Professional Writing Fundamentals

The time to begin an article is when you have finished it to your satisfaction. By that time you begin to clearly and logically perceive what it is you really want to say.

Mark Twain

The ability to write effective copy is an important skill to acquire if you are part of your company or organization's marketing team. In this issue we will discuss the characteristics of effective copy and reveal some techniques to improve your skills.

Effective marketing copy has an accepted form which is in three parts:

1) a headline or attention-grabbing first sentence

2) the development of the sales pitch

3) 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.

The Headline...

Realize that you have less than ten seconds to grab the readers' attention and convince them that it is worth their time to continue reading. Therefore, headlines and first sentences have a disproportionate effect on the success of the copywriting. Make your headlines provocative to make sure you engage the reader.

Develop the Message...

Before you begin writing the body copy, determine the primary message or selling point and all of the secondary selling points. If you use the primary message as part of your headline, then dedicate a few lines or paragraphs to expand that 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. Use sentence fragments, as long as they will sound good to the reader. Use 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 follow the copy.

The Call 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 it could tell them what will happen if they don't buy your product. If you use the latter 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".

Similarly, the content consists of three parts: who, what, and why.

1) **Who** means the audience that is targeted by the message.

2) **What** means the specifics of the product or service being sold.

3) **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.

Who...

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, and see whom 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 more 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.

What...

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 the product benefits. Price + quality = value, a very persuasive benefit that most buyers are seeking.

Why...

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.

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.

The Role of Style in Professional Writing

All business writers need to be familiar with the best-known guide to American English writing: *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. Often referred to as *Strunk and White,* the book was first written in 1918 by Cornell University professor William Struck Jr. In 43 pages, Strunk presented guidelines for "cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English." Following Strunk's death in 1946, Macmillan and Company commissioned the American writer, poet, and *New Yorker* columnist E.B. White to revise the book. His revision was published in 1959; two more followed (in 1972 and 1979). The fourth edition appeared in 1999 with a foreword by E.B. White's stepson Roger Angell, a glossary, an index, and editing by an anonymous editor. The most recent release (2005) is based on the 1999 text with added design and illustration.

The original edition contained eight elementary rules of usage, ten elementary principles for composition, "a few matters of form," and a list of commonly misused words and expressions. In the 1959 edition, E.B. White updated and extended these sections, and added an essay and a concluding chapter called *An Approach to Style.*

The Elements of Style remains the most popular and often-required guide to proper use of American English. A small book of only 105 pages, it is available in paperback, hardcover, or kindle edition at most bookstores or online. We heartily recommend it to all business writers.

We're Here To Help

If you would like a "second eye" on your finished copy, we'll be happy to proofread, edit, or give our opinion on how well you have accomplished your objective. Call us at 513-248-2121, or fax a copy to 513-248-5141, or email a copy to info@techgra.com, and we'll start to work.

a vocabulary of the graphic arts

words

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 "Ít'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)

THE idea CORNER

The Perfect Idea Generator... a Swipe File

A very effective technique to 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.

The Elements of Style

"*The Elements of Style* is still a little book, small enough and important enough to carry in your pocket, as I carry mine. It has helped me to write better. I believe it can do the same for you."
Charles Osgood

The book contains a surprisingly small number of rules and principles, all of which are easy to understand. The charm of the book comes from its unique tone and the wittiness of the explanations and examples that accompany each rule and principle.

Here are the original eight elementary rules of usage:

1. Form the possessive singular of nouns with '*s*.
2. In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each term except the last.
3. Enclose parenthetic expressions between commas.
4. Place a comma before *and* or *but* introducing an independent clause.
5. Do not join independent clauses by a comma.
6. Do not break sentences in two.
7. A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.
8. Divide words at line-ends, in accordance with their formation and pronunciation.

Here are the original ten elementary principles of composition:

1. Make the paragraph the unit of composition: one paragraph to each topic.
2. As a rule, begin each paragraph with a topic sentence; end it in conformity with the beginning.
3. Use the active voice.
4. Put statements in positive form.
5. Omit needless words.
6. Avoid a succession of loose sentences.
7. Express coordinate ideas in similar form.
8. Keep related words together.
9. In summaries, keep to one tense.
10. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.

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. Therefore, 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. This is related to, but different than, the product or service features. Usually the features equate to a specific, intended customer benefit. 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 reader's interest and keep him reading.

questions and answers