

The Sales Copy Master Class

KENT AUSTIN

Learn to write copy like a pro from one of the UK's most successful freelance copywriters.

Complete with unabridged real-life copy examples

Learn to write copy like a pro, turbo-charge sales and destroy the competition!

The Sales Copy Master Class

The ultimate guide to writing effective sales copy from one of the UK's most successful freelance copywriters

Welcome

"You are about to master the little-known and obscenely lucrative art of salesmanship in print.

And I'm going to show you how – step-by-step."

Kent Austin



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Introduction

The Sales Copy Master Class is a complete stand-alone learning program, entirely original and written exclusively by the author. It is the product of my many years' front-line experience as one of the UK's leading sales copywriters, all distilled and unified into a tried and tested blueprint for copywriting success. Written in clear, jargon-free language and presented in easily assimilated sections, The Sales Copy Master Class contains all the information you'll ever need to learn how to write world-class copy that will sell your product, service or idea – whatever you're selling.

Why The Sales Copy Master Class?

The world of marketing as we once knew it has changed forever. In just a handful of years an entirely new language has revealed itself: pay-per-click, SEO, e-marketing, viral marketing, blogging, podcasting, video marketing, search engine advertising, social network marketing – these are all terms that until very recently simply didn't exist in the business lexicon. And they all rely on one key skill: the ability to write effective sales copy. Ask any successful marketer and they will tell you, without hesitation, that “copy is king.”

For the ambitious entrepreneur these changes in the marketing landscape open new windows onto a wealth of lucrative new marketing opportunities.

Essential marketing

Why does one business prosper and grow while another struggles and fails?

Before we get started, I just want touch for a moment on the subject of marketing. You'll often find two seemingly identical businesses selling exactly the same or very similar products, yet one fails while the other succeeds. We can all think of examples of this in our own experience, but why does it happen?

In almost every case it's because the successful business has taken the trouble to develop a cost-effective marketing strategy while the other has left it to chance. You can have the best product in the world, but if you aren't broadcasting the right message to the right people in the right places, it isn't going to sell. End of story.

Remarkably few small business owners and managers REALLY know how to market their businesses effectively. The truth is you don't succeed in business by selling specific things; you succeed by selling things in a specific way. Only a very few people know this.

Real marketing for businesses in the real world

There is a common misconception among business people that effective marketing is a complex skill, one that demands years of study at business school, qualifications in statistics and business analysis and at least a stint or two in the higher reaches of a global corporate marketing department.

Corporate level marketing does indeed involve a high degree of expertise. However, most of the efforts of corporate marketing departments are directed at promoting brands. But the impenetrable world of brand awareness marketing is of little or no relevance to the typical small to medium sized enterprise (SME).

The fact is that most campaigns created by major ad agencies cannot be tracked with any degree of accuracy. That's because most major ad agencies aren't engaged with direct marketing. In the world of direct marketing (where I come from), every order, every advertisement, and every sales letter and every online campaign is tracked with the utmost precision. Every penny spent produces a measureable return on investment.

Yet every year thousands of SMEs squander their fragile marketing budgets on unquantifiable and largely ineffective advertising campaigns that are totally inappropriate to their needs. And when asked why they do this, they are likely to give the same answer: 'To get our name out there'. Sadly, they've missed the point of what it's all about. Marketing for smaller businesses is about one thing only - eliciting a direct and measurable response. The Sales Copy Master Class shows you how.

How to use The Sales Copy Master Class

The Sales Copy Master Class is divided into four interconnected and interdependent sections, (complemented with a 30,000+ word sales copy swipe file) each one dealing with a distinct area of the copywriter's art. Feel free to dip into the content as the whimsy takes you. But to gain maximum benefit from this program it is vital that you start at the beginning and work your way systematically through the entire program, step by step, completing the exercises as you go.

Why?

Because, taken together, the exercises build up to become your first piece of polished sales copy. Yes, you can actually put it to use and begin reaping a return on your investment right away! Now isn't that what you wanted? I told you this was practical stuff...

Warning

You are about to enter a baggage-free zone...

One of the most important lessons you'll learn as a copywriter is that no room exists for redundant words. Every word you use must serve a purpose or be ruthlessly excised from your copy. Superfluous adornment and aimless digressions are the hallmarks of bad writing. There is no exception to this rule.

Here's a real-life example:

"Further, future significant technological developments must again be complemented with significant advancements in human capabilities in respect of their education, thus fortifying their role in creating both their technological future and their social society. This infers the TOTAL ENGAGEMENT of all an organisation's people (includes their contribution, consultation and equitable reward) in the organisation's operational and financial systems..."

You get the idea...

To this end, I endeavour to practice what I preach. Now let's get started...

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The Sales Copy Master Class

www.salescopymasterclass.com

How to write great sales copy

The indispensable rules from a seasoned copywriting pro...

"It is by imitation, far more than precept, that we learn everything."

- Edmund Burke

"When everyone is looking for gold, it's a good time to be in the pick and shovel business."

- Mark Twain

What makes for great copy?

Give one hundred copywriters an identical assignment, and you'll end up with the identical number of interpretations. That said, if they're professionals, they'll all adhere more or less to a number of hard and fast rules. Within the parameters of these rules, however, there's no right or wrong way to write copy. Ultimately, the only true measure of success is RESULTS. Your copy will live or die accordingly.

Good copywriting has everything in common with good journalism: the compelling headline, the teasing sub-head, the hook, an appeal to curiosity and the emotions, self-interest, a desire to read through to the end to see what happens.

I labour this point because there is a tendency among some copywriting 'experts' to suggest that effective copywriting depends on learning a repertoire of tricks, short cuts and closely guarded 'secret' formulae that, once mastered, will somehow work a curious magic upon the reader and compel her to part with her money.

This is piffle. Good copy – copy that sells – is about being able to produce a structured and compelling argument that will capture a reader's **Attention** and appeal to their **Interest** while enhancing **Desire** and satisfying their doubts to a point where they take **ACTION**, and being able to do so convincingly and in a way that stands out from the crowd. There are no quick fixes.

- ✓ **Attention**
- ✓ **Interest**
- ✓ **Desire**
- ✓ **Action**

The classic '**AIDA**' formula. You may well have come across it - or one of the many variations that have sprung from it - before. But awareness of the AIDA formula is but a first small step on the journey. Grasping the concept is, of course, what matters. This program arms you with the tools to do just that.

And a note of caution: it's true there are techniques and strategies employed by copywriters that do not feature in journalism (as we'll discover), but if your writing is any way dull, pedestrian, clunky, unstructured, rambling or incoherent or, heaven forbid, peppered with spelling mistakes and grammatical bloomers, all the clever tricks in the world aren't going to save you. Enough said.

Here's a list of cast-iron rules for the aspiring copywriter. Stick with them and you'll prosper. And when you feel that you're good enough, feel free to break them at your will. All else is inspiration.

But before we begin...

The most important rule when writing copy

"Sir, in my heart, I know I'm funny." Lt. Steven Hawk (Good Morning Vietnam)

Consider these two examples from an imaginary lonely hearts column:

#1 - "Single biker, 50, seeks fun and friendship. Enjoys, wine, good food and staying in evenings. Great sense of humour!!!"

#2 - "Fat, penniless biker, 50, with drink problem seeks blonde bombshell, 20, with bike for no-strings relationship. Send photo of bike. "

The first advertiser 'tells' us he has a great sense of humour; the second advertiser 'shows' us. OK, he may not end up with the girl of his dreams, but he'll definitely attract more attention. The first ad is a baseless claim; the second proves its case.

The #1 most important rule of writing copy, then, is SHOW. DON'T TELL. This rule applies not just to copywriting, but to all forms of writing, non-fiction and fiction included. Ask any publisher and they'll tell you that out of the vast quantity of manuscripts that land on their desks in any one year, just a fraction of one percent actually make it through to publication. The rest end up in the recycling to form the basis of yet more dud manuscripts, ad infinitum. (Sadly, the same fate awaits much marketing and ad copy.)

Why is this?

It's because, almost without exception, every one of them is telling and not showing. And it's the biggest reason by far why most new authors fail to find a publisher. Don't take my word for it. Ask any editor or literary agent. Or try it for yourself: pick up a book by, say, F. Scott Fitzgerald. Open it at random and read any paragraph. You can bet your life he'll be showing and not telling.

Apply the same principles to your sales and marketing copy and you'll see a dramatic improvement in results. Take your lead from the masters.

So here we go then, the AIDA formula, as used by successful copywriters the world over since time in memoriam in the noble cause of wealth creation. Enjoy and prosper:

Rule # 1 Attention!

“In the modern world of business, it is useless to be a creative original thinker unless you can also sell what you create. Management cannot be expected to recognize a good idea unless it is presented to them by a good salesman.”

- David M. Ogilvy

OK, let's consider what this means in practice. How do you go about getting attention? Well it's easy. All you need to do is be bolder, brasher, louder and more persistent than the competition! It works. It's what every two-year old child does when it wants attention. In a cinema or a restaurant, wherever, all they have to do is jump and scream and they get all the attention they could ever need - wholesale.

But there's a problem. It's the wrong kind of attention. Why? Because it's unfocussed. It irritates everybody and profits nobody.

Unfortunately the fractious two-year old has yet to learn the subtle art of selecting his audience, ie his parents. (Who else is going to care?) He instead employs a scattergun approach, squandering his resources on attracting the unwarranted attention of the entire room, which by an uncanny coincidence is exactly what the majority of businesses do with their fragile marketing budgets.

So before we begin let's make one thing clear: getting attention has nothing to do with jumping up and down and making the loudest noise. Getting attention has everything to do with selecting the right audience at the right time and in the right place and delivering the right message. Or as master copywriter Gary Halbert once put it: “Find a hungry crowd and give them what they want.”

Let's look at how it's done.

1.1 Locate your USP

"What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly."

- Thomas Paine

Before you so much as write a word, it is CRITICAL that you consider your USP.

You're probably familiar the idea of the Unique Selling Proposition (USP), at least in principle. It's a much-used marketing-speak term in ad-land and beyond. But what exactly is a USP? Ask six different marketers and you're likely to get six different definitions.

So let's nail this bugbear once and for all, because it's important.

The concept of the USP is credited to the copywriter Rosser Reeves, who popularised the term in his book *Reality of Advertising* in 1961. He defines a USP has having three parts:

1. Each ad must make a proposition: "Buy this product and you get these benefits"
2. The proposition must be unique: something that your competitors do not, cannot or will not offer
3. The proposition must sell: it must be something prospects really want; it pulls them over to your product.

A USP clearly and concisely explains a single quality about your product that allows it to stand out from the competition.

Reeves most enduring USP was probably the one he conceived for M&M's, the sugar-coated chocolate sweet:

"It melts in your mouth, not in your hands"

Your Unique Selling Proposition is your major benefit encapsulated. It's what differentiates you from the competition. It's what you stand for in the eyes of your customers.

What's your USP?

If you don't know what it is, then you can bet your life nobody else will.

Please understand that your USP doesn't necessarily have to be unique (unless it is) - the term itself is misleading on this score.

What matters is that you clearly and concisely define your product to best match your prospects' needs and differentiate yourself positively from your competitors by emphasising a major benefit that you can claim as your own. Note that I say 'claim' as your own, because in all likelihood there will be competitors out there who could also lay claim to the benefit expressed in your USP – they just didn't think about it.

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Your job as a copywriter is to unearth the most compelling benefit possible and express it in a way that is exclusive to your brand or product.

Your USP can be articulated in a strap line / tag line or slogan.

Here's the strap line I use for my copywriting agency. It neatly encapsulates what I do best, and it serves me well:

"Hard-hitting, provocative writing that will sell your product, service or idea"

Now, there are no doubt plenty of other good copywriters out there who could make the same claim but, at least to my knowledge, I'm the only one who expresses it quite this way.

How do you formulate a killer USP?

If you have a wildly original product, then it shouldn't be rocket science. I recently dined at a restaurant in London whose USP was that its customers eat in complete darkness, served exclusively by blind waiters!

Dans le Noir ?

A truly sensory culinary experience

Dans le Noir ? is a restaurant offering the visitor a dining experience in complete darkness.

Says it all...

As the world of business is in a state of constant flux, however, a USP will sometimes need to change to adapt to new circumstances.

Dans le Noir? has been very successful, not least because of the predictable mountain of free publicity it has received in the media. For this reason it is unlikely to be long before competition emerges. When this happens, *Dan le Noir?* simply needs to change its USP to include the words 'London's original...', or 'London's first and finest...'. When hit hard by the competition, Smith's Crisps strap line became 'The original and the Best.' You get the idea.

Well, you're thinking, it's all very well for them, but my business has nothing original to differentiate it. When this happens, you need to think laterally. The first thing you do is check out the competition. Look online, in the press, Yellow Pages, trade journals, etc, and find out what your competitors are saying about themselves.

But even more importantly, find out what they're NOT saying about themselves!

Is there a benefit they're neglecting to exploit that you could claim as your own USP? Remember that your USP doesn't have to be original or exclusive - it just has to be *claimed* as your own.

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For example, data hosting provider Rackspace uses the strap line ‘Fanatical Support’. And as they’ve registered the phrase as their own intellectual property no other hosting provider can legitimately use it in the same context.



Now I’ve no idea whether customer support at Rackspace is any more or less fanatical than with any other hosting provider. Perhaps it is. But that’s beside the point. What matters is that Rackspace has claimed the USP as its own, and in the process it taps into what is perhaps the main concern of any business when selecting a hosting provider, namely that if their server goes down they want help to solve it – fast!

A USP does not necessarily have to be expressed in the form of a registered strap line; it can simply be a benefit that is exploited in your marketing and advertising that becomes associated in people’s minds with your brand or product.

Let’s say, for instance, you’re in the car insurance business. And let’s say your policies include 90 days annual European driving cover at no additional cost. And let’s say your competitors’ policies also include this benefit, BUT they make no mention of it in their marketing and leave it buried in the small print. Claim this benefit it as your own!

I changed my motor insurance recently for this exact reason. Last summer when I drove my car in Europe I discovered that my standard insurance policy didn’t cover me. I had to take out a separate (and expensive) short-term policy to cover me for just two weeks.

Then I received a direct mail shot from another insurer – a MAJOR UK insurer and motoring association - offering me ‘90 days FREE European cover’ included with my standard policy”. I switched insurers like a shot.

It was only after I’d made the decision to switch that I discovered, upon researching the market more thoroughly, that most of this MAJOR insurer’s competitors were also offering the same or a similar benefit – it’s just that it only ever featured in the small print. I had to search for it. They clearly didn’t consider it to be a significant benefit. Lesson learned.

Another type of USP is the ‘bold guarantee’.

In its early days, Domino's Pizzas struggled for business. Not surprising when you consider the competition – even back in 1960, when Tom Monaghan opened his first pizzeria with a down payment of \$75 and a \$500 loan. How do you find a USP for something as commonplace as a pizza? Then Tom (or a copywriter working for Tom) had an inspired idea - his, now famous, 30 minute guarantee:

“Hot, fresh pizza in 30 minutes or your money back”

The rest is history. There are now 8,000 Domino's outlets across the globe, and counting.

Your USP can be based on *anything*...

...size:

High and Mighty for Big and Tall Men

...location:

The last filling station for 60 miles!

Fill up now! Starfleet Services in ½ mile

... low price:

ASDA

Permanently low prices

...high price:

Stella Artois

Reassuringly expensive

...exclusivity:

Liberty

Liberty doesn't need to flesh out its USP with a promise or slogan. It's already implicit in the name. Understatement speaks volumes to the right kind of prospect. Think Bentley, Hermes, Gucci, Rolex...

Your USP should permeate your selling literature; not simply as a slogan, but as an embedded message presented from any and every angle.

Here's how Rackspace embeds the message:

Fanatical Support

Rackspace^R Unique Customer Service Philosophy

Rackspace is different to many other hosting providers in that we are a service orientated company. It is our goal to be the best service company your business has ever interacted with. Our customer service philosophy, Fanatical Support[®] has won much industry recognition and is the foundation of our success. Our latest awards were picked up in the 2010 National Customer Service Awards where we won 'Front Line Customer Service Team' and 'Customer Service Team of the Year'.

Here's how I go about it on my own website:

Hard-hitting, provocative copywriting that will sell your product, service or idea

When you've just seconds to differentiate your product in a crowded marketplace, you aren't about to take chances with the impact of your copywriting.

Attention spans are getting shorter. Information is becoming more complex. Buying decisions happen in the blink of an eye. The importance of powerful, clear and concise copywriting has never been more critical. Give me an unruly tangle of information and I'll craft it into a hard-hitting and compelling communication – fast. I'll work with you to develop a strong brand identity and a consistent and authoritative voice throughout your marketing literature.

1.2 Benefits vs features

A hefty proportion of all sales copy is feature driven. That's why it doesn't work especially well:

"The BGZ 640 clothes dryer has a 7.5 kg capacity, a built in condenser and an alternating tumble function..."

So what?

"The BGZ 640 clothes dryer has a massive 7.5 kg capacity, enabling you to dry 50% more clothes in a single load. The 640's built in condenser means there's no need for an inconvenient ventilation hose, and its alternating tumble function means your laundry will always be crease-free..."

Ah, now I see...

The second version of the copy translates features into benefits. The features are still mentioned, but each one is followed immediately by an associated benefit. Why? Because benefits sell. As with the headline, self-interest is the driving force:

People don't buy a faster drill, they buy a quicker hole.

People don't buy a titanium tennis racquet, they buy a superior volley and serve.

People don't buy an 8gb memory card for their digital camera, they buy the capacity to take and store 2,000 pictures.

