



Writing effective copy for websites

What works off-line, will pretty much work on-line, too.

(A few copy secrets and techniques to make YOUR websites more effective)

OK. Let me ask you a question. And I need you to be honest with me...

"How good is your website. Or rather, how well is it written?"

As with most things in the marketing and communications arena these days, copy on websites is mainly dross. People spend fortunes with so-called experts, to get an all-singing, all dancing website - and then accept poor - or at best, workmanlike copy.

I find it astonishing.

You can have the most stunning layout, the most appealing shade of background colour, the easiest navigation bars in the history of the world - but if your copy isn't on the money - your website is going to underperform and eventually disappear without trace.

You can spend fortunes on all the latest trends and devices to drive people to your website, but if the copy doesn't connect and interest, then you might as well flush your money down the pan.

Words do the selling, remember? How many times does it have to be said, before it registers?

And copywriting techniques that sell off-line, will sell on-line too...trust me...

Everything we seem to hear these days is about traffic. Traffic, they tell us, is the key to online success. People spend fortunes on it.

But, if your site is badly written, it will not generate sales or enquiries – and it will not deliver results. So traffic is the last thing you need.

The first thing you need to do, is realise that the power of copy is just as important on-line as it is off it. So you need the very best, if your website is to deliver for you.

Don't give your vital copy brief to your website designers and specialists, or your local nerdy anorak. It's a racing certainty they'll screw up.

They can't write, they're normally useless at spelling and don't even understand punctuation. So giving them the copy brief will put you in hospital with a stress-related illness. Give the brief to someone who really understands copy.

Preferably someone with a direct marketing pedigree. An individual who has to SELL for a living. Someone, as David Ogilvy used to say, "*who has tasted blood*".

Your promotional strategy, whatever form or direction it may take, will be geared to do many things, including drive punters to your site. In fact, everything you do in business should help to generate visitors to your site.

For the vast majority of companies these days, the website is their company brochure on line. It should provide relevant information, attractive offers and interest the visitor to take the next step of making contact and discussing future business.

Simple.

So when visitors arrive at your site you need to turn them from curious browsers into potential business. So, how do you do that?

How to start

Well, first you have to be clear about a number of key points:

Ask yourself these questions. If you can't answer each one instantly and in a 30 second description that is clear, concise and very understandable, then you have problems.

Because if any of these are unclear to you, they will be like dirty water to your visitor.

- 1. What *exactly* are you selling?**
- 2. What is the *main* feature or USP?**
- 3. What is *different* or *better* about it?**
- 4. Have you delivered the benefits *clearly*?**
- 5. Why should the visitor be *interested* in it?**
- 6. What do you want your visitors to *get out of the visit*?**
- 7. What do you want the visitor to *do*?**
- 8. Have you made it *easy* for them?**

Try it yourself. Surprise your marketing director and manager one morning and ask these questions. You may be very surprised by their reaction...

This discipline is absolutely essential for clear delivery of a company's USP and focuses everyone on the challenge at hand. But I can tell you, that very few companies employ it.

Don't be like loads of companies and organisations out there and take everything for granted. Take a step back and think about it a bit more.

It will pay you back in spades...

The Home Page

Start simple on the Home Page. Don't overdo it...

Tell them just enough. There's no need to tell them everything at once.

Your homepage is the first thing that your website visitor sees, so it's got to be warm and inviting.

It's the welcome mat to your home...

You have to convince the visitor that you have something in your house that's worth them spending their valuable time in investigating.

Tell them why they should come in. Confirm what's in there for them.

By the way, don't be seduced by visuals. Loads of visuals can detract from the selling message and turn people off. These days, so-called exciting visuals on websites have started to overshadow the meat of the content - the *words*.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but not on websites. Load of tosh.

Give me 100 well written words anyday, to a jumping bean or a rotating starburst.

That bouncing spider in the upper left hand corner of the page will not tell your impatient visitor what they need to know about your range of products or services.

So, the odds are, that visitor will probably leave. In a hurry...

I remind you again. Pretty pictures don't sell ...It's WORDS that do the selling...

