

11 Things You MUST Know Before Hiring a Copywriter

By Alexandria K. Brown

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Alexandria K. Brown
ali@akbwriting.com

AKB Marketing Comm. Tips <http://www.akbwriting.com>

So you're considering hiring copywriting help for your next brochure, Web site, or marketing project. Congratulations! You should get great results if you hire a pro to do it right.

Many business owners and marketing professionals have valid concerns about letting an outsider develop their content. After all — it's your business, you know it best, and your image is critical. However, you're wrapped up in your business every day. A good copywriter can see your business in a new light, draw out the key benefits of your products and services, and communicate that excitement to your clients and prospects.

Working with a writer isn't a complicated ordeal, however it will benefit you tremendously to become familiar with how the relationship typically works and ways to help the process move along smoothly. So, here are my top 11 tips on how to choose and work with a copywriter:

1. Understand your mission beforehand. A crucial factor in streamlining the writing process is determining the principal points you need to communicate — before you bring in a writer. Who is your target audience? What is your message? What is unique about your company? In what type of tone do you want to speak to your reader? What type of response do you ideally want the reader to make? Having this information agreed upon before you get a writer involved will save you unnecessary copy revisions and keep your costs down.

2. Develop a realistic schedule. Yes, you've heard this all your life, but haste makes waste. Avoid hastily hiring a copywriter and dumping a rush job on her. Not only will you not have time to thoroughly check her experience and references, but, no matter how wonderfully talented she is, her first drafts will not be "fully cooked." This is because copywriters need time to let words and ideas simmer. Most writers will request a few weeks to develop your copy, so set a realistic schedule to give the creative process ample time. Count on going through one or two revisions as your writer refines the piece's angle and conveys the key benefits of what you're promoting.

3. Make sure the writer you hire has written for the medium you want. Let's say you need someone to re-energize the copy on your Web site. A freelancer who has only written magazine articles won't likely have the skills to create content for a dynamic Web site. She's probably not proficient at breaking-up copy into easily digestible bits, integrating hyperlinks that entice your users to take action, and keeping your end-user in mind to plan a friendly, easily-navigable site. She may be able to learn how, but you'll be paying for her slow ramp-up speed. Take time instead to find the right person — it will save you many headaches down the road.

4. Experience within your industry isn't always necessary. "So you've never written for a _____ company before?" I've heard many prospects say. Don't worry. A writer's ability to write well for the medium is more important than her having prior experience in your industry. Many writers are true generalists and write just as well for an edgy new media start-up as they do for a giant hospital network. They're very proficient at diving into your business, learning it inside and out, and churning out great prose to entice your target market. Now of course, if you're producing a technically oriented business-to-business Web site or marketing piece, you may want to hire a writer with experience in both your project's medium and your industry. If you find a good one, hold on tight. You've struck gold!

5. Ask for references, and contact them. All writers can show you samples of well-written material, but how do you know if they'll work to understand your communication needs, meet deadlines, and act professionally in front of clients? Any great copywriter should have an ample list of references that she can share with you. Be sure to contact at least two of them, and ask them about the writer's weaknesses as well as her strengths.

6. You get what you pay for. It amazes me how businesspeople will drop thousands of dollars on Web or print design and hesitate to spend half as much on great copy. Pictures and design enhance your message, but jeez folks ...the writing IS your message! Good copywriting does not come cheaply — you'll find writers who charge anywhere from \$50 - \$150 per hour and up. You'll pay more for an experienced writer, one with a particular specialty, or one who's also a proficient editor. (Many writers are also great editors, but not all writers are editors, and vice versa.) Some writers will even arrange for your piece to get a final review by a professional proofreader. (A very good idea, since there are almost always a few errors that no one catches until the last minute.)

7. Work on more than a handshake. True writing pros will give you an agreement they've drawn up for you. However, you'll occasionally find yourself having to draft an agreement for the project. This doesn't have to be complex — a simple letter of agreement that you both sign should do fine. Be sure to include the project size, number of revisions included (if applicable), timetable, and agreed fee (this can be a flat fee or hourly rate). And don't forget to ask what's not included. For example, many writers charge extra for in-person meetings, research time, and weekend or rush work. You should also expect to pay an upfront retainer. Serious writers charge one-third to one-half of the total project fee upfront, and many won't begin your project until they have the signed agreement and check in hand. And if you have sensitive or proprietary information, don't hesitate to have your writer sign a non-disclosure agreement.

8. Give your writer background info at the start. I've often heard the story of a writer being hired for a large project, and the first thing she's asked to do is come in and interview several principals of the company. After several days of interviews, the writer is then handed the company's annual report, previous brochures, and marketing plan. If this background info had been given up front, the client could have saved hours of time and money! At the beginning of your project, pass on any and all previous brochures or sales kits, direct mail, Web site URLs, annual reports, research results, or business or marketing plans.

9. Appoint one person as your "project captain." Appoint one person at your company as project captain. If you allow too many people in your organization to work with the writer directly, each of them will likely have a different opinion of the copy and request different edits from your writer. She may be forced to make many unnecessary revisions, adding time and cost to your project. If you need to involve multiple reviewers in the process, have your project captain handle the internal reviews and edits and decide which ones supercede others. Then give your writer one master copy that includes all edits to be made. Also, be sure to involve your final decision maker early on, be it your CEO or board of directors. This gives your writer clear direction and avoids costly revisions down the road.

10. Give constructive criticism. Although copywriters have egos of steel and are accustomed to criticism, make yours constructive for best results. "This paragraph just doesn't work" isn't nearly as effective as "What we need to do here is stress the benefits of the non-skid surface." Also, tell her what parts you do like so she can emulate them elsewhere. And of course, everyone loves to know when they've done a good job. If you like her work, be sure to share that with her.

11. Don't discount "chemistry." You need to feel comfortable with your writer in order to work effectively together. Take the time to find a great copywriter whom you truly like and develop a good working relationship together. You'll get top-quality work that will help your business thrive. And you'll have a skilled and knowledgeable copywriter on call for your next communications effort.

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Alexandria Brown is president of AKB Marketing Communications. Her FREE monthly e-zine gives "how-to" tips on writing compelling copy for Web sites, brochures, and e-zines. Learn how to attract new clients and strengthen your customer relationships! Subscribe today at <http://www.akbwriting.com> or by e-mailing AKBMarCom-On@lists.webvalence.com

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