You get the idea...

During my years as a copywriter and marketer I've spent a *lot* of time involved in training people in the art of selling. In my experience, the main quality that distinguishes a successful sales person is the ability to translate features into benefits, and to do so in a believable and engaging way.

Instead of stating simply and clearly the benefits of what she's selling, the inexperienced sales person will frequently become bogged in a mire of facts, figures, statistics and irrelevancies.

But there's no point in telling someone, for example, that the car you're selling has a hybrid engine if it doesn't mean a thing to them. And it certainly doesn't pay to presume that just because you happen to know that a hybrid engine emits less CO₂ and gives more miles to the gallon that your prospect will be equally well informed.

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And even if your prospect does get the drift of what this barrage of features implies for them, it will have nothing like the same persuasive impact as being immersed in the benefits firsthand.

As with the ace sales person, the ace copywriter will paint a picture for their prospect, they'll transport them in their imagination to a place where they can actually envisage themselves as the owner of this indispensable product. They'll create a sense of urgency and desire; they'll make them wonder how on earth they ever got by without the product; they'll connect powerfully with their emotions. And they do this by driving home the benefits.

When features become benefits - a note of caution...

"Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes time and annoys the pig."

- Anon

Once you've got to know the rules, only then can you learn to break them. And so it is with extolling benefits. Because there is a certain type of prospect who is going to be immediately turned off by being hit over the head with a list of benefits. For want of a better term, I'll call this person the 'industry insider'. This is the targeted business-to-business (B2B) prospect, usually a specialist in his field, and who is able to read between the lines with having it spelled out. They will also pride themselves on this ability.

If, for example, you're writing a sales letter addressed to, say, mining engineers, and you're attempting to sell them a new type of pump that outperforms other models on the market. You're going to consider very carefully how you present the benefits.

The wrong way:

"The Acme Super-Fast 490z pumps at speeds of up to 5,000 litres a minute, which means an end to waiting as your mine shaft drains slowly of water while you lose valuable productivity. The Acme 490z pump will drain your mineshaft in hours – not days!"

OK, I exaggerate for effect, but you see where I'm going.

In most cases this type of prospect is 'feature orientated', meaning they understand the jargon of their business better than you do, and they certainly don't need to be told that your 5,000 litre a minute pump is going to drain their mine shaft faster than their 2,000 litre model, *and* that it's going to have an impact on their productivity. They're perfectly able to work it out for themselves, and must be allowed to do so.

Here's an extract from a real-life brochure (de-branded) that I wrote for a firm of City of London asset managers:

The XYZ Asset Management team enjoys complete investment autonomy, empowering it to achieve optimal medium and long-term returns, with the emphasis on flexible and transparent long only equity solutions based on client specific benchmarks...

To the uninformed reader this is gobbledegook. But my target prospect knows exactly how these features translate in terms of benefits without having them spelt out. Any attempt to clarify the benefits would be construed as patronising, and the brochure would almost certainly end up in the bin. Instead I've flattered my reader by crediting her with the intelligence to work it out without my help. As a result I'm immediately on her wavelength.

If I were selling the identical product to the general public, (ie business-to-consumer or B2C) I would, of course, come from an entirely different premise, and I certainly would never, ever use jargon (as well as acronyms: RNID, DTI, etc) without first clearly defining what it means.

As a general rule of thumb, when writing for niche business-to-business markets, the more specialised your prospect the more feature orientated they will be, and the more resistant they will be to benefits-orientated 'selling'.

I labour this point because in my early days as a copywriter I fell into this very trap. I wrote a benefit-laden, all bells and whistles, razzmatazz, in your face sales brochure for an especially staid machine manufacturer. It was thrown back at me to be rewritten! I've never made the same mistake again. Be warned.

1.3 Write a damn good headline

“I never drink when I write. But I often write when I drink.”

- Keith Waterhouse (6 February 1929 – 4 September 2009)

Back in the 1920s, a copywriter by the name of Max Seikham was employed by the Sherwin Cody School in New York to write an ad for their English language classes. The campaign coincided with a massive influx of European émigrés into the city, most of whom were unable to speak English. English lessons were big business. Max came up with the following headline:

Do you make mistakes in English?

The body copy below the ad then went on to list some of the most common grammatical mistakes made by non-native English speakers, followed by a call to action to sign up for classes.

The ad was a flop!

But Max wasn't a quitter. After careful consideration, he added an extra word to the headline. Just one word: 'these'. Everything else about the ad, including the body copy and the call to action, remained identical to the first ad. Hence the headline now read:

Do you make these mistakes in English?

The ad was successful. So successful in fact that it became the control ad for the school for the next two decades. But why should just one word have made such a profound difference? After the event, of course, it's easy to see why: the addition of the word 'these' instils curiosity. It implies there is something to follow. It informs the reader in an instant that in reading on they will find out what 'these' mistakes are. What aspiring English speaker could resist? Max's original headline was a closed loop question: it merely invited a 'yes' / 'no' answer and no further dialogue; his new headline prompted action by making a powerful appeal to both the reader's natural sense of curiosity *and* self-interest. Such is the authority of a good headline.

The headline is far and away the most important element of your copy. It's also the most abused and misunderstood.

This applies whether you're writing an advertisement, a sales letter, a newsletter, an email, a landing page for a website or any other piece of sales orientated writing. And if you're running a business, I would argue that every customer facing piece you will ever write falls under this category – whether it's a presentation to pitch before a venture capitalist to raise

vital money, a letter sent to explain a change in your terms of business, or even a product service manual. In one way or another you're always selling, however indirectly.

Why is the headline so important?

Begin at the beginning. Every day we're inundated with messages that are hell-bent on selling us something. From the moment we turn on the radio or TV or open a newspaper or log onto our computers in the morning; when we're travelling to work by car, train, bus, taxi or tube; when we go online; when we sit down in front of our televisions at night to relax.

We're hit with a relentless bombardment of advertisements, each yelling at us to be noticed. How do we live with it? Easy, we filter them out. Or at least we filter out all but the tiny proportion of ads that grab our ATTENTION.

Why does one ad grab our attention over another? In almost every case, it's the result of a powerful headline. Or a powerful visual accompanied by a powerful headline.

What makes for a powerful headline?

There's more to crafting a headline than getting attention for attention's sake. Your headline must also be relevant. The job of the headline is to draw the reader into the body copy of your ad, letter, website, email, press release, direct mail package, etc. To achieve this it must reflect the primary benefit of your product. It must also actively sell your product in its own right.

In his book, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, copywriter David Ogilvy argues that, on average, five times as many people read the headline as read the body copy: "When you have written your headline, you have spent eighty cents out of your dollar. If you haven't done some selling in your headline, you have wasted 80 percent of your client's money."

You're probably thinking: "But what about all those quirky and wacky headlines I see around me every day? Are they actively selling me a product?"

The answer is yes – but only in an indirect way. Because in most cases what you're looking at is brand advertising. The purpose of brand advertising is to keep a brand at the forefront of the public consciousness. It works for global conglomerates, but it has no place in the advertising efforts of a typical small to medium-sized business.

Our only concern as copywriters is to generate a direct response. In the process we may well enhance awareness of our brand, but that is not our primary motive.

Nor are you trying to win prizes for originality. You're focused exclusively on one thing: selling your product. So your headline must actively sell to your audience.

Unlike brand advertising, it isn't good enough for your selling message simply to get noticed and sub-consciously absorbed for later reference.

At the extreme level, this will involve encapsulating your selling proposition in the most direct way possible by delivering your headline as a self-contained message:

Here's a direct headline I produced for an online interview coaching site:

Using InterviewGOLD™ is like having your very own interview coach available 24 hours a day

Whether or not you went on to read the body copy of the page, you would understand the message. And if you happened to be looking for a new job, there's a strong chance that you would continue reading beyond the headline.

The late, great copywriter John Caples discovered, by means of painstaking split-testing, that the most effective headlines always appeal to the self-interest of the reader.

Whenever you craft a headline ask yourself the question: "Will this headline appeal to the self-interest of my target group?" If it doesn't, keep redrafting until it does.

OK, so you've got this part right. Now you're left with a mile of creative leeway.

Let's examine some tried and tested headline formulae:

A. The no-nonsense direct headline:

End of season clearance: 70% off all garden furniture for one week!

Says it all. If you've got an irresistible offer, why muddy the waters?

The 'end of season clearance' is important here, because it provides a plausible reason for offering such a substantial discount. Whenever you make a bold offer or claim, make sure it is always backed-up with a reason - think credibility!

B. The direct question:

Are you paying too much for your car servicing and maintenance?

Once again, a strong and unambiguous headline designed to resonate with the target sector, and lead the reader into the body copy of the ad.

C. The indirect question:

Why crawl underground when you can fly through the air?

This is an ad headline I wrote for a Fixed Wireless Access (FWA) provider.

It achieves three things: 1. it arouses curiosity; 2. it poses a question, which is then later answered in the sub-head and main body of the copy; 3. it refers indirectly to the USP of the product:

Fixed Wireless Access is a high-speed wireless connection beamed directly to the core of the internet. Unlike a conventional internet connection, it doesn't travel via underground cables, meaning that it's both faster and more reliable. Once you know this, the headline makes sense.

Remember, 'Clever' headlines must always relate directly to the main benefit of the product.

D. The command

Give me just five minutes of your time and I'll show you how to eliminate back pain forever...

Tell your reader what to do. So long as your command includes a strong appeal to self interest, it's hard to resist.

A variation on the command headline is to tell your reader what NOT to do:

If you'd rather not know the ugly truth about hidden bank charges and how you can avoid them, then please don't read this ad...

A red rag to a bull, or what?

E. Make an announcement

Present your headline as news:

Announcing UNLIMITED automated data backup for PC users for just 13p a day...

Announcement headlines can also begin with 'introducing'; 'new' 'now', 'for the first time', etc.

F. Offer a promise of valuable information

How to lose weight in time for summer – 7 painless steps to shedding the flab

The 'how to' ad is as old as copywriting itself. The cover of any lifestyle magazine would seem naked without such a promise. Even as a hardnosed copywriter, I find the 'how to' formula difficult to resist – even though I *know* that in the process I'm being manipulated by another copywriter! Such is the power of this type of headline.

Below is a variation on one the most successful direct response headlines of all time:

How Doctors Stay Well While Treating Sick People All Day

It combines a promise, proof, curiosity and an immediate reward.

And just for good measure, here is the headline of one of the most successful direct response ads of all time, which also happens to be the title of the product, Dale Carnegie's mega-selling book on self-improvement, published some 50 years ago and still in print today:

How to win friends and influence people

OK, this stuff sounds a bit dated these days, but who on earth wouldn't find at least a scintilla of appeal in such a beguiling title? Although I'm not so sure that I'd want to be caught reading it in public!

Be as creative as you like with your headlines, but never be clever just for the sake of it. The best headlines always get straight to the point and relate powerfully to the principal benefit of your product.

An example: let's say you were advertising a marketing program for start-up businesses and you used this headline (this is a variation of a real headline for a real product):

Don't become one of the 80,000!

The headline refers to the worrying statistic that 400,000 new businesses start up each year in the UK, and yet as many as one fifth of these cease trading within their first 12 months. But the headline is weak, because it could be referring to anything at all. Unless we read the body copy, it remains a mystery. But it arouses little curiosity. 80,000 what? Who cares? Why should we read any further?

How could this headline be improved? Several variations spring to mind. Here's one of them:

FACT: one in five of all UK business start-ups fail within one year! Why?

Now, if you were one of those 400,000 new business hopefuls and you saw this headline, would it stop you in your tracks? You bet!

Misguided creativity is responsible for some of the least successful headlines in the history of advertising. Never, ever, lose sight of the end game – which is to sell your product, service or idea. All the rest is balderdash!

And finally, approach headline writing as a brainstorming exercise. Pour your ideas onto the page. Don't be content with just one or two hopefuls. Stretch your imagination until you come up with 20, 30 or even 40 ideas. Play with them. Swap them around. Compare them with headlines used by competitors; run the same ad or letter but with a different headline; compare the response.

A US-based mail order company tested four different headlines for a diet product, over a six-month period. The sales copy remained identical in every other respect. Only the headline was different in each mailing.

The headlines were as follows:

1. "Revolutionary New Diet Product!"
2. "A New Diet Breakthrough!"
3. "Dieting Secrets of a Desperate Housewife!"
4. "How a "Wisconsin Housewife" Lost 22 Pounds in 32 Days!"

The responses for each ad were tracked and logged. The final results were as follows. Over the testing period, total sales were 220 units. Here's how each individual ad performed:

1. "Breakthrough New Diet Product!" - 7% of total sales
2. "A New Diet Revolution!" - 3% of total sales
3. "Dieting Secrets of a Desperate Housewife!" - 30% of total sales
4. "How a Wisconsin Housewife lost 22 pounds In 32 Days!" - 60% of total sales

As you can see, the most successful headline produced almost 20 times the number of sales as the least successful headline. I rest my case.

1.4 Use sub-heads

A function of the sub-head is to clarify and reinforce the message of the headline. Here's a headline I wrote for a website selling an interview skills program:

CONGRATULATIONS!

You've just improved your chances of winning a job offer by 92%*!

And the sub-head:

A proven system that has helped thousands of candidates win top jobs

The headline grabs attention; the sub-head expands on the message. If your headline is supported by a visual, then its relevance is reinforced by the context of the picture.

Here's a headline I wrote for an outdoor advertising campaign to be displayed on billboards, trains, buses, subways etc. In fact, the headline makes sense by itself, but when complemented by a strong sub-head and a powerful visual, its impact is increased dramatically.

Challenge your view, not your intelligence!

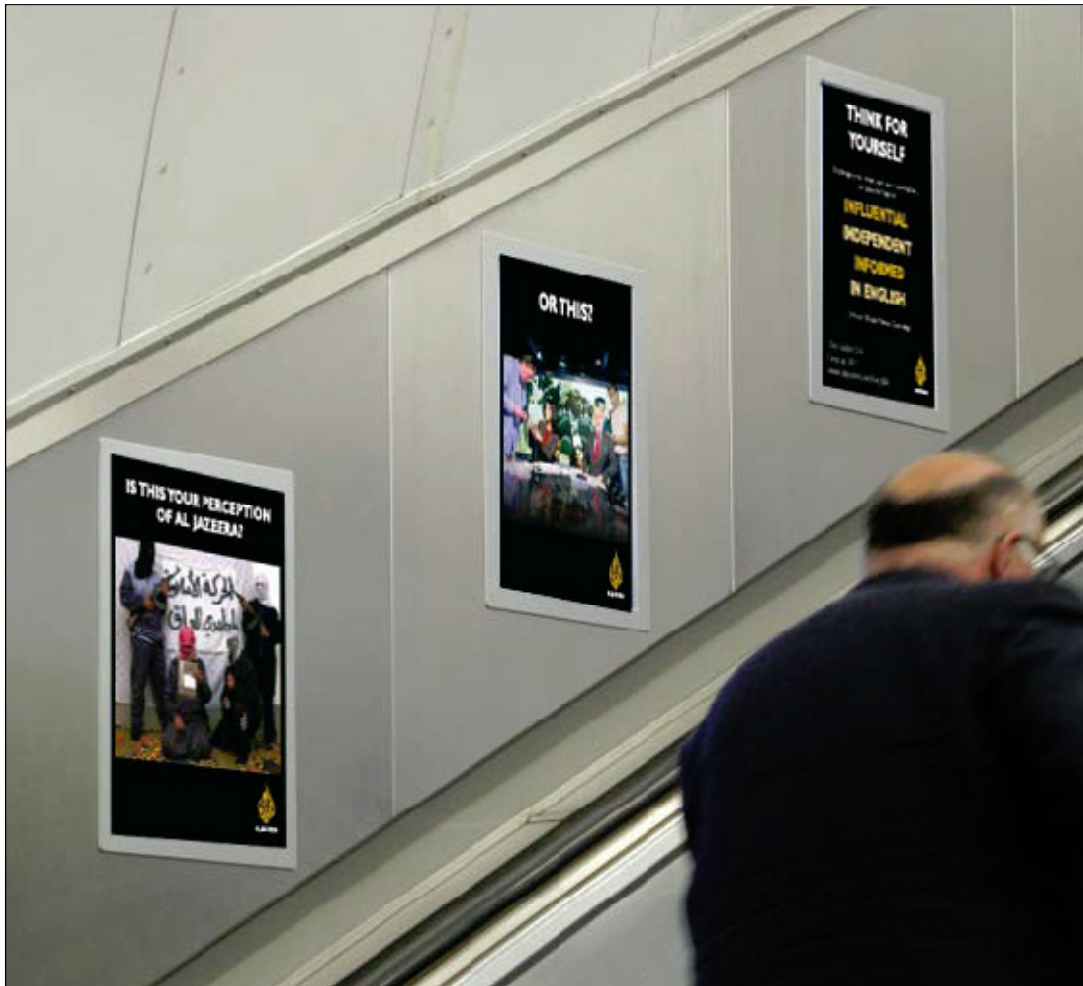
Al Jazeera English

Influential – Independent - Informed - In English



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Here's a variation of the same campaign, designed for the London underground. In this case it uses the power of the headline to tell a story across three ad posters in sequence.



Below is one of a series of headlines I produced for a computer skills training company:

The sky's the limit (literally!)

Welcome to your rewarding new future as an IT professional



The headline above would be meaningless without the both the subhead *and* the visual.

Another function of the sub-head is to organise your selling message and further tease the reader into your copy. As a newspaper journalist will divide her copy into bite-sized chunks with sub-heads to make it more readable, so the copywriter will use sub-heads to drive her argument to its conclusion.

