

“Just Be Cool to People”: How Tom Render Lands Six-Figure Clients With Cold Outreach

John Bejakovic interviews copywriter, marketing strategist and former Agora writer Tom Render about the high-effort, highly personal outreach behind his client roster

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability. Filler words, false starts and repetition have been removed; the substance is unchanged.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

I'm here with Tom Render. Tom is a copywriter and marketing strategist. He used to be at Agora, and now he's doing his own thing. When I recently sent out an email to my list asking folks if they'd done cold outreach, Tom wrote back to say that cold outreach is actually the main way he's gotten clients over the years. Considering the level he's at, I was very curious to hear more. Tom agreed to talk about it, and that's what we're here for. Tom, thanks for being here.

TOM RENDER

Thanks for having me.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

Like I said, you were at Agora. What kinds of services are you offering now, and what kinds of clients are you going after?

TOM RENDER

Direct response copywriting. There's really nothing in that wheelhouse I wouldn't do — long-form sales letters, webinars, ads, emails, the whole thing. But I only work with businesses that go direct to consumer. Direct response companies like Agora, obviously, and mainly coaches. I've done a bit of e-commerce over the years too.

And I do the whole gamut. I don't really like doing only a small piece, because there are too many variables. It's, “Oh, your ads didn't work.” Well, that's because your sales letter sucks. So I like to do the whole thing.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

In my experience, that actually makes it much easier to sell. It's very rare that people say, "Fantastic, you can write one quarter of the sales page, and we'll get somebody else to write the other three quarters."

So walk me through some of your results. You said most of your client work has come via cold outreach. Tell me about some of those clients. You don't have to name names — just give me a sketch of who they are and roughly what size of business.

TOM RENDER

Okay. Like I said, mainly coaches and consultants, but across different sectors. Obviously Agora, in financial publishing. I've worked with them—

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

Let me stop you. Did you get Agora via cold outreach? Is that how that happened?

TOM RENDER

Yep.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

Really? Keep going, but I definitely want to hear that story once you wrap up.

TOM RENDER

It's a good one. It's interesting. Then a lot of fitness coaches. Before I was a copywriter, I was a strength and conditioning coach and a rugby coach, so that was an easy fit. I've worked with a few big names in there. Trent Harrison is one I worked with through an agency — people might know him as a weight loss coach. Brave Thinking Institute, which people might know from the mindfulness space. A few people like that. So it runs the gamut.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

I feel like Agora is the standout, right? They're very rare. Okay, tell me the Agora story. I'm very curious how that worked out.

TOM RENDER

This was about 10 years ago now. I was on some forum — I think it was a Copy Chief forum — and there was a rumor that they might be hiring people. But that's always the case.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

Why would they not be hiring people?

TOM RENDER

Right. And I was like, I want to work there. It'd be a great name to put on my CV. I was very junior at the time. I'd done sales and marketing roles — business development manager, marketing manager, all sorts of things — and copy was part of my job. But I really just wanted to be a copywriter. I like writing. So I thought, let's do that. I want to land there. I think that's the best.

So I looked up the various affiliates and publishers and what was going on. They have a London office, so that made the most sense. I looked up the publisher there. At the time it was Paolo Cabelli, who nobody will know, because he's the most secretive man on earth. I stalked him across the internet until I found something interesting. He'd studied film — really artsy, high-level cinema, indie films — and he likes horror. I found out his favorite horror movie. I can't remember what it was now.

Then I wrote him a one-page sales letter built on a metaphor: great copy is like great horror. Everything that's scary in a horror movie happens off screen, and everything that's great about copy happens in the subtext. I even redesigned the poster for that movie with my face on it. Then I printed it and sent it in the post, as well as by email and direct message.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

And what happened then?

