

BREAKING IN

Advertorials

I bet you normally flip right past those “special advertising sections” in your favorite magazine, much like you ignore infomercials on TV. I admit that I did, too—until I began writing them.

I’ve since written several bylined advertorials for *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*. You’ll find them in just about every major magazine, along with most metropolitan newspapers.

Just what are advertorials, anyway? As you might suspect, advertorials blend advertisements with editorial content. Topics range from environmental protection to coastal properties to weddings to the latest technological gadgets. A section on the automobile industry, for example, will update readers on new models and contain ads by car manufacturers. Advertorials might focus on a theme, such as health care, and involve many sponsors or feature a sole advertiser. In some cases the sell remains subtle; the editorial content doesn’t mention sponsors per se. In other instances, sections describe the advertisers specifically. And while most run three to four pages, they can number as few as one or as many as 30 or more.

Even though the line is somewhat blurred, advertorials constitute marketing, not journalism. Editors at the *Times* told me to approach my sections as a journalist. Sponsors don’t supply copy, and they’re normally not given the option of approving ours (unless they ask nicely). But what I write isn’t objective; it’s promotional. I’ve yet to rake muck. “Advertisers want to feel comfortable that we’re not going to say anything controversial about them,” says Tim Borton, supplement manager at *The Boston Globe*.

At the same time, editors often hire former journalists attracted by the promise of more money. Advertorials can pay as much as \$1,500 per page, and it’s not unusual for freelancers to earn six-figure incomes while writing fewer than a dozen sections per year.

Editors also prefer content specialists who can gain credibility with advertisers, cut through industry jargon and present information to a broad readership. I sold myself as an expert in higher education (I hold a doctorate from Harvard in that field and write widely on the subject) and trumpeted my extensive network of industry contacts.

“We look for people who write with expertise for trade publications and who’ve also written for a national audience,” says Jeff Ort, group director of creative services at *The New York Times*. “We don’t hire writers from Madison Avenue because their writing is too breathless, too promotional. We want meat here.”

A word of caution, though. I initially assumed writing advertorials would lead to assignment from news editors at those same papers. Not so. Some news editors, it seems, are loath to hire writers who’ve crossed over to the “dark side” and sold themselves to the marketing devil. Once you’ve promoted, they claim, you can’t be objective. “We maintain a clear separation between advertising and news,” Borton says. “Our writers can’t write for the paper, too.”

But that rule varies from publication to publication, and from editor to editor. “In the newspaper business, the separation is fairly clear,” says Stacy Sass McAnulty, director of worldwide special advertising sections at *BusinessWeek*. “Magazines are a bit different, especially those focused on entertainment instead of hard news. Some writers can move back and forth easily, while others actually use pseudonyms for advertorials.”

So if you have a flair for promotional writing and can claim expertise in a given field, don’t hesitate to pitch your services. And next time you encounter an advertorial, try reading instead of flipping.

PITCH THIS NICHE

The Boston Globe

boston.com/globe

135 Morrissey Blvd., Boston MA 02107

(617) 929-2000

borton@globe.com

Daily newspaper. Contact: Tim Borton, supplement manager. Terms: Payment varies.

BusinessWeek

businessweek.com

1221 Avenue of The Americas, 43rd Floor,

New York NY 10020

(212) 512-2511

stacy_sass-mcanulty@businessweek.com

Weekly business magazine. Contact: Stacy Sass McAnulty, director, Worldwide Special Advertising Sections. Terms: Payment varies.

People

people.aol.com/people

1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10020

(212) 522-6699

Weekly entertainment magazine. Contact: Karla Moriarty, creative development director. Terms: Payment varies.

Time

time.com

Time & Life Bldg., 1271 Avenue of the Americas,

New York NY 10020-1393

(212) 522-1212 (212) 522-0323

Liza_greene@timeinc.com

Weekly news magazine. Contact: Liza Greene, creative director. Terms: Payment varies.