

Tips for Writing Effective Sales Copy

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Without fail, every single time I lead a Search Engine Workshop (<http://www.searchengineworkshops.com>), I get a bevy of questions on how to write effective ad copy. Obviously, the many elements involved have received voluminous regard in myriad books, lectures and seminars spanning more than seven decades. So, to simplify such a wide ranging subject is difficult, to say the least.

Regardless, there are many easily identified basic elements and strategies that can be applied to lay the foundation for solid and effective sales copy. So, without further adieu, here's a grab bag of recommendations that I've gleaned from my own experience combined with the tips I've received from other well respected authorities on the subject.

Customers buy benefits not features. As the old saying goes, sell the sizzle not the steak. Always remember that features have a purpose. Never assume the customer will figure out for themselves what that purpose (benefit) is. It's a mistake to write about a 3Ghz computer without connecting the fact that such a system is blazing fast and then talk about what it will do for them.

"Forget about waiting for your programs to load! ...our new 3Ghz chip makes computing so blazing fast that you'll be challenged to keep up even if you're a wizard on the keyboard."

Always view your product, and your copy, from the customer's point of view. When you read what you write, put your copy to the test by saying.

so what! who cares!

...because your customers will. Think about it: don't you when you read someone else's sales pitch?
...we all do. That is why...

You must present a unique and compelling reason for a customer to do business with you – a reason that stands out in a crowd of competition. This concept is most frequently referred to as your unique selling proposition (USP).

Ask the questions: What is it about your product or service that is unique? What do YOU offer that your competitors can't?

These questions may not always elicit easy answers but, nevertheless, you must find, and articulate, good answers to them.

Do you offer...

* the lowest price, * the fastest delivery, * the best guarantee, * the only widget available this side of the planet Saturn?

...what compels me (the selfish, I-don't-give-a-heck-about-you, customer) to do business with you when I can choose from a basketful of your competitors?

Once you truly grasp this fact of marketing, it becomes easy to see that finding the right USP and articulating it in your sales copy can literally spell the difference between (excuse the cliché) success and failure. It truly is that important.

Make sure your site loads within 30 seconds or less. No matter how effective your content is, if your visitors have to wait for your page to load, you'll lose them. Remember, we live in an increasingly impatient world where time is precious. People tend to think there's something wrong with slow loading sites, and they don't want to do business with losers.

Pay attention to layout. Place your headlines where they will be seen first, and arrange your presentation in an orderly fashion. It has been said that effective sales presentations are arranged somewhat like a tour. There's a beginning, middle and an end - in that order. Avoid putting the customer in control of the order in which they participate in the tour.

Give them a focal point - an obvious place to start reading as well as a well laid-out path to follow all the way to a conclusion. Tell them up front what you're selling or offering. If they have to guess, you'll ultimately be the one guessing why they left your site without buying.

Use graphics (images) to invoke emotion or to draw the eyes to text you want your readers to see. Do not use graphics to gratuitously fill space. Always ask yourself what you want the graphic to accomplish.

Does it demonstrate the product? ...illustrate a benefit?...promote a professional image? ...or draw attention to an important section of a page? All of these are good answers and validate the use of graphics.

Images can be powerful, but space upon a page is precious and not to be frivolously squandered. Always strive to get the largest possible return from each of your images. Use them to invoke positive emotions. A picture of a happy family getting into a brand new car is more appealing than just a picture of the car.

If, on the other hand, an image or graphic lacks purpose, then lose the graphic.

And, by the way, be especially careful with the purpose; 'promotes a professional image.' Remember, your customers care less about your image than you do. Hard to believe, but it's true. Professionalism is good. But, customers always care more about themselves than they do about you. So, stay benefit oriented and focus on your USP. Those two factors alone will generate sales far better than a professional looking image-enhancing (slow loading and space consuming) corporate logo.