TOM RENDER

They contacted me and said, “This sounds great. Do you want to do an interview? We've got an opening.” I said, “Let's do that.” The interviews went pretty well — pretty easy meetings. I think he opened the meeting by saying, “I can see from your letter that you clearly understand what we do, which is always the hardest part of finding copywriters for us. They just don't get what we do and how we do it, and clearly you do. So this is a bit of a formality, really.” So it was easy.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

That is very impressive. It was basically one giant demonstration, a shock-and-awe package. Very cool. Is this how you've gotten other clients too, with this amount of stalking and up-front work?

TOM RENDER

Most clients I work with end up running from \$20K to half a million in fees. I don't do small stuff — \$2K here, \$500 there. We're going to sign a contract that's ideally worth six figures or more to me. So it's worth my time to put in the effort to find the right people. And even if you weren't working at that level, I think it would still be worth it as long as you're charging more than about \$5K.

Actually, before Agora — and this is how I knew to do this — I was business development manager for a recruitment firm that specialized in really odd tax hires. Say you've got an international tax role in a very small town in Bulgaria. It's a \$150K role, and it has three different language requirements. That's really difficult to fill. That's what they specialized in.

I installed an outreach program for them. We'd research companies that would need these kinds of roles. Then we'd research the candidates, without asking the business if they needed any help. Then I'd present a sheet of candidates to the hiring manager and say, “I'm guessing you're not interviewing anybody who looks anything like these CVs. Do you want to hire us to do this recruitment for you?” And they'd all say, “Yes. Oh, thank God, please.” That firm went from one or two clients a month to two or three new clients a week, at about a \$15K average fee.

It was quite process-driven. You've got to have the human element — that's really the thing — but you can turn it into a process. It's not that complicated. You know who's going to hire you. You can often look them up by name, or at least you know their job title and what they do.

To me, the best way to make cold outreach work is to go only after people who definitely want your help. Take Agora: if you can come up with big ideas, there's no shortage of work for you at that company. None whatsoever. Meanwhile, people run around the internet offering to write some emails for the current promos. Why would they care about that? They already have thousands of emails for those promos. The copywriter on that project has probably written a hundred emails for it. Do you think you're going to come up with an idea they haven't already had? Trying to stand out that way just seems odd. But they're always desperate for new ideas.

Or, for example, if I were trying to get your business, I'd ask, “What does John want? Offers. Really hot offers he can sell to his list.” So I'd go find some really good offers you wouldn't find yourself and connect you with those people. I'd say, “Hey, can I have an introduction fee? I've got all these offers if you're willing to do a brokering deal.” And you'd say, “Sweet, you've just saved me a whole year of work.” Here's a list of 20 offers. Do you know what I mean?

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

It'd be easy for me to say yes to that.

TOM RENDER

You're getting into the mindset of the person you're trying to speak to. That's why I go after these direct response companies. If I tell most businesses I'm a copywriter, they go, “What does that do?” and I have to explain myself. But the publisher at a massive direct response company doesn't ask what a copywriter is. You don't need that. I just say, “Copywriter. Here are eight big ideas you can use for your next promo.”

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

Right.

TOM RENDER

Eight. That seems like a lot. That email is getting opened. And there will be eight good ideas in there, because I just spent three weeks on it. So to me, that's the whole thing. Be nice to people. Do some up-front work. Be cool to people.

I'll go down the rabbit hole a bit here. In my mind, you want to do two things in tandem. You want to continuously do things that put you in the mind of people you'll want to reach at some point in the future. And when you're in need, you can go out and do targeted outreach. Both work together, because it's the same thing.

You wrote to your list asking that question. I had an answer, so I wrote you an answer. It's the same with John Forde back in the day. That's why I wrote an article for his newsletter. He asked, and I didn't just respond with a paragraph saying yes. I wrote him something like a thousand-word article that I'd thought out and spent real time on. Even if he never published it, he'd open it and think, "Well, that was good." And is John Forde a good person to have a relationship with? Of course he is. Off the back of that and my work with Agora, I've been out drinking with John around Paris, and I've met other copy chiefs you'll never find on the internet. They hide, because as soon as they say they're an Agora publisher, they get spammed to death.

