



A few tips on how your copy can SELL a lot harder – and a little bit of client education thrown in...

The gloves are well and truly off now, aren't they?

The world's in turmoil and getting worse every day.

Just take the U.K. for example. A double dip recession is on the horizon, retail sales are dropping, business failures are rising, unemployment is at a worrying level and consumer confidence is at its lowest level for a long time.

Everyone is running scared.

Now I hear this morning that another 600,000 people will lose their jobs in the U.K. in the next few months. And then VAT will rise in January.

Social unrest will, without doubt, follow soon after.

Not good, Not good at all.

But it's the same in most countries in the world. Confidence in anything and anyone is now through the floor.

It's a very worrying scenario. If you work in marketing or sales, or in general or senior management and it is your responsibility to get your customers and prospects to buy what it is you are selling, you know it's going to get harder.

No, it's worse than that. Much worse.

It's likely to be the toughest two years you will have ever experienced...

This scenario now demands that you simply HAVE to get better at communicating your company's promotional messages to your target audiences.

You have less money in your budget. But that's irrelevant.

You have to SELL. At all costs. Nothing is more important.

NOTHING.

And, unless you are from Andromeda, you will recognise that everything you do in promotional terms, will require copy.

Whether for direct mail, email, ads, inserts, door drops, website, radio, SMS, social media, online banners, posters, matchbox advertising or anything else for that matter, you will need to use words as effectively as you can.

Words do the selling, remember. Not the pretty pictures. Not the brand. Not the positioning. Not the mission statement.

WORDS...

WORDS...

WORDS.

Well, the correct ones, anyway.

So, pay attention. Because the rest of this article could help your organisation get through this appalling mess. It might also save you your job.

When you are writing 'force communication' as Herschell once referred to it, you have to (a) take it seriously and (b) know what you are doing.

Obvious, you may say.

Wrong. Most copy is total garbage. It definitely has got worse in the last few years.

In my book, it's down to naivety. Most letters fail, simply because people don't understand.

Let me explain:

Everyone reading this has to write letters every day in business. And most give it very little thought. So, when it comes to writing that sales letter for the next mailing, it's easy - "I'll knock it out over lunch".

People think it's that simple.

I can tell you that it isn't.

It's a *specialist* technical discipline - and one of the most difficult things of all, to master successfully.

And I will keep on labouring that point to anyone who wants to listen, until they lower me into the ground. Because it's such a vitaly important point - even more so with these extremely tough times ahead.

Yet, the power of copy is being totally ignored by most people in the marketing and communications arena. And in senior management too.

I see it every day. So do you.

The quality of copy is appalling. Most of us see it in emails and direct mail, but it's also prevalent in ads, inserts and especially websites.

And, while we are talking about websites, why is it that companies employ the same anoraks that build the site, to write the copy as well? It surely is quite clear by sitting across from these rather odd individuals, that they can't talk properly, let alone write copy that has to connect and sell.

It's one of the mysteries of life, if you ask me.

I am handling more website copy briefs than ever before. I just rewrote a FIFTY SEVEN-page site. And rewrote is the correct word.

It's rarely a smartening up job with website copy. Most of it has to be completely rewritten. Simply because it was written initially by someone who hasn't got a clue about what they are doing.

Now you are faced with the daunting challenge that lies ahead, you have to realise the importance of copy in the selling process. Consider your targets for a minute.

Those that have money to spend now, know their power. They will not be sold with pedestrian copy. Not a chance.

They will buy from someone who understands them, connects to them, talks their language - and makes them a strong and relevant offer.

Those that have little or no money - and some of them will be your customers or prospects by the way, will be a much tougher sell.

They will not be in a buying mood. The shutters will be up. So, it's up to you to write copy to lower those shutters a little, by doing all the stuff above, better than your competitors are doing.

Here are three suggestions on how to immediately improve your copy:

- 1. Don't write the copy yourself. You are unlikely to be much good at it. Use a professional who works with words every day. The additional cost will come back to you in spades - in the form of business.**
- 2. Don't give copy briefs to traditional ad agencies, PR agencies, website designers, design houses, media companies or your mother-in-law. As I have said before, writing selling copy is a *specialist* technique. None of those people have any idea about how to use selling copy effectively.**
- 3. Be brave. When you brief a copywriter and you receive the first draft, proof it yourself, or at the very worst, with one other colleague. Don't put it around the office. Don't ask for opinions that have no relevance - like the Financial Director, or Operations Manager. They know less about how copy works than you.**

Which brings me on to the word that gives copywriters nightmares - '*tone*'. It's also known these days as '*on brand*'.

