

SO WHO NEEDS A WRITER ANYMORE?

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OMG, is anyone these days not a writer? With the expansion of new media and media platforms, and with keyboards that fit in the palm of your hand, the art (yes, we still cling to that word) of communicating is itself being redefined.

Not so fast, say the six veteran freelance marketing writers of Copyopolis. Despite these shape-shifting changes, there remain some stubborn principles of commercial writing that can't be, well, written off . . .

ADVOCATING FOR THE AUDIENCE

If there's a primary role for the writer, it's the role of audience advocate. And with all of those media aiming all of that content at all of our topped-out receptors, that role has never been more important.

By advocating for the audience—by evaluating, filtering and preparing the content clients want delivered—writers work hard to cut through the immense clutter (yes, some of it the client's) and provide information that's important, useful and relevant. So while we're writing like writers, we're thinking like customers: What information do I really need to know? How quickly and efficiently can I absorb it?

Many well-intentioned clients, as the ultimate "insiders," end up addressing themselves rather than their customers. Writers must work to redirect their efforts, asking ourselves the tough questions from the customer's point of view. Questions like:

- **Does this copy speak to me or down to me?**
- **Is it providing information of real value, or is it merely self-promotional?**
- **Does it make all the correct assumptions about what I may or may not know?**
- **Are its levels of friendliness and familiarity appropriate?**
- **Does it respect my time and intelligence—or is it wasting both?**

And that's just the beginning of the task. The sections that follow address the issues writers face in our daily professional lives: the principles we follow, the toolboxes we stock and use, the conversations we initiate and the politics we dodge—all to do what we love doing for clients. So, in a sense, this article is all about advocating for you: explaining the process to create a better understanding that maybe, after all, not everyone these days really is a writer. At least not the writer you deserve. P.G.

CREATING MESSAGING THAT SELLS

So you know the audience wants to know what's in it for them, but what do you want them to know about YOU? Beware of getting so excited about promoting that you want to throw in everything but the kitchen sink. Just to contain all that information, the piece would have to fold like an accordion, and a website would take minutes to load. It's easy to lose sight of one of the essential elements in good communication: messaging.

Effective messaging skillfully weaves in key strategic marketing points that make someone want to buy from you: who you are, what you do, how you solve their problem, why they should choose you over others, primary benefits and features, and the customer hot button. Copywriters shape content around these vital marketing points, influencing and motivating people to act.

If you have a marketing department or person, messaging is easier—strategy and messages are already developed. The writer then creatively transforms messages to help readers decide to buy—and the company makes sure copy matches brand, image and overall marketing strategy.



But many companies don't have marketing people. They're so slammed running the business they haven't thought about a marketing message—and might not even have a short "what we do" phrase. An experienced marketing writer guides companies through the painful marketing message development process, asking questions: In five words, what do you do? Are you number one, the first or a leader in the industry? Are your products the highest quality, prices the lowest, customer service the best? What are product strengths and weaknesses compared with competition? Sales objections and questions? Key benefits, features and hot button?

Armed with these answers, the copywriter focuses first on the customer hot button: the one thing that causes whiplash, rivets attention and is the reason people buy. It could be price, quality, convenience, saving time or energy, making the buyer a hero or not touching a grungy toilet cleaning tool. Maybe it's not a top benefit. Next the pro develops those few key benefits and features the audience sees as deal makers. Stress few. Too many—and lengthy—points dilute messages like melting ice cubes in a drink. To make

messaging jump out even if the reader scans, the writer builds the hot button into headlines, intro, close and even visuals—and benefits into subheads and visuals.

Your product may be the market's best. But if messaging isn't effective, you lose sales. An experienced marketing writer knows the difference between writing about something and writing strategic messages that address what relevant deal makers are and what motivates people to buy. Effective messaging is all about the what of communication. B.W.

USING LANGUAGE THAT **RESONATES**

And while you may know exactly what you want to say, how you say it—the language you use—makes all the difference in the world. Call it “delivery.” Explains how one guy can tell a joke and leave the room in stitches, and when another one tries, they just ... leave. Words matter. Tone matters. Voice matters. What's the ultimate goal of any piece of writing? Sure, to inform. Educate. Motivate. Sell. Move. Inspire. Provoke. Outrage. All true.

But none of that will happen until you accomplish the fundamental goal of any writing—a goal both far more basic and far more complex: to have it be read. Go on, roll your eyes, but until someone glues eyeballs to page or screen and takes it in, it's all theoretical. If it doesn't speak to them, they will show no pity. Next.

And to find out what does speak to them, a good copywriter will grill you about your audience like a Bronx beat cop working a snitch: How do they talk? What words or language will get through to them? At what level do we have to speak?

Language is what builds your message. It translates—channels—your company's communication objectives into the “dog whistle” your audience can hear—minus the jargon and shop talk. And that takes a craftsman.

And once you have those answers, there are a few more filters to run it all through: Keep It Simple. Keep It Real. People read below their grade level. They want simple words—one to two syllables are ideal.

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words, un-stuck-up words (i.e., use, not utilize; get, not obtain; etc.). And short sentences that sound friendly and natural.

When people read, they hear a voice speaking those words in their head. And they want that voice to be accessible, genuine. They're hungry for the authentic. They want to be talked to, not talked at. And by a voice that knows them and gets them. A voice that does all that gets listened to.

Here is a most intriguing—and revealing—question: The voice of which famous person do you envision talking about your company? James Earl Jones? Patrick Stewart? Sally Kellerman? Queen Latifah? Once you figure that out, tone, voice and language fall into place. P.B.

