

Writing That Sells: A Guide to Effective Copywriting

If everything begins with a sale, then we are all selling something to somebody. Some of us are selling products or services for cash, while others (such as charitable organizations) are selling the idea that their cause is worthy of support. Even people who offer things for free are selling something – that what they are providing is useful.

Copywriting services

Copywriting is an essential element of any sales or marketing effort, regardless of the medium chosen to deliver it. Here are some typical projects that benefit from copywriting:

- *Printed sales material:* brochure, display ad, direct mail campaign, product description, sales letters
- *Printed informational material:* case study, white paper, newsletter article
- *Web sites:* landing and inner pages, SEO content
- *Social media:* blogging, Facebook, tweets

Besides creating original material, copywriting services may also include proofreading and editing of existing text. Proofreading checks for spelling, grammar and sentence structure – the basic elements that readers use to judge the quality of the writing. Editing looks at context and syntax – the elements that improve or hinder the reader's comprehension of the text. Neither proofreading nor editing includes rewriting, though.

Effective copywriting matters

Direct response copywriting – using the written or spoken word to get people to take some form of action – requires the same skills when used for traditional media (print, television, radio) or new media (web sites and social media). In addition, search engine optimization (SEO) is a new use for copywriting that is growing in importance.

When we are selling, communication with our audience is grounded in the mechanics of the sales process. One enduring description of the sales process is summarized by the acronym AIDA: get the reader's *attention*; engage his *interest*; create *desire* to own; and provoke *action*. The AIDA concept is attributed to E. St. Elmo Lewis, an American advertising and sales pioneer, who developed it in 1898 – well over 100 years ago. Based on customer studies in the U.S. life insurance market, the steps are still accepted as a description of four phases buyers follow when accepting a new idea or purchasing a new product.

Here is a way to apply the four AIDA steps to a copywriting project:

- *Attention:* Use a compelling headline to attract the reader's attention. Then use a subhead to reinforce the headline, and an illustration or photograph for emphasis.
- *Interest and desire:* Develop interest beginning with the first sentence of the body copy. Its sole purpose is to get the reader to read the next



Idea Corner

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.



sentence. So focus on benefits to the reader rather than features of the product or service.

- **Desire:** Use the second and subsequent paragraphs to elaborate on benefits and describe how the product or service will solve a problem or enhance the reader's life. Aim for a logical progression of benefits that ends with the reader concluding "I must have this."
- **Action:** The final paragraph is the call to action – it tells the reader what to do next. Add a final thought as a *P.S.* to further stimulate desire and action.

Compelling content is based on knowledge

Before you begin writing, it is important to understand the target market, the benefits product or service brings to the target market, and what motivates the buying decision. Very large corporations or businesses find these answers with research, focus groups and other techniques outside the budget of a small business or local non profit organization.

So then, how can you get the information you need? An excellent way is to ask your top customers. Most businesses follow the *Pareto principle*, better known as the *80-20 rule*. As applied to business, the Pareto principle states that 80% of sales come

from 20% of customers, making the task of surveying customers a lot more manageable. Here is what you want to learn from a combination of survey questions and what you already know about your customers:

- **What demographic characteristics do your customers share?** For individuals, this could include age, marital status, household income, ethnicity, etc. For businesses and organizations, SIC code, annual sales, number of employees, etc.
- **What separates your product or service from those of your competitors?** Look for measurable characteristics like better performance, more features and benefits, on time delivery, ease of ordering, etc.
- **What motivates your customers to buy?** Is it price? Delivery time? Superior quality?

With the answers you are better prepared to write the copy to develop the interest and desire. You will also know what kind of an offer to make.

Copy that sells

Using the AIDA approach means keeping the reader engaged from the headline all the way through to the call to action. This is best done by keeping the copy itself straightforward, focused and easy to understand. Here are some guidelines:

- **Keep the focus on the reader.** An excellent test of this concept is to be sure the copy answers the reader's question "what's in it for me?" When you apply this test, it becomes instantly apparent why leading with benefits is more persuasive than a list of features. *Made of titanium* (a feature) is less persuasive than *will last a lifetime*" (a benefit).
- **Use a topic sentence for each paragraph.** A topic sentence is the theme or main idea for the paragraph and is usually the first or last sentence. All sentences in the paragraph support the topic sentence by providing evidence or a persuasive argument.
- **Present evidence.** By citing accepted positions, research or statistics you'll be giving the reader more than your opinion and be building credibility. This is especially important if you are developing a new or counter intuitive idea.
- **Provide a specific offer.** No matter what you are selling – a product, service or idea – it has to be specifically stated to be accepted. Without a clear, even bold offer, you risk the reader misinterpreting what you have said.
- **End with a summary.** Restate the original benefits and remind the reader of the evidence you presented to support the benefit.

Don't settle for bad writing

Some people are natural writers – they intuitively know how to develop an idea that persuades others. That's why people follow syndicated columnists and read editorials.