So it's a constant process of networking, talking to people, and sharing things with them that they'll find cool, interesting or helpful. And then you can just make a soft ask.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

That's actually what I wanted to ask you next. You were saying it's a process you can do on an ongoing basis, and also something you can do when you need it. You sound like a very forward-thinking guy, so I'm imagining there weren't many situations where you were completely out of clients and needed somebody by tomorrow. Have most of the jobs you've gotten via cold outreach been in that first category, where you're regularly writing to people you want to be in touch with, and eventually something comes of it?

TOM RENDER

No, I'd say it's about 50-50. And that's because I'm confident in the process. When I left Agora, I moved to France, and I didn't have another client lined up. But I didn't really care.

There was an agency doing comedy writing. I was on their email list and had already bought a few of their information products, so in a way I was already digging the well a little. But I'd never spoken to the owner. I just thought it would be a cool place to work — a direct response company specializing in funny ads and sales letters. I'd like to do that. I had no relationship

with him, other than knowing who they were, the same way people know who Agora is.

So I spent some time reading their most recent emails. I went to their website and found out who their clients were. I wrote some ads for his clients that I thought might be interesting, and I also wrote ads for his own agency. This is where all the cold outreach gurus say, “Only send five words, because people don't have time.” People have time if you're interesting. I think I sent him a two-and-a-half-thousand-word email. But it was funny. I spent time making it funny, because they do funny advertising. He wants comedy ideas that sell, so I spent time coming up with those, and he thought they were funny.

So the whole thing is a meta demonstration, all the time. Of course he was going to read the whole thing. Why wouldn't he? I'd clearly spent the time to understand what was going on. I hadn't just spammed his inbox. That email couldn't possibly have gone to any other person on earth. You couldn't even template it to send to somebody else, which I think is half the point. It's the same as making friends. If you had a stock set of questions you asked every time you tried to make a new friend, you wouldn't have many friends. It's a terrible way to do it, and cold outreach is exactly the same. Just be cool to people. It's not that hard.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

That's interesting. Earlier you said it's a combination of the human element and the process. It seems like each of these is so customized that I don't know what I'd tell people besides the old Dale Carnegie thing: find out what people want and show them how to get it. But that's basically what you're doing. You do the research, figure out what they want, and then demonstrate right up front that you can do it for them, right?

TOM RENDER

Exactly. There's the meta level: what does a copy chief at a big direct response business want? New ideas to sell their current offers, or ideas for new offers that wouldn't be too difficult to put together. Then within that, you dive into the human being on the other end. What do they like? What do they do? If you can make something personal, it always stands out. And it's not that complicated to make things at least a little personal. I don't mean swiping from LinkedIn that they went to whatever university. That's horseshit. Everybody can see through it, and it's weak. Just be better. Ask someone who knows them.

That's why I say it's a process. How do you research a sales letter, even for a mass market? Say it's for overweight women in their 50s who are trying to lose weight so they don't get some illness and miss seeing their grandchildren. They hate that they're in none of the photos with their own grandchildren. Great. How do I do more research than that? I'll search through forums. I might get on a call with somebody. I've been on loads of customer calls. I do it all the time, and it always astounds clients. I ask, “Can I speak to some of your customers?” and they say, “What? Why?” And I say, “Because I want the words from their mouths, not yours. The

sales letter is for them, not you.” And they say, “Oh, nobody’s ever asked me that before.” It’s just not that complicated.

You can do exactly the same thing when you’re finding your own clients. I’ll ask people, “Do you know this guy? Can you make any kind of introduction for me? Yes, no, maybe?” When I say this, people go, “That’s going to be a lot of work.” Yes, it is. That’s exactly the point. If somebody looks at something you’ve done and thinks, “Wow, that must have taken 20 to 30 hours,” they’ll be impressed, if nothing else. And that’s always a good thing.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

I think the point you made is key: if you’re selling \$200 and \$500 services, this doesn’t make sense. But if you’re selling \$20K, \$50K, \$100K or \$500K engagements, it absolutely does.