INJECTING A **FRESH** VIEWPOINT

No matter whose voice your customers hear inside their heads, ultimately they must be persuaded to buy that software, hybrid car or (insert your offering here). That's where a copywriter is indispensable. Especially a freelance copywriter who—as an outsider—can bring a fresh viewpoint to the mix.

Familiarity can foster an insider's mindset—an occupational hazard for internal marketing staff. Being too close to the subject makes it harder to filter through all the facts and figures, avoid jargon and accurately gauge customer knowledge about your product or industry.

As every staff writer knows, after a few years on the job it can get, well, a little boring writing about the same old stuff. What was once exciting and new has become routine. Hospital sheets? Computer networking? Cereal and shampoo? How can you keep it fresh year after year?

Another fact of life for the staff writer is the increased pressure to produce more faster, with fewer resources. So, out of necessity, just crank it out! Who has time to ponder a different approach in the face of all those deadlines? A freelance writer can, of course. He or she looks for unique angles and perspectives that spark new ideas within the creative team.

A freelance marketing writer can be your best ally when it comes to challenging the status quo. Consider the business consulting firm that always started each brochure with a complicated matrix of its industry and functional services. This was a sacred cow until a freelance writer tactfully convinced the powers-that-be to use that prime space for selling instead of telling.

Being an outsider has other virtues too. Like sidestepping office politics—something that internal staff can't easily do. The freelance writer has no trump cards to play, no chain of command to navigate, no role in internal feuds. And no hurt feelings over revisions or other potential stumbling blocks. He or she has only one agenda—to do the best possible job of reaching your customers and persuading them to buy.

Whether or not you have a marketing staff, you're ahead of the game with a freelance writer who has the objectivity to question assumptions that may no longer be working for you. It's the best insurance to protect your investment in promoting your product and your company. K.C.

PUSHING BACK

An experienced marketing writer is a team player. Along with wordsmithing your text, he or she is never reluctant to pitch in on strategy, concepting, audience analysis and whatever else needs to be done to move the project along.

But occasionally a writer might throttle back a bit on the ol' team spirit and start asking lots of new questions. It can be perplexing behavior if you haven't worked with a lot of writers and may cause you to wonder, "Hey, what's going on here? What gives?"

What gives is a bit of "push back." Now, a marketing writer—especially a freelancer—doesn't push back casually. (Every writer wants to be loved, after all, and brought back for many more projects.) It's just that, like Marvel Comics' web-slinging superhero, your writer's Spidey senses have started tingling.

The writer has detected one of those "writing" problems my co-authors have been discussing throughout this article. Something is off with your project's message, tone, language or accuracy, and because you've hired a professional, he or she feels compelled to raise a red flag while there's still time to find a solution that makes everything copasetic.

Of course, a good writer knows how to object without being objectionable, and most will start off with a subtle approach along the lines of, "We talked about this earlier, but I'm still wondering if the (fill in the blank) could be improved. What if we said it like this ... Wouldn't that be more persuasive to (buyers, prospects, readers)?"

But it seems you're not getting it. You've misunderstood, deflected or minimized the issue, and that's forced a more overt push back. Now, you're hearing something like this: "I think we have a problem with the way we are (addressing the audience, stressing features over benefits, bashing the competition, and so on). I could be wrong, but we should talk this through since revisiting this issue later could be expensive and time consuming."

It can be disconcerting to hear and may cause you to wonder if the writer is still on your side. But relax. The answer is: absolutely. The fact that the writer is willing to risk annoying you is evidence of how much he or she cares about your project.


So, the next time you're feeling some push back, consider hitting the pause button. Maybe your writer has it wrong, and a short conversation will make everything all better. But maybe the writer's instinct is dead-on, and something is up. Chances are it wouldn't be the first time. S.K.

BRINGING COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS TO THE TABLE

It goes without saying that the writer's job is to write the job. Make it happen. For anyone who's not a writer, getting the words onto the page—well, the screen—can be daunting. Ralphie in *A Christmas Story* may have effortlessly spilled out the words describing the official Red Ryder carbine-action 200-shot range model BB gun

that he wanted for Christmas, but most people can't. They'd just as soon spend an afternoon in a dentist's chair as try to put something into words.

But a writer who's accustomed to writing on many different topics is prepared to make decisions about the organization and structure of the material to be covered. A writer also knows how to write differently for a specific medium—a print ad, a landing page, a video script. The writer knows what to include, what to leave out and how much importance each element deserves in the overall piece. Before a writer writes your job, he or she thinks it.



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with traditional ads. Yet somehow, we still need
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A writer will also understand what kind of tone is appropriate to your objective and your audience, and that tone will determine choice of vocabulary, sentence structure and length of sentences. A writer, of course, is also your expert in matters of grammar, spelling and punctuation, and while those capabilities should be obvious, keep in mind that in recent years, students have been shortchanged in their language skills. As adults, they may not know the difference between an ad lib and an adverb.

Some rules for grammar, spelling and punctuation vary or change with the times; they're codified in various style manuals a writer keeps on the shelf. So a writer may ask you which style manual you use. An experienced, really anal-retentive writer will have nearly memorized at least one popular style manual.

Some large companies have their own style guides, mandating the verbal equivalents of PMS colors and other legalities of trade dress. With or without such a book, a writer should be attentive to proper use of your trademark. A writer is typically a proofreader, too, who will troll for typos and proper comma usage.

We all hear the dire predictions: Print media are dying. Young people don't read. You can't reach anyone with traditional ads. Yet somehow, we still need to communicate by stringing words together. That means we still think writing is important. In fact, it's more important than ever, to help us communicate effectively in so many media. Who needs a writer? Everyone who still has something to say. G.D.