

The Basics of Web Copywriting

(A Basic Web Copywriting Guide)

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Introduction

Writing good, effective web copy is not easy although many people believe it is. If you want to make sure that visitors to your website understand how it works and what it can do for them then you need good quality web copy.

Within these pages we will take a basic look at what it takes to perform good web copywriting. Before we get into the meat of the subject there are several things we need to consider.

Websites are not read in the same fashion as traditional printed material, web pages are read in a hyper textual fashion, on a traditional printed page a person reads left-to-right top to bottom. A webpage is read much the same way as a glossy magazine, people let their eyes skip across the page pulling out sections they find interesting to give their focus to.

We must try to remember that Internet users are actively seeking information not passively soaking up data. If they do not find something on your website that they find interesting they will leave it. A person surfing in this fashion will leave the website within seconds if no relevant content is found. If your copy is too long winded they are unlikely to read it fully, you must be able to cut to the chase quickly and interesting fashion.

Truly effective web copy will take all of these considerations above into account.

You really should not underestimate the importance of understanding the basics of producing targeted, effective web copy before jumping in feet first to produce content for your website.

Chapter 1

Web Copywriting is Different, why?

When one is writing copy for the web it is important to remember that the mindset of those who will be reading it is different from those reading a more traditional paper-based form of presentation.

Most website traffic comes from search engines, this means the visitor has been actively looking for the kind of services or goods you offer. This has significant implications as this puts the visitor in a position of control, They are already set on finding a particular service or product or are searching for particular information.

First-time visitors to your site arriving from a search engine results page will have several unvoiced questions that will need to be answered quickly and directly by your web copy. They will ask "is this the right website?" And "does it have what I'm looking for?" the final question will be "do I feel I can complete my goal here?"

It is extremely vital that these questions are answered in your page headings and headlines. You need to be able to hook this first-time visitor immediately. With many people this is the only opportunity will get to grab their attention.

In order to facilitate this, your web copy must provide answers instantly, the visitor needs to know that they

indeed have come to the right place and you have exactly what they are looking for.

The most important thing to consider when writing copy for the web is it you must continually reassure your visitors that they have found the right place and their goal can be achieved here.

Chapter 2

Your Visitors are Important

Fact gathering and planning are crucial to the production of great web copy. All the facts must be gathered before you start to write, this will help you achieve your goals.

You should attempt to decide the questions that visitors to your site will need answers for. Generally there are four basic questions a visitor will need addressed.

- Why am I here?
- What do I do?
- Why should I do it?
- What next?

If your sites basic layout does not provide instantly obvious answers to these questions you should consider using copy to answer them. These answers should be available to all visitors regardless of them being a first-time visitor or not, returning visitors often forget the answers to questions and need to be reminded.

Remember at all times that approximately 50% of your visitors will not bother working things out for themselves and the other 50% will not succeed in working it out for themselves if the answers are not clearly given.

During the planning stage take great care to focus on your key target audience, remember it is impossible to please everyone but we can make sure that your most

valuable visitors have their questions answered directly. You must show these visitors what you can deliver for them in particular. A more effective solution is to not use words which would not be read by anybody but the target audience.

If you are attempting to target more than one visitor demographic then make sure you send them to specific landing pages designed for their target group. If the visitor does not think your site is of value to them they will go somewhere else.

When preparing the answers to the questions it is important to let the bare facts support them. Do not produce excessive descriptions and make sure they are compelling. A high percentage of visitors will leave your site if they feel it is all just hype, however, some amount of hype will be necessary to raise the excitement level for your visitors.

Chapter 3

To Succeed You Will Need to Plan

Before you begin to produce copy it is imperative that you define your goals clearly, this can be done in the planning stage.

You will have already defined your business processes, and have a clear reason for needing the copy. Your website functionality should be complete including technical support, direct sales and subscriber base before you attempt to produce copy to drive targeted traffic to your site.

Let's take a brief look at a scary sounding word, demographics. Don't be put off by this buzz term, defining your demographic requirements simply means deciding what type of customer you're looking to attract. Once this decision has been made you can then move on to deciding what copy content is needed to attract them to your site.

Without a plan it will become increasingly difficult to know who your key demographics are. Without this knowledge you are surely going to fail in bringing willing customers to your website. Remember, any website can generate traffic but a successful website generates targeted traffic.