I’ll piggyback on what you’re saying. One of the best copywriting clients I got when I was still actively freelancing — I knew the guy was hiring, but I did the same thing you’re describing. I could have sent an email saying, “I’m a copywriter, I love what you do, blah, blah, blah.” Instead, I spent maybe a week writing two full leads for the VSL they were running at the time. I formatted it to look like their VSL page and everything. After I sent it, there wasn’t even an interview. The guy said, “All right, that’s it. We can start right away.” We did have a call at one point, but we’d already confirmed the entire contract back and forth over email. At the end, he said, “We should probably get on a call and speak to each other for a bit,” and I said, “Probably.”

TOM RENDER

Exactly. You demonstrate that you know what they do and how they do it, and that you’re here and willing to help. It’s a weight off their plate. That makes it easy.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

Let me ask you an important question. Back when I was looking for clients, I tried this very detailed kind of outreach, and one problem I had — I just want to get your take on it — is how you decide who to approach. Is it somebody you know for sure is looking for help? Or somebody you’d 100% love to work with, and then you research them and triangulate that yes, you want to work with them, and yes, you have reason to believe they’d want help? How do you make sure all the work you put in doesn’t just get you back, “Thank you, that’s amazing, but we’re really not hiring anybody” — or no response at all, even if they admire what you did?

TOM RENDER

There are a couple of things. One is definitely to try to home in on somebody you think is hiring right now. That's one of the easiest approaches, and it's easy to work out. Sometimes they're literally advertising a job. Even if they want somebody in-house, they'll be open to contractors and freelancers. And you might be open to working in-house as well. Just because you're a freelancer doesn't mean you can't take a job. It might make sense for you.

If they've just landed any kind of funding, they're definitely hiring. If they've recently launched a new product, they definitely need new ideas. If they've got a product that seems to be failing, they definitely need new ideas. You should know these signals anyway. If you worked for that business, what signals would you be looking for?

Say a video of theirs just popped off. You're looking through their YouTube and think, “Wow, that video absolutely crushed it. I bet they're inundated with new leads, and I bet they don't have enough emails for those leads,” or they don't have a good way to capitalize on it. Maybe you take that video and turn it into a sales letter: “This idea is really working for you, and I haven't seen you launch it as a campaign.” That's how a lot of companies get their ideas. They put stuff out on social media, and whatever pops off, they turn into sales letters and campaigns. If you haven't seen that happen, it's probably because they're under capacity. Otherwise they would have done it. They've got a proven idea they haven't turned into sales yet, and they're a direct response company. These people don't do organic marketing, and they don't do it well. So if something pops off and doesn't turn into an actual sales letter, that's an opportunity. You'd be looking for exactly those things if you worked there.

So definitely try to find signals that at least indicate they might be hiring, if they're not completely overt about it. The other thing I'd do is make sure you're not wasting your time regardless. Does it look really good to have very high-quality samples for some of the biggest names in your industry all over your website? Yes. Now, don't lie and say you worked for those companies when you didn't. But you can say, “Speculative samples I wrote.” If somebody looks at one and thinks, “That actually does look like an Agora campaign,” they'll be impressed anyway. So you're building your portfolio, or you can turn it into content, or into something you send to somebody else. You can have second- and third-level thinking about what else you could use it for.

Mostly these people aren't going to reply to you, and you won't land them. If you put in this amount of effort, I'd say you're probably more like 50-50 on landing clients. At least that's been my experience: I close about half of the people I go after. But I don't necessarily close them that week. They might sit in the pipeline. That doesn't really matter, because it's a constant thing. If they weren't looking before, but a few months later you see a signal come up, you just reply to that person: “Do you remember my thing? I see you're looking now. Remember, I'm cool, right?” And they'll go, “Oh yeah, this was cool.”

