Crafty Copy by Mark Buckingham - as featured in Internet World

Creating an emotional appeal, weighed carefully to your online demographic, is imperative, says Mark Buckingham

Losing potential customers from a website is a reality all businesses face daily - but do you know why some prospects go elsewhere? Presumably, you don't have the luxury of conclusive answers. However, if you did understand the reasons for failing to convert prospects, the odds are that your sales copy is a weak link: turning-off your visitors and failing to make a connection with your audience.

In an increasingly high-speed, web-savvy marketplace – where competition in almost every sector is only a click away – the importance of establishing instant impact with your reader through a coherent blend of powerful, compelling words cannot be overemphasised. Fluid, engaging copy that swiftly generates a feeling of empathy and confidence in your company is pivotal to the success of almost any commercial site. Yet this vital area is often under appreciated, with many organisations patently complacent about the principles of highly-effective web copy.

Strong aesthetics may attract a prospect, but a failure to connect with your visitor through words will almost certainly hand leverage to your competition and can significantly undermine the potency of your site. Richard Lomax, founder of Norwich-based marketing agency Richard Lomax and Associates, and author of the acclaimed Marketing Gold Standards Report, believes that many organisations adopt a fundamentally flawed approach to establishing a relationship with their online audience.

'All too often, the financial benefits of balanced, persuasive sales text to which readers can relate are neglected,' says Lomax. 'Regard your copy as a 24/7 sales force; it's essential to compel your reader through effective "salesmanship on screen" '. Just as a

good salesperson would hope to identify and connect with a prospect, your copy must also create the right affinity.

'As with conventional copywriting, you have just a few seconds to command the browser's attention and take control,' adds Lomax. 'This can be done with benefit-led headlines, clear presentation, short sharp follow-up body copy that draws your reader in without sacrificing depth of content. Focus on the prospect, their problems, frustrations and expectations ahead of your unique selling points.'

The words you employ have huge influence over the success of your site. Investing in professional copywriting is an area that any company serious about their online presence cannot afford to overlook.

Alex Ridings, founder of Kent-based web design and print media consultancy, Think Tank Publishing, believes this is an outlay that should never be overlooked: 'The services and fresh perspective of a professional website copywriter should be central to any web strategy, whether or not they work in conjunction with an in-house marketing team. An experienced copywriter should have an extensive portfolio of sites they've worked on, and will ask questions geared at understanding your objectives and your audience and work with you to create a plan and synopsis before creating a rough draft'.

Test your copy and layout and invite honest, objective feedback. Good copywriting is a process of trial and error and continual refinement. Get this right and your reader will be more receptive to what you have to say, and more likely to act on your call-to-action messages - once you've convinced them that you genuinely understand their problems and can cater to their needs. Predictably, most visitors have arrived at your site to solve a particular problem or with a certain expectation in mind - so emphasise what's in it for them. A site must engage the reader and make an emotional connection through their perceived 'pain' points'.

Creating copy for maximum impact and search engine visibility

It's not just your audience who favour balanced, informative copy. Prominent coverage on Google, and other major search engines, is another key factor behind the longevity of any site. Evolving search engine indexing formulas are designed to determining the usability, authority and relevance of a site (among other telling factors). The quality and consistency of your text plays a decisive role in your ultimate positioning and the strength of your sales prose will almost certainly be diluted unless it's underpinned by a streamlined, user-friendly structure. An overall congruence between design, prose, navigation and on-page optimisation (as well as quality inbound links from other credible and relevant sites), contributes massively to prominent natural search coverage.

A major factor behind optimal natural search engine coverage is keyword consistency: essentially, the frequency, density and distribution of your selected key phrases (or target search terms). Engines typically give more weight to sites demonstrating clear presentation, consistent themes (or page specificity), and offering depth of information embedded in a lean, user-friendly structure.

An important part of this process is carefully researching and selecting strategic key phrases to weave carefully into your draft copy – much like the subtle inclusion of trigger words to help imbue the desired response to your message. Arbitrary inclusion or excessive repetition of key phrases can harm your site's rankings and readability. Worse still, over-zealous, spurious optimisation techniques, coupled with sluggish navigation and profligate, bloated graphics may well see your site relegated to relative obscurity on the search engine results pages.

Search engine copywriting is an increasingly popular specialisation and an inherent element of search engine optimisation (SEO); aimed at achieving this often challenging – yet vital - balance of search engine accessibility and optimal sales impact.