Always consider when planning new copy that your target audience is generally going to be more intelligent and clued up than the typical visitor to the website, they have come here for a reason and they are looking for answers.

Targeting describes the process of defining which of your visitors will have requirements that can be filled by your particular services or products. You must strive to become a complete expert in every aspect of your product or service. Once you have determined whom you need to target you can start to seek for them. It will help to create a basic profile of those who will be most likely to purchase your service or product. Once this profile is complete you can then start to produce targeted web copy written to appeal to the target audience the profile indicates.

Now you have found your target demographic you can begin to develop a plan for writing your copy, using the following list as a guideline will help you to plan effectively:

- At the start of the copy tell the customer what he wants, present him with his own question.
- Decide on a tone for your article, one that is likely to fit well with your target audience.
- Present the arguments to them in an easy fashion, taking the lowest common dominator of reading ability into account that your target audience may possess.

It is imperative that you consider each of these three things and they are covered in an equal light, allowing none of them to overpower each of the other two.

Chapter 4

Writing Good Web Copy

When attempting to write good copy for the web there are two fundamental things that should be looked at first. Both the page title and META descriptions are extremely important and will usually be the first things that a visitor will see when using a search engine to find a particular product or service.

This does not apply to all search engines, several ignore the META description completely and some will show a short excerpt of the text from your site.

There is a logical list of items the production of web copy should address; this list is formed in order of importance.

- Page title, this is the text that is displayed at the top of the browser window and is often the very first thing any visitor will see upon entering your site or searching the Internet.
- META description, with many search engines this is the first piece of information that is presented to a prospective visitor following a successful search result.
- Heading tags, these help to break up your copy and guide the reader to specific areas upon the page.
- Visible content, care must be taken to optimize all visible content in the most search engine friendly manner. Pay special attention to your alt tags, these are the text descriptions of images that displays if the image does not appear for some reason. The hyperlink text and text attribute, this allows you to name hyperlinks sensibly and display

a tool tip. Lastly you should work on your META tags, although these are not seen as being as important as they once were due to abuse by webmasters in the past. All of these things are taken into consideration when a search engine decides which results to return the highest in its rankings.

The importance of keyword or key phrase targeting cannot be stressed enough. There is no point in writing copy if you do not know the search terms your target demographic is using. By using correctly targeted keywords and key phrases you are effectively attempting to serve your target audience with their favorite dish.

Chapter 5

Niche Mining and the Discovery of Good Keyword Phrases

Search engines are arguably the most effective way of bringing new visitors to an existing website. A person may have never heard of your website but by using a search engine to find what they require, your website will be presented to them by a successful search result.

Search engines are not human, although they are becoming increasingly intelligent by the year. A common misconception is that the search engine will return answers when in fact they just answer with a new question, is this the sort of thing you're looking for? The searcher is then free to choose from returned results.

How can you tell though, how can you find out what people are really looking for? Luckily there are products on the market that will help you analyze and discover effective keywords and phrases to accompany your web copy. One such tool is Word Tracker, it lives at www.WordTracker.com. What this system does is to enable you to analyse keywords or phrases that you supply, it will return you feedback about your keywords selection. It will also return related key words and phrases which we are then able to test by running them through the search engines.

It will then give you the daily world search index, this is an indication of just how many people search for the particular key word or phrase per day and how

many other websites are competing for search results using the same keywords. Word Tracker will then calculate the key word effectiveness index (KEI) for the particular word or phrase. By selecting a keyword or phrase that is receiving a high number of daily world searches but has a fairly low amount of competition you maximize your probability of being returned high in the search engine rankings. We call this niche mining or keyword mining. By finding an effective keyword niche you will be able to drive highly targeted traffic to your site which is already in search of your service or product.

You really should do your keyword mining before you even start to build your site, this means you can prepare your copy take into account your newly acquired keywords or key phrases and will not have to rework existing copy. Of course it can be done a later time but will involve more work as you will have to change existing content, retitle pages and rewrite META descriptions. Remember if you are not researching then your competition is.

Chapter 6

Short and Simple is Best

Remember that you are aiming to have visitors return to your website as well as generate new traffic. There are several things you should keep in mind when producing copy of the web.

Unless a visitor has been driven to a specifically created landing page on a website they will more often than not only skim the first section of the page. The longer your copy the less likely it is that they will read it to the end. Do not place any long pieces of copy on any pages where visitors do not expect it to be.