Going to events is another thing. Sometimes it's really cringeworthy, and you don't want to be that guy. But go to events and drink beer with people. I'll bring up my horror letter story from Agora. It's funny and interesting. People say, "Can I see it?" Then I show them, and I have a contact and a friend, and they'll often introduce me to somebody else.

That's how I ended up working with a betting company. I met someone who knew Paolo personally — I think they called themselves CEO or something — at a relatively large sports betting company. I showed them the letter, and they said, "Paolo would have loved that." I said, "I'm sure he did." Then they said they had a few offers coming out that they couldn't get through. There was some seasonal deadline — a football thing, I think, I can't remember. They asked, "Can we just hire you temporarily to write these campaigns?" Of course you can. So you can use this work in other ways, because these are fun stories to tell. If you do a good job and make it fun and interesting, you can tell people your fun and interesting story, even about not getting a reply.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

I think that's a great way to think about it. Even if you don't get a reply, how do you reuse the work? And there's a litmus test there: is this campaign so good, so creative, so well researched and thought out, that I can use it as an interesting story to tell other people? Here's the idea I had, here's the research, here's what they did. The ultimate goal is to get hired, of course, but one criterion is: does it make for a good story? And if it does, it probably makes for a good campaign as well.

TOM RENDER

There's another UK copywriter — his name is Lewis something. He's very young. I'll tell this story because one of the other objections people have is, "I'm not that good. I'm still very junior."

Lewis was very junior, or at least he was then. He was doing the same thing, but he documented the whole process and put it out on LinkedIn, an email list, a blog, that kind of thing. And he'd take the piss out of himself: "Here's a sales letter I came up with. This was my thinking, and this is why I came up with it. I'm still learning this trade, so if you've got feedback, tell me." People like me would comment, "Your headline might be improved if you did this." And he'd say, "Sweet. I got this feedback on the headline, I've made these adjustments, I've come up with three new ones, and I think they're quite good. That was a good piece of advice, and now I'm sharing it with you."

I say this in the John Forde article too: you don't need to be the greatest. You need to demonstrate your greatness at your level. He's not going to charge \$20K for a package. He might charge \$5K, which for the right client is what their budget allows and what they want. And the idea he gives that client is a layup anyway. Companies hire junior writers all the time,

because they're cheaper. It's not true that everybody works only with the best. Not even remotely. They'll hire one or two greats and five or six juniors. So there's actually more work for juniors than for seniors. You just have to demonstrate that you're good at your level, and own your level, whatever it is.

I'm not the world's greatest copywriter. I'm not Gary Halbert, and I'm not trying to be. But I have a wealth of other experience. I've done a podcast. I've been a marketing manager, a business development manager, a sales manager. I've got all these things Gary Halbert never had. He couldn't look at your full campaign the way I can and see how it fits into the wider business. He wouldn't think, "The sales calls going to that sales team are completely useless and wasting their time, because the leads are coming in with the wrong frame of mind, so we need a pre-framing video." I will, because I've run sales teams. We've had leads coming in who should have been buying and weren't, because they weren't coming to the call in the right frame of mind, and then you diagnose it. So bring all of your experience. You've got an information advantage somewhere inside you, from whatever you've done. Use it, and there'll be plenty of work.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

Very impressive. Okay, final question. It sounds like you have big clients, and I imagine they stick around. To what extent are you actually still doing cold outreach? Is it something you do because you still find it interesting? Do you do it when a client disappears and you decide it's time to add somebody to the roster? Or do you not even do it anymore?

TOM RENDER

I do it. It depends. Right now, I'd say I'm more in a relationship-building phase. Like this call. If I decide later this year or next year to come out with a copywriting course, you're at least going to give it the time of day, right? Whether you actually promote it is a completely different question, and it might depend on the quality. But you'll give it your attention. So I'm always digging the well. Why wouldn't I be?

I go to networking events, I speak to people, and I constantly send ideas and information to people — sometimes well-thought-out pieces, sometimes just two lines replying to something. It's funny how many responses I have in my inbox from list owners, or the marketing manager running a list, just laughing, because I was being funny. Or you can be thoughtful, or whatever you want to be. But you're constantly making touchpoints all over the place.