Pay particular attention to your headlines. This is where you sell the sizzle, not the steak. Your headline must articulate a benefit, a USP! Many ad copy writers spend more time refining their headline than they do the body copy of the ad. And, don't be afraid to test different headlines against each other while leaving the rest of your offer the same.

Also important is that first paragraph. Studies have shown that if you can attract the readers interest with the headline and then maintain interest throughout the first paragraph, then chances are far greater they will complete your entire sales presentation (tour). The first paragraph of your sales copy should solve a problem or clearly articulate what benefits are forthcoming once a customer becomes involved with your product or service.

Use credible testimonials. Encourage them from your customers and place them strategically along the "tour" to help validate certain points of your sales presentation. Of course, the testimonials must be legitimate. There are laws that forbid fabricating testimonials.

Avoid using abbreviations and trade terms. Use the language that your least informed customers might use and be sure to expand acronyms. The last thing you want your prospects to feel is "stupid" – and confusing them is also bad for business. Even the most sophisticated prospect will not object to your spelling things out by explaining in terms that anyone can understand.

A word on long sales copy. It's okay to have long copy as long as it isn't b-o-r-i-n-g! Tests have shown that honest-to-gosh, cash-in-hand buyers will read long copy for as long as they aren't bored. That's why ALL copy must be succinct, to the point, but tell the whole story with the precision of a surgeon performing a delicate operation.

Obviously, this takes practice. Start by writing everything that you want to say and then start whittling it down, combining it, and organizing it into a lean, mean, benefit-oriented sales presentation that tells the whole story without a single wasted word. Your goal is to keep your qualified prospects excited about the solution they are about to possess as a result of doing business with you.

Truth-be-known, qualified prospects will read everything as long as it isn't boring. On the other hand, tire kickers (the unqualified prospects) will not read long copy. But, neither will they read short copy. And from a sales perspective, who cares – they weren't going to buy anyway.

So, when it comes to long copy, you must first ask yourself who's reading it? ...and then strive to capture and captivate the interest of the qualified prospects only.

Make the text easy to read. Know your market and fashion the text to fit their eyes. Studies have shown that 12pt Times New Roman is easiest to read in paper and ink format. However, the Internet is different. When reading from a computer, people prefer 12pt Arial or, when smaller, 10pt Verdana.

Break the paragraphs into easy-to-read pieces. Use bulleted or numbered lists, mini headings, bold type, and heading tags to further facilitate the one-bite-at-a-time, easy-to-chew page appearance.

These layout strategies enable the reader to skim quickly through your sales page while comprehending a great deal of your presentation without having to actually read every single word.

Closing strategies: depending on the nature of your product or service, you might find it beneficial to offer a bonus, a guarantee, or a payment plan to further define your USP and to help close sales.

Remember the call to action! Never assume a prospect will know what to do next. You must tell

them. Spell it out clearly what you want them to do next.

* pick up the phone and call; * complete the order form; * sign up for the newsletter; * join our forum.

Then proceed to explain what will happen once they've completed the process, and take a moment to review the benefits, bonuses, and guarantees.

Last but not least, I'll share a tip that most professional ad copy writers use and one I highly recommend.

Read everything you write out loud.

The idea is to ferret out the sections that cause word stumbling. Restructure and reword them so your readers won't stumble too. Be on the lookout for overused words and listen carefully to the rhythm and tone of the message as you connect with the general flow of the content in its entirety.

Remember also to apply the "so what ...who cares" argument to test the validity of your presentation points. Trust me, your customers will. So, you might as well give your sales copy the acid-test ahead of them. Here's where you must seek and destroy those self-serving company platitudes and overtly impressive credentials that tend to bore the motivated prospects who (rightfully) care only about themselves. In other words, put your credentials on an 'About Us' page and focus your sales message on solutions and benefits for the customer.

In Conclusion

This list may not be the complete list, but it certainly is an important one. And, if ever you're at a loss for what to say in your sales copy, start with the most basic task of all – interviewing your customers to find out what they want. From there it's a matter of crafting a presentation that leads the customer toward having what they want by purchasing it through you.

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