Make your copy easy to understand, this matters just as much as the length of it. Your visitors must be able to quickly understand what you are trying to present to them, they do not wish to have to sit and think in an effort to decide what is you are telling them. If you cannot give the facts briefly and directly then you should consider rewriting the copy.

Aim to deliver one key point over one or two lines. Any more than this and you're likely to lose the focus of your visitor and the chance of them understanding the message you are trying to get across to them.

Remember we have already anticipated that these new visitors are looking for something, once you have captured their attention you need to direct them to a page that has more detailed copy on. Provide them with a hyperlink to a fresh page that contains all the information they need.

If you really must include longer passages of copy then you should consider formatting it in a style comfortable for the reader. Often your visitors even though they are expecting a page full of text will be unwilling to actually read it. Give them a helping hand, use headings, tables, bullet points and paragraphs to make the text more user-friendly. This is also a fantastic way of getting your key points across.

You should always assume that a decent percentage of your visitors will not be prepared to read longer bodies of copy, you must ensure that longer passages are skim reader friendly and that pertinent facts are easily extracted from the page by a person who is reading hypertextually.

Longer passages of copy do not need to maintain the approach of directness that we would use in shorter copy, however, make sure it is simple to understand and that visitors will not be deterred from reading it due to its complexity.

Try to keep a neutral tone when writing copy. You should aim to produce copy that is simple to read maintains an unassuming tone and is neither tedious nor overbearing. Ignoring any of these simple guidelines could cause your reader to switch off and you will lose the opportunity to convey your point to them.

Try to keep things consistent throughout your copy, visitors like to become familiar with the content they are reading, they like to find a safe place that they understand. If they feel at home reading your copy then chances are they will come back to read more.

Chapter 7

More on Good Copywriting

One of the biggest mistakes a web copywriter can make is that of not maintaining consistency. You may discover that unintentionally you become lazy in the quality of the content and the look of your site when it comes to presenting particular services and products.

It's absolutely imperative that you regularly review your website to check that the phrases and terms you are using are consistent. You must also ensure that your ideas are communicated clearly throughout your site and presented to your visitors in a consistent manner.

You should always thoroughly check your spelling, grammar and formatting closely. One simple spelling mistake will often undo all the planning and effort that was put in producing what otherwise could have been a piece of stunning web copy. A simple spellchecker is often all that is required to ensure the quality of your copy is not damaged by any silly mistakes.

You should try to avoid excessive use of punctuation, things like exclamation marks and question marks. Instead use headings and bold text to stress any points you wish to bring to the notice of your visitors. Excessive punctuation looks unprofessional and some visitors especially those with advanced language skills will find it annoying.

It is also terribly important that you have a good understanding of the language that's being used within

the copy. Website copy tends to use different language than other forms of publication. For example, web copy would not use similar language to a technical document unless of course the website specialized in technical documents. When you are writing, try to keep in your head the concept that you are writing to be read not writing for writing sake. Many people make the mistake of writing for themselves this is fundamentally a large flaw with any web copy production, you should write in a form that will be easily read by your visitors.

There are many ways that a website can be made to look more visually appealing without resorting to complicated graphics and page layouts, consider trying some of the ideas outlined below, you may be amazed at the results of these simple practices can deliver.

- Try to break up the pages as much as possible by formatting large chunks of information. The use of formatted text can drastically improve the readability of a page.
- Make sure your paragraphs are easily digested, break up the large areas of text into several paragraphs. This will help to make your copy more readable and supply you with the opportunity to get more points across.
- Never ever add extra spaces at the end of a line, this makes a webpage look like the writer is struggling to find words to fill the page.
- At the end of a paragraph ensure that you signify it actually was a paragraph by leaving two empty lines below it, you should also do this after every heading or title.

If you really must write a long bodies of copy then try to use some or all of the following formatting rules.

- Column width should be kept fairly narrow. The visitor will find it uncomfortable to move their

eyes from left to right across the entire with a webpage.

- Make sure you include plenty of subheadings, this will facilitate visitors with the ability to scan the page quickly in a hypertextual fashion to focus on parts that they wished to read further.
- In the important parts of your copy indent from the left hand side of the page, this helps to define areas of text you wish highlighted as important and helps to break up what would otherwise be a large and tedious chunk of text.

