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## **Trading Places**

By Lori Widmer

Yes Virginia, you *can* make good money writing for trade magazines, even if you have limited experience in any one trade. I know because I do.

I can hear you now – “But it’s boring, isn’t it?” Only if you make it boring, it is. See, most writers think trade writing means “technical” writing. Actually, it is technical writing, but not in the way you’re thinking. You’re writing something very specific and most often something that relates to a business function, operation, or strategy. But that’s where the technical aspect begins and ends. There are just a few differences between your consumer article and a business article. They are:

### **Audience**

Your audience is made up of people working in a specific segment of the business world. For example, I write insurance articles. My audience? Insurance executives, insurance agents, and risk managers. They share a common thread – insurance. They read trade magazines for information that they can use, but they’re just like any other reader. If it’s not entertaining or if the article fails to catch their attention, they’re turning the page to find something else. That brings us to your next difference:

### **Focus**

You won’t be writing about how to get stains out of your grandmother’s wedding veil for this crowd. But in a way, writing consumer articles like that does prepare you for how to approach the articles that trade magazines buy. Take a look at some trade magazines. Try *Writer’s Digest*, for starters. What kinds of articles are in there? The how-to article, I’m betting. And more often than not, your trade magazine is going to be focusing on how-to topics, as well. Some of the topics I handled: how to lower your workers compensation costs; how to put together a sound corporate governance structure; how to retain clients in a sales career; how to choose the right software application for your business; how to reduce infection rates in the emergency room.... You see where this is going. The focus is going to be primarily on bringing some kind of value to your reader, with a few profiles and a bit of industry news mixed in. For the savvy writer willing to ask many questions of the interview subjects, this is a great alternative to fighting for a chance at an upfront piece in a consumer mag. Hence your next difference:

### **Steady Work**

If you can break into a trade magazine, you can pretty much secure a long-term relationship. That’s because good writers are tough to come by. The stigma that plagues the trade industry is that writing is difficult to learn, or that you need special experience. Not so. I’ve written for an emergency-room physicians’ magazine, an accounting magazine, a sales magazine, and numerous insurance magazines. One magazine was high-level quantitative math applications to risk management. One look at my checkbook would make you realize I had zero experience in that area, nor am I a medical professional. What I am is curious, and I’m not afraid to ask the basic questions, or to say, “I’m new to this – help me understand.” Your interview subjects are fountains of information and they’re all

too happy to help you out if you ask. That can only make your article stronger, and leave the editor with a great impression of your work. Which leads us to another difference:

### **Nice Paychecks**

Here's the payoff. A good number of trade magazines will pay you quite well for your efforts. One I work with pays \$1 a word. Mind you, trade magazines can also suffer the same budget restraints of other magazines, so it's not uncommon to have an editor offer you \$500-800 for a 1,500-word article. It's up to you to determine if the work involved is worth the money you'll receive.

### **Finding Work**

So where to start? It's not difficult to find work if you know what it is you'd like to write. Start with a topic. Let's assume you've seen the following statistic: "Half of all restaurant fires start in the ventilation ductwork." Strange idea, but you can develop that in a number of ways. Let's look at the various industries that this information could be important to – restaurant management, fire safety, risk management, construction, operational management, and even some business magazines. Why these? Each one of them has some vested interest in the effects of a fire inside a restaurant.

So now let's develop your ideas. For restaurant management, you might want to write something such as "how to locate and identify ductwork fire hazards", or "proper cleaning and inspection techniques for ventilation ductwork". For the fire safety industry, "educating restaurants on the risks of duct fires" or "new products for extinguishing duct fires" with a sidebar something like "the path of the fire".

For risk management, "how to insure against fire" or "fire control systems for your kitchen ducts". You might even want to write a new-construction piece on "the best fire prevention for retail kitchens". For the construction industry, you could cover "building a more fireproof kitchen", or "new products for safer kitchens". Operational management magazines might buy an article on "recovering from a kitchen fire and prevention going forward" techniques.

### **Ask for the Job**

Once you've decided on a market and an angle, it's time to ask for the job. Again, do a little research. You'll have a much better chance of selling the article if you include a couple of experts you hope to interview for the article. Don't forget to treat this query like any other – you're out to sell your idea and to sell yourself as the writer to do the job. It wouldn't hurt to put a few questions you intend to ask into your query. But please – no one-line email queries. That's a guarantee you'll not be taken seriously.

### **Writing and Beyond**

Once you score the assignment, great! Now write it like you mean it. Take time to be curious, and ask lots of questions. Make sure when you're writing the article, you're giving facts, but you're concentrating on the story itself. After all, this is an article meant to entertain and inform. It's not meant to be a boring, stodgy piece of writing that puts you to sleep along with your reading audience. Think hooks at the beginning, meat in the middle, and a tidy finish. Have fun with it.

Whatever you do, don't just start writing something like "If you've had a restaurant fire in your ductwork, there are ways to recover from that." Yawn. Try instead something like this: "What's the

hottest issue in the restaurant casualty line? Grease fires. That, my friends, works. How do I know? That line actually scored me not just an article job, but a senior editor position. The bottom line – be creative. Have fun. Don't think that "technical" has to be boring. Far from it. It takes a bit more study sometimes, but it's essentially as exciting as you care to make it.

Try it. The trade magazine is a great opportunity if you're willing to do a little bit of basic research at the beginning, find an idea that matches that magazine's style, ask questions with curiosity and no fear of looking foolish, and delivering a good product that shows your enthusiasm and your interest in learning more.

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