But if writing is not your strength, or if you lack experience in direct response copywriting, consider hiring a writer to do this work. As a skill, it is as important as good graphic design. Here at *Precision Printing* we can help you with copywriting tasks, either with our staff or using outside resources. Contact *Diana at 970-245-1294* for more information.

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Vocabulary

AIDA: an acronym for Attention, Interest, Desire and Action, the four steps of a sales funnel.

Benefit: something that promotes or enhances well-being; an advantage.

Bot: short for *robot*; a software program that operates as an agent to simulate human activity. Web crawlers or spiders are an example of bots that access web sites and gather their content for search engines. Other types of bots include *chatterbots* that simulate talk with a human being; *shopbots* that locate the best price for a product; and *knowbots* that collect knowledge for a user by automatically visiting web sites and gathering information that meets specified criteria.

Copyright: the exclusive legal right, given to an originator or an assignee to print, publish, perform, film, or record literary, artistic, or musical material, and to authorize others to do the same.

Copywrite, copywriting: the art and science of writing words to promote a product, a business, a person or an idea.

Copywriter: a person who engages in copywriting.

Feature: a distinctive attribute.

Pareto principle: a principle developed by business management consultant Joseph M. Juran who named it after Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto. The principal was based on Pareto's 1906 observation that 80% of the land in Italy was owned by 20% of the population. Also known as the 80-20 rule.

SEO: an acronym for Search Engine Optimization. Describes the strategic placement and repetition of key words and phrases that appear on web site pages to promote selection by search engines.

Topic sentence: a sentence that states the main idea of the paragraph. Often appears as the first or last sentence of a paragraph.

Unique selling proposition (USP): a real or perceived benefit of a good or service that differentiates it from competitors in the minds of purchasers. First proposed as a theory in the 1940s to explain why customers switched brands. The term was invented by Rosser Reeves of Ted Bates & Company. An example of a USP is the M&Ms slogan "Melts in your mouth, not in your hand".

Web crawler: a computer program that browses the World Wide Web in a methodical, automated manner or in an orderly fashion. Web crawlers are mainly used to create a copy of all the visited pages for later processing by a search engine that indexes the downloaded pages to provide fast searches.

Q&A

Please give a comprehensive definition of social media.

Defining social media and its use and effectiveness for business is an evolving topic. In May 2011, Heidi Cohen, a self-described actionable marketing expert and owner of Riverside Marketing Strategies gave this definition of social media:

Social media are the platforms that enable the interactive web by engaging users to participate in, comment on and create content as means of communicating with their social graph, other users and the public. Social media has the following characteristics:

- Encompasses wide variety of content formats including text, video, photographs, audio, PDF and PowerPoint. Many social media make use of these options by allowing more than one content alternative.
- Allows interactions to cross one or more platforms through social sharing, e-mail and feeds.
- Involves different levels of engagement by participants who can create, comment or lurk on social media networks.
- Facilitates enhanced speed and breadth of information dissemination.
- Provides for one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communications.
- Enables communication to take place in real time or asynchronously over time.
- Is device indifferent. It can take place via a computer (including laptops and netbooks), tablets (including iPads, iTouch and others) and mobile phones (particularly smartphones).
- Extends engagement by creating real-time online events, extending online interactions offline, or augmenting live events online.

May I have a word?



Randy Greathouse
General Manager

You hear a lot these days about content, meaning what we say in our printed sales and marketing materials, on our web sites, in our blogs, and on our social media sites. Everyone seems to be talking about what to say but ignoring how to say it.

Good writing – proper use of grammar and punctuation; clear sentence construction and choice of words; and strong writing style – has always been important. In this issue of *Printing Tips* we suggest why it is reasonable to consider good writing to be as important as good graphic design for the overall success of your sales and marketing plan. Direct response copywriting – writing that motivates people to take action – has its own set of best practices that you may be unaware of, even if you are a strong writer. And there is a growing body of knowledge that distinguishes direct response writing for print from writing for social media and search engine optimization.

As part of our service to our customers, we are gathering information to keep us ahead of the curve in the evolving discipline of new media. We hope you'll think of us first as you move your business or organization in that direction.

Tips & Tricks

When writing headlines, the conventional wisdom is to make them short – eight words or less in most cases. This tradition dates back to the early years of magazine copywriting and probably is more related to space constraints than any measure of effectiveness. In fact, research from the direct mail industry indicates that only slightly more than half (50-60%) of effective headlines are eight words or less – meaning that almost half of longer headlines are effective.

Things may also be different when writing headlines for web sites. Dr. Jakob Nielsen, an acknowledged

user-interface expert who holds a Ph.D. in human-computer interaction from the Technical University of Denmark in Copenhagen, released an eye-tracking study in 2006 that showed readers read web pages in an *F* pattern. They scroll across the top of the page, come back across the page, then down the left side to see if anything is of interest.

Knowing this pattern provides the opportunity for web page designers to place a headline across the top of the page, locate a subhead below it, and put other supporting information down the left hand column.

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Holiday Closures

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