Chapter 8

A Headline Should Grasp

The landing page for the visitor as he enters your website is possibly the most important of the entire site. This is doubly important if the page requires the visitor to "convert" which is the term we give to the process of enticing a visitor to buy a product, a service, subscribe to the website or perform any other action they were brought to your site to perform.

Possibly the most tried and tested way of increasing conversion ratio is to instill a sense of urgency into the visitor. Several effective ways to achieving this exist and I will outline a few of them below.

- Offer daily deals, this is a great way to get customers returning to your site.
- Free offers or bonus offers when buying a service or product.
- At Christmas and other holidays why not offer seasonal promotions?
- Instill a sense of urgency by telling your visitors that stocks are limited and going fast.
- Limited time or limited availability offers also work well.

A word to the wise if you do intend to use these kinds of marketing tactics. Consumers can be wary beasts, and you must earn their trust. If you tell them that an offer is open for a limited period then it should remain open to limited period only. This kind of fundamental mistake is witnessed again and again across

a broad range of websites; the owners foolishly believe that their visitors are not bright enough to see through this transparent attempt to get them to part with their money.

There are other more stealthy ways to introduce a sense of urgency, why not include a price page with timestamp prices? Ensure these prices are keen and competitive, the inclusion of the timestamp implies to the customers that these prices may change at any time. This approach relies much more on psychology and if you attempt it make sure you understand how your target demographics should react to it. If you are selling high end and expensive products displaying prices may not be the wisest option.

This whole concept of urgency is designed to get people to convert; there are three types of customers or more correctly two types of customer and three types of visitors. The first kind of customer wants to buy and he takes very little convincing of the fact, probably the perfect customer. The second type of customer is what this e-book is all about, the kind of customer who thinks they might want to buy and needs convincing. The final type of customer or visitor is actually no customer at all and nothing you can do can entice them into purchasing your product or service.

Just remember if you do intend to use this concept of urgency try to avoid hype; you must come across with integrity.

Chapter 9

Headline Development

Writing a good headline is not quite as complicated as many professional marketers would like you to think. It is actually very simple; if you approach it from the right angle it should be no problem at all. Instead of thinking about how to write your headline just think about what it should say.

Consider the fact that the wrong headline written beautifully is less effective than the right headline written badly. A weighty headline does not need to be dressed up with flowery words.

Do not let your ego get in the way of your headlines, a headline does not need to be clever, it does not need to be witty, it does not need to be catchy and it does not need to be elegant. It does need to be effective.

It can help when trying to develop a headline to think of it backwards, consider the question it needs to answer, is your target audience looking for specific product? You don't need to tell them you can supply it, you need to remind them that they wanted it.

Headlines do not need to be long winded or clever, why write a thousand words when a handful will suffice? A great example of this is a very simple headline written by a friend of mine in an attempt to bring people into his beach bar. He simply put up a large sign saying: Stop! You need a Margarita now! This simple headline produced huge amounts of traffic to his bar and is a great example of exactly what a headline should do. It should grab the reader and make them think "yes I agree".

Chapter 10

Headlines and Tone Testing

When writing any copy, it is important that the headline sets the tone for the rest of the content. Never forget your headline is the empowering text; it sets the scene for the copy.

If your headline fails to perform its basic function, you can rest assured that your visitor will deem your copy of a similar worth. Incredible copy displayed beneath a terrible headline becomes terrible copy.

Don't be afraid to write multiple headlines and switch them in and out of your page in an effort to decide which fits best with the tone of the rest of the copy, you can always change headlines at a later date if you feel is not working out too well, indeed if you run the kind of site that has many returning visitors you may find it beneficial to rotate headlines regularly.

The headline on any webpage is the facilitator and a enabler of conversion; it can be seen as the key element of page content and carries much weight with your visitor. If a potential customer does not say yes to your headline is unlikely he will say yes to your products.

Chapter 11

Text Links Should Be the Same

In this section we will brush briefly over the concept of usability. Although many websites these days are developed to conform to stringent web standards, often dictated by groups who maintain reams of guidelines that should be followed to ensure a website is accessible to everybody you can rest assured it is highly unlikely you will need to go to such extremes.

The number one thing we should ensure when considering the user experience of a website is that they must know what is a link and what isn't a link. Originally all hyperlinks were blue and underlined, this tradition continues today on many of the most popular websites around the globe. You do not need to follow this tradition however; you do need to follow the concept. Links should be clearly visible and should be consistent across the entire site; a user should always know what is a link and what isn't a link.

