

COPYWRITING KNOWLEDGE

Craft Compelling Content: Discover the Secrets of Headlines, Storytelling, and Brand Voice.



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CHAPTER 1

WEB COPY: HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

Web Copy: How Much is Enough?

These days, there's widespread acceptance that a website is an integral part of the marketing plan of any business. Likewise, it's commonly accepted that web copy is a vital component of any website. But how much web copy is enough?

The pure volume of information available on the Internet is daunting - often counterproductive. There are approximately 550 billion documents on the web, and every day another 7 million are added.

According to an A.T. Kearney, Network Publishing study (April 2001), workers take so long trying to find information that it costs organizations \$750 billion annually!

Yet people continue to use it. Information gathering is the most common use of the Internet (American Express survey, 2000). And it seems work-related searches are amongst the most common, with 48% of people using the Internet to find work-related information, as opposed to 7% who use magazines (Lyra Research, 2001).

Interestingly, however, the average person visits no more than 19 websites in the entire month in order to avoid information overload (Nielsen NetRatings in Jan 2001).

So how do you ensure your site is one of those 19? How do you make your content helpful without making it overwhelming? That's what this article is about...

I've written several articles on WHAT to write on your website in order to make it helpful.

1) Know your audience (Reader or Search Engine?)

Think about whether you're targeting human readers (potential customers) or search engines. This must always be one of your very first questions, as the answer will determine your approach to content.

In general, human readers think less is more. Search engines, on the other hand, think more is more (well, more or less...). In many ways, it comes down to a question of quality versus quantity. Human readers are interested in quality, whereas search engines are interested in quantity. Human readers want you to answer their questions and make it clear how you can benefit them.

And they don't want to wade through volumes of text. Search engines want a high word count, full of relevant keywords, and short on diagrams.

You need to think carefully about your audience. In most cases, it'll be a trade-off. A high search engine ranking is important (or at least beneficial) to most businesses, so a happy medium is required. The following tips will go some way toward providing this balance.

2) Make it concise

Say everything you need to say, but always ask, "Can I say it with fewer words?" The literary world may be impressed by complex writing, but visitors aren't. Keep it simple, and keep it brief. Your home page shouldn't be more than 1 screen long. In other words, visitors shouldn't have to scroll. Subsequent pages can be longer, but try to keep them to a maximum of about 300-400 words each (approximately 1 scroll).

A lot of people will tell you that you also need 300-400 words or more on your home page for a good search engine ranking. You don't. If you focus on the right keywords and generate a lot of links to your site, you can achieve a high ranking without losing your readers' interest by padding

TIP: For most businesses, a good rule of thumb is to make it conversational. Old school writers and would-be writers oppose conversational copy; don't listen to them. Unless you're writing for an old-school audience, feel free to write as people talk.

3) One subject per page

On this, both readers and search engines agree. Don't try and squeeze too much information onto a single page. For example, instead of trying to detail all of your products on a single Products page, use the page to introduce and

summarize your product suite, then link to a separate page per product. This way, your content will be easier to write, your readers won't be overwhelmed, and you'll be able to focus on fewer keywords (so the search engines will get a clearer picture of what you do).

4) Make it scannable

According to a 1998 Sun Microsystems study, reading from a monitor is 25% slower than reading from paper. As a result, 79% of user's can read when online. So make sure you accommodate scanning. Use headings and subheadings. Highlight important words and sections.

Use bulleted lists and numbered lists. Use tables. Use statistics. Use meaningful indenting. Use short sentences. Most importantly, be consistent in your usage. Oh... and follow rules 2 and 3 above.

5) Use a simple menu structure

Try to keep your high-level menu (Home, About Us, Contacts, Products, Services, etc.) to a maximum of about 10 items (5-8 is ideal). If you have too many options, your site will seem unstructured and your visitors won't know where to start. In order for a visitor to want to come back to your site, they need to feel comfortable when they're there.

They need to know what to expect. If they can't identify any logic in your menu structure, they will always feel lost. What's more, this lack of structure will reflect badly on your business.

The Internet can be an incredibly cost-effective form of promotion because the cost per word to publish is so low. Don't be fooled into thinking more is more just because it costs less. Audiences - even search engines - don't want everything; they just want enough.