1.6 Write about your prospect and their problems - not yourself

When many smaller businesses set about writing sales copy they inevitably launch into a description of themselves: what 'we' do; how long 'we've' been doing it; how well-appointed 'our' offices are; a profile of 'our' friendly team; how 'we' deliver innovative solutions and how 'we' go the extra mile on behalf of 'our' customers, etc, etc...

Of course, it's fine to include a short profile of your business. But this belongs on the 'about us' page of your website, or on the back pages of your brochure, and not on your website landing pages, sales letters or on page one of your brochure – which is very often where this self-congratulatory puffery turns up.

This is what I call 'we-our' copy. It does little to differentiate your product, and in most cases leaves you sounding identical to your competitors, who are equally determined to tell the world how good they are. And, critically, it lacks that vital appeal to self-interest. When someone reads your sales copy, the only question on their mind, if only sub-consciously, is 'what's in this for me?'

So when you sit down to write your copy, think 'you-your', and not 'we-our'. Address your reader in the second person:

WRONG:

“We offer our customers an easy-to-implement affiliate scheme. By promoting our services on their websites they can earn extra income, simply by placing one of our banners on their websites and emails.”

RIGHT:

*“You can earn an open ended income from promoting **** *****™ to your website visitors or candidate database, with zero costs, zero input, zero administration and zero risk. Simply place a discrete banner on your website and emails and leave the rest to us!”*

Gary Bencivenga, one of America's most successful direct response copywriters, once said that the two most important words in copywriting are 'yeah' and 'sure'. If your copy can't pass the 'Yeah, sure!' test then it lacks believability and consequently won't sell.

I'd agree with him. I'd also argue that the second most important two words are 'so' and 'what'.

So what if you claim to have a friendly and courteous staff. *So what* if you offer superior attention to your client needs. *So what* if you're committed to a culture of continuous improvement. Does your prospect really care? Besides, if you're running any kind of serious business all of the above should go without saying.

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By all means touch on these areas, but this isn't front page selling, and it does nothing to differentiate your business, because it's all back to front. It's all about you, when it should be all about your prospects and their problems.

1.7 Be provocative

"There is always a heavy demand for fresh mediocrity. In every generation the least cultivated taste has the largest appetite."

- Paul Gauguin

One sure-fire way of gaining attention is to provoke your reader. Some years ago I sent an e-mailer to prospective clients promoting my copywriting and marketing services. It contained this subject headline:

"Only salespeople generate income; all others generate costs..."

It's actually a quotation from management guru Peter Drucker. I don't necessarily agree with him, but that isn't why I used it. I used it to get a reaction. It worked!

It provoked more immediate responses than just about any other email I've ever sent. Some people agreed wholeheartedly with Peter Drucker's sentiment, and wrote to tell me so; others were spitting feathers, and also wrote to tell me so. One person, an accountant, wrote to remind me that accountants also generate income by saving businesses money and managing cash flow. Before I knew it I had a full scale debate on my hands.

The point is that my headline provoked people to open my email, if only to disagree or damn me. And by the time they'd read my email, many also clicked through to my website to see what else I had to say about sales and marketing. The result was a flurry of incoming enquiries from people who liked my approach and also just happened to be looking for copywriting and marketing services. You can see how it works.

Now what if I'd used a more conventional headline? Something like this:

"6 ways in which my copywriting skills will benefit your business..."

There's nothing wrong with it. In fact I regularly use this approach to good effect.

But, and it's a big but, it will only inspire a recipient to open my email (or read the body copy of an ad or sales letter, etc) if the message resonates with their present needs.

The provocative headline, conversely, gets opened for other reasons: empathy, curiosity or plain annoyance. It's not to say that one approach is superior to the other, and for this reason I'll frequently alternate between headline styles, split-test and measure the results. The important thing is to get read.

Being provocative extends beyond writing antagonising email headers. Here's a marketing postcard I wrote for one of my clients who specialises in environmentally sustainable print:

Read and Destroy!

Let's be realistic. Very soon this card is going to end up in your bin.

So it may help to know that it won't leave a toxic legacy. It was printed with vegetable based ink, using a safe waterless process, on sustainable paper accredited by the Forestry Stewardship Council. And unlike ordinary laminated print, which inevitably ends up in a landfill, the revolutionary new laminate on this card means that it can be harmlessly recycled...

Here's a variation of the same mailer:

Junk Mail! Bin Immediately!

Love it or hate it, direct mail is a fact of life. And the depressing truth is that 97% of the stuff gets binned without receiving so much as a glance.

So it may help to know that when you dump this card it isn't going to leave a toxic legacy...

I'm tapping into two resident emotions simultaneously: the green debate, and people's widespread aversion to junk mail. And by openly admitting to the sin of sending junk mail and even anticipating the recipient's likely reaction by inviting her to bin it, I've a better chance of getting my message across than running with a conventional straightforward headline and sales message, such as:

Environmentally Friendly Printing

We print using vegetable based ink, using a safe waterless process, on sustainable paper accredited by the Forestry Stewardship Council. And unlike ordinary laminated print, the revolutionary new laminate on this card means that it can be harmlessly recycled...

It conveys the identical facts, but it is void of emotion. Which postcard would be more likely to get you thinking?

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1.8 Place captions beneath visuals

The fact is many more people read captions than read body copy. As far as possible, always place a caption beneath a visual. Ideally your caption should embody your brand name, USP or selling message.

...world-renowned eBay marketing entrepreneurs Matt and Amanda Clarkson



Matt and Amanda deliver eBay education programs to people all over the world.

What you've learned in this section

You've learned that...

- ✓ Before you begin writing, it is CRITICAL that you consider your USP.
- ✓ Your Unique Selling Proposition (USP) is your major benefit encapsulated. It's what differentiates you from the competition. It's what you stand for in the eyes of your customers.
- ✓ Your USP can be articulated in a strap line / tag line or slogan.
- ✓ Your USP should also be embedded, from different angles, in every message that you broadcast to the wider world – including your guarantee: “Hot, fresh pizza in 30 minutes or your money back”.
- ✓ Your USP can be based on *anything* at all including:
 - Quality
 - Service
 - Size
 - Location
 - Price
 - Exclusivity
 - And so on...

You've learned that...

A hefty proportion of all sales copy is feature driven. That's why it doesn't work especially well.

As a copywriter, you must paint a picture for your prospects; you'll transport them in their imaginations to a place where they can actually envisage themselves as the owner of this indispensable product. You'll create a sense of urgency and desire; you'll make them wonder how on earth they ever got by without your product; you'll connect powerfully with their emotions. And you do this by driving home the benefits.

You've learned how to...

- ✓ Write a damn good headline.
- ✓ The headline is far and away the most important element of your copy.
- ✓ A good headline grabs our ATTENTION

But there's more to crafting a headline than getting attention for attention's sake. Your headline must also be relevant.

- ✓ The job of the headline is to draw the reader into the body copy or offer.
- ✓ To achieve this it must reflect the primary benefit of your product.
- ✓ Your headline must actively sell to your audience.

This involves encapsulating your selling proposition in the most direct way possible by delivering your headline as a self-contained message.

Types of headline formulae:

- ✓ The direct headline
- ✓ The direct question
- ✓ The indirect question
- ✓ The command
- ✓ The announcement / news
- ✓ The promise

You've learned that...

- ✓ When complemented by a strong sub-head and a powerful visual, the impact of a headline is increased dramatically.
- ✓ The function of the sub-head is to clarify and reinforce the message of the headline.
- ✓ The headline grabs attention; the sub-head builds upon the message.
- ✓ If your headline is supported by a visual, then its relevance is reinforced by the context of the picture.
- ✓ Another function of the sub-head is to organise your selling message and further tease the reader into your copy.

You've learned to...

- ✓ Write about your prospect and their problems and not to write about yourself.
- ✓ When someone reads your sales copy, the only question on their mind, if only sub-consciously, is 'what's in this for me?'

You've learned to...

- ✓ Be provocative
- ✓ One sure-fire way of gaining attention is to provoke your reader. This involves tapping into their emotions.

You've learned to...

Place a caption beneath all visuals. Many more people read captions than read body copy.

EXERCISE 1

Nail your USP

Consider your own USP. (If you don't yet have one in the formal sense, then now's the time to do something about it.) Does it do the best possible job of differentiating your brand from the competition? How might it be improved?

Visit a cross-section of competitor websites, find out what they're saying about themselves and compare their offerings with your own. How do they stand up? Look for chinks in your competitors' armour. Identify at least one major benefit that you may lay claim to as exclusive or special about your own brand – this does not necessarily need to be unique (unless it is); as with the insurance example above, it simply needs to be something that your competitors are currently neglecting to fully exploit.

Once you've isolated your major benefit, I then want you to craft it into a 100-word 'elevator pitch' that neatly encapsulates your USP. Don't worry too much at this stage about getting the writing spot on. You'll have plenty of opportunities later on in the program to revisit and polish your writing. What's important at this stage is the substance of your offer. Style comes later.

Print out your USP and stick it on the wall.

EXERCISE 2

Write a series of headlines aimed at selling one your own products or services.

Experiment with the various headline types discussed above. Don't stop at three or four – in fact, don't be content until you've got 30 – 40 potential headlines. If this sounds excessive, I can assure you that it isn't. Nor is it merely an extended exercise designed to help you get the hang of crafting effective headlines.

What you are doing here is going through a process of elimination. It's what all good copywriters do when sitting down to write an ad, direct mail piece or landing page.

Now that you're armed with your bank of headlines, it's time to find the best one for your needs. Guided by the principles outlined in section 1.3, go through your headlines and select what you believe in your own judgement to be the winning four; set aside (but do not delete) the remainder.

Now, based on what you've learned so far, together with your existing knowledge of your product and prospects, select your favourite headline out of the four winners.

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Your next step is to develop four sub-heads, one for each of your headlines. Remember that the function of the sub-head is to clarify and reinforce the headline, organise your selling message and further tease the reader into your copy - the headline grabs attention; the sub-head expands on the message.

Rule # 2 Interest!

“The nicest thing about not planning is that failure comes as a complete surprise and is not preceded by a period of worry and depression.”

- John Preston

OK, so you’ve succeeded in grabbing your reader’s attention. What next? Your task now is to maintain their interest long enough to be able to deliver your message.

How many times have you begun reading a piece in a newspaper or magazine because you were attracted by the headline, then only to give up after a few lines because you found it boring or irrelevant?

Likewise, how often has your eye settled on a news story that you had no intention of reading, but have nevertheless found yourself so absorbed that you read avidly through to the end?

Why makes the difference? In most cases it boils down to the distinction between good and bad writing. A journalist has a limited window of opportunity to gain your interest. If he loses you along the way then he’s failed in his job.

The same logic applies to successful sales copy. Read on...

2.1 Be relevant

*I keep six faithful serving men
Who teach me well and true.
Their names are What and Where and When
And How and Why and Who*

- Rudyard Kipling

Who am I writing for?

It's the first question to ask yourself when you sit down to write your copy.

Being relevant means writing in a tone and style appropriate to your readership. It also means making doubly sure that what you're offering your target prospects is something they are likely to want to buy. In my experience this is a major blooper for most fledgling copywriters, because they write in the same 'voice' irrespective of what they're selling and the demographic of their target audience. They mistakenly believe there exists a universal 'language that sells' and that if they use it success will surely follow. Don't believe a word of it: there's no such single language.

To illustrate this point, here's a snapshot of my recent workload:

- A brochure for a firm of City of London asset managers
- A brochure for a firm patent attorneys
- An online sales letter for a USA timeshare reseller company
- A series of advertisements for a USA reality TV series
- A series of sales letters for a manufacturer of printing machines
- A website for an artiste representation agency
- A website for a garden design consultancy
- A website for a government-backed charity that delivers learning services to the disadvantaged
- A website for a major managed hosting data provider
- A website for a lost property retrieval service
- Numerous websites and marketing packages for design and marketing and advertising agencies
- Ghost writing a 300pp book on political corruption on behalf of a West African politician
- A branding strategy for a high-profile business and retail development in Kiev, Ukraine
- A re-branding strategy, including advertising and marketing collateral, for the city of Saint Petersburg on behalf of the Russian government

- An ongoing newsletter / monthly press article for a data storage provider
- A web-based sales letter for an information marketer
- An outdoor advertising campaign for a major international television news channel
- A series of ads and promotional pieces for a major global motor manufacturer
- A series of sponsorship brochures for three internationally renowned motor racing teams

It's a microcosm of the world at large, from the mundane to the exotic. And this is just a partial list. I didn't make it up for the sake of an example. It's real. See: www.copy-doctor.co.uk

The point is no two assignments are the same. Let's take an example:

One of the projects listed above is a brochure for an asset management company. My readership comprises investment bankers, fund managers, private investors, heads of industry: educated, business-literate people who understand investment. They want to be informed. And they certainly don't want to *feel* like they're being sold to. It is essential therefore that the tone of my copy reflects my readership, ie modulated, informative, relaxed, non-salesy, softly-softly. Here's an extract from the brochure:

*“Small, agile and cohesive, the ***** Asset Management team enjoys complete investment autonomy, empowering it to achieve optimal medium and long-term returns, with the emphasis on flexible and transparent long only equity solutions based on client-specific benchmarks. As our fund managers' interests are directly aligned with those of our investors, you can be confident that we make every effort to deliver outstanding performance...”*

As with most industries, investment banking has its own specialist jargon. Critically, I reflect this in my writing. To neglect to do so would diminish my client's credibility. I've done my research. So must you. Being relevant means understanding your reader, getting into their skin.

Another project mentioned above is a web-based, long-form sales letter I wrote for an information marketer. The product is aimed at an entirely different readership: business opportunity seekers - people of ordinary means from predominantly blue-collar backgrounds who are seeking a way of earning extra income from home. Here's an extract from the opening of the letter:



“How tapping into the secret law of attraction can enable you to earn multiple streams of income and gain financial independence for you and your loved ones - fast!”

***In just a few moments
you'll have access to the same unique wealth creation
methods that thousands of ordinary people worldwide are using to
give them **the financial freedom to enjoy life to the full...*****

In 1961, Bob Proctor was a high-school dropout, scraping a living as a cleaner and with nothing to show for his life but a string of dead-end jobs and a pile of unsupportable debt. Yet within a year he was making more than \$100,000. He soon topped the \$1 million mark and today is personally worth in excess of \$11 million, and all as a result of **an amazing chance discovery**.*

*In just a few moments Bob is going to show you exactly what his discovery was, and how you can take advantage of **the identical knowledge** to gain financial independence and take control of your life – **fast!***

But first of all, who is Bob Proctor and why should you take any notice of what he has to say?

“You have the power to change, to become more productive and creative and live a happier and more fulfilled life. You just have to learn how to apply the power of your mind. I’m here to show you how...”

Bob Proctor

Bob Proctor is one of the most successful and sought after success coaches and speakers in the world today. Through his books, seminars, courses and personal and corporate coaching programs, he has quite literally transformed the lives of thousands of people and has helped his students create unimagined wealth and prosperity - in many cases millions of dollars – simply by helping them apply powerful and yet little-known universal principles...

* For independent verification of Bob's wealth, visit: <http://www.freewebsitereport.org/www.bobproctor.com>

[Continued...]

Once again, I address my reader in a 'voice' she is likely to relate to. On this occasion it's warm, down to earth, sincere, friendly, confidence building. I highlight the benefits of the business opportunity while at the same time anticipating readers' resistance to buying by answering their questions and allaying their fears in advance. Unlike the asset management example above, however, I steer away from jargon and words or phrases that will not to be immediately understood by my target audience.

Just as I address the investment bankers and fund managers in a 'voice' they can relate to, I speak to my target audience using their own language. Remember, you're a sales person in print. Your aim always is to empathise with your readers. Gain their trust.

In the same way that a journalist writing for a tabloid newspaper will not write in a tone more appropriate to a broadsheet, your copy should always be pitched using language that will be both understood and appreciated by your readers.

To study the assignments mentioned above, among many others, visit my corporate website: www.copy-doctor.co.uk

2.2 Arouse curiosity

If you've ever begun to read what seemed like a promising piece in a newspaper then given up through lack of interest, then the journalist has failed in her task. By the same token, if you decide to skip an article because the headline leaves you cold, or gives away so much as to merit no further reading, then the journalist (or sub-editor) has not done his job. And good copywriting has everything in common with good journalism: the compelling headline; the teasing sub-head; the hook; an appeal to curiosity or self-interest; a desire to read to the end to see what happens.

So how do you arouse curiosity in your writing? It begins, of course, at the beginning - with the headline, as discussed earlier in the program. However, the need to evoke curiosity doesn't end with the headline. As with all good writing, the urge on the part of the reader to find out 'what happens' should drive them through to the end like a relentless and invisible force.

Consider the following:

In this free report I'm going to tell you about how my breakthrough strategies for increasing sales can increase the profitability of your business from between 50% – 300% within one year. But does this mean you'll have to work harder? Far from it - in fact implementing any one of these proven marketing strategies will in all likelihood give you the freedom to work fewer hours while earning significantly more money.

You're probably wondering why I would give information like that away for free, and exactly what you can expect to gain by downloading my free report. Good questions and I'll answer them. But first, take a moment to consider...

See where we're going here? I'm all the while whetting your appetite by appealing to your curiosity and innate self-interest, and I've no intention of letting you off the hook until I've told you what I'm going to tell you. Telling your reader what you're going to tell them, while not actually telling them, (until the end, that is – there must be no anticlimaxes) is just one of many techniques used by good copywriters to drive the momentum of their writing.