Don't get obsessed with this. It is trivial. And totally unimportant in the whole scheme of things. *Trust me.*

When you revisit your trading estate in two years time in your second hand Smart Car - and the tumbleweed is blowing across the street and squatters are living in your old offices, you will realise you should have focused more on selling copy, instead of fussing about whether a word is '*on brand*' or not.

Or have the right '*tone*'.

Neither of those two imposters pay the bills...

As a professional wordsmith, I am fully conversant with the need to talk to the customer or prospect in the right manner. I write within the experiential background of the reader.

Always have, always will. Because it is the professional way. And, it *works*.

Professional writers always write in a language that is comfortable for the audience. In a tone and a style that will connect to the audience and one they will understand.

And, of course, be likely to respond to.

But in recent years, certain client reaction to copy drafts has started to get up my nose a little. Well, a lot, if I'm totally truthful.

Other copywriters I know share the same frustration.

Sometimes a client will look at the copy and say: *"the tone isn't right"*. Or, more in keeping with current terminology, they will say *"that word is not on brand"*.

"We don't use words like that. Please change it"

This turns me into Godzilla instantly. For two reasons...

1. I believe everything I write into which I have poured my heart, soul and total professionalism, is nigh on perfect. It's my baby. A work of art. On average, I redraft copy at least 6 times before the client ever sees it, so how can the client find anything wrong with it?

2. Second, because saying something has the wrong 'tone' or a word is not 'on brand' is kryptonite to the copywriter. We start throwing things around. Plus, most clients are pretty vague about tone. They find it almost impossible to explain why the 'tone' is wrong, so the conversation normally goes round in circles.

A word not being 'on brand' is, to me, ridiculous. Every single word I use is there for a reason. To assist the selling process.

I've said this before and I'll say it again. People do not buy brand. They do not buy tone. They buy benefits, value and other more important things.

I had a quite banal conversation once with a client a few years ago, who insisted I rewrite a paragraph, because I had started it with 'And'. *"We don't talk to our clients this way"*, was his reply.

Neanderthal.

If the brief is right, then you should let the copywriter dictate the 'tone'. That is the skill you are paying for.

Many years ago, Drayton wrote this:

The professional copywriter's ability to adapt the tone of a letter or email will make your copy charming. It will give it personality.

This is how outstanding writers disarm their prospect in just the same way as a charming individual can disarm somebody he or she is trying to persuade to do something.

Is this something you can learn? I believe that to some extent it is, just as if you make an effort, you can be charming in person.

The first secret of personal charm is easy to master. You study the person you're talking to. How often have you heard it said of someone known to be charming, 'She seemed so interested in me'?

This is not false. You have to be genuinely interested in people, to get them on your side.

Relating to your prospect and then linking the needs of that prospect to what you want them to do, normally does the trick.

Charmers, of course, always appear relaxed and confident because they do relate to their listeners. In the same way, the knowledge you have amassed enables you to be relaxed and confident.

To put the reader at his or her ease. Not to alarm them in any way.

As the great man suggests, this approach lowers their guard.

And once that guard is lowered, the copywriter takes over.

Yes, the reader was in control, when opening the letter or clicking through the email, but once they start to read and get hooked, they are now being controlled, without even realising it.

The copywriter now has the reader in his/her total control. This is why the skills we possess are so valuable.

The reader is almost hypnotised. And what will happen next is predictable.

The reader will fill in the order form, pick up the phone, or respond to the email as if it's the most natural thing the world,

Which, after all, is the whole object of the exercise.

So, don't gamble with your copy. Don't take it for granted. Don't join those sad marketers and business people who have a 'tick in a box' mentality regarding words.


Words (the correct ones) are more important than *ever*.

So are the professionals that work at the coalface of this specialist discipline. Be nice to them. Respect them. Buy them copious amounts of alcohol.

But above all, take copy seriously. Appreciate that at this present time, **nothing is more important in your marketing and communications than copy.**

NOTHING...

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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