



# Working words

Tips on writing sales and marketing  
copy that sells

## Working words

Words are powerful stuff. Images may pull your punters in, but it's your words that are going to sell your concept, your product or your services.

Whatever you're planning - brochures, ads, mail shots, newsletters, web copy - use this guide to make sure your words work hard in your favour. You can use it to prepare for briefing a writer, or even help you write some of your own copy.

## Before you start

Ask your self a few key questions.

### Who?

What's your audience for anything you write - technical, consumer, management, youth? Your audience will affect what you write about and the tone that you use.

### Why?

What do you want your audience to do as the result of reading your words? Just about everything you write should have a call to action, telling your readers what to do now to get more information or buy the product or service.

### How?

- What's going to be the best way for you to reach your audience? In the first place, you might use press ads, GoogleAds, direct mail or emails to excite interest
- How will you follow up? Do you direct people to your web site - or even better, a special landing page on your web site that relates specifically to your campaign? Do you ask them to apply for a brochure? Or a white paper? Or call a number to find out more?
- Then what happens? Think about your whole programme of contact with your potential customers to turn your words into sales

## Advice in general

- Keep your writing simple. Busy people want to understand what you're saying instantly
- Keep your writing short. Say what you need to say, and then stop
- Always get someone other than the author to proofread any document
- Write everything with the needs of your customer in mind - avoid jargon and don't make assumptions about knowledge
- Build a style list that you and your colleagues can all use. Include items like typefaces, heading sizes, bullet formats. It's all part of your corporate branding and it's important
- Write actively not passively. It's infinitely more immediate and interesting to read that "We tested the product" rather than "The product was tested"
- Decide whether you want to write in the first or third person, and keep to it. We are talking directly to you in this guide, but in a more formal document you might want to opt for the third person eg "Customers can use this service to ..."
- Don't rely on spell checkers to understand your copy. If your spelling is weak, check your words manually
- Decide how formal you want your piece of writing to be, and stick to it. In this guide we're happy using contractions - "it's" rather than "it is" for example, but it might be out of place in a formal

document

- Know the rules of grammar - and then break them judiciously. Language is constantly changing and there's no certain answer anymore about split infinitives, for example. You can successfully commit the heresy of starting a sentence with "And" or "But" in a piece of advertising or direct mail, but don't overdo anything
- Search engine optimisation for web pages is a great tool for driving potential customers to your site - but don't sacrifice clarity and quality of your web copy in the process
- Don't be overly coy about pricing. If you're selling consumer goods in particular, prices are important to your sell
- Do write positively. Your's is a good news story

## Horses for courses

The content, structure, length and level of your document will reflect your goals.

### **Direct mail, email shots, advertisements, sales letters**

The important issue with any direct mail or advertising is that you're writing for people who didn't know they wanted to hear from you.

If you don't grab attention straightaway, your work will be binned unread. It's absolutely vital to put your hook right up at the front. If it's a business audience, you can play on the issues that you know they need to resolve. For a consumer audience, value is often a good enticer. You know your audience best.

Get your message out fast and snappily. This is not the place to go into details. Make sure though that you tell your readers where to go to get more information, or how to place an order instantly.

### **Brochures**

This is where you can tell the real story about your products and services. A good way to develop the story might be:

- Identify with your audience - what are their issues or their interests?
- Describe your solution
- Highlight the unique selling points of your solution, and

why people should buy from you. (Knocking the competition is not to be advised - unless you have a good lawyer. Better to focus on the benefits to your customers)

- Talk about the features of your offering, and make sure you relate these advantages to the benefits your customers can receive by using your product or service
- Explain what to do next

### **Web site landing pages**

If your mailing has been about a particular product or service or a special offer, then it's a really good idea to develop a web "landing page" to accompany it.

On this page you can give more information about the product or service - and especially any offer you're making. Please, though, do not simply regurgitate what's already been said in the mailer. That's frustrating for the reader and will turn them right off doing business with you.

You can also add links to other relevant information you already have, such as case studies, reviews, quotes. You could offer brochures and white papers to download. It all helps to make a very rounded story.

It's also a great place to gather information about your readership. Ask visitors to register (simply) before downloading a brochure and you'll get a picture of who's responded to your mailing. You'll also get the chance to

ask them if they'd like to hear from you more regularly.

### **Web sites in general**

For a company of any size, this is a massive subject that requires plenty of planning. Your web site is your online store front, and it needs to:

- Reflect your brand
- Attract visitors and encourage them to browse
- Ensure information is easy to find and understand
- Provide simple ways to buy your products, services or knowledge

Unless you're a very small organisation, enlisting a professional designer is a very good idea to develop your look and feel and structure. They should also be able to offer advice on making your site comply with legislation on accessibility for those with disabilities.