2.3 Meet the need

To inspire someone to buy your product you must first place yourself in their shoes. Ask yourself this question: 'If I were looking for XYZ product, exactly what information would I need to enable me to make a confident buying decision?'

Before you write so much as a line of copy, it is vital that you exhaustively research your product, from every possible angle. Visit competitor websites: compare prices, specifications, guarantees, USPs. What can you do as a copywriter to improve on your competitors' offers?

Writing a sales piece before you know exactly what the competition is doing is like a general taking his troops into battle without first having assessed the strength his enemy.

Failure to complete this exercise is one of the most common reasons that a piece of sales copy will fail to convert – and when I use the term 'sales copy' I include websites and brochures as well as sales letters, emails and direct marketing pieces.

When you've finished researching your product, your next, and equally important, task is to research your prospects. Who exactly are you selling to? (don't presume here) What do they want? What *don't* they want? What are their hot buttons? Where is their 'pain'? How deep you go at this stage depends on how well you know your product. If you're selling a tried and tested product to a clearly defined audience, it's easier than if you're testing the water with an unknown product. What is important, however, is that you base your research on firm data, as opposed to just 'gut feeling' and speculation. This would include looking at previous sales stats for the same or similar products (who bought them?), asking industry insiders, visiting blogs, and assessing competitor markets. To assess potential demand for a brand new product or service, it's also a useful exercise to look at the actual number of online searches conducted on related search phrases.

See: <https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>. It can save you a lot of tears and wasted effort further down the line.

2.4 Prove your case

Failure to deliver a complete argument is one the most common reasons why amateur copy fails to convert. Always anticipate your prospects' response to your argument and answer as many questions as possible in advance. Always prove your case, and always keep it watertight. Wherever possible, use facts, figures and statistics, backed up by testimonials from satisfied customers and / or supporting evidence from credible professional sources, including respected newspapers and journals. Here's an example of what I mean. It's a real-life mailer I wrote for a supplier of chemical hygiene solutions to schools and colleges:

Introducing ***** Alcohol-Free Hand Foamer Sanitiser - a breakthrough in school hygiene

"Hand hygiene is the single most important way of reducing infection and preventing its spread."

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

[Dear personalise]

I'm writing in response to a recent request for information from a member of your school team.

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that preventing the spread of infection in schools is essential to the health of children and staff:

- Every year almost 22 million school days are lost due to colds and flu
- 52.2 million cases of the common cold affect children under 17 years of age each year
- Children average 6-10 colds each year

Not only do schools play a vital educational role in promoting personal hygiene, they also benefit measurably from the results - regular hand cleansing by students and staff in schools is **proven to reduce sickness based absenteeism by up to 40%**. Bacteria and viruses can live on surfaces such as desks, door handles, toilet seats and equipment for as long as two hours. But while conventional hand washing with soap and water offers a degree of protection, it fails to provide the lasting and comprehensive defence that is essential for minimising the transfer of infections.

******* Alcohol-Free Hand Foamer Sanitiser is the most advanced hand sanitiser on the market. It kills and, vitally, offers long-lasting protection against 99.9% of all bacteria.**

- ***** is proven to kill all superbugs including H1N1 swine flu
- ***** is the only hand cleanser that is scientifically verified to protect against norovirus

Research by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute found that alcohol-based gel (currently used in UK hospitals) stops offering protection against infection as soon as it has evaporated – a matter of minutes. But unlike alcohol-based hand cleansers, ***** **contains an advanced active barrier that continues working on the hands for six hours after application.** Its powerful, bio-degradable formula contains NO irritants, is kind to skin, there is no need to rinse the hands and it can be used by all ages. Yet ***** costs no more than ordinary hand cleansers.

As the sole distributor of ***** for southern England, ***** is dedicated to promoting effective hygiene throughout the region's schools. To encourage maximum use, we supply all school and pre-school customers with sturdy wall-mounted dispensers free of charge, which may be strategically placed in

washrooms, vestibules and classrooms. ***** is also available as a powerful and versatile surface cleaner and dry-mist room fogging system that offers 30 days active protection against infection.

To arrange a no-obligation in-school demonstration, or simply to find out more, please email info@*****.com. One of our advisers will be delighted to pay you a visit at your convenience.

Sincerely

***** , Director

"There's a strong economic case for investing in good hand washing facilities in our schools. Britain's twelve million cases of norovirus, gastroenteritis, MRSA, e-coli and now swine flu infections are mainly down to dirty hands."

Dr Val Curtis, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine Hygiene Centre, Oct, 2010



***** is tested to BS and EN Standard 13697
www.*****.com



Bear in mind always that any piece of sales copy is only as strong as its weakest link: if for one moment your argument loses its momentum or if you make a claim that sounds farfetched or unbelievable, then you've failed in your task. Think credibility. Always prove your case.

Let's also take a closer look at how this letter is constructed. It's written according to the Problem-Agitation-Solution Copywriting Formula. This is a direct marketing copywriting technique that has been used for many years by some of the world's best copywriters. I first heard of it from internet marketer Yanik Silver. Used correctly, it gets great results. The aim is to tap into your prospects' perceived 'pain' (which you've already established via in-depth research into the wants and needs of your typical prospect – see 2.3 above) and then get them emotionally charged-up to take action to remove their pain – now!

The underlying psychology is that people will always act to avoid pain (in its many forms). That's why it's such a powerful formula:

- 1. To begin with, you must define exactly what your prospect's 'pain' is. In this case it is chronic sickness-based absenteeism due to the avoidable spread of infections in schools:**

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that preventing the spread of infection in schools is essential to the health of children and staff:

- Every year almost 22 million school days are lost due to colds and flu
- 52.2 million cases of the common cold affect children under 17 years of age each year
- Children average 6-10 colds each year

- 2. The next step is to agitate the problem, tap into the emotions and get them to realise nothing they are doing currently will work to solve their problem:**

*Not only do schools play a vital educational role in promoting personal hygiene, they also benefit measurably from the results - regular hand cleansing by students and staff in schools is **proven to reduce sickness based absenteeism by up to 40%**. Bacteria and viruses can live on surfaces such as desks, door handles and equipment for as long as two hours. But while conventional hand washing with soap and water offers a degree of protection, it fails to provide the lasting and comprehensive defence that is essential for minimising the transfer of infections.*

3. And then finally you offer the solution that is about to resolve their problem. You are their knight in shining armour coming to the rescue:

XYZ Alcohol-Free Hand Foamer Sanitiser is the most advanced hand sanitiser on the market. It kills and, vitally, offers long-lasting protection against 99.9% of all bacteria.

- ***XYZ is proven to kill all superbugs including H1N1 swine flu***
- ***XYZ is the only hand cleanser that is scientifically verified to protect against norovirus***

*Research by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute found that alcohol-based gel (currently used in UK hospitals) stops offering protection against infection as soon as it has evaporated – a matter of minutes. But unlike alcohol-based hand cleansers, **XYZ contains an advanced active barrier that continues working on the hands for six hours after application.** Its powerful, bio-degradable formula contains NO irritants, is kind to skin, there is no need to rinse the hands and it can be used by all ages. Yet **XYZ** costs no more than ordinary hand cleansers... [continues]*

The letter concludes with a strong call to action.

There you have it - the Problem-Agitation-Solution Copywriting Formula. It can be applied effectively to market any number of products and services.

2.5 Ask questions

Conceptual clarification questions	- <i>Probing assumptions</i>
Probing rationale, reasons and evidence	- <i>Questioning viewpoints and perspectives</i>
Probe implications and consequences	- <i>Questions about the question...</i>

Should you really structure your copy in the form of a series of questions? Why should you take any notice of this advice? Because, USED IN MODERATION, the Q and A structure is an effective and compelling way of presenting an argument. But then again why should you take my word for it? Well, not least because it was used (invented?) by none other than Socrates, around 500 BC. And if it's good enough for the sage of Athens, it's good enough for me (and you couldn't say it isn't tried and tested).

To find out more, Google 'Socratic Questioning'. But then again what could you hope to achieve by that?

Here's an example of how I use a sequence of questions to drive my argument...

"How secure is my data?"

With computer hacking and cyber crime becoming ever more sophisticated, security is critical. And as most data centres are located in vulnerable urban areas, there's also the very real risk of accidental or deliberate physical damage to your servers.

*Contrast the traditional data centre with ***** ...*

Located deep underground in a remote ex-NATO nuclear bunker. A 30,000 square foot, world-class, purpose-built data centre. Three metre thick steel and tungsten reinforced walls. Add to this state-of-the-art electronic defences, automatic fail-over - which guarantees that faults have minimal or no impact on service availability - bullet-proof physical security, and fully-managed firewalls. We think you'll agree that data doesn't get more secure.

"What is the environmental impact of my hosting presence?"

*Because not all hosting providers are the same. In fact ***** is the first and only data centre in the UK to provide low energy, high performance hosting – with zero carbon emissions (not to be confused with 'carbon neutral' offsetting). Uniquely, 100% of our power comes from renewable resources such as wind and hydro power, and our managed servers utilise low-energy technology to consume up to 60% less power than their conventional counterparts. Compare this with a traditional energy-hungry data centre, which consumes more power than an equivalent sized blast furnace, and you'll understand why this makes such good sense.*

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What does zero carbon mean for you and your organisation?

Quite simply, it reduces your impact on the environment. And in an age of increased corporate accountability, growing legislation and a new awareness of green issues, there's never been a better time to take a responsible lead by reducing your carbon footprint...

2.6 Vary the length of your sentences and paragraphs

There's no such thing as a dull subject, only dull writing.

I can't emphasise this point too strongly. Uniform sentences are as tedious as uniform architecture lining uniform streets. It's the difference between the heart of an ancient city - with its unpredictable squares, boulevards, lanes, crannies and alleys - and its thoroughly predictable modern suburbs – inevitably a drab, monotonous grid of utilitarian streets and concrete buildings. Whenever was a tourist ever inspired to visit the suburbs of any city?

So add vibrancy and contrast to your writing: break up your sentences into manageable chunks. Combine short, sharp sentences with longer run-on sentences, but keep your sentences of a manageable length. The author Marcel Proust commonly wrote sentences in excess of 600 words. Don't even think about it. Limit your sentences to a maximum of thirty words.

Use short, one sentence paragraphs.

They are an especially useful way of driving home a point.

But don't overdo it.

Otherwise your copy will appear stilted and staccato.

Like this.

Equally dangerous is to write overly long paragraphs. Long paragraphs belong in academic essays and novels. Many readers only have to look at a densely written paragraph to be put off. So read your writing through. Whenever you indentify an overly long paragraph, look for a natural sentence break and hit the return button.

It works wonders.

2.7 Be concrete and specific

Remember how in section 1.3 above we saw how, in a split-test, one particular headline dramatically outperformed three other similar headlines and was responsible for 60% of total sales. Just to jog your memory, here's the winning headline again:

"How a Wisconsin Housewife lost 22 pounds in 32 Days!"

And here are the also-rans:

"Breakthrough New Diet Product!" (7% of total sales)

"A New Diet Revolution!" (3% of total sales)

"Dieting Secrets of a Desperate Housewife!" (30% of total sales)

So what accounted for such a disparity in performance? The answer is that the winning headline was highly specific. It wasn't just talking about any housewife; it was a 'Wisconsin Housewife'; and she didn't just lose some unspecified amount of weight; she lost '22 pounds'; and it took her precisely '32 days'.

You get the idea...

People respond positively to specifics. Compare these two statements:

Unlike some holiday share operators, we actually do the selling for you. Last year alone we handled numerous incoming enquiries on behalf of our resellers. Most of those calls resulted in healthy commissions. In fact one of our resellers received a record-breaking commission cheque. And he didn't even have to sell a thing! He used the money as a down payment on a stunning second home...

Unlike some holiday share operators, we actually do the selling for you. Last year alone we handled 25,560 incoming enquiries on behalf of our resellers. 71% of those calls resulted in commissions. In fact one of our resellers, John R. Smith from Stoke Newington, London, received a cheque of £41,390 for just one quarter's sales – October to December, 2007. And he didn't even have to sell a thing! John used the money as a 30% down payment on a stunning waterfront condo in Miami Beach, Florida...

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The second statement is infinitely more powerful because it reveals precise facts and figures. Not only is it more plausible, it's also more compelling, because it enables the reader to enter into the 'dream' and visualise themselves in the shoes of our lucky Mr John R. Smith.

Please understand that I'm not suggesting that you fabricate or embellish the truth; I'm saying that to be convincing you need to do your homework and, wherever possible, never neglect to use a concrete and specific fact in place of a lazy, ill-researched and indeterminate generic alternative. And the same logic applies to your choice of words...

2.8 Use strong words and a confident tone

Wrong:

Our innovative accounting solutions could help you make a significant saving on your annual accounting fees...

Right:

The ACME XYZ bookkeeping system will slash your annual accounting costs by a minimum of 30%. Guaranteed.

Compare

could help you make a significant saving...

with

will slash your annual accounting costs by a minimum of 30%. Guaranteed.

People crave reassurance. They want to spend their money with someone who demonstrates the confidence of their convictions. It's true that on a subliminal level they're equally aware they've fallen victim to the bravura of the copywriter but, believe me, it doesn't matter. How do I know? Because, along with most other people, I fall for it myself – practically every day of the week; I'm an inveterate sucker for a good sales pitch. Despite the fact that I manipulate consumers' minds for a living, I'm fully susceptible to having my disbelief suspended with alarming regularity, because I too am a consumer. Confidence works. But a word of caution...

Obviously, if your claim sounds like a hollow brag or just too good to be true, then it's going to have the opposite effect, otherwise known as 'yeah, sure' syndrome. Gushing sales copy of the 'my product will make you rich beyond your wildest dreams' variety no longer works with today's jaded punter, especially when it isn't backed up with anything less than 100% watertight evidence. They've heard it all before, and it's the quickest way to lose a prospect. Yeah, sure...

So remember, if you have an irresistible offer, always ensure that the magnitude of your promise is matched in scale by the efficacy of your proof.

Use Anglo-Saxon words

Always use short, sharp Anglo-Saxon words in favour of multi-syllable Latin words. Derived from the Germanic and early English languages, Anglo-Saxon words are more urgent and pushy in tone, easier and quicker to read, and, if only on a subliminal level, better equipped to compel your prospect to take action.

Multi-syllable Latin words, on the other hand, come to us through the Latinate languages of Italian, French and Spanish. They tend to be more nuanced, ornate and less determinate. Which is hardly surprising, because many of these words have their roots in the royal courts of Europe, where the imperative to be politic, tactful and wistfully noncommittal, whilst also appearing to be politely attentive, could literally mean the difference between social advancement and losing one's head!

In a formal, journalistic or literary context of course Latinate words can of course be deeply expressive. Indeed, if we were restricted exclusively to using Anglo-Saxon words our language would be rendered course and lacking in contrast. It is this diverse combination of influences that makes English such a complex and colourful language.

Anglo-Saxon words versus Latinate words:

<u>Anglo-Saxon</u>		<u>Latinate</u>
Accomplish	-	DO
Accurate	-	TRUE
Acquire	-	GET
Adjacent	-	NEAR
Agitate	-	STIR
Construct	-	BUILD
Discontinuity	-	GAP
Discussion	-	TALK
Inaccurate	-	WRONG
Incline	-	LEAN
Inventory	-	STOCK
Miserable	-	BAD
Principal	-	FIRST
Purchase	-	BUY

You get the idea...

2.9 You / your (not I / we) – use present tense, second person

This is a subject we touched upon earlier in the program, but I just want elaborate on the point. You'll notice that virtually all fiction is written in either the first or third person voice, ie: 'I woke up this morning', or: 'She woke up this morning'. But, for fairly obvious reasons, it is extremely rare that you'll find any work of fiction written in the second person voice, ie: 'You woke up this morning'.* Copywriting is the polar opposite. It thrives on intimacy; it's a one-on-one process. That's why I'm addressing *you* in the second person now. My aim is to develop the illusion that we have a personal, mutually beneficial and trusting relationship. We have, haven't we?

*That said, the author Tom Robbins once wrote a novel entirely in the second person (*Half Asleep in Frog Pyjamas*). It wasn't one of his best. I wonder why?

When not to use 'you' - a word of caution...

As with most rules, there are exceptions. Overuse of the second person voice (you / your) can be off-putting. Be economical and add contrast by reverting to the first person (I/ we / our) whenever it would seem natural to do so. Trust your instincts. And as with the above – 'when features become benefits' – there are occasions when it is simply inappropriate to write in the second person. The main one to watch for is brochures. And this is especially relevant when writing for high-end and some business-to-business sectors, such as the professions and old-school manufacturers and retailers.

The problem being that writing in the second person implies familiarity, and there are many people (especially in the UK) who consider it poor taste to be addressed 'across the table' in this way. They demand deference, damn it, not some over-familiar, jumped-up salesy copywriter yoik telling them what's good and what isn't good for them. In the end it comes down to common sense. Think about your target audience. How are they likely to react? If in doubt, defer.

2.10 Don't draw attention to your writing

I'm talking about style vs content. In the first place your task is to sell products, and not to impress your readers with the lyricism of your prose or the breadth of your vocabulary.

As an effective copywriter, it is critical that your writing 'disappears' into your message.

It's as if you, the writer, do not exist. This means that you never use an unnecessarily complex or obscure word or construction when there's a perfectly plain alternative.

Wrong:

He was domiciled in Spain

Right:

He lived in Spain

It means keeping your sentences short, simple and to the point; it means never attempting to convince the reader how 'clever' you are; it means avoiding pompous stylistic flourishes, obscure vocabulary and unorthodox syntax designed to impress your reader (think Will Self).

