Don't Sell Yourself Short — Copywriting for Marketing Materials

The ability to write effective copy is an important skill to acquire if you are part of your company's marketing team. In this issue of MacMillan Graphics' **Printips,** we will discuss the characteristics of effective copywriting and offer some techniques to improve your skills.

The Building Blocks of Effective Copy

Effective marketing copy has an accepted form and predictable content. The form is in three parts: a headline or attention-grabbing first sentence; the development of the sales pitch; and a call to action. Whether you are writing a sales letter, ad copy, a brochure or a direct mail marketing piece, the same three parts will always be present.

Similarly, the content consists of three parts: who, what and why. **Who** means the audience the message is aimed at; **what** means the specifics of the product or service being sold; and **why** means the reasons for buying this particular product or service instead of others. Before you can begin writing, you must have thought through the who, what and why so you know how to write the copy.

Define the Audience

You may think that anyone (or everyone) is the potential audience for your product or service. However, marketing to an audience that broad is not feasible. In fact, most businesses derive about 80% of their sales from about 20% of their customers. Find that group in your own business, and see what characteristics they have in common. Or study your competitors to see who they are targeting.

If you can't decide who your customers are, decide who they are not. It may be easier to decide who you do not want to serve than who you do. Remember that a target audience is more than a statement of demographics. Visualize a real person to represent the target audience, and be as specific as you can. To describe a target audience as "working mothers, aged 18 to 45" is a more effective planning tool than the general "women aged 18-45". If you can precisely define your target audience, you will be able to write advertising copy with definite appeal to that audience.

Define the Product in Terms of the Audience

Begin by spotlighting the features and benefits of the product or service you are selling.

For each feature, develop an accompanying benefit – this will be used later to develop the appeal to your audience. For example, if your product is made of durable material (feature), the benefit is that the product will last longer, need replacement less often and retain its attractive appearance.

Benefit statements reflect how the product or service affects the customer's life. Usually the benefits will make the customer's life or task easier, faster or more desirable.

Remember that cost and quality are major considerations when describing product benefits. Price + quality = value is a very persuasive benefit that most buyers are seeking.

Differentiate

Most products or services are not unique in the marketplace. To be effective, the copywriting will have to differentiate between your product or service and the other choices the customer could make. Without a discernible and well-stated difference, the only way customers will have to differentiate is on price.

Support Your Claims

A discerning customer will require you to support your benefit claims by providing some kind of evidence. This could be scientific facts, user testimonials or the endorsement of a trustworthy or qualified individual. Do not fabricate testimonials – ask current customers to provide them. Make it clear when you are asking that you want the truth, good or bad. (After all, no rule says you have to use all the testimonials you gather.) A happy customer is a powerful persuader – nothing you write will be as genuinely sincere as the praise of a satisfied customer.

Start by Getting Their Attention

Realize that you have less than 10 seconds to grab the reader's attention and convince him that it is worth his time to continue reading. Therefore, headlines and first sentences have a disproportionate effect on the success of the copywriting. Make your headlines provocative to unhesitatingly engage the reader.

Body Copy: Keep It Organized, Simple and Focused

Before you begin writing the body copy, determine the primary message or selling point and all secondary selling points. If you use the primary message as part of your headline, then dedicate a few lines or paragraphs to expand the point. Then fit in the secondary selling points in order of importance. Move smoothly from point to point, using short sentences. Aim to keep all sentences to 12 words or less, and use sentence fragments as long as they will sound good to the reader.

Stick with words that are simple and easy to understand. Your readers will not invest in dissecting or studying your copy – instead, they will move on to some other activity. Make it easy for the reader to understand and keep up with the copy.

Call Them To Action

Always include a call to action, and consider creating urgency to act. A call to action might tell your audience what will happen if they buy your product or service, or could tell what will happen if they don't buy your product. If you use this version, select a problem your audience won't be able to solve without your product.

Other closings could be the offer of a guarantee or free bonus. If you introduce a time limit to the offer or bonus, you have created an urgency to act. You can also modify product solutions by adding how long the solution will take. The statement "Consolidate Your Overdue Bills" is less powerful than "Consolidate Your Overdue Bills In Just Six Weeks".