For example, somebody I once worked with just had a baby girl. He's a very good copywriter. So I said congratulations. Why wouldn't I? It's a nice thing to do. Not that I think he'll hire me — but he might. Or the company he works for decides, "We should do one of those funny Christmas commercials," and he goes, "I know a guy who can write funny," because I'm top of mind, even though we haven't seen each other in two years. You want to be digging all these

little wells all the time. It's not a tick-box exercise — well, in a way it is, and you can make it one. But I think it should just be a habit: reply to people, send them stuff. “I thought this would be interesting for you.” “Why don't you try this campaign? I've seen this company doing it, and I thought it would work for yours.” How many people do you actually need a relationship with to have unlimited work? Maybe 20, if that.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

I think that's a great point. A lot of people who get interested in cold outreach, which is where we started, come at it from a place of desperation: “I have nothing, and I need something now.” If you have nothing, you might as well start there. But it's not something that only works at that point, or that should only be done at that point. It's constant pinging. I do it all the time. If I'm on somebody's email list, or I see somebody and like what they're doing, I just write them an email, without anything specific in mind for where it could go. Just connecting with people, giving them a compliment, putting them in touch with somebody who might be useful.

TOM RENDER

We've got a bit of a meta example of this, actually. When I joined Agora, Vas — whose million-dollar thing you just promoted — had done your training. You'd launched Copy Riddles, and he sent it to everybody in the company, saying, “You should do this. This guy's relatively unknown, but it's really good.” I think a dozen of us bought it immediately.

I've kept in touch with Vas somewhat. We're not best friends, but he'd know my name if you brought it up. So when I saw your promotion, I bought it immediately. I didn't even read the sales letter. I just clicked and bought it. One, because I know it'll be good. Vas is a genius, he's way more of a nerd about this than I am, and I want to know everything he knows. But also, it's a good thing that I'm buying it from you. You'll see that notification: “Oh, Tom bought another thing from me. Great.” And Vas will see it: “Oh, Tom. I remember training him back in the day.” I'm keeping in contact with people in a roundabout way, if that makes sense.

If somebody brings out a book, buy the book. It's \$15. Buy it and write them a message: “I really enjoyed this. By the way, you've got a typo.” Alan Dragu launched a copy creator program, and I joined immediately. I went through his codex. It was good, but he'd clearly put it together quickly. So I line-edited it and reformatted it and said, “Here are all the errors. There you go.” And he said, “Wow, dude, that's really good,” and he sent me a hat in the post. It's sitting up there.

Why would I spend 12 hours line-editing his stuff? It's not as if he couldn't do it himself. He'd already planned a version two. He said so in the thing: “I know this has some errors, but you needed the information. I'll get to it.” I did it because that's a good contact to have.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

And that goes right back to your point about keeping your radar out for what people are doing, and spotting clear opportunities to step in — to solve a problem they 100% have, or take advantage of an opportunity they 100% have but don't have the time, energy or bandwidth to deal with right now. And you can say, “Here, I already did that.”

Thank you very much. This has been inspiring for me. I don't know what other people will take from it, but I feel like this has been gold. A lot of people could make a lot of money and build a really nice business and client roster just by following what you've talked about here, over and over. And it doesn't have to take years. If you start doing this kind of thing consistently, for a few weeks or a couple of months, it's going to start sparking opportunities that wouldn't have been there otherwise, and it builds on itself from there. So thank you for sharing all this. If people want to hire you or find you, where should they go?

TOM RENDER

They should look me up on LinkedIn. I haven't relaunched my website yet. Just look up Tom Render on LinkedIn and hit me up there. I think I'm the same on Instagram. Just reach out.

JOHN BEJAKOVIC

Excellent. I'll put all these videos together and include a link to your LinkedIn. Tom, thanks again. This has been excellent.

TOM RENDER

Always. Thanks.