Good writing speaks for itself. If indeed you are a genius with words, rest assured it will shine through without resort to flashy prose. Your job as a copywriter may be likened to that of a stage puppeteer, who melts into the darkness and attracts as little attention as possible to his presence so as not to distract from the illusion he is creating. Do likewise.

2.11 Be concise, be simple – distil your message

‘KISS’: Keep It Simple, Stupid!

"Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead."

- Gene Fowler

In a much earlier life I worked for some years as a chef. I was quite a good chef; never a great chef, but certainly quite a good chef. During my years as a copywriter I've been struck repeatedly by how the principles of good cooking also apply to good writing:

- Simplicity
- Restraint
- Balance
- Understatement
- The bold and unexpected flourish...

In various ways, I touch on each of these ideas during the course of this program. But there's a further culinary parallel – one that all accomplished cooks intuit early in their careers - it's the ability to distil the essence of a dish in such a way as to do justice to the individual ingredients and yet arrive at something unique.

How then does this work when applied to writing? In the first place, it means ruthlessly eliminating all unnecessary words (ingredients). Very often it will necessitate the wholesale omission of entire sentences and paragraphs (however brilliantly written) if they are superfluous to the purpose of the copy.

So how do you judge when and when not to cut?

Unlike the chef who has inadvertently spoiled his food with too much salt or chilli, a writer has the luxury of being able to revisit her work...

Read your work aloud. I've said it before and I'll say it again: never, ever consider a piece of copy complete until you've read it through aloud. Pretend you're delivering your copy as a speech to a crowded room. As you read you'll become instantly aware of any repetitions, awkward syntax, overly long sentences, bad punctuation and unnecessary words and phrases. When you've read your piece through once, revise and then read it through again; revise and then repeat the process for a third time. Apply this process faithfully to all your writing, whether it's a short advertisement, a brochure, sales letter, press release or a 60 page website.

And it isn't just in cooking that we find parallels with writing. In fact the principles that govern good writing apply to all art forms and creative processes.

The sculptor Giacometti would begin a life sculpture with a vast lump of raw clay and end up with a work of such pared-back simplicity as to, on the face of it, be barely adequate to represent his original subject. (In case you haven't seen his sculptures, they resemble upmarket matchstick men.) And yet somehow in the process of taking away, the artist achieves the opposite effect, for in their stark economy his sculptures give the impression that they penetrate the very heart of their subjects. So it is with effective writing: never be shy to slash and burn until you arrive at the essence of what you want to say. No more. No less.

Keeping it simple is not to be confused with being simplistic – i.e. naive or one-dimensional. In fact the opposite applies: whenever you encounter a piece of writing that conveys a complex message simply and effectively you can be pretty certain that the writer has sweated blood over it. The art is in making it *look* easy.

What follows is probably the most profoundly important lesson you'll ever learn on your journey to become a wealth-generating copywriter. And it has everything to do with fish. Yes, you heard. Fish...

I'm driving along in my car and I pass a large blackboard positioned at the side of the road, in front of a fishmonger's shop. Chalked on the blackboard are these words:

Wet Fish Sold Here

As an anally retentive copywriter with obsessive-compulsive tendencies this makes me very angry. Stopping my car, I take a rag from my glove compartment, stride across to the board and rub out a single word:

Fish Sold Here

Fish is wet by nature. Therefore the word 'wet' is superfluous. OK, I can hear the pedant in you saying, 'but you can get *dried* fish.' But if the fishmonger were selling dried fish then the sign would read: 'Dried Fish Sold Here'. Of course it would.

I take my rag and erase a second word:

Fish Here

Of course the fish is 'sold'. Unless, of course, the fishmonger is giving the fish away. In which case the sign would doubtless read: 'Free Wet Fish Here'.

I rub out a third word:

Fish

Of course the fish is 'here'! If it were somewhere else then the sign would tell me so: 'Fish – 200m'.

Wet Fish Sold Here

Fish Sold Here

Fish Here

Fish

If this seems to you like a frivolous exercise, think again. The 'fish' test was taught to me by my first ever university tutor – an exceptional, indomitable teacher and scholar by the name of Lindy Jordan. She used it to make a very serious point about my essay writing. Like so many budding writers, I had been determined to inject 'style' into my writing. Unfortunately, my fledgling style, as pointed out by Lindy, had most in common with E.L. Wisty.

(E.L. Wisty is a character played by the late comedian Peter Cook. He is a bland, monotonous, know-it-all, whose verbose monologues are designed to bore people to tears.)

For an aspiring writer, this news was a humbling and painful experience. But I'm nevertheless eternally grateful to Lindy for her constructive, if brutal, honesty. (You're probably dead by now, but thanks anyway, Lindy.)

Directly as result of that one piece of advice, my essays jumped from a typical 'C' grade to consistent 'A's and 'A+'s. All because I applied the 'Fish' test to every essay I wrote – which involved the ruthless culling of all unnecessary and inappropriate words, pomposities, pretensions and literary affectations until I was left with the essence of what I had to say – and NOTHING more.

Apply this to your own writing.

Wrong (fishy): *He was summarily dismissed from his position.*

Right (non-fishy): *He was fired.*

2.12 Begin sentences with conjunctions

But why should anybody want to do this? Surely it's what every primary teacher drums into her pupils? 'You do not begin a sentence, or worse still a paragraph, with the words: *and*, *but* or *because*. And yet if you study any intelligent newspaper or book, you'll discover that professional writers do it all the time. So must you. Add dynamism to your writing by beginning sentences with any of the following:

And, but, so, yet, although, even, though, while, whereas, despite, as, both,

or, after, before, since, when, now that, for, if, unless, in case, provided that...

And don't neglect the word *because*. Used judiciously, it's one of the strongest and yet most neglected words in the copywriter's lexicon.

But, of course, it's easy to overdo it. **Because** used gratuitously it can make your writing look stilted and repetitious. **And** I would therefore recommend restraint.

2.13 Avoid the pomposity trap

“Write drunk. Edit sober.”

- Ernest Hemmingway

Being able to write coherently does not of itself make you a copywriter. Never underestimate the skills of the copywriter. I did, and it made my transition to commercial writing that much harder. Because when I started out I had a chip on my shoulder. Unlike most copywriters, I happened to have a degree in English (completely unnecessary, as it happens). I'd spent three years at university. I'd written many thousands of words on Shakespeare, Beckett and Woolf; I'd been commended by my tutors on the elegance of my writing style. Perhaps understandably, I was convinced that writing a company brochure, brand strategy or sales letter would be a breeze by comparison. This was a dangerous miscalculation of the copywriting business.

When I became a copywriter I continued to write in the same detached, elevated style that had served me so well as a student of English literature. Ouch! It was only when I began to go deeper into my craft that it occurred to me that academics can be among the worst writers in the world (and woe betide the copywriter who has an academic 'correct' her copy).

The leisurely constructions and bookish terminology that are the staples of academic writing have no place in the hard-nosed world of copywriting. Neither has the grammatically pristine sentence, nor even correct punctuation; and as for peppering your copy with semi-colons...

There is a tendency among 'educated' people to adopt a scholarly writing style and then apply it across the board, as if it were the standard that all writers must aspire to. (Of course, that should read, "the standard to which all writers must aspire", because my first sentence is grammatically incorrect. Unlike academics, copywriters will never hesitate to hang a preposition if it does the job better!) Write in plain, everyday language. Write specifically for your target audience and always write for one person, as if you were conversing with a friend in the pub. Never write for a crowd. Intimacy is the key.

2.14 Break up your copy with bullet points and numbers

That's why it's important to segment your copy into manageable chunks. In the first place this involves keeping your paragraphs short. Another extremely useful device is the use of bullets and numbers. What are the advantages?

- ✓ Introduce natural breaks in your prose
- ✓ Quick to read and assimilate
- ✓ Easy on the eye
- ✓ Convey the maximum amount of information in the minimum amount of space
- ✓ Bullets 'leap out' at the reader
- ✓ Easily scanned for quickness
- ✓ Organise and deliver information sequentially and in order of importance
- ✓ Avoid the need for long and convoluted sentences, especially when you have a large amount of complex, technical or potentially boring information to convey in sequence.

Bullets are particularly useful when writing websites and other sales-orientated collateral. But beware. Bullets are commonly overused, especially by lazy writers or those who lack confidence in their ability to write sustained prose. So use sparingly and judiciously or not at all.

2.15 Emphasise key words and phrases with **bold**, CAPITALS, **highlights**, underlining, *italics*, **coloured fonts**, etc. (sometimes)

In 2001, John R. Smith made an extraordinary discovery. It enabled him to build an online information marketing business that is now worth in excess of

£5 million, with over 140,000 customers in 152 countries, and all created with virtually ZERO capital!!!

Good writing should stand up in its own right. It does not require gaudy embellishments to help it on its way. (And that would include the gratuitous use of the exclamation mark!)

There are, however, occasions when it is permissible to break the rules. Popular among internet / information marketers and hard-nosed sales copywriters, the practice of drawing attention to key words and phrases is proven to have a measurable effect on conversion. Done properly, the enthusiasm of the writer becomes infectious and incites a sense of urgency in the reader.

But use such techniques only very, very sparingly and even then only then when clearly appropriate to your product. For instance, copy of the 'MASSIVE STOCK CLEARANCE! EVERYTHING MUST GO! FINAL DAY!!!' variety can benefit hugely from this treatment. But it would hardly win you credibility if you were selling stock broking services or machine parts. Let common sense prevail.

Otherwise YOUR COPY will end up looking like the **PROVERBIAL dog's breakfast!!!!**

2.16 Write as you would speak

For reasons unknown to me, when called upon to write copy, many people automatically adopt a stiff and ludicrously formal prose style. It's as if they feel an obligation to obey an unspoken rule which insists that they should write like a nineteenth century attorney at law.

These are otherwise perfectly articulate people who would appear to have no difficulty in expressing themselves verbally. And here rests the secret: write as you speak. A reliable guide is to imagine you're speaking across the table to a friend in a pub – but, of course, with all the 'ums', 'errs', 'you knows' and sundry verbal digressions edited out.

Don't be afraid to use contractions: *it's*, *there's*, *you'll*, *isn't*, etc; use informal words and syntax; be short, sharp and to the point. And don't forget to begin sentences with connectives: *and*, *but*, *because*, *so*, *also*, etc.

As ever, there are exceptions to this rule.

One example is if you're writing for any kind an 'old-school' audience: legal, engineering, professional, etc, in which it pays to lean toward the formal. As ever, common sense prevails. **Select your audience and speak to them in a voice they'll relate to.**

2.17 Don't use jargon or acronyms (unless warranted)

Once again, this comes down to readership. Who is my audience? It's the first question you must ask yourself before beginning any writing assignment.

Don't use jargon in your copy unless a/ you have first clarified the meaning, eg: 'Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists' (SOCP); or b/ your target readership is a specialist audience.

For instance, if you're an asset manager writing a brochure designed to be read by investment bankers, fund managers then the terminology of the industry must be reflected in your writing, with no holds barred. To neglect to do so, for example by dumbing down your writing to appeal to non-financial readers, would simply diminish your credibility and be condescending to your reader. You can safely assume that your readership will understand the language of your trade without clarification. Remember the rule: write for your audience.

2.18 Write in the active form

Active and Passive Verbs

Wherever possible, always favour an active verb over a passive verb.

Passive form:

Measures have been put in place by XYZ company to ensure that quality is consistent with output...

Active form:

XYZ company has put measures in place to ensure that quality is consistent with output...

What's the difference?

The subject of an active sentence performs the action:

“XYZ company has put measures in place...”

The ‘subject’ of the sentence is *XYZ company*; *measures* being the ‘action’.

In active sentences, the thing doing the action is the subject of the sentence and the thing receiving the action is the object.

[Thing doing action = *XYZ Company*] + [verb = *put*] + [thing receiving action = *measures*]

In passive verbs the reverse is true:

“Measures were put in place by XYZ company...”

In passive sentences, the thing receiving the action (*measures*) is the subject of the sentence and the thing doing the action (*XYZ Company*) features at the end of the sentence.

Most sentences are active. Active verbs are more powerful than passive verbs and inevitably express the same meaning with greater immediacy and using fewer words. Pick up any newspaper. Every story you read will be written predominantly in the active form. It's the first rule of journalism. Conversely, most amateur copy falls into the passive trap.

It's permissible to use the passive form in moderation. For example, if you believe the thing receiving the action is more important or should be emphasised. You can also use the passive form if you don't know who is performing the action or if you don't want to reveal who is performing the action.

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Another important exception is when writing optimised web copy, when the key word search term involves the 'action' part of the sentence. For example, if the search term happened to be 'mobile GPS handsets':

Passive:

Mobile GPS handsets are supplied by XYZ company...

Active:

XYZ company supplies Mobile GPS handsets...

In the passive form, the key word term is brought to beginning of the sentence, making it more immediately relevant for the web crawlers. That said, use this technique only sparingly or your copy will end up stilted and unreadable.

2.19 Get rid of "that"

Most instances of the word 'that' can be removed from a sentence without altering the meaning.

"These are the main criteria that stock traders measure."

"These are the main criteria stock traders measure."

Removing 'that' makes for a cleaner, more concise sentence. If in doubt, read the sentence aloud.

Learn to write copy like a pro, turbo-charge sales and destroy the competition!

2.20 Don't use the future tense unnecessarily

Wrong

Getting good at marketing will grow your business...

Right

Getting good at marketing grows your business...

2.21 Don't use capital letters inappropriately

Be outstanding at Sales...

Your Sales ability is one of the very best ways to enhance the profitability of your business.

This week I am doing a FREE 1-hour Sales Seminar called Advanced Selling Skills for Dummies. I'll be showing you the most important Sales skills to immediately impact your profitability.

The Sales Seminar is Free but we only have 100 places and this invitation is going out to 11,000. Reserve your place at this important Sales event today.

In the above example, the words 'sales', 'seminar' and 'free' each begin with an unnecessary capital letter. In some cases this is just down to lazy writing; other times it's simply a case of the writer using capitals to draw attention to a particular word – which it may well do, but for all the wrong reasons.

What you've learned in this section

You've learned to ...

Be relevant

Being relevant means writing in a tone and style appropriate to your readership. There is no such thing as a universal 'language that sells'. No two assignments are the same.

Arouse curiosity

The need to evoke curiosity begins with – but doesn't end - with the headline. As with all good writing, the urge on the part of the reader to find out 'what happens' should drive them through to the end like a relentless and invisible force.

Meet the need

To inspire someone to buy your product you must first place yourself in their shoes. Before you begin writing, it is vital that you exhaustively research your product. Who and what are you competing with? When you've finished researching your product, your next, and equally important, task is to research your prospects. Who exactly are you selling to, and why should they buy from you?

Prove your case

This is one the most common reasons why amateur copy fails to convert. Always anticipate your prospects' response to your argument and answer as many questions as possible in advance. Always prove your case, and always keep it watertight.

Ask questions

USED IN MODERATION, the Q and A structure is an effective and compelling way of presenting an argument.

Vary the length of your sentences and paragraphs

To add vibrancy and contrast to your writing, break up your sentences into manageable chunks. Combine short, sharp sentences with longer run-on sentences, but keep your sentences below thirty words. Avoid long paragraphs. Whenever you indentify an overly long paragraph, look for a natural sentence break and hit the return button.

Be concrete and specific

Wherever possible, always use precise facts and figures. Not only are they more plausible, but they are also more compelling, because they enable the reader to visualise your message.

Use strong words and a confident tone

Wrong:

Our innovative accounting solutions could help you make a significant saving on your annual accounting fees...

Right:

The ACME XYZ bookkeeping system will slash your annual accounting costs by a minimum of 30%. Guaranteed.

You / your (not I / we) – use present tense, second person

Copywriting thrives on intimacy; it's a one-on-one process. That's why I'm addressing *you* in the second person now. Wherever possible, and whenever appropriate, always write in the second person voice – 'you'.

Don't draw attention to your writing

As an effective copywriter, it is critical that your writing 'disappears' into your message. It's as if you, the writer, do not exist. Do not write to impress. Write to sell.

Be concise, be simple – distil your message

Ruthlessly eliminate all unnecessary words from your copy, however brilliantly written, if they are superfluous to the purpose of the copy. To identify where to cut, ALWAYS read your copy aloud.

Begin sentences with conjunctions

Add dynamism to your writing by beginning sentences with any of the following:

And, but, so, yet, , because, although, even, though, while, whereas, despite, as, both, or, after, before, since, when, now that, for, if, unless, in case, provided that... But don't overdo it.

Avoid the pomposity trap

Write in plain, everyday language. Write specifically for your target audience and always write for one person, as if you were conversing with a friend in the pub. Never write for a crowd. Intimacy is the key.

Break up your copy with bullet points and numbers (where appropriate)

Most of us are averse to reading large tracts of unbroken copy. Introduce natural breaks in your prose with bullet points and numbers. But use sparingly and judiciously.

Emphasise key words and phrases with bold, CAPITALS, highlights, underlining, italics, coloured fonts, etc. (sometimes)

Drawing attention to key words and phrases in this way is proven to have a measurable effect on conversion. But use such techniques only very, very sparingly and even then only then when clearly appropriate to your product and target audience.

Write as you would speak

Write in plain, straightforward language. Don't be afraid to use contractions: *it's, there's, you'll, isn't*, etc; use informal words and syntax; be short, sharp and to the point. And don't forget to begin sentences with connectives: *and, but, because, so, also*, etc. Select your audience and speak to them in a voice they'll relate to.