Use Language Wisely

To enliven the copy, use adjectives and adverbs to modify nouns.

Consider the difference between offering a service and offering a quick, reliable service. Or offering a program or a comprehensive program package.

If you have room, include useful and interesting information without getting too technical. Also, avoid technical terms, particularly when writing for a wider audience.

Edit, Edit, Edit

Before you finalize your copy, read it over repeatedly to be sure it contains information that supports the main and secondary selling points in language designed to appeal to the specific target audience. Remove anything that is not consistent with these goals.

We're Here To Help

If you would like a "second eye" on your finished copy, we'll be happy to proof read, edit or give our opinion on how well you have accomplished your objective. Call us at **513-248-2121** for an appointment, FAX the copy to **513-248-5141** or e-mail a file to **mgl@macgra.com** and we'll start to work!

Build A Swipe File

A very effective technique you can use as an idea generator is a **swipe file.** A swipe file is your collection of sales letters, ads, brochures, self-mailers, post cards, newsletters – anything you have received that catches your eye or positively influences you.

You can create a swipe file geared to whatever you want to compose. One swipe file may be sales letters; another interesting designs; yet another good examples of sales, advertising or informational copywriting. Then when you are creating your sales or promotional piece, you can look through your swipe file to get the ideas flowing. Remember, though, that a

swipe file is only for ideas. You still have to write the copy or design the brochure yourself.

Here are some things to include in a swipe file:

- Creative, attention-getting ads
- Competitors printed materials
- Great promotional ideas
- Excellent examples of promotional and direct mail marketing
- Reference or resource list
- Paper samples
- Graphics and cartoons

A swipe file costs nothing to create and may give you just the creative boost you need to break a writer's block. And of course if you are really stuck, please give us a call at **513-248-2121**, and we'll help any way we can.

a vocabulary of the graphic arts

Nothing obscures the message in a sales piece as much as grammatical errors. Here are some **homonyms** – pairs of words with the same pronunciation but different meanings – that are often misused in writing.

Affect, Effect

Affect is a verb meaning to influence.
   "Cold weather can affect the health of elderly people."

Effect is most often used as a noun, meaning result.
   "The medicine had an immediate effect."

In formal English, effect can be used as a verb, meaning to bring about or execute.
   "The election results will effect a transfer of power."

It's, Its

It's is the contraction for **it is** or **it has.**
   "It's a girl!" or "It's been raining for three days."

Its is a pronoun, the possessive form of it.
   "The dog wagged its tail."

There, Their, They're

There is an adverb indicating place (literally or figuratively).
   "Go there at once." or "You have completed enough of the test; you may stop there."

Their is a pronoun, the possessive form of they.
   "They like their school and do their lessons well."

They're is a contraction of **they are.**
   "They're spending the holidays at home."

Who's, Whose

Who's is a contraction of **who is.**
   "Who's in charge here?"

Whose is a pronoun, the possessive form of who and which.
   "Whose shoes are under the couch?"

You're, Your

You're is a contraction of **you are.**
   "You're one of the finalists in the spelling bee."

Your is a pronoun, the possessive form of you.
   "Your car is covered with dust from the construction site."

For online help with writing, consult these sources:

www.m-w.com (online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary)

www.thesaurus.com (online version of Roget's thesaurus)

Please Route to the Printing Buyer

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Q.

I'm not a very strong writer. Do you have any suggestions to help me be more effective?

A.

One of the best ways to write good, strong copy is to approach the task with organization. Good copywriters always know both the audience and the desired action for the audience to take. This information is the basis for strong copywriting, so determine the answers for your project right at the beginning.

Next you need to list the benefits your audience will derive from using the product or service. Jot down the features, then translate the list into benefits for the customer. When writing, mention the features but emphasize the benefits.

With the audience, desired action and benefits identified, you are now ready to write a first draft. Paint a picture or tell a story that will draw the reader to your point of view or inspire the desired action. Realize that although you are writing for a specific audience, the personalities of readers vary. Include just enough technical information to satisfy readers who need to see data to make a decision. Keep copy simple and clear for readers who like to get to the point quickly. Include bullet points for readers who like to skim.

Finish your writing with an attention-getting first sentence or headline that will grab the readers' interest and keep them reading.

questions and answers