CHAPTER 2

WEBSITE COPYWRITER IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Website copywriter in the 21st century

The process of keywords search is well-known. However large the company can be, whatever industry it operates in there are usually some persons at the company who can perform this task. However, once the keyword search has been performed one should start working these keyword phrases into the text of your web-site. The person who performs this task is a website copywriter.

Apart from being creative and having an aptitude for producing appealing, memorable and attracting content the professional web site copywriter should be able to write the text in easy-to-read, convincing and action-driven style. He should also be able to perform thorough web site analysis and understand how the web site maintained by you should be changed or adjusted in order to get higher conversion rates.

But even if he has these qualities it may not be enough. In today's highly competitive and ever-changing online world it is indispensable for him to understand current marketing trends; what customers want to purchase as well as what expectations they have. Apart from this he must also analyze marketing and advertising strategy of the main competitors of the company and propose effective adjustments in the content of the web site to countervail them.

If you are hiring an experienced website copywriter it is advisable to look through his portfolio in order to get an insight into his experience.

Experienced web site copywriter who has already provided some copywriting service should indicate what type of copywriting he has been working on and what results he has achieved.

Moreover, he must also understand modern marketing techniques such as writing press releases and writing articles. The website copywriter should always keep himself abreast of the latest changes in marketing in order to produce high-quality content. If the website copywriter you intend to hire matches the above mentioned criteria, then he will be able to bring high results for your company.

CHAPTER 3

HOMEPAGE COPY: THE TRANSITION ZONE

Homepage Copy: The Transition Zone

Have you read Paco Underhill's fascinating book, *Why We Buy* about the psychology of retail store shopping? One of his major tenets about brick and mortar shopping holds the key to effective homepage copy - something he calls the "transition zone." If your homepage copy creates a sales zone not a transition zone, you could be losing sales.

The Transition Zone Explained

Think about the last time you visited a brick and mortar store... Maybe it's raining or snowing outside. Maybe you just left the dry cleaner before arriving at the electronics store. As you first enter the store you constantly make adjustments to changes in lighting, temperature, sounds, and visual stimulation.

You need to get your bearings. Underhill calls this part of the store the "transition zone," a place for adjusting from outside to inside, not selling. Selling attempts in this early stage are lost.

When does your homepage copy start selling? Unless your answer is never, it is too soon.

The Trade Show Lesson

I remember that the worst trade show booth to have was just inside the front door of the trade center. Instead of making sales I was giving directions, demoted from VP Sales to greeter, gopher. You would think that being first was an advantage. This position might be true in search engine ranking but not in trade shows booths.

The fact is many people don't even notice the first booth until they have completed their adjustment process. By that time, they are well past the first booth and buying from booth number 4.

Most website visitors behave like trade show guests. Is your web site copy trying to close business in booth one or giving the visitor time to adjust to the new

digs? Why not put your actual sales copy in booth two or three or four? Better still distribute the message across all three. After all, that's where the customers are headed anyway once they have transitioned to your site.

Cushion Don't Convince

So if selling is inappropriate what can you do to make your homepage copy sell without selling? Effective homepage copy cushions the hard landing strangers feel when they first arrive at your site. A soft landing is a receptive landing. Why not use your homepage copy to give visitors what they need:?

Acknowledgement Anticipation Acclimatization

Acknowledge Your Visitors

Let's go back to your recent store visit... You're barely inside the door and the overly friendly sales clerk asks, "Can I help you find what you are looking for?" Most times this clumsy sales attempt is made too early in your transition to the store from your previous location. For most people shopping is an experience not a mission. Instead of being sold during their time of transition, most customers simply want to be acknowledged - greeted, recognized.

How does your website copy acknowledge visitors to your site?

- Does your homepage copy confirm that your visitors are in the right place?
- Does your copy welcome them?
- Does your web copy make demands of these shaky travelers too soon?
- How does your homepage copy help them adjust to the change in environment?

Build Anticipation

You're standing ten feet inside the store. And there it is, way over there - the outline of that gorgeous HD TV you've been after. As you walk towards this target your heart races a little as you anticipate getting up close and personal with your quarry. The closer you get, the more you notice the details of your treasure.