Don't use jargon or acronyms (unless warranted)

Once again, this comes down to readership. Who is my audience? It's the first question you must ask yourself before beginning any writing assignment.

Don't use jargon in your copy unless a/ you have first clarified the meaning, eg: 'Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists' (SOCP); or b/ your target readership is a specialist audience who will be familiar with the terminology.

Write in the active form

Passive form:

Measures have been put in place by XYZ company to ensure that quality is consistent with output...

Active form:

XYZ company has put measures in place to ensure that quality is consistent with output...

Get rid of "that"

Most instances of the word 'that' can be removed from a sentence without altering the meaning.

Don't use the future tense unnecessarily

Wrong:

Getting good at marketing will grow your business...

Right:

Getting good at marketing grows your business...

Don't use capital letters inappropriately

Your **S**ales ability is one of the very best ways to enhance the **P**rofitability of your business.

EXERCISE 3

Building on your headline and sub-head from our exercise in section one, write three paragraphs of body copy. Restrict yourself to one page of copy (A4) and, at this stage, keep the bottom third of the page free. If necessary, break up part your copy with bullet points. This enables you to deliver the maximum amount of detail in the minimum amount of space.

When you've finished writing, read your copy out loud. Do not ignore this step (even if people overhear you and snicker - who cares?) Use the above 'What you've learned' section at the end of part two as a check list. Does your copy fulfil the criteria to gain maximum attention? If it doesn't, then tweak it until you are satisfied that does, and that it is written to the best of your ability.

Rule # 3 – Desire!

"A committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled."

- Sir Barnett Cocks

When copywriter David Ogilvy was asked by a reporter if he believed in 'reason why' advertising, his response was: 'Is there any other kind?' This next section focuses on two of the most critical words in advertising: *reason* and *why*.

3.1 Connect with your readers' 'resident emotion'

Emotion is the most potent motivator known to man. Harness this force in your marketing, and you'll be well on your way to that second home in the Bahamas.

Connect with your readers' resident emotion.

What does this mean? Begin by asking yourself the question: "What am I selling?"

You're a vacuum cleaner seller.

Q: What are you selling?

A: You're not selling vacuum cleaners. You're selling a cleaner, safer home.

You're a double-glazing seller.

Q: What are you selling?

A: You're not selling replacement windows. You're selling a draft-free, warmer, quieter environment and a significant saving on energy bills.

You're an insurance seller.

Q: What are you selling?

A: You're not selling life insurance. You're selling a secure future for somebody's partner and children in the event that the unthinkable should happen.

So how do you sell more mobile phones when everybody already owns one?

Ask the question: "What are we really selling?"

Mobile phones, of course!

Not anymore! Otherwise why should anybody want to buy a new one? What's wrong with the old one? It still works! No, we're selling irresistible status symbols in a multitude of styles and colours. They just happen to double-up as phones. And if you aren't seen with the latest model people are going to think you're a schmuck and a loser.

Ah, now I see...

Let's take it a step further. Below are two possible headlines for a life insurance product. Which one is likely to be the most effective?

Learn to write copy like a pro, turbo-charge sales and destroy the competition!

Headline #1:

£100,000 of Life Cover for Just £9 a Month!

Headline #2:

What would become of them if you weren't around?



Of course (combined with the visual) headline #2 wins hands down. The first headline is perfectly rational and informative, but does nothing to stimulate an emotional response.



**What would become of them
if you weren't around?**

£100,000 of Life Cover for Just £9 a Month!

Headline #1 would instead work better as a sub-head or better still included in the body copy, and even then couched in more emotive terms:



**What would become of them
if you weren't around?**

£100,000 of Life Cover for Just £9 a Month!

How much is your family worth to you? Of course, it's impossible to put a price on something so valuable.

But it's good to know that, should the unthinkable happen, your loved ones' future security is taken care of. Just £9 a month will provide your family with a significant lump sum in the event of your death

Learn to write copy like a pro, turbo-charge sales and destroy the competition!

Whenever you sit down to write your selling copy, whether it's an advertisement, a brochure, a sales letter or a website or any other sales orientated document, do your research before you begin. Always ask yourself the question: "What am I selling?"

In the process, be certain that you've located your prospects' resident emotions – i.e. what they care about most in relation to what you're selling – their hopes, wants and fears. Where's the 'pain'? Decide which of these emotions are the strongest, most compelling, most dominant in your prospects' lives and then define them in a way that keeps their emotions working with you - and never against you.

A real life example of emotional advertising in action...



For many years, advertising was directed mainly at the rational intellect. Take the tobacco industry. For years, the American tobacco giants sold their cigarettes by promoting 'great taste' and 'quality tobacco' - and variations thereof.

But then one smart copywriter on Madison Avenue dreamed up Marlboro Man and everything changed. Created by Leo Burnett Worldwide, Marlboro Man is widely recognised as one of the most brilliant advertising campaigns of all time.

Manufacturer Philip Morris & Co had originally launched the Marlboro brand in 1924. But by the 1950s, scientific data pointing to the harmful effects of cigarette smoking prompted the industry to begin selling filter-tipped cigarettes. Marlboro cigarettes, among other brands, were now sold with filters. But they hit a problem. Filter cigarettes, Marlboro in particular, were considered to be feminine; they'd previously been targeted at an

exclusively female market which used the campaign slogan 'Mild as May', but now Philip Morris wanted Marlboro to appeal to men.

In the space of a few weeks, Leo Burnett managed to transform a feminine brand into a masculine one. How did he do it?

Marlboro Man inhabited an imaginary place named Marlboro Country, (read 'Cowboy Country'!) a world that implied strong, immutable values, freedom of spirit, rugged individuality and, above all, manliness.

It wasn't long before Marlboro Man turned up everywhere: sitting astride his horse, brooding moodily beneath his Stetson hat and staring into the distant sunset with a Marlboro hanging from the corner of his mouth. But despite his ubiquitous nature, Marlboro Man didn't say very much. In fact, in most of the ads he said nothing at all. No mention of price or coupons; and not a peep about tobacco blends, filter-tips or quality leaf. Nothing. Zip. In other ads just a single line accompanied the image: 'Marlboro Country'; and even at its most expansive the strap line read: "Come to where the flavour is. Come to Marlboro Country." The ads ran from 1954 to 1999. Marlboro became (and indeed remains) the world's best selling cigarette.

Lesson to be learned?

The Leo Burnett people had pinpointed a (the?) dominant resident emotion of the typical smoker: namely a need to relate to the supposed values of their brand. They had discovered they could most effectively manipulate smokers' strongest positive emotions, eg 'smoking this brand of cigarette means that I am masculine and individualistic,' while at the same time largely resolving their negative ones, eg 'smoking is bad for my health and is likely to kill me,' by way of suspending a smoker's incredulity just long enough to make the required impression on their buying behaviour.

Always tap into the resident emotion of your target audience. It's all very well that your prospects 'know' something you've told them, but they also need to 'feel' it.

So let's now bring this idea down to earth and see how this principle may be applied to ordinary, everyday businesses. Here's an extract from a recent 'real life' sales letter that I wrote for a company which sells giant umbrellas. It was sent to 25,000 pub landlords in the UK. It achieved a 2% response rate, netting almost £500,000 in revenue for my client in the space of two weeks:

"Awnings sales boom as determined landlords aim to hang on to customers..."

The Observer, Sunday February 10, 2008

Dear...

FACT: research shows that licensed establishments with the best sheltered outdoor environments have seized a massive edge over their struggling competitors.

Indeed, demand for high quality, family-friendly *al fresco* dining has never been greater. And now with the smoking ban about to enter its first full summer season, the need for additional outdoor capacity is predicted to explode. But not all outdoor coverage is the same...

******* are suppliers of the world's finest outdoor coverage and furniture, at a price unmatched anywhere else. A unique ***** giant umbrella solution is a fast, flexible, low-cost way of expanding your business with a minimum of disruption.**

Our German-manufactured giant umbrella systems not only liberate your business from the dictates of the weather, they are also **proven to have a significant impact on profits**. A comfortable and attractive sheltered outdoor space means **your customers stay longer and spend more**.

With optional heating, lighting, furniture, speakers, graphics, guttering and side sheets a ***** solution enables year-round outdoor business and a vastly superior customer experience.

- ✓ **Earn more during busy weekends and holidays by operating at increased capacity. Added space means more 'bums on seats'**
- ✓ **Improve and expand your dedicated smoking area**
- ✓ **Liberate your outdoor business from the dictates of the weather – rain or shine**
- ✓ **Enhance your visual profile with a massive range of colours, styles and designs**
- ✓ **Give your customers and staff vital sun protection during hot weather**
- ✓ **Fully customised to meet your exact needs**
- ✓ **We are the UK's sole importer of ***** giant umbrella systems – German technology at its best**
- ✓ **Milder winters and warmer summers mean *al fresco* living is here to stay. An enhanced environment means your customers stay longer and spend more.**

******* is the UK's first, biggest and best-stocked outdoor coverage and furniture specialist.** All of our products are covered by a cast-iron **3-year guarantee**, and backed by unequalled technical support, nationwide delivery, installation and service.

In the near future, you'll receive a polite courtesy call from a member of our customer service team to arrange for an ***** technician to provide you with a free, no-obligation quotation. When you place your order before the 30th of May 2008, you'll qualify for an additional 10% discount on our already unbeatable prices. This offer applies to the first 50 applicants, and *will* end on the 30th of May 2008. The question is can you really afford not to invest?

Learn to write copy like a pro, turbo-charge sales and destroy the competition!

To arrange for a quotation **TODAY**, simply call **0800 *** *******, or email:

sales@***.co.uk NOW**. It could well be the best business move you'll make this year.

Thanks for reading, and to a prosperous 2008.

***** ***, Director, *****

“Established awning manufacturers warn that ‘canvas cowboys’ are rushing to offer British pub chains cut-price smoking shelters that are unlikely to last more than one winter. ‘There are a lot of structures that are very Heath Robinson...the market has sucked in a lot of, shall we say, ‘entrepreneurial’ characters who are making a killing.’”

The Observer, Sunday February 18, 2007

Let's put this into context. Even before the smoking ban, pubs – those bastions of the British identity - were going out of business at a rate of 35 per week. The fact is that in recent years our drinking and socialising habits have changed. Top this with an economic meltdown, increased enforcement of the drink driving law, rocketing pub prices, cheap supermarket alcohol and the smoking ban. And yet, despite the odds, many pubs have survived the downturn, adapting to their new circumstances by concentrating on serving good food in a pleasant environment.

Now, if you were among that majority of pub landlords who are presently feeling the pinch, or even wondering how you were going to survive another winter without going bankrupt, and you were then to receive this letter, you **WOULD** read it. Why? Because I've appealed directly to your self-interest (via your resident emotions!). Note also how I've added plausibility to my case by using a real-life headline from a respected newspaper.

Here's another letter. It's written for the same client, but this time with the aim of expanding their distributor network. Here I tap into the resident emotions of would-be distributors, namely that they will be taking on a profitable, quality product that is in high demand and very easy to sell. I also position my offer as a rare and exclusive opportunity, thus flattering my reader, and end on a note of urgency. Once again, this letter was highly successful, bringing in so many enquiries from potential distributors that my client was able to select the best of the best:

At least 9 highly profitable reasons to become a *** distributor
(excluding the fact that we're very nice people to do business with)**

A unique invitation from *** (UK) ...**

Dear [personalise]

The fact is opportunities like this don't come around every day – your personal invitation to join ***** exclusive group of UK distributors. During our ten years as market leader we've been highly selective in our choice of distribution partners. We can afford to be. Demand for our superior quality products has inevitably outstripped supply.

But now we've made the decision to expand. Due to the ever-increasing popularity of our products, we're in the enviable position of redefining our operation to encompass a nationwide distribution network. To this end, we're taking the unprecedented step of inviting a small number of carefully selected trade partners to become area distributors. Take a moment to consider the benefits to you as a ***** trade partner:

- ✓ **Generous, open-ended profit margins – huge potential on multiple orders**
- ✓ **No investment required. No stock to carry**
- ✓ **A proven high-demand, 'soft sell' product**
- ✓ **Complement your existing product range**
- ✓ **Full product training and ongoing support**
- ✓ **Survey, delivery and assembly by *****'s own service technicians**
- ✓ **83 designs in 100 colours, with lucrative add-ons, including heating, lighting, guttering and side-sheets**
- ✓ **The world's finest quality outdoor coverage, backed by an 8-year guarantee and full technical support**
- ✓ **Enjoy the security and satisfaction of working in partnership with Europe's market leader**

There's never been a better time to become a ***** distributor. Hotels, pubs, leisure and conference centres, schools, clubs, public attractions – the list goes on - they've one thing in common: the need to accommodate extra sheltered capacity. And now with the smoking ban about to enter its first full summer season, public demand for outdoor coverage is predicted to explode.

When you become a ***** distributor, you'll enjoy exclusive geographical rights to a quality product that is proven to sell in large quantities. The potential of this business opportunity cannot be overstated. As you'd expect, an offer of this kind is guaranteed to receive a high response. Allocation of distribution areas is strictly limited. If you feel there's a fit between your own business needs and the ***** opportunity, I'd strongly advise you to contact me TODAY to avoid disappointment. Call me, ***** ***, on **0870 *** ****

or email: *****@*****.co.uk . I'm waiting to hear from you.

Thanks for reading, and to a prosperous future.

Yours sincerely

***** ***, Director, ***** (UK)

3.2 Make your prospect an irresistible offer

What you offer your prospect in those few vital seconds when they decide whether or not to continue reading can mean the difference between success and failure. Therefore, if you have a compelling offer it's important to drive it home early on in your copy – if not in the headline, then certainly in your opening paragraph.

What form should this take?

It depends entirely on what you're selling. But whatever your line of business, the art is to make your offer pretty much irresistible to your target audience. In its crudest and most simplistic form this means making your offer sound like it's simply too good to miss:

*MASSIVE, ALL-ENCOMPASSING BOXING DAY CLEARANCE: 50%
OFF ALL marked prices on bedroom furniture FROM 7 am Friday 26th
December...*

Why make an offer at all?

Sales letters and advertisements that contain an incentivising offer typically achieve a higher conversion than those without an offer. However, it depends on the nature of your product, and also your needs as a business, as to what constitutes an 'offer'. For example, if you are selling an FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) product (as above), then it can be easy to develop an offer that delivers immediate added value for your prospect – ie two for the price of one; reply within 24 hours and receive an additional complimentary product, etc, etc.

But what if you are selling a product or service that doesn't readily lend itself to conventional promotional offers, such as creative and consultancy services?

Copywriting is one such example. Only recently, I was looking at the website of another copywriter (yes, I do keep a regular eye on the competition, and I suggest you do too). He was offering a 20% discount on his regular fee, for one month only – advertised using a prominent banner on his website. Now I've no idea how successful his campaign was, but I would be surprised whether it had any significant impact on his business. Here's why.

First off, there was no obvious mention on his site as to what he charged for his services in the first place. It was therefore impossible for a prospect to understand how much they would be saving. The offer invites the question: "20% of what?" For all the prospect knows this copywriter could already be more 20% (or more) expensive than his competitors, rendering his offer unquantifiable and therefore meaningless. (Remember how important it is to be concrete and specific.) Secondly, I've been in this business long enough to know that, within reason, price seldom sells over quality. Another danger in offering creative and consultancy services at a discount is that it potentially cheapens your image; at worst, it can

even smack of desperation. And if you become trapped in a cycle of discounting your services, it can also be a one-way ticket to financial oblivion.

The truth is that the vast majority of your customers will be much more interested in getting a good job done than in haggling over price. They expect to pay the going rate for high quality work. If you appear to be out of kilter with accepted market rates it can actually have a counterproductive effect on your business – ie if you appear too cheap, people become suspicious that you aren't up to scratch. You're also likely to attract the type of client who always wants something for nothing – and, believe me, they're out there!

Frankly, it has never crossed my mind to advertise a discount on my services, for the simple reason I have more work than I can handle. Of course, this hasn't always been the case. But back in the days when I needed to generate more business I used a very different tack. I sold on quality.

Selling on quality over price

Here's a simple example of how it works:

As London's most celebrated purveyors of meat and game, we supply seven of the city's eight Michelin starred restaurants. Be confident that you're buying the best quality produce available anywhere in the marketplace...

"The ACME Meat Company's produce is second to none. That's why I use it in all my restaurants. In fact, I wouldn't use meat from any other source."

Pierre Hubert – Maison Sonnet

The bedroom furniture headline (above) sells on price, whereas the ACME Meat Company headline sells on quality. And, of course, a shining testimonial, especially from a known and respected source, is always worth its weight in truffles.

That's a fictional example. Now let's look at a real-life example of selling on quality over price. Below is a letter I wrote on behalf of a brand and design agency, based in the north east of England:

From One-off Design to 'Fit for Purpose' Brand Creation and Revitalisation...

[Dear Personalise,]

It's now possible to source world-class design and brand development locally - and for a fraction of what you'd expect to pay a London agency.

My name is *** *****. I'm an experienced designer and brand consultant. Over the years I've delivered successful projects for clients across many market sectors, with the emphasis on the 'high end of small businesses'.

Now, through a fortunate series of events and after much professional globetrotting, I've come to live and work in ***** where I own and run a thriving design and branding agency.

Why am I writing to you? For no other reason than to let you know we're here. Because, crazy as it seems, most of our business comes from clients throughout the UK and overseas, as far flung as the Caribbean and the United States - anywhere but local.

We're no more expensive than other local agencies, but a whole world apart on results.