If you provide your users with a standardized experience, you will free them of the need to come to understand the navigation and instead they can focus their entire concentration upon the content of your pages. Always remember that you have a limited window of opportunity with every visitor, if you fail to make the sale or conversion within this window then you have lost the opportunity. Anything that causes a visitor to spend time thinking about anything but buying your product can be seen as an obstacle and needs to be removed.

Chapter 12

Keep It Upbeat

Almost all copywriting of marketing purposes should be upbeat, remember that you are trying to excite the visitor into purchasing your product or service. Always keep things vibrant, never dull or depressing. Negativity should be avoided, never tell a visitor something is not; instead tell them what could be.

You have one chance to grab the attention of your visitor, you need to do this at the very beginning of your copy and you need to reinforce this at the very end. It is advisable to use your best content at the top and the bottom of the page, at the top to grab attention at the bottom to make sure the visitor ends his experience on a high note.

If you are weak to finish your visitors will exit your site with a feeling of disappointment. They will no longer remember the upbeat and compelling introduction as well as the quality detail presented in the body of a copy. The only thing they will remember is a disappointing fadeout at the end.

It may help to consider that writing web copy is very similar to telling a story; you should start with a concise introduction that will set the scene. You should then continue to provide the storyline, you can think of your closing paragraph as the finale.

Conclusion

Always remember that as a web copywriter your job is to entertain your reader, unlike other forms of writing you do not have the luxury of time on your side. You must grab your reader quickly, interest him enough to gain his concentration, and maintain that concentration and focus throughout your copy. Copy also has a more important purpose, to entice and excite a prospective customer into becoming an actual customer.

I like to draw an analogy between a fruit machine or a one armed bandit and good web copy; these clever machines sit quietly in a corner and draw the eye of prospective gamblers. Their clever design entices otherwise sensible people to take cash out of their pockets and throw it away. Imagine how the world would be if these machines were selling used cars or washing machines?

A copywriter faces much the same problems as a one armed bandit designer, you have a limited amount of media available to you and you must make the best use of it as possible. Nothing should ever be wasted, every phrase, every headline and every piece of formatting should be designed to grasp the attention of your reader and make them want to buy your product.

If you're trying to sell the difficult products you may like to explore the option of changing what is perceived as a conversion, why not have a simple user registration process or newsletter sign up that effectively becomes a foot in the door. If you are finding it impossible to achieve sales purely through copy than either of these two options give you the opportunity to revisit a prospective customer and attempt a conversion.

To summarize, this shortlist represents the fundamental practices that need to be adopted by copywriters in an attempt to ensure that copy is relevant and useful.

- Adopt an unassuming tone
- Keep things short and sweet
- Avoid the hype, be passionate but sincere
- make sure you are writing for a targeted audience
- always consider keywords and their relation with search engines

You should also remember the following facts:

Remember that the landing page of your site is the most important; this is the opening of your window of opportunity and needs to be given much weight.

Make sure your website is developed with visitors in mind and not for yourself, what looks and reads good to you may not fit your target audience.

Never forget the importance of search engine rankings, although you should always design a page around the visitor try to keep in mind that a search engines spider is a very special kind of visitor, one that will bring other visitors to your website. Never ever forget the search engine optimizer's mantra of "content is king". Keep your site refreshed with new content and do not allow it to stagnate. Every time you add a new page it'll be spidered by the search engines and the chances of a successful "hit" in search results increases. Returning visitors need to be satisfied with fresh content otherwise they will slowly drift away as they can no longer find a reason to return.

Keep the following things in mind when considering adding new content:

- Adding new content will ensure that returning the visitors have something fresh to experience. But try and avoid repeated content.
- Each new page that you add will be spidered by search engines such as Google and increase your chances of a positive search result, never forget that search engines will probably be your primary source of traffic.
- Do not be tempted to take content from other sites for inclusion on your own, the major search engines penalized websites for including duplicate content. If faced with a choice of using unoriginal content or providing no new content then choose the latter.

Adding new content will not dramatically increase the traffic to your site overnight, but if you consistently expand your site and content base you will find the traffic increases steadily over time.

I hope this e-book has been useful to you and will help you write compelling, useful and profitable copy in the future.