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PRINTtips



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My Word... Copywriting Skills for Business

A fundamental skill for all businesses and organizations is to use language effectively in sales and marketing materials. The task of creating the text for these materials is known as *copywriting*. The purpose of copywriting is to persuade the reader to act – to respond to an advertisement, to buy a product or service, to donate to a cause, to join an organization. Copywriting is part of direct mail marketing post cards, self-mailers and sales letters; display advertisements; brochures; press releases; white papers; catalogs; and all other marketing communications material.

Copywriting differs from technical and business writing because it is persuasive rather than expository. Like technical or business writers, copywriters may present information, but their primary goal is to influence the behavior of readers. Copywriting can also violate the rules for standard business writing to achieve a desired effect or to make the writing more interesting.

Getting started

Copywriting combines the skills of a writer and a salesman. The writer pays attention to the nuances of language and word choice while the salesman strives to get the reader's attention, create interest, provoke desire, and compel action. In addition, a copywriter must know how the copy will be used, the message to be delivered, and the audience. Not understanding these things leads to four common copywriting mistakes:

- *Ignoring the audience.* Remember that the purpose of copywriting is to influence



behavior, and that a strong motivator is a perceived benefit. Copy that concentrates on the characteristics of the business or organization (the number of employees, years in business or at a location, mission statement) or makes vague, unsupported claims (great customer service, high quality product) is ignoring the reader. Answer the question "What's in it for me" and you'll be focused on the audience.

- *Losing focus.* The more features and benefits you include in the copy, the more likely readers are to become confused. Focus the message on a single topic, and if needed, create a series of messages.
- *Changing copy too often.* This mistake is especially prevalent in direct mail marketing campaigns. A consistent message consistently delivered yields better results than a series of changing messages. Resist advice to refresh the copy. If something is working, keep using it.

My Word... Copywriting Skills for Business (continued)

“... the copy for a brochure should present factual information...”

- *Attracting attention rather than business.* Good copywriting must attract attention, but then it must develop the reader's interest in order to proceed to a sale. A message that is attention-getting but does not create desire and provoke action is useless.

When reading advertising material, some people like to scan the headlines and bullet points and essentially ignore the text. Others read every word of copy so they will be fully informed. Still others scan headlines and bullet points looking for something of interest, then read carefully. Effective copywriting has to address all three reading styles.

Readers who scan headlines and bullet points need graphic elements – subheads, bold or italicized type, pull quotes, sidebars – to attract their attention. Readers who study the entire advertisement need details about the product or service – FAQs (frequently-asked questions), specifications, pricing if applicable. Including a reader-involvement device such as a quiz or brief survey is also an effective attention-grabber.

Case study: copywriting for a brochure

After business stationery, a brochure is often the next item that businesses and organizations develop and print. While some may think of a brochure as an informational piece, good copywriting can turn it into an important sales and marketing tool.

For maximum effectiveness, the copy for a brochure should present factual information within a persuasive structure that coordinates with the company's sales process. Knowing where in the sales process the brochure will be used – to generate leads or to close the sale – will help inform the copy content. Also remember to determine the audience (which may change depending on the step in the sales cycle) and what action the audience is expected to take.

Write the first draft of the copy with the target audience in mind. Most products or services solve a problem or relieve pain, so tailor the message to demonstrate to the reader that you understand

the key problems. Hold a presentation of features and benefits until you have built rapport with the reader, then address commonly-asked questions and objections.

Write subheads, sidebars and photo captions that can be used both as visual elements and as a means to establish credibility. Captions are frequently read and remembered, so write them to reinforce the points illustrated by the photos. A sidebar containing expert testimony or a case study will establish credibility.

Include charts, graphs, diagrams and technical specifications in a separate section rather than interrupting the flow of the copy. Readers who prefer this information will find it, and those who don't need it won't be distracted.

Conclude the copy by establishing the *call to action* (i.e., the reader's next step). Present complete contact information (phone, FAX, e-mail, company url) since different readers may have different preferences for establishing contact. If appropriate, include copy that asks for the order.