And, unlike many other agencies, you'll discover that we truly give a damn!

Combining strong creative leadership with sound commercial acumen, we'll work collaboratively to get 'beneath the skin' of your business to produce design and branding that is at the same time outstanding, relevant and totally functional - whatever it takes.

Our talented team includes designers, photographers, writers and programmers, all of whom will be working seamlessly towards their goal of positioning your brand at the top of your market sector. And in my role as senior designer and art director, you can be confident that I'll be personally involved with your project at every step through to successful completion.

While our habitual drive to excellence may have turned us into unapologetic perfectionists, our feet are still firmly on the ground: we're strong believers in listening and understanding before getting stuck in. To this end I hope you'll find working with *** ***** a mutual and enduringly flexible experience.

Whether it's an integrated branding campaign or a simple one-off design project, we'll work with you as an extension of your business, combining all the benefits of a world-class agency with the responsiveness of an in-house team - without the overhead.

I appreciate that you're busy, so thank you for taking the trouble to read this letter. Just one final thing: I'd like to invite you to visit www.*****.co.uk and judge for yourself. You can also email me personally: ***@*****.co.uk. If you're anything less than overwhelmed by the quality of work from your present designers, we think you'll find our commitment to helping you somewhat refreshing.

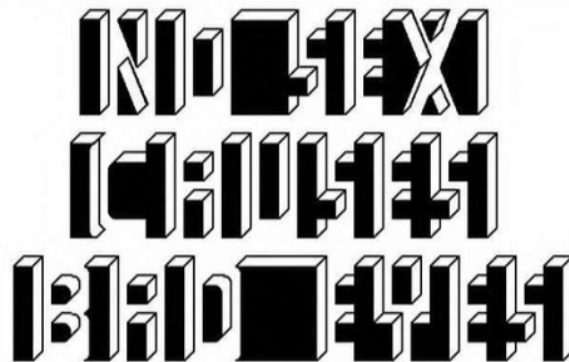
With kind regards

*** *****

On the face of it, the above mailer seems barely to fall into the category of a 'sales' letter at all. It has an unremarkable headline; there is no incentivising 'offer' and the call to action is ultra-low-key. But what this letter does do very successfully is differentiate my client from her competitors, which ultimately is what good copywriting is all about.

This letter was initially sent to just 40 local businesses. Within one week of posting, it had produced six serious incoming enquiries, one of which went on to become a major client for the agency (alone responsible for one-third of the agency's previous annual turnover). The letter went on to produce consistent business for my client, month on month, even to the point of allowing her to expand considerably and take on additional staff. Now, several years on, it remains the control mailing and is the principle source of business revenue for my client. Such is the power of selling on quality over price.

Here's a further example of selling on quality over price; this time coming from a more unconventional angle (it was one of a sequence of letters sent by one of my marketing communications clients. Once again, it was highly successful in generating incoming enquiries:



You can't always trust what you see...

(no more than you can believe what you read!)

Sometimes you need to view a problem through a fresh pair of eyes. And this has never been truer than when you're looking to seize the competitive edge in a slowing economy. For instance, are you *really* getting the most out of your marketing pound by doing things in the same old way? When did you last put it to the test?

Attention spans are getting shorter. Information is becoming more complex. **Buying decisions happen in the blink of an eye.** The importance of clear, compelling and original marketing communications has never been more critical. In today's economic climate it's no longer good enough to be just 'adequate'.

Learn to write copy like a pro, turbo-charge sales and destroy the competition!

Small wonder then that the likes of Maurice Lacroix, Tesco and Virgin trust ***** as a preferred supplier. Because they understand that inspired thinking and cast iron measurable results come as standard.

See past the commonplace and judge *** for yourself.** No egos, no attitudes, no suits – and not an account manager in sight (and no silly fees to pay their commissions).

If you're anything less than 100% happy with your existing marketing communications, simply contact me, ***, today. We think you'll find our commitment to helping you somewhat refreshing. And in all likelihood it will save you money and time into the bargain.**

Call me, ***, today on 020 8******

e-mail: ***@*****.co.uk**

www.***.co.uk**

Many thanks for reading. With kind regards

*"Extremely approachable and very friendly to work with. The ***** team*

showed great flair and expertise and the results have proved to be extremely

positive in increasing customer awareness and generating new business."

***** , *****

******* - fresh and relevant marketing communications in all media since 1985**

Notice that in both letters above, although I'm selling on quality I nevertheless cover the issue of price. In the first letter: "We're no more expensive than other local agencies, but a whole world apart on results"; and in the second example: "...not an account manager in sight (and no silly fees to pay their commissions)." I do this to reassure my prospects that they will not be paying over the odds, despite receiving a superior service.

A word of caution. When writing about your service, beware of the falling into the 'generic sell' trap. By this I mean selling the concept of what you sell or do, as opposed to selling 'you' or your specific product. It's a surprisingly common mistake among inexperienced copywriters. Here's an example of what I mean.

A little while ago, a friend forwarded me a sales email she had received from a copywriting agency. As one would expect, it was well-written and had quite a catchy subject line (you'll remember how we touched on 'reason why' copy above):

"6 reasons why you should not hire a copywriter"

The letter then goes on to extol the virtues of hiring a professional copywriter, as against the hazards of going it alone, but from a reverse perspective. All well and good, but there was a problem: the copywriter in her enthusiasm for her subject had completely forgotten to sell *her* copywriting services over any other copywriter. There was an accompanying sidebar that gave a little information about the agency, but the main letter focused exclusively on selling the 'concept' of hiring a copywriter – any copywriter.

This led on to a second major problem with the email. The copywriting agency had failed to select its audience. The email was a 'cold' B2B e-shot addressed to marketing and creative agencies. Now, if there is one sector that does *not* need to be sold on the concept of hiring a copywriter, it's marketing and creative agencies. Believe me, they already know. Their resident emotion is far more likely to be *which* copywriter should I hire? And not *why* hire a copywriter? This particular copywriter failed entirely to differentiate herself from the competition. Always sell the product, not the concept.

3.3 Tell a story

"My problem is reconciling my gross habits with my net income."

- Errol Flynn

So much copy is DULL, DULL, DULL!

Even if you're selling a relatively unexciting product there's no excuse for being dull in your writing. In fact there's no such thing as a boring subject, only boring writing.

One of the most effective ways to excite your reader is to paint a picture with words. Tell a story. Below is an introduction I wrote for the website of an upmarket conference centre:

It's the end of a tiring but productive day. You're enjoying a well-deserved aperitif in the lounge as guests mingle in anticipation of dinner. The tranquillity is disturbed only by the murmur of a dozen animated conversations and the discrete ring of cut glass.

Drawn beyond the understated elegance of the decor, your gaze settles on the view from the ancient vaulted windows. Beyond the croquet lawns stretch twelve pristine acres of landscaped grounds, and in the distance the dramatic vista of the rolling Chiltern Hills.

In the kitchens, our award-winning chefs create original dishes from locally sourced fresh produce; beguiling aromas stimulate your taste buds. And all the while a team of quietly attentive staff attend to your every need with consummate professionalism.

In the depth of your reverie it's easy to forget that you're a mere fifteen miles from the heart of London.

*Such is the ***** Manor experience.*

I've simply taken a list of features (many of them common to other conference centres) and used them to transport the reader in time and place so that she actually 'feels' the experience. You'll notice that I appeal to the three senses: sight, sound and smell. This is so much more effective than merely listing these same features as bullet points:

- *Tranquil rural location*
- *A sixteenth century manor house set in 12 acres of grounds*
- *Professional and attentive staff*

- *Award winning food*
- *Easy access to London*

Or in straightforward prose:

*“Set in a tranquil rural location, with easy access to London, ***** Manor is a sixteenth century manor house set in 12 acres of pristine grounds. Enjoy fine cooking from our award winning chefs while our professional and attentive team takes care of your every need.”*

Research your subject well and you'll always unearth a new or unusual angle to form the basis of your story.

Begin in the middle

Another take on the story telling technique is to 'begin in the middle'. Good journalists commonly use the same trick to hook their readers into a story. Below are the opening paragraphs of a flyer I wrote for one of my seminars for aspiring copywriters:

“These days I have as much work as I can handle. My assignments span the copywriting and consulting spectrum: sales letters for internet marketers, websites for FTSE 100 businesses, brochures for global motor manufacturers, any number of joint ventures with creative agencies, ghost writing a book on political corruption for a Nigerian politician and, most recently, a major rebranding exercise for the Russian city of Saint Petersburg.

Am I some kind of super-achiever? Far from it. Has it always been this good? No. Did I ever feel like giving up along the way? More than once. Would I trade this lifestyle for any other? Read on ...

I began my career as a freelance copywriter in October 1997. Starting from scratch, I was working at full capacity and overdraft-free in less than a year. This is the story of how I did it...[continued]”

Had I been telling my 'story' in a linear, chronological fashion, the third paragraph would logically belong at the beginning of the piece. Instead I plunge my reader right in at the middle. It's a great attention grabber.

Never presume, however, that your reader is always going to read through to the end of a sales letter, web page or even a press ad. For this reason it's vital to summarise your key message up front. My introduction above carried the following headline:

How to Make £100,000+ a Year as a Freelance Copywriter

Here's a three-part formula I've carried with me since my university days. It was taught to me as a way of structuring essays, but it's equally relevant to journalism *and* copywriting:

1. Tell them what you're going to tell them
2. Tell them
3. Tell them what you've told them

No preambles. Get straight down to the facts. Be as provocative and as lyrical as you like in the process, but never get bogged down in wordy introductions before you hit your reader with your USP. If your selling message is buried somewhere down towards the bottom of the page, it's unlikely that your reader will ever reach it.

Here's a variation of the formula, adapted especially for copywriters:

1. Tell them what you've got
2. Tell them what it does
3. Tell them what you want them to do next

Despite this, many copywriters, and in particular those writing 'mini-site' sales letters for internet marketers, will often structure their copy deliberately to keep their readers guessing as to what it is they're selling, only revealing the identity of their product at the very end.

As a technique, this can and does work, but it presumes that the reader has the time and inclination to read the entire letter. Most won't. It's an approach that harps back to the golden days of long-copy direct response copywriting; an age when people were prepared to be sold to at leisure and were sufficiently wide-eyed to be kept guessing. But the modern punter is an entirely different animal.

By all means write a long-copy letter, but tell them what you're going to tell them first. Here's the beginning of an online / offline sales letter (17 pages in length!) I wrote for an internet marketer:

[HEADLINE:]

"How tapping into the awesome power of viral marketing can enable you to earn £15,000 - £25,000 a month "retirement" income working from home just one hour a week ... within 6 months!"

[SUB-HEAD:]

In just a few moments you'll have access to the same unique online Business Building System that ordinary people worldwide are using to give them the financial freedom to enjoy life to the full...

[FIRST PARAGRAPH:]

*In 2001, ***** made an extraordinary discovery. It enabled him to build an online information marketing business that is now worth in excess of £5 million, with over 140,000 customers in 152 countries, and all created with virtually ZERO capital!*

In just a few moments he's going to show you what his discovery was, and how you can take advantage of exactly the same system to earn from between £15,000 - £25,000 a month – every month. [Continued...]

You'll notice that I tell my readers exactly what I'm selling as early on as the sub-head: it's a "unique online Business Building System". No mysteries.

And finally, to round off this section, a 'story' in a very different voice. This formed the opening of a brochure I wrote for a builder of multi-million pound super-yachts. In the above example I'm selling to prospects who aspire to wealth; in the example below I'm selling to prospects who have already acquired it:

The *** – 90, 67, 55, 50**

"Award winning cruising yachts, meticulously hand-crafted in Britain to deliver matchless levels of comfort and performance. The ultimate in sailing refinement and a stunning appeal to the senses

In the beginning...

*When ocean racer ***** and his wife ***** set out to fulfil their dream voyage, it was with a clear vision in mind. Theirs was to be a passage of discovery, not only of distant and unfamiliar shores, but also of themselves; an inner voyage that ultimately would lead them to a deeper appreciation of the world and create memories that would endure a lifetime.*

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Their first challenge was to find the perfect blue water cruising yacht, one that could sail anywhere, navigate any ocean, in safety and comfort, and, critically, without the need for additional crew.

She also had to have sparkling performance and looks to be proud of – elegant and refined – a home from home where friends and family could be entertained in style. It had to be a yacht in which they could pursue life-enhancing experiences, forge new friendships and discover a world beyond the ordinary.

“Experience the quiet admiration of your fellow sailors, secure in the knowledge that you own the very best...”

[Continued]

We all love a good story. If you can weave your sales message into a compelling story (especially one of victory against overwhelming odds) you'll greatly increase your chances of being read.

What you've learned in this section

- Emotion is the most potent motivator known to man. It is therefore essential that you connect with your readers' 'resident emotion' – i.e. what they care about most in relation to what you're selling – their hopes, wants and fears. Where's the 'pain'? Begin by asking yourself the question: "What am I selling?" You're a vacuum cleaner seller. What are you selling? You're not selling vacuum cleaners. You're selling a cleaner, safer home. Where appropriate, combine headlines, sub-heads and body copy with emotive visuals for added emotional impact.
- Make your prospect an irresistible offer. What you offer your prospect in those few vital seconds when they decide whether or not to continue reading can mean the difference between success and failure.
- Where appropriate, sell on quality over price.
- Beware of the falling into the 'generic sell' trap, i.e. selling the concept of what you sell or do, as opposed to selling 'you' or your specific product. Always differentiate your product or service from the competition.
- Tell a story. One of the most effective ways of exciting your reader is to paint a picture with words.
- Begin in the middle. Another take on the story telling technique is to 'begin in the middle'. Good journalists and novelists commonly use the same trick to hook their readers into a story. Never presume, however, that your reader is always going to read through to the end of a sales letter, web page or ad. For this reason it's vital to summarise your key message up front.

Exercise 4

Review the copy you've written so far. In the light of what you learned in the last section, have you created desire in your readers? If you were considering buying this product or service, would you find your offer irresistible? For your copy to be effective, it is essential that you present the best possible case within the available space and format. With this in mind, continue to refine your copy until you are satisfied that you have a watertight argument. Return to the 'what you have learned' sections at the end of each 'rule' and use them as a check list. If your copy ticks all the boxes, you should now be well on the way to producing a professional and highly polished sales letter. All that remains now is to address the fourth, final and most critical element of the AIDA formula. Action!

Rule # 4 – Action!

Inspire your reader to take action

‘Most good copywriters . . . fall into two categories. Poets. And killers. Poets see an ad as an end. Killers as a means to an end.’ If you are both killer and poet, you get rich.’

- David Ogilvy

4.1 Make your offer believable

Which headline promises the reader more proof?

Headline A:

Tension Headache?

Headline B:

When Doctors Have Headaches, What Do They Do?

Of course, it's Headline B, which ties the implied promise (a headache remedy) to a strong proof element: doctors. When John Caples tested these two headlines, headline B won by a convincing 71%.

If you're to persuade people to part with their money, they must first trust you. When did you ever buy something from someone you didn't trust? To win trust you must first come across as believable. Therefore every offer you make must include a clear and credible rationale to back up your claim. This brings us back to the subject of benefits. Quite rightly, a copywriter should always emphasise the benefits of whatever he's selling. But there's a right way and a wrong way of approaching benefits. The inexperienced copywriter will take the perceived benefits of a product - the bigger, the brasher the better - and plaster them across the page in the hope they'll stick:

"Buy my herbal remedy and it will cure your snoring forever!"

"Your cat will prefer Kattokins cat food to any other brand!"

"Promote my network marketing products in your spare time and it will make you a millionaire!"

Yeah, sure!

Well, of course, you're going to be able to fool some of the people some of the time (perhaps a tiny percentage). But to rise above the mediocre and make your copy fly you're going to have to add the magic ingredient - PROOF. The outrageous unsubstantiated claim might well have worked in a bygone innocent age of inhabited by snake oil salesmen, but the 21st century punter, by contrast, is a cynical animal. She needs convincing. Think CREDIBILITY.

If, for instance, you're selling a herbal remedy that purports to cure snoring, then you'll need to include a persuasive and credible endorsement from a respected medical source, such as a Harley Street specialist, etc.

If you're selling cat food and you're able to say that the British Council of Veterinary Surgeons (for example) has verified in independent tests that a majority of cats prefer your brand of cat food, then you've got a winner.

Likewise, if you're selling a network marketing opportunity that turns people into millionaires, to satisfy the sceptics (i.e. pretty much everybody), you'll need to back it up with some highly convincing screen shots of bank statements (your own and others) and bona-fide testimonials from other successful marketers that demonstrate your claim beyond all reasonable doubt. Otherwise forget it.

And in every case you'll need to offer verifiable testimonials from people who've bought your product. In fact there are few better ways of gaining credibility. It's the equivalent of saying, "Don't take my word for it listen to these people as well." That's why when multi-national network marketing businesses (the likes of Amway and Herbal Life) run conventions in a drive to sign-up new members they will inevitably wheel out their most successful 'millionaire' networkers as living evidence that their business model works and that their promises are not far-fetched.

Neglecting to offer adequate proof of claims is one of the most common mistakes of inexperienced copywriters. If you don't have the evidence to back it up, however much you may believe in your product, it isn't going to sell. End of story.

A note on testimonials

Use testimonials, but never, ever, make them up (or allow them to appear as if they've been falsified even though they're genuine). We've all seen so-called testimonials that sound like they've been made up on the hoof. It's usually because they have. Consider this example:

"Absolutely fantastic! My wife and I have made so much money from business networking with XYZ company that we've been able to buy a retirement home in the Bahamas with our first year's profits – outright and for cash!"