Once that's in place, you can add your words and pictures. Bear a few points in mind:

- Web copy should be brief and clear. While scrolling down a page is becoming more acceptable, simply loading up your brochure copy onto a web page will turn off many visitors
- Clinging too closely to the demands of search engine optimisation can make your web pages disjointed and unclear. Strike a balance between technology requirements and clarity of expression
- Content management systems are great for enabling staff across the organisation to upload information to the web site, but is anyone checking and proofing what

they're publishing? Professionalism on the web is as important as it is in print

- A page full of images will load far more slowly than a page full of words. Choose images that are relevant to your message

### **White papers**

If you're publishing technical or in-depth documents, get those with the knowledge to work with those with the writing skills. However detailed a document is, it still needs to be accessible and well-written.

### **Case studies**

Case studies make good references, especially in business. A double-sided A4 sheet will usually be enough to tell a good story. Journalists make good case study writers because they're used to interviewing and then distilling the information into readable articles.

A good structure for a case study would be:

- Brief description of the customer company
- What were their issues?
- Why did they choose your products or services?
- What benefits are they achieving?
- What are their plans to use your products or services in the future?

A good sprinkling of quotes from the customer will lend even greater credibility to the case study.

Make sure you do everything by the book though. Ensure

your customer knows exactly where and how you're going to use the case study, and perhaps get them to sign an approval form.

### **Newsletters and magazines**

Consider your audience when you decide your content of your internal and external magazines and newsletters.

News about staff changes in your organisation may be fascinating to include in an internal newsletter, but will not help your sales drive in a customer magazine.

Determine your objectives in developing your newsletter or magazine.

Why are you writing to your staff?

- As a management tool to explain strategy and changes?
- To promote a sense of community?
- As a bit of light relief for a Friday afternoon?

Why are you writing to your customers?

- To overtly promote new products and services?
- As a support tool to engender customer satisfaction and loyalty?

If you plan to initiate a regular publication, ensure that it will be regular. People will notice if you produce two issues and run out of steam. Enlist the support of people who can provide the content, put together a publication schedule, and task someone with overall responsibility for putting it

together and getting it out.

### **Presentations**

A presentation that consists of page after page of bullet points being read aloud is tedious. Great presenters tell an enticing story around their slides, but they need to understand that story first.

If you're writing your own presentation, putting a few slides together around what's in your head is fairly straightforward.

If you're writing a presentation for someone else to take and use, it's a far harder task. Here's where the notes section comes into play. Use this space to explain and expand on the content of each slide. You could even provide a full script for the user.

Providing a short and long version of the presentation makes it more flexible and re-usable in different situations.

Consider whether you're planning to print off and use the presentation as a handout. Will it stand on its own or will it make no sense a week later?

Don't forget to proofread. Ever got sniggering from the audience who have been distracted from your message by your spelling?

### **Press releases**

If you're employing a PR consultant, writing your press releases will be part of the service. If you prefer to issue a few releases yourself, here are a few thoughts.

Consider your audience. Journalists are busy people who receive many, many press releases every day. If you want to receive coverage for your story, it's important to:

- Make sure your story is worth telling. Upgrades to products or changes of staff are only interesting news if there is a different angle to the story that will attract a journalist's attention
- Make your headline attention-grabbing
- Tailor your story to your audience. National, specialist and regional press are all looking for different types of stories. Even if you are announcing the same news, you might consider different versions for different sectors of the media
- Make yourself available. Some journalists will want more information. Provide details of a contact available for interview
- Write to be edited. Some publications may just take your press release and edit it into a space. Get the key facts about your story into your first paragraph
- Provide contacts for readers to find out more
- Date your press release
- Keep it short and to the point. Offer to provide more information and pictures

## A few notes on picky things

Consistency throughout your writing really helps to give a good impression. There are a zillion little things that can bring your copy down. Here are some of the most common (and yes it is being picky, but it's worthwhile).

- Are you an "is" or an "are"? as in "BT is" or "BT are"
- Do you use "double quote marks" or 'single quote marks'?
- How do you use caps in your titles and subtitles? Or should that be "How Do You Use Caps in Your Titles and Subtitles?"
- How important are people? Do you use "Managing Director" or "managing director"?
- How are your apostrophes? Some people just know where to put an apostrophe, and a huge number of people don't. Those who know can be very unforgiving, so make sure you get it right
- Fewer or less? Less of a single item, fewer of several. So "less cheese" but "fewer slices of cheese". Even the BBC gets this wrong sometimes
- Are you asking too many questions of your reader? In this guide there are plenty of questions directed at you, the reader. Generally, though, it's best to be sparse with questions. Your audience want you to give them information, not think it all out for themselves.

- What brand of English should you use? US or UK? That depends on your market. If your audience is international, keep your language simple and avoid the puns - especially if your document is going to be translated into other languages. And decide little things like whether your words are "ized" or "ised"

And here's the call to action ...

We can write this guide with confidence because we've been practising its advice successfully for many years. You too can benefit from our experience.

If you'd like help with putting your words together, contact Wrightwell. We can write your copy from a brief, or give what you've written an expert once over.

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