (which goes along with that first part about working as hard and as much as I want). Of course, I also have the responsibility of knowing what clients are willing to pay. Otherwise, I wouldn't work at all. I also have the right to decide not to work with someone. I tend to fire 1 client every 2 years or so because they're no longer worth the hassle. The responsibility that comes with that is that if I'm not happy with the money or something else, I am the only one who can

change it. I have sole responsibility for getting, doing, managing, and delivering the work. There is no one else to blame when things go wrong, so I try to keep that to a minimum.

AMWA: *What is a typical workday like for you?*

Brian: I wake at 6 AM and am in my office by about 7 AM. I juggle about four to 10 projects myself, and supervise/coordinate the work of about a half dozen other freelancers who work with me on various additional assignments. I write, run to client meetings, am incessantly hammered by a deluge of e-mails and phone calls, and don't break for lunch (or anything else for that matter) until dinner. In the evenings, I handle the business side of the business (billing, organization, etc) and balance with a second business that my wife and I also own.

AMWA: *What do you find most rewarding/challenging?*

Brian: Nothing feels better than when a client is pleased with my work. I enjoy every project for its own unique nuances and challenges.

AMWA: *What surprised you most when you first started in the field?*

Brian: How much money can be made by working hard.

AMWA: *Is there anything that surprises you now?*

Brian: Absolutely. Something new is happening every day—many that I'd never expect. New opportunities. New challenges.

business, 80% of the work goes into delivering the first draft, yet I had only ensured 50% compensation for myself by delivery of that first draft. I had to carry a large number of hours while the project was in limbo. Even though I keep my eyes wide open around estimates, I still got caught in a bind. I have taken steps to make sure this never happens again. The upside is that I always learn more when something goes wrong than when it goes right.

AMWA: *When you hire a newer medical writer, what qualities and skills do you look for?*

Brian: I look for individuals who are professional, expert at their craft, who are able to write volumes even when input is sparse, who are creative (and at times abstract) thinkers, who are not afraid to trust their instincts but also know how to get the information they need to get the job done; and who deliver consistently on time, on target, and on budget.

AMWA: *What are the best ways for a newcomer to establish himself or herself as a medical writer?*

Brian: Formulate in your mind what kind of business or employee you want to be. Ask yourself "Who am I? How am I going to brand myself?" I've spent many years on the hiring side, and I always hated hiring freelancers because most never seem to care as much as I did about the budget, the client's needs, or delivering on time. I established myself as the "freelance for people who hate hiring freelancers" by consistently delivering on time, on target, and on budget. Establishing yourself is really about developing your reputation.

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AMWA: *Would you share with us a recent surprise?*

Brian: Surprises come in many shapes and sizes. Recently, I got an unexpected education around estimating. I give really buttoned-down estimates and I am very clear with clients upfront about the expectations and deliverables. I had prepared a very large estimate (five figures) for a series of eight or nine pieces in a promotional program for a medical communications company. My estimate was set up to bill 50% of the cost at completion of first drafts and the balance upon completion of one revision. The project moved forward, my client was happy and sent the work on to their client, who decided to change the focus of the program and rethink the strategy. Needless to say, the project stalled. The enlightenment for me was realizing that as with any writing

AMWA: *What resources do you recommend for a writer in his or her first position?*

Brian: Read everything that everyone around you writes, and ask yourself how they came to those words based on the direction and resources they received. It's sort of the Completion Backwards theory, I guess.

AMWA: *Any last advice for people just starting out or looking into transition into medical writing?*

Brian: Whether your name is on the door or not, work as though your life depends upon what you accomplish, because it does.