

Keeping it Real: Writing Effective Website Content

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The Importance of Quality Writing

By now, we've all spent an incalculable amount of time on the Internet. Whether we're shopping, dating, plagiarizing, or just plain wandering, our time online has enlightened us, made us laugh (or cringe), and made it possible to never leave the house. But have you ever considered who's responsible for the content? Who's in charge of authoring the text, much of which we take as cyber gospel? Who is it that's misspelling and "misnomer" some of the most basic words and phrases in the World (or, shall I say, world wide web)? Ok, grammatical accuracy aside, it's becoming more apparent that the art of writing just isn't what it used to be. Is the Internet so informal a medium that it's exempt from penmanship standards? I say "No." Writing that is published on a website is often referred to as 'creative copy.' It needs to be just that—creative. And while my former high school students seemed to think 'copy' had more to do with writing than being creative, I assure you, a website's content is wide-open to a million wannabe critics. And that number is growing every minute.

Selling Your Product, and The Importance of Shaving...

In our struggling economy, it is crucial that consumers trust and believe in what's being sold. Web surfers aren't as easily parted with their hard-earned cash as they were when Clinton was in office. With a website, content equals integrity. And integrity equals sales. In an eCommerce scenario, your website is part brochure and part salesman—setting up and closing the deal. Unfortunately, when the wording is awkward and the grammar is just plain poor, consumers click to the next link on the Google™ list of products they were searching for.

In the days of the traveling salesman, he'd take his best suits on the road, shave every morning, and exhibit impeccable manners. Why? To make the sale, of course. It's all about first impressions and the trust that follows. The same mindset should be adopted for a website. Yes, graphic design is pretty much the suit in this metaphoric scenario, but the copy writing is the shaving and the impeccable manners.

Try this exercise: go to 10 random text-heavy websites. They shouldn't be hard to find since most tech-oriented sites suffer from a case of text overload. Now, read through the copy with a fine-toothed comb, looking specifically for grammar errors, misspelled words and awkward sentences. If you aren't much of a wordsmith yourself, cut and paste random website paragraphs into a Word™ document and keep an eye out for the red and green squiggly lines that signify spelling and grammar errors. Now, most people have made their peace with sub-

par copy, but you should still be shocked to find multiple errors. Out of 10 websites, I would wager that 7 of them offer up examples of poor writing, and at least 3 of them startlingly so.

Going back to the door-to-door salesman analogy, would you rather buy a vacuum cleaner or encyclopedia from someone clean-shaven and polite, or someone who looked like he spent the night in a box downtown? I thought so. Thus, would you rather order flowers for your sweetheart or purchase the latest Steven King book from an online store with some brains, or from a site where the word 'commerce' is spelled with an 's'?

Once Again, Less is More...

Now that we've established the most obvious reason why quality copy writing is so important, let's move on to something a bit more subtle. We've heard the phrase 'less is more' a million times. Well, here's one more piece of evidence that it's a mantra worth repeating as you write website copy. What is the most common problem with websites, today? If we take away the fact that most are riddled with grammatical errors, we are left with the element of 'text overkill,' also known as 'scroll-til-you-die' syndrome. How many sites have you visited where the homepage has more letters and characters than the NASDAQ section of the newspaper? It's just as confusing, and, more importantly, daunting to the reader.

One thing to note about web-surfers: unfortunately, a majority are skimmers—lingering on each site for no more than a minute or two. Simplify your homepage by reducing the text, and eliminate the need to scroll. On any sub-page of your site, you can have scrolling until the purple cows come home, but on the homepage it's like serving boiled liver and cabbage as an appetizer.

One of my favorite scenes in a movie regarding the art of writing is in *A River Runs Through It*. A father is home-schooling his son, and the lesson for the day is a writing exercise. At first, the son has a couple pages or so of handwritten fodder, and each time he brings it to his father for review, the latter reduces it by half. Finally, when the son is left with a mere paragraph, the father looks it over and hands it back saying, "Good. Now throw it away." The point, here, is that what can be said in one simple paragraph should not take up a whole page or two. Reduce the writing to its bare bones. This rule is reflected in the journalistic style of Hemmingway, and it should be reflected in the copy on your website homepage.

Keep it Real...(Write for your visitor)

For the final 'rule,' the landscape is a little grayer. When it comes to people's tastes, it's hard to get it right every time. After all, some people like McDonald's and others would rather eat their own foot. So, how do you write website copy

for the masses? The key is: you don't. You write for your audience. And chances are, they're a predictable bunch. If they're not, then get off your ass and do some research. It's not rocket science, but if you are marketing a product or idea to rocket scientists, then your copy is obviously going to be complex, austere and possibly idiosyncratic. If you are marketing massage oils, then your copy is going to be soothing, calm and sensual.

There are generally four personality traits that are associated with website visitors:

A. Logical. A logical customer is going to want all the facts. The more specs and descriptions, the better. And he/she'll be willing to scroll or go an extra page deeper to find this information. Bulleted lists of dimensions and sizes are good, etc. One cool thing about meeting the needs of your relentless 'logicals' is that you pretty much cover the corollary questions your other types might have.

B. Feeling. A feeling customer will want information about other people's experiences. He/she'll look for testimonials and evidence of satisfied customers. They want to know what sort of people you appeal to and information about your commitment to service. Lastly, they would like to feel you're in it for more than money. Even though you probably are...

"Logicals" and "Feelers" are fairly patient; they're usually willing to look for the information that's important to them. They tend to deliberate when making their decisions. Not so for the "Spontaneous" and "Competitors." These folks want to get their information and make their decisions quickly.

C. Spontaneous. Lifestyle is the name of the game for the Spontaneous customer. He/she'll want to know how your product or information supports or improves on lifestyle. They tend to look for options that allow a more personalized experience. They want to feel that a particular website was specifically built for them. They'll want to accomplish a lot with a minimum of fuss and bother. You should be wary of wasting this customer's time since they tend not to linger long.

D. Competitive. The same is true for the Competitive customer. Don't dare waste one precious moment of her time. Not a single click more than absolutely necessary. This customer wants to know the bottom line. If your website boasts stuff like "best, most and greatest," you'd better back it up on the spot. Quick comparisons with competitors will help. If you cannot communicate to the Competitive that you're the bomb, then they're gone by the third click of the mouse.



So, in considering the four traits of your potential visitors, it's important to understand which one(s) you are specifically targeting and go for it. Trying to appease each of these types of people is nearly impossible and will lead to either hyper-complexity, or mind-numbing vagueness.

Off to see the Wizard...

In the end, it's all about appearances. The beauty of a website as a marketing tool is that it can make a small business seem big and legit, while allowing a giant company to come across as warm and friendly. I call this 'the "Oz" factor'. A website is a big, green, shiny curtain. Poor grammar, unfocused rambling and content that ignores the needs of your customer are all instances where someone is drawing back the curtain and exposing the ugly elements of your business. If you don't invest the proper time and thought into your website copy, eventually, your prospects will wake up on your competitor's site uttering, "There's no place like home page..."

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