Alex Ridings, of Think Tank Publishing, explains: 'One popular approach we adopt when creating a site that works well for both the engines and the reader is to first assume the role of the traditional marketer. We'll work with our client to ascertain the desired style, content and structure of the site and then find the best way of promoting this to fit the site structure and the demographic. We'll then move into the search engine optimisation and keyword research process and tailor the copy accordingly – often re-writing the copy many times over to ensure it flows as well as possible'.

Readability must never be sacrificed. 'Your copy must be logical and convincing, whilst employing the right key search terms - but never excessively repetitive or stifled,' explains Ridings. 'Getting this right is one of most valuable parts of a site and should never be rushed'.

Efficient, structured navigation is also critical. Information must be presented in a way that lets users drill down to the level of information they want. There should be clear call to action massages based on what you want your visitor to do. Do your want them to sign up for your opt-in list? Download your software? Buy your product? Your copy must lead your visitor to this point and remind him to take the desired action.

Preparation is all-important. Diligent profiling of your audience and research of your marketplace help forge a better relationship with your reader and will be evident in your copy. Evaluation of your website traffic and visitor trends, interviewing customers, conducting regular testing and undertaking customer surveys are just a handful of activities that can help a company establish affinity with potential customers. Ask questions. Enquire about initial concerns and why your customers felt confident in your products or services over your competition.

'Even though you may have to offer some incentive, satisfied customers should be happy to provide this information', believes Lomax. 'And where possible, ask existing customers why they bought from you and what areas of your site or promotional literature most appealed to them? Try and also glean this information from prospects that have yet to buy from you. Evaluating your customer base is one is the most valuable ways of attracting more sales. Often the responses will be surprising and not for the reasons you initially thought,' he adds.

Understanding of the psychology of your audience (and, give or take a little guess work, your would-be prospects) can make the stark difference between highly effective, inspirational audience-focused text and blank, prosaic copy that achieves little more than turning your prospect away. Translate your answers into solutions and invest time into developing first-rate, compelling sales copy, and your website can be your greatest sales tool.

Buckingham's Top Tips:

Preparation – carefully research your market, audience and competition before writing your copy and always create a plan before writing your first draft.

Use sufficient copy – don't be afraid to use detailed copy if required, but break it down into short paragraphs and guide users to detail-heavy pages.

Succinct, fluid copy – draw your reader in quickly through sharp, relevant and engaging prose and headlines – don't waffle

Presentation – readability is crucial: don't be afraid to use sufficient copy, but use headlines, mission statements, sub headings and bullet points to break text into readable chunks and link to more detailed pages (e.g. FAQ).

Fresh content – update your site with new content and add pages and let your readers know about it.

Keyword density – integrate chosen keywords diligently and create opportunities to use descriptive search terms, but avoid excessive repetition– if it doesn't flow, it won't work for your reader or the engines.

Appropriate style and tone – write as if you are talking to a member of your audience. Inject your own style and be imaginative, but realise your site is not a creative writing showcase.

Hyperlinks – guide users through your site through strategic linking but don't include too many links – you'll risk your reader jumping from one page to the next without absorbing anything.

Proof read and test – don't just settle for your first or second draft. Be prepared to re-write many times over and seek honest feedback

Avoid hype – emphasise what's in it for the reader but avoid over-zealous language and advertising jargon

Avoid slating your competition – being overly negative is not only unprofessional, but can leave you potentially vulnerable to legal claims.

Credibility - establish distinction through verified facts and figures, testimonials and unique selling points

Don't use print-media copy - copy from your brochures etc can help you, but always start from fresh when writing for the web

Subjectivity and interpretation - even when you think you have adjusted the balance of inspiration and personalisation, always consider subjectivity. Be aware of all angles of interpretation without appearing patronizing or condescending

Consistency – find your optimal structure and tone and stick to it: inconsistency is unprofessional

Read just your headlines – do they, alone, persuade the customer to buy?

Be sensitive to newcomers and guests – when in doubt, write it out: instead of using parenthesis, use a glossary, or FAQ page

Be assertive - don't be afraid to ask for a commitment in your call-to-action statements but do emphasise what's in it for your prospect and don't appear pushy.

Talk to people – get inspired by a wide variety of people and situations - not just business networking. It will reflect in your copy.

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