But of course, you need to use the right ones, to get their attention and then hold it. Tease them. Interest them. Encourage them to read on and click forward.

You do this by using the right words, in the right way. By doing this, you will have achieved the first goal. You have made your welcome mat attractive, relevant and inviting.

They are now in the front door...

Continuing with the rest of your site

Just think of the rest of the pages on your website, as the rooms of your house.

You need to make them warm, friendly and comfortable. Make them look inviting and interesting - not cluttered like Uncle Billy's house.

Never forget, that the sales message is paramount. This means your copy has to SELL.

Use all the proven copywriting techniques, I have been writing about in this column for years. **What works off-line, will pretty much work on-line.**

And don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Here's some proof...

Using proven offline copy techniques to improve the performance of your website

As with any other copy challenge, you have to *structure* your message delivery.

Note the similarities here, to proven off-line disciplines.

1. Make it easy to read and understand. Use simple words.

Use simple, concise, easy to understand words and you'll do much better than if you try to be clever and intellectual. Fonts should be larger, sentences and paragraphs short, sharp and to the point. And space should be used sensibly, because reading on the web can be difficult.

Use bold text to help make your copy more scannable, but use it judiciously. If you make everything bold, it defeats the purpose. In my experience, emboldened text tends to work better than italicised text when you need emphasis on web pages.

2. Reading habits are a little different on the web. Make sure you cater for this.

The visitor wants information. Make it easy for them to get it. Computer screens just don't make comfortable reading platforms. So, concentrate on making it easy for people to scan pages. Break copy up with subheads and headers and well-considered spacing.

Most people just scan, initially, they don't read left to right. They dart all over the place, looking for clues to content. Make it easy for them to find it - and then deliver what they are looking for, in the clearest way possible.

3. Long copy or short copy? It's not long or short. It's interesting or uninteresting.

Because the problems of reading from a monitor are well known, far too many companies fall into the trap of skimming on content. In a lot of cases, this can be a fatal mistake.

When long copy is required, don't be frightened of it. To sell your product or service, use as much copy as is necessary. Remember, the longer they keep reading, the more chance you have of them buying from you.

Your prospect needs as much detailed information as possible to provide re-assurance that they are making the right decision. If they are interested in what you have to offer, they will stay as long as it takes to get the facts.

4. Use links to unique web pages

The web is a medium for providing information. When someone visits your site, they are looking for specific info. So give it to them. If you don't, they'll buy from someone who will.

But how do you get a lot of content onto a short web page?

You don't. You create a lot of unique web pages.

If you have 10 products, make a main products page and 10 products web pages. Don't try to cram all the details about every product onto one page.

Keep them reading by making the content 'flow'

5. The importance of AIDCA

The copy element of your website is where the real action is. Text attracts more attention than graphics. And this is a proven fact...

This is where you hold the attention of your audience, create interest, generate desire, tell them why they should buy from you and then give them clear and easy instructions on how to do exactly that.

AIDCA. Attention, Interest, Desire, Conviction & Action. Exactly the same sequence as in a DM letter, email or ad.

6. Be specific and be believable

Today, people are sceptical. They don't believe anything anymore.

If your offer is a bit dubious and your copy, at any time, gives any cause for doubt, then the visitor will stop reading and leave.

The same thing happens in any selling copy.

So, it's important that your copy has the *ring of truth*. This is achieved by understanding words and choosing the correct ones. Words that are descriptive and positive.

So, there you are. Proof if any was needed, that **copywriting techniques that sell off-line, sell on-line too.**

The potential nightmare of search engine optimisation

Before I conclude, an article about writing for websites wouldn't be complete without SEO, because this subject has reached almost mystical status in certain circles.

To give it its full name, **search engine optimisation** is the technique of writing copy text on a web page in such a way that it reads well for the spiders. This can result in the site enjoying a higher ranking in the search engines for the targeted search terms.

It is a discipline that everyone talks about, yet literally only a handful of knowledgeable writers out there, have any idea of how to write this type of copy well.

And this is why...