By putting products a little off in the distance smart retailers build anticipation. You know what it's like. Details come into focus over time. Expectation increases.

Where could you put your best offerings to heighten anticipation without killing transition?

- How can you replace assertiveness with anticipation?
- Wouldn't it be a good idea to introduce your value proposition in your homepage copy, without demanding customer action right away?
- Where could you place the copy that supports this value proposition?
- Shouldn't your remaining pages build expectancy and familiarity at the same time?
- How about making your web site copy one integrated "time release capsule"?

Deepen Acclimatization

Whenever a copy goes against the customer's natural order, it becomes a threat, losing credibility and any chance of influence. It doesn't make sense to challenge the site visitor's natural need for transition. Why not embrace this idea? Remember the old ABC's of selling? Instead of "always be closing," why not use the transition zone strategy "always be comforting."

Think of ways your homepage copy can help your customers acclimatize to your site.

- Do you repeat your key ideas to build familiarity?
- Is the look and feel of your copy consistent?
- Does your copy give a snapshot of what's possible on your site?
- Is your navigation system explained?
- Has your homepage copy briefly highlighted your content?
- How can your visitors gain quick control of their journey?

That's acclimatization. Now you're ready to sell. YES! Effective homepage copies smooth the transition from stranger to guest using acknowledgement, anticipation, and acclimatization. Done well and it's sales zone time for the customer. Done poorly and it's cortisol time for you.

CHAPTER 4

WEB COPY 101

Web Copy 101

You already know how to create a great web copy. Just remember your childhood nursery rhymes. As silly as it sounds, "3 Blind Mice" will show you the way.

For some reason, "3 Blind Mice" paid me a visit. As I heard the 100th replay, it hit me - this would make a great web copy. As a matter of fact, this simple little ditty contains 10 elements of Web Copy 101. In case you've forgotten, here's how it goes.

"3 Blind Mice; 3 Blind Mice.
See how they run; see how they run.
They all ran up to the farmer's wife;
She cut off their tails with a carving knife.
Have you ever seen such a sight in your life
As 3 Blind Mice?"

Let's see how this children's nursery rhyme is a model of Web Copy 101.

Web Copy 101 #1, 2, 3 ...3 Blind Mice (title or heading)

- 1)** Try singing "A trio of visually impaired rodents, A trio of visually impaired rodents." Catchy? Formal writing doesn't sell. Write the way people speak and you will be heard. The title does something else for this song.
- 2)** If you had to choose between songs entitled "Cows," "Ducks," or "3 Blind Mice," which one would you choose? The title in all web copy has to grab the attention of the reader. There's more.
- 3)** This alluring title makes the content clear right away. How many times do you stumble on a website only to find you're not sure what they are selling or how it relates to you? Be sure your web copy uses the title or headline to set the table for the visitor.

Web Copy 101 #4 ...3 Blind Mice, 3 Blind Mice (first line)

- 4) This song is going to be about little rodents, not geese. Does the first line of your web copy highlight what you offer, or at least whom your site is for? Good web copy is not mystery writing. Instead it says, "We're here to sell you something and here's why you need it today."

Web Copy 101 #5, 6 ... See how they run, See how they run

- 5) Repetition is the key to any message track and a staple of effective web copy. From a psychological point of view, it lets your message become familiar and safe. From a search engine point of view repetition builds your keyword density and raises your search results. From a net reader perspective repetition in your web copy reinforces your message for the superficial reader who is scanning your site quickly. Repetition works on many levels. Let me say that again - repetition works on many levels.
- 6) The invitation to watch how the mice run around is also a clever way to involve the readers by getting them to do something. Does your site invite some kind of reader activity in the body of the web copy?

Web Copy 101 #7 ... They all ran up to the farmer's wife; she cut off their tails with a carving knife

- 7) A good way to stitch your ideas together and build more active involvement in your copy is to use pronouns (they, she). By forcing the readers to build connections between previous and current information, pronouns keep your site visitors more engaged.

Web Copy 101 #8 ... Have you ever seen such a sight in your life?

- 8) Do you know the best way to keep someone interested in what you are writing? What is 3 times 3? If you thought "nine" you proved my point. If you thought "eight" try night school. If you thought anything at all, you demonstrated the power of questions to generate reader participation.