Whether or not to include pricing in a brochure is largely a function of how the brochure relates to the sales process. A brochure that is used early in the sales cycle to generate leads should probably not include pricing information unless price is the primary competitive advantage. If the brochure is used toward the end of the cycle to close the sale, then pricing information may be both appropriate and required. Also, the shorter the sales cycle and the lower the price, the more likely the price will be useful in the brochure.

To guard against having to reprint the brochures because of a price change, have the prices printed separately and used as an insert to the brochure. Because an insert could be separated from the brochure, include contact information and a summary of key benefits on the insert. Contact us and we'll explain how this can be done.

Pay attention to how the copy will be laid out on the brochure. In particular, use the brochure cover to attract interest and begin persuading the reader.

“...have the prices printed separately and used as an insert to the brochure.”

My Word... Copywriting Skills for Business (continued)

This may mean reducing the size of the company logo or brand and replacing it with copy or a visual element that illustrates the benefit to the customer provided by the product or service.

As the reader completes each page of the brochure, he will decide whether to keep reading or put the brochure aside. This means that each page must individually attract attention, create interest, generate desire and provoke action. Entice the reader to keep going and you'll earn the chance to complete the sale.

The importance of copywriting

The ability to generate good copy is a powerful sales tool. Benefit-oriented copywriting that

addresses the audience's needs and is structured to be persuasive helps turn your sales and marketing material into an important part of the sales process.



“The ability to generate good copy is a powerful sales tool.”

Display Ads Present a Special Challenge

Copywriting for display ads presents a special challenge for the writer. Limited space and competition from surrounding articles and ads means that the ad must focus on a single benefit to be effective. While it may be tempting to include secondary features and benefits, the risk is that the reader will be distracted from the main point.

Design and graphics are especially important in display ads as they attract the reader's attention, while headlines engage the reader's interest. The copy then persuades the reader and provokes action. All three elements are required for a successful display ad.

Despite having limited space, a display ad must clearly state a benefit for the customer. Characteristics and features of the product or service are used to support the benefit, not to supplant it. Be selective in what you include as support – it is better to thoroughly discuss one benefit than to confuse the reader with related but irrelevant statements. If coffee beans are harvested from an eco-friendly farm and have a distinctive, pleasant taste, pick just one characteristic to feature in the display ad.



“Design and graphics are especially important in display ads as they attract the reader's attention...”

Writing for Non-Profit Organizations



“... provide details on exactly how donations or dues revenue will be used.”

Non-profit organizations face an extra task when writing copy. In addition to being supportive of the organization’s purpose, potential donors or new members also want assurance that their money will be used as intended, and not to support a lavish office or unnecessary expenses.

One way to offer this assurance is to provide details on exactly how donations or dues revenue will be used. Write objective statements that include a specific measure such as

- *A donation of only \$10 provides textbooks for an entire classroom of students.*

- *\$100 will buy a water purification system large enough to serve four families.*
- *Your donation of \$25 will fund a half-hour of classical music programming.*

Like their business counterparts, non-profit organizations need to emphasize the benefit to the donor above the benefit to the recipient. Since the benefits are often intangible, it is important to write vividly and emotionally so the donor can get a mental image of the donation at work.



“When reading an advertisement, people have a tendency to procrastinate...”

Q. *What is a sense of urgency?*

A. In marketing, a *sense of urgency* is a device to give readers a reason to respond quickly. When reading an advertisement, people have a tendency to procrastinate – to put the advertisement aside and consider it later. A sense of urgency helps overcome this tendency by providing a reason to act immediately.

There are two common ways to create a sense of urgency: offer a reward for prompt action, or assess a penalty for not acting. Some examples of a reward include a free gift for responding or a bonus with purchase; an example of a penalty is a limited supply of the product or service being offered or a sale that lasts for a defined period of time.

A sense of urgency works by creating scarcity – the reader must act by a given deadline or be among the established number of people to respond. The sense of urgency can be undermined if the deadline or other conditions are not strictly enforced.