I am convinced that to be effective at writing SEO copy, you have to be a direct marketer first - and an SEO copywriter second.

(The best in the world at it, is a good chum of mine, Ian Dewar, who is an old DM ligger like me and ran one of the first DM agencies in London in the halcyon days.)

The reason is very simple:

What your website copy has to do, is interest your visitors (that means your potential prospects, customers and clients) in what you have to sell, the moment they arrive on your site and start reading.

Never mind anything else. Your website has to *sell*...

SEO is 'manufactured' copy aimed to attract a particular audience. But, it's not those potential prospects, customers or clients at all, staggeringly - but the spiders.

These are those shadowy figures that get turned on to your particular subject or discipline, by reading copy that has the right number of relevant phrases and words in any block of copy, that they find important.

The spiders review web pages and if they like what they see, they rate the page highly, which in turn drives traffic to the site. I think we can all understand the logic there.

But there's a BIG problem with this. And it's as big as it gets...

Companies are now placing more importance on this 'manufactured' copy, than on the 'real' copy that does the selling. I have seen numerous sites recently, where copy is clearly written for the spiders - not for human beings.

This means that all this costly work done to attract spiders, get high rankings and drive traffic - is totally undone in an instant.

Why? Because when real people visit the site, they are confronted with copy that's so unattractive and unappealing, so lacking in the killer elements, it fails to connect.

So, the visitor leaves and will never return. It's barmy...

The spiders love you. But real people don't. It's total lunacy in my book.

But why are we getting seduced by all this stuff? I'll tell you why; it's this obsession about being on page one of the rankings.

To a lot of people, this is vital. I can understand it, if you're a mail order company or selling a special widget, or have something vertically different - but for the rest of us, it's not something we even aspire to.

For the vast majority of you out there who have a website, you look at it as virtually your corporate brochure on line. Your website is there for one main reason - to support and underpin your promotional efforts.

So, when your promotional strategy and your valuable money has succeeded in driving real people to your website, every single word has to sell as hard as it can.

Whatever you may be selling or providing, you invest your money in promoting your speciality - something that you offer that's better or different than anyone else.

All those efforts will result in business from those you convince quickly - or continuing interest from those you don't. The latter group will return again to visit your website to get further information, a more convincing argument or to allay their suspicions or fears.

Good, well-written copy is essential to convert these individuals, who are interested, but not convinced.

Now what I'm saying here, is this. Copy that has been written by an "SEO professional" is not the best copy you could present to someone in that scenario. And, I'm being very kind when I say that.

I've been in DM for nearly 30 years. I've been writing cutting-edge copy for the best part of that time. I know what is needed *technically* and *emotionally* in copy terms, to get a prospect hooked - in any medium.

Every word is a *weapon* in selling copy. Every comma, dash and dot is a calculated decision. We write that way for a reason.

It delivers. It convinces. It produces interest, response and orders. **It SELLS.**

I would never ALLOW my cutting-edge copy to be diluted and defaced by a SEO copywriter who is only interested in spiders.

Who the bloody hell are they anyway? Spiders do not place business. People do.

And real people do not get turned on by manufactured copy.

We have so much information to back this up, it's scary. So why are we letting these charlatans mutilate that hard-working copy that we have taken so long to prepare?

This has worried the hell out of me for the last couple of years.

Digital is now on top of everyone's agenda to such an extent, that in certain circles, to criticise any part of it, is tantamount to heresy.

Well, I don't give a monkey's chuff about that. A lot of digital these days is 100%, first division garbage - and I'm not afraid to say it.

The main reason it is garbage, is because people are forgetting the basics...

...we HAVE to communicate...we HAVE to SELL...

Nothing is more important. *Nothing...*

Whatever people may tell you to the contrary - **copywriting techniques that sell off-line, will sell on-line too...**

...believe it, because it's true...

Keep the faith



About the Author

Andy Owen is Managing Director of Andy Owen & Associates, a leading International direct marketing consultancy, specialising in all aspects of creative and copywriting for direct marketing.

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All Andy's previous articles are available to view and download at www.andyowen.co.uk/articles.html

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