Everybody loves and needs to answer questions. Does your web copy provide thought provoking questions that get your reader thinking and involved?

Web Copy 101 #9, 10 ... As 3 Blind Mice

- 9)** Brilliant web copy. More repetition. Plus, the story ends where it started. One of the advantages of writing with search engines in mind is that keyword focus helps you stay on topic. The glancing reader needs this controlling idea to get the essence of why they need what you have, now. Is your site's central idea consistently expressed all the way through your web copy?
- 10)** True, the song is written for children, but notice the use of short, crisp sentences to tell the tale. How are you telling your tale? You want your web copy to be clear, smart and direct.

I hope they get stuck in your head - the 10 lessons that is, not the lyrics. By the way, no animals were hurt during the writing of the article about web copy 101.

CHAPTER 5

WEB COPY SABOTAGE

Web Copy Sabotage

How does your personality affect your web copy? Whether you mean to or not, your site reflects you in ways you might not notice: sometimes good, sometimes bad. While personality peccadilloes can be endearing in social situations, minor personality flaws can cause web copy sabotage. So before you get out your keyboard, get out a mirror.

Why not see if any of these 3 personality traits are seeping into the design and copy of your web site?

Insecurity Pride Anxiety

Web Copy Sabotage #1: Insecure people create timid sites

Most people are insecure in certain situations as they vary their image to gain the favor of others. Nothing kills web copy faster than trying to be a people pleaser. Insecure people create timid sites that try to be all things to all people. Instead of declaring, "Here's who I am," an insecure web copy tentatively pleads, "I can be whatever you want; hope you find something you like." How forgettable and phony is that? Secure people on the other hand have learned to get real.

Some people like them; others don't. Their web copy stands out because their authors stand up. Their web copy is memorable because it is authentic. Does your web copy take a stand or does it sit on the sidelines wanting to be liked? Is your web copy real or real phony?

Web Copy Sabotage #2: Proud people produce narcissistic sites

While timid web copy aims overly outward, narcissistic web copy looks too far in the other direction. Business owners have a justifiable pride in their business. Sorry to say this pride can lead to web copy sabotage.

- Many owners lost in their delight often boast, "Look what I can do," instead of proclaiming, "Look what you get."

- Their web copy tends to focus on features instead of real customer benefits. It highlights trained staff rather than peace of mind.

Missing are empathy and impact. Nothing kills internet rapport like a one-sided relationship. Does your web copy brag about you or resonate with strangers?

Web Copy Sabotage #3: Anxious people make nervous sites

Nervous sites are the most common form of web copy sabotage. They don't gaze outward or inward; they look nowhere, all hurried and patchy. The visuals are the first give-away:

- a little red here and a dash of purple there
- a touch of bold with a smidgen of underlining
- a bevy of random quotations
- a frenzy of isolated graphics

Where's the rhyme? Where's the reason? Where is the message? The web copy reads more like a digital ransom note than a calm presentation of a distinctive value proposition.

The sad part is this kind of web copy sabotage is that it frequently betrays an honest business person who is just not comfortable about expressing his business. This web copy unfairly depicts sleaze and incredulity.

Sometimes the anxiety is driven by a specific learning style. A number of individuals are more comfortable with trees than a forest, preferring details to the big picture. That's too bad because site visitors usually crave the big picture before they invest their care and clicks. What image does your web copy convey - calm or chaos?

Web Copy Sabotage: What can you do about it?

So you're not perfect. Everybody is a bit insecure, a tad proud and slightly anxious. The trick is to keep these failings from invading your web copy. So what can you do to prevent web copy sabotage?

Your human shortcomings might populate your site because you are just too

close to the data to detect your demons creeping up the keyboard.

You've got to get some distance. First, have a third party who's not a family member play site doctor, looking for symptoms of insecurity, pride, and anxiety in your site design and copy.

There's nothing like conducting your own foible check to be sure you parked your sabotaging issues at the curb, not in your web copy. Here are 3 questions to ask:

- What exactly does my site stand for?
- How do my visitors see themselves?
- How have I organized my design and copy?

If these tactics don't help you improve your web copy, you could either see a qualified psychiatrist or hire - you know - a handy copywriter.