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A Copywriter Never Mumbles - and Other Principles of Effective Ad Copy

By Walter Burek

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H.L. Mencken, the author, journalist and social critic observed that most people "write badly because they cannot think clearly." And the reason they cannot think clearly, he went on, is that "they lack the brains."

Putting aside H.L.'s criticism for the moment, let's assume that all copywriters have the "brains" and, more often than not, we are capable of clear thinking. It follows then, that we stand a very good chance of being able to write well. But clarity of thought is only step one. The following principles will help you move on from there, so that you can put down in writing exactly what you have in mind.

1. Don't mumble.

Advertising is most effective when it is easy to understand. (Take a look at any advertising effectiveness study.) In other words, you sell more stuff when you write copy that is clear.

Copy that speaks out commands attention; copy that mumbles doesn't. So once you've thought about what you want to say, come right out and say it. Don't mumble your message by being short on specifics or long-winded in your sentences. And don't use big words, cliches, jargon or borrowed interest.

Keep in mind E.B White's sobering advice: "When you say something, make sure you have said it. Your chances of having said it are only fair."

2. Get to the point.

Start selling with your very first sentence. Try to make it and every sentence that follows simple and declarative. Factual. And short. Short is powerful. Lincoln used only 266 words in his Gettysburg Address. And many believe that the shortest sentence in the New Testament - "Jesus wept." - is also the most moving.

3. Don't write like a nerd, a lawyer or a bureaucrat.

In his *Simple and Direct*, Jaques Barzun says, "The whole world will tell you, if you care to ask, that your words should be simple and direct. Everybody likes the other fellow's prose plain." Don't inflict technical jargon, pompous words or fancy phrases on your readers. Remember, you're trying to communicate with them, not impress them with your grasp of show-off fad words or vague abstractions. Why write "sub-optimal" when you mean "less than ideal?" Why write "interface" when it is more clear and direct to write "discuss," "meet," or "work with?" Why take the chance of annoying your reader by writing "net net" instead of "conclusion?"

4. Use short paragraphs, short sentences and simple words.

The professional copywriter always practices this simple principle: Short sentences and short paragraphs are easier to read than long ones. And easier to understand. Rudolf Flesch, in *The Art of Plain Talk*, says that the best average sentence length is 14 to 16 words, 20 to 25 words is passable, but anything over 40 words is unreadable. So write in crisp, short, snappy sentences. A trick of the trade — using sentence fragments — can help keep your average sentence length to a respectable number of words. And add drama and rhythm to your copy.

Paragraphs should also be kept short. Long, unbroken blocks of text intimidate readers. If it looks hard to read, they probably won't read it.

As for short words, John Caples, the Hall of Fame copywriter said: "Even the best-educated people don't resent simple words. But they are the only words many people understand."

Plain writing in simple words simply communicates more effectively than writing with a lot of big words. Keep in mind that in Shakespeare's most memorable sentence — "To be or not to be?" — the longest word is only three letters.

5. Write simply and naturally

People like to read simple, easy-to-understand writing. And the simplest, most easy-to-understand style is to write conversationally, the way you talk when you're at your best — when your ideas are flowing smoothly, when your syntax is fluent and your vocabulary accurate. A simple test to check on your conversational tone is to imagine yourself speaking to your reader instead of writing. Are you expressing yourself clearly, or are you mumbling? Are you using only those words, phrases and sentences that you might actually say to your reader if you were face-to-face? Or do you sound stiff and impersonal? If you wouldn't say it, why write it?

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Walter Burek is an award-winning copywriter who learned his craft at some of the finest advertising agencies in the world and has been a writer and Creative Director on some of advertising's most

important accounts. Currently, he offers freelance copywriting services through his company, walterburek.com. Walter also writes, edits and publishes Words@Work, a free newsletter for marketing communications professionals.

A Professional Copywriter Can Help You Avoid These Seven Common Marketing Pitfalls

By Heather Robson

Small business owners often make the mistake of believing that they can get by writing their own copy for their marketing materials. Even big corporations sometimes fall into this trap believing they can be just as effective handling copy development in house.

While it's true that you can produce passable copy this way, you often are missing out on better results—results that a copywriting professional can bring to your marketing efforts. And settling for lesser results means your business isn't doing as well as it could, and its marketing materials are not providing the return on investment that they should.

The main concern that business owners and marketing directors alike have about hiring a professional copywriter is cost. They fear that the cost will be prohibitive. But in most cases the copywriter's fees are minimal compared to the overall cost of the marketing campaign. And good copy can improve the success of the campaign by up to 34%.

The reason a professional copywriter can make such a difference to a marketing campaign is not only that they know how to write persuasively...they also know what common mistakes to avoid. If you're trying to get by using copy written by somebody whose main focus is not copywriting, your marketing materials could be suffering from one of these common traps.

1. Me–Centered Copy

It's so easy when you're selling a product or service to focus on that product or service. It seems like a no-brainer. But the truth is doing so can kill your response rate. Professional copywriters know to avoid this me-centered mentality and focus on the prospect instead. This shift alone is enough to make a sharp improvement in any marketing campaign.

2. No Call to Action

So many marketing pieces do a great job of getting the prospects attention. They draw them in, convince them of the product or service's merit...and just when the prospect is ready to buy, they drop the ball, and forget to tell the prospect what to do next. A call to action is a simple, but often overlooked, way to build response rate...and it's something that every copywriter worth his (or her) salt will include.

3. Selling Features

This common marketing trap is similar to the Me–Centered copy trap. Instead of figuring out what the prospect wants to know about your product (why they need it, how it will help them), it's so easy to just tell them what you know about the product. A professional copywriter will avoid this trap and focus on a product's benefits, not features.

4. No Testimonials

If your copy doesn't include powerful testimonials, your marketing efforts are missing out on one of their most powerful tools. A professional copywriter will always ask about testimonials. If you don't have them, they'll offer some tips for collecting them.

5. Where's Your Target?

One of the most common copywriting errors is overlooking the target market. In an effort not to exclude anyone, the copy doesn't appeal to the people it's really meant for. If your copy doesn't immediately grab (and hold) the attention of those your product or service is meant for, a professional copywriter can help your response rate.

6. What's Your USP?

Your Unique Selling Proposition. What sets you apart from the competition. And ultimately why someone buys from you. A professional copywriter will want to know what it is or will help you determine it. And they will use it to make your marketing copy stronger.

7. Don't generalize.

A professional copywriter will spend time researching the market and issues of interest related to your product. They'll always be specific with the information they convey, adding intrigue and credibility to your every marketing piece.

These are just some of the most common pitfalls that a professional copywriter can help you avoid. By enlisting the services of a professional, you can improve your marketing efforts through a better response rate and an increased return on investment.

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How Original Should Your Headlines and Slogans Be?

Top 3 Rules for Writing Effective Copy

The Lies We Live By

10 Things You Should Expect From Your Website Copywriter

Copywriting Crash Course

How to Use Your Mind for Study

Web Copywriting Tune-Up Kit

GUERRILLA MARKETING Volume 3

30 Powerful Business eBooks



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