John, Birmingham

Yeah, sure...

BUT, if the identical testimonial had been signed-off as follows, it would be a very different story:

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“Absolutely fantastic! My wife and I have made so much money from business networking with XYZ company that we’ve been able to buy a retirement home in the Bahamas with our first year’s profits – outright and for cash!”

John Turner

Managing Partner

Business Networking Enterprises Ltd

Birmingham

www.bnebirmingham.co.uk

The second testimonial is verifiable and therefore convincing; the first is merely suspicious. As with my own testimonials, the inclusion of a name, job title, AND, critically, a web address will dramatically improve credibility (see www.copy-doctor.co.uk).

Remember, you’re a sales person in print. And a good sales person never makes their claim bigger than their proof. The greater the claim, the greater the onus of proof. The greater your credibility, the greater the response, and the greater the profits. This means empathising with your reader. Anticipate their questions and objections and answer them in advance.

4.2 Create a sense of urgency

Offer a compelling reason to take action now

Introductory offer

*If you decide to take advantage of one of ***** flexible managed backup services, you will receive a generous 30% discount on our competitive retail pricing. But it is essential that you place your order within 24 hours, after which this restricted introductory offer will end.*

Ask for action

*Don't put it off. It's just too important. Call or email ***** to arrange your free consultation today: 01*** *** *** – 9:00 am – 6:30 pm Monday – Friday*

*Email: sales@*****.co.uk*

*www.*****.com*

There are many compelling reasons why your prospect should take immediate action. Here are just a few:

- Time sensitive special offer – “Will end on...”
- Limited availability
- Begin to make life easier /better – now
- Join the privileged few who will own the XYZ product...
- Price is set to rise

Here is a real life e-mailer I wrote for a well-known motorsport team (de-branded). It neatly encapsulates at least three of the five ‘reasons’ listed above:

[Subject line: ‘Your unique invitation from the ***** Racing Team...’]

The *** World Championship Racing Team**

**100 countries - 5 continents - 350 million
households - 750 million viewers**

That's our TV coverage – what's yours looking like?

Your unique opportunity to gain massive brand exposure to motorsport fans worldwide

[CLICK HERE NOW TO FIND OUT MORE](#)

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Now in its ***** adrenalin-fuelled season, the ***** **Championship** has quickly become established as one of the world's most prestigious and exhilarating motor racing series. Fought out in 20 races across four continents, it's one of only four *****-recognised world-series motorsport championships, including Formula 1, and is a powerful and highly cost-effective platform for generating brand awareness on a global scale.

What does this mean for your brand?

Formed at the beginning of the 20** season, the *******Racing Team** has made a big impact - **FAST!** Competing against well-known teams like Aston Martin, Corvette, Lamborghini and Ford, it has already taken three decisive race wins, including the prestigious ***** Trophy at ***** , instantly establishing itself as a serious contender for this year's driver and team titles. But then again what else would you expect from *****? We don't do things by halves.

Offers like this don't come along every day. This is a rare opportunity for your brand to partner with a winning team, get on board from the ground up and share in the rewards of our success as we grow.

The *****Racing Team** currently has available a very limited number of bespoke partnership and media packages for selected commercial partners.**

[CLICK HERE NOW TO FIND OUT MORE](#)

BUT TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS OFFER YOU WILL NEED TO ACT FAST!

[CLICK HERE NOW TO FIND OUT MORE](#)

"Where the world's most prestigious automotive brands build their reputations, battling for supremacy in a spectacular test of man and machine..."

Your aim is to create a sense of urgency while at the same time making it as easy as possible for your prospect to take action. If for any reason they feel that they can put off making their buying decision until a later date, the chances are you've lost them forever.

4.4 Offer a genuine 'no-risk' guarantee

Whatever you're selling, there's nothing guaranteed to improve your sales like a genuine no-risk guarantee.

Here's a guarantee I created for an online information marketer:



**You Are Protected By Our
100% 60 Day Money Back
Guarantee!**

If after watching ** ...***

***... if for any reason (any reason at all) you are not totally convinced that this product is of REAL VALUE AND worth MANY TIMES what you paid for it, just let us know within 60 days and we'll return your investment in full – that is our cast iron guarantee to you.
No questions! No quibbles!***

NB: YOUR 2 SPECIAL BONUS DVDs ARE YOURS TO KEEP AT NO EXTRA CHARGE, EVEN IF YOU DECIDE TO RETURN ** AND CLAIM A FULL REFUND.***

Just return ** within 60 Days from purchase and we'll refund your money in full. And you still get to keep your FREE GIFTS!***

So your worst case scenario is that you get to keep your free gifts and you walk away from the experience with every single penny in your pocket ... OR ... you agree that this has simply been a brilliant investment of your time and money and are set to transform your life as you watch these DVDs over and over.

I hope this demonstrates how confident we are in the quality of this product.



The effusive ‘in your face’ tone of the copy is appropriate to an information marketing product. It would of course be wholly inappropriate for a more conservative product. Use common sense and craft your guarantee according to your product and your target audience, but remember to make it watertight and convincing, with no suspicious sounding weasel clauses, such as ‘return in original condition’, etc. And, wherever possible, always relate your guarantee to your product’s performance. For example, if you’re selling an e-course on becoming a better golfer, your guarantee would look something like this:

“Study the Golfmaster Pro programme at your leisure, watch the DVDs, do the simple daily exercises. If after six months you are not totally delighted with the way your handicap has improved, simply let us know and we’ll return your investment in full – that is our cast iron guarantee to you. No questions! No quibbles!”

Counter-intuitive as it may seem, in many cases the longer you make your guarantee the less likely you are to receive a demand for a refund, because it has the effect of putting off your customer’s decision date some time into the dim and distant future.

Depending on what you’re selling, a highly effective form of guarantee is to state that in the unlikely event your customer should require a refund they can keep the products they’ve received completely without cost or further obligation. This is especially effective if you’re selling downloadable digital information products, which cost very little to deliver but have a high perceived value to the prospect.

If you’re concerned that offering a guarantee will erode your profits, you shouldn’t be. Provided your product is of sound quality, the existence of a guarantee will far outweigh in value the number of resulting returns.

Understandably, some businesses are nervous about offering a guarantee in case their customers take unfair advantage of them. This is especially relevant if you’re selling a high value product. If, for instance, you sell top-end fitted kitchens at £60,000 a time, you aren’t likely to offer a ‘money back if not completely satisfied – no quibbles, no questions’ guarantee. It would be just too risky.

I have an acquaintance who, upon completion of her new fitted kitchen, decided that she hated it. There was absolutely nothing wrong with it. She simply hated it on aesthetic grounds, despite the fact she’d chosen it in the first place. She insisted that her hapless kitchen fitter tear it out and begin again.

Fortunately the kitchen fitter’s guarantee was watertight: it covered workmanship and materials (their customers would anyway be protected by their statutory rights as a consumer), but made no provision for fickle people who changed their minds without a valid

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reason. (Believe me, they're out there!) Quite rightly, my acquaintance was forced to pay-up twice.

So unless you're dealing with relatively small risk, it's important to consider the implications of your guarantee. Here's the guarantee I use for guarantee for my copywriting business, and it has served me well for many years:

Most clients are delighted with my copy when they receive it. But if you are not 100% satisfied, I will revise the copy in accordance with your exact guidelines - and at no additional cost.

4.5 Speed and cost of delivery

The speed with which a product is delivered has a clear effect on buying behaviour and customer satisfaction. Direct mail sellers know this. That's why major online and mail order retailers, such as clothing retailer NEXT and Amazon, etc, place great stock on speed. NEXT now promises guaranteed next day delivery on orders placed as late as 9pm! Now do you think they would knock themselves out to achieve such a superhuman deadline if it didn't have an impact on sales? Of course they wouldn't. It's also one of the reasons online book and music downloads have now overtaken sales of hard copy products - people crave instant gratification. They may not always know what they want, but they know they definitely want it NOW!

So if you can deliver faster and / or you're offering free or low-cost shipping and handling, always make a big noise about it.

4.6 Offer discounts and easy payment terms

To make your discount both attractive and plausible (as well as legal) it is first important to highlight your regular price. You also need to be specific: where and when was your product sold at full price? Supermarkets are past masters at this, especially when selling wine – they rotate their special offers, making it as easy possible for their customers to view and compare price changes as they fluctuate. Always make your discounts generous – between 25% and 50% is optimum.

Offering easy payment terms can be a highly effective means of tipping the balance on buying decisions, especially on ‘big ticket’ purchases. For instance, if you’re selling an online video coaching course for, say, \$1,900, a good percentage of your prospects are going to rule it out on price alone, however much they may want it – they simply don’t have \$1,900 to spend in one go. To counter this problem you simply offer an alternative payment plan that allows this segment of your prospects to pay in three or four equal instalments – for example, an initial payment of \$600, followed by three further monthly payments of \$500, making a total of \$2,100. For the privilege of spreading the cost they pay an additional \$200. But this is offset, because all they now have to find to gain full access your irresistible product is \$600. This lower figure is now the one that will be dominant in your prospect’s mind, and not the final price of \$2,100. By deferring payment, you’ve lowered the affordability threshold.

What you've learned in this section

Be believable

To win trust you must first come across as believable. To make your copy pay you're going to have to add the magic ingredient - PROOF. Never make your claim bigger than your proof - the greater the claim, the greater the onus of proof.

Use genuine testimonials from credible, identifiable customers. Wherever possible, include a web URL in the footer. This adds hugely to your credibility.

Create a sense of urgency

This means giving your reader a compelling reason to take action now. Always conclude your sales piece with a call to action.

Offer a genuine 'no-risk' guarantee

Whatever you're selling, there's nothing guaranteed to improve your sales like a genuine no-risk guarantee. Wherever possible, always relate your guarantee to your product's performance. The longer you make your guarantee the less likely you are to receive a demand for a refund. Always consider the implications of your guarantee.

Emphasise speed / cost of delivery

If you can deliver faster and / or you're offering free or low-cost shipping and handling, always make a big noise about it.

Offer discounts and easy payment terms

Always make your discount generous – between 25% and 50% is optimum. Lower the affordability threshold by allowing your prospects to pay in instalments.

EXERCISE 5

Return to your copy and craft a compelling conclusion to your selling message. Use the above 'What you've learned' section as a check list. Does your call to action tick all the relevant boxes? If not, then rework your copy until you are satisfied that it does.

Rarely, if ever, can a first draft not be improved upon - and this applies to all writers, even the most experienced. Rewrite and rewrite again, and continue rewriting until you're 100% happy with your work. If possible, show your work to other people and ask for their feedback – ideally someone with experience in sales and marketing. Very often a fresh pair of eyes can pick up things that you as a writer have overlooked. But be careful to balance their opinions against what you've learned in this program, and do not be swayed to make changes against your better judgment.

Ultimately the only guide as to whether you've got it right is by measuring your results - which brings us to crunch time.

But first of all, congratulations! You've made it through to the end of the program, and as a result you are already a head and shoulders above many so-called professional copywriters.

Now that you've completed The Sales Copy Master Class your final step is to test the water with your sales copy – either as a hard-copy sales letter, an email and /or web-based landing page. The form it takes will depend upon what you're selling and your existing marketing processes.

If you're sending your letter / email to an extensive mailing list, it is a good idea to run a split test to two sample segments – i.e. two or more different versions of your letter. Try using different headlines, sub-heads, different nuances on your offer, calls to action etc. The letter that brings in the best response then becomes your 'control' letter, unless or until you come up with another letter to beat it.

But what percentage of conversions constitutes a 'good' response? The answer is there isn't one! All that matters is that you turn a profit, and this is determined by your average sale.

If, for example, you are selling printing presses and you send out 10,000 emails at a cost of £200 and achieve a 0.1 percent response rate, you could be forgiven for being disappointed. But if those measly 10 responses brought you in \$100,000+ in profits (which is perfectly feasible), then you've got a result. If you're selling post-it notes, however, you could have a problem – but even then only if you fail to recoup your costs. Success is not about measuring percentages in isolation; it's about measuring ratios, and always trying to beat your previous result. Bear this in mind when assessing your efforts.

The complexities of direct response marketing are beyond the scope of this programme, but if you want to explore the subject in depth, then I strongly recommend that you read *Common Sense Direct and Digital Marketing* by Drayton Bird.

The 10,000 hour rule

Of course, your final step in this stage of your journey to become an effective copywriter is also your first. The reason professional copywriters become good at their craft is because they spend a LOT of time doing it. To master your craft effectively, so must you. And if you've reached this far you can be confident that you are now equipped with all the tools you need to achieve your goal. Everything else is practice.

In his book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, the writer Malcolm Gladwell claims that the key to success in any field is a matter of practicing a specific task for a total of around 10,000 hours. That's right, the greatest writers, athletes, chess masters, entrepreneurs, artists and scientists only ever reach the peak of their game after spending a three hours a day for a decade (or six hours a day for five years) mastering their chosen field.

Gladwell claims there is no such thing as a 'self-made man' (and he offers a very persuasive argument for his case). Instead, it's the years spent intensively focused on their area of expertise that place the world's most successful people above their peers. In my experience this is true.

I rest my case.

And finally, for fear of becoming boring, I repeat my demand that you **read everything aloud!** (Failing in this duty may be compared to the chef who fails to taste his own cooking before serving it to his customers.)

If a piece of writing cannot comfortably be read aloud, then it is flawed. I read EVERYTHING aloud. I strongly suggest that you do too. Quite literally, sit in front of your screen and read your copy as if you were addressing the room. It's by far the most reliable way of identifying problems with your writing: breaks in flow, unnecessary repetitions, overlong sentences, clunky rhythms and clumsy oversights – they'll all be exposed.

And now you're ready to get writing and get those golden geese a-laying.

But wait. Before you sharpen your pencil...

...have you armed yourself with the basics?

The fact that you're reading this leads me to suppose that you're able to write at least reasonably confidently and that you have a fair working knowledge of grammar and punctuation.

If you harbour any self-doubt in this area, however, don't be demoralised. As with any other skill, the more you practice the better you become, and even professional writers can become rusty through lack of application. For this reason you will benefit hugely from acquiring the following books (available through Amazon): *On Writing Well*, by William Zinser; and *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk jnr. and EB White. They're timeless classics, may be read in a matter of hours and are essential reading for anyone who wants to improve their writing skills. Even the most accomplished writers will discover gems of previously unconsidered wisdom lurking in their concise pages.

And absolutely finally...

Always recognise that there will almost certainly be vast untapped opportunities for you outside of your traditional marketing sphere. What are you selling? Is it *all* that you could be selling? Always consider ways of expanding upon your basic product to grow your business. How might you reposition your product or add to it to trigger new demand or crack open a whole new market? Think big!

Happy writing!

Convert and be prosperous

Kent Austin

Appendix - 1

A tried and tested sales letter formula [not definitive, but one of many!]:

1. Begin by telling your reader exactly why you are writing to them:

Always remember that you are selling a solution and never just a product. And always address your prospect in the first person, i.e. “I” and not “we” (unless you are writing a joint letter with a business partner). Keep it personal:

Dear <personalise>

“I’m writing to you to tell you about ...” Be as specific as possible. Find the most persuasive and concise way of delivering your USP.

2. List your reasons for writing:

In the process, stress your unique suitability to solve the prospect’s problem. Why you and not someone else? What qualifies you over your competitors, and what specific results have you achieved for other similar businesses with the same type of problem? Compare your solution with lesser options.

3. List the features and benefits of your offer:

“This is what you get [when you buy XYZ product] ... and this is what it will do for you...” Demonstrate that the benefits inevitably outweigh the cost.

Focus on the benefits that will solve the prospect’s problem. If you need to get a lot of information across at this stage, list your features and benefits using bullet points. For example: “You get [feature], which means [benefit].” But don’t overdo it – in a short copy letter I generally work to a maximum of seven or eight bullet points in any one list.

4. Place yourself in your prospect’s shoes and answer as many of their questions or objections as possible:

For example: “Understandably, before making a decision you will want to know whether [XYZ product] is right for you. In my experience, these are the most frequent questions asked by our customers. If you can’t find an answer to your question below, simply contact us on [insert contact details]...” Now list your most frequently asked questions / objections in bullet point format.

5. Deliver a risk-free guarantee:

Explain precisely how your guarantee works and how it removes any risk from the buying decision. For example:

“You Are Protected By Our 90 Day 100% Money Back Guarantee! After using [XYZ product] ,if for any reason - any reason whatsoever - you are not totally convinced that this product is of REAL VALUE, just let us know within 90 days and we’ll return your investment in full – that is my cast iron guarantee to you. No questions! No quibbles!”

Obviously, this type of guarantee is not suitable for every product. Tailor your guarantee to fit your product, and be certain that it removes (or at the very least significantly reduces) any risk to the buyer.

6. Craft an irresistible call to action:

“Ordering [XYZ product] couldn’t be easier. Simply [give precise step-by-step directions] (“Click here,” “enter your details,” “call this number,” “email @,” etc, etc).

7. Tell them exactly what will happen after they’ve taken action:

“Once you’ve placed your order...”

Describe as clearly and concisely as possible what will happen next once they’ve placed their order. Tell the prospect how and when they will take delivery of their new product; how they will use it, etc, etc. Your aim is to inspire confidence – the reader must be allowed to confirm for themselves beyond any reasonable doubt that they are making the right decision.

8. Add a sense of urgency:

Tell your prospect why they need to take action NOW: “But you’ll need to move fast, because...” Introduce a time limit or an order deadline, limited stock, etc. Let them know the consequences or potential cost of putting it off until another day. As with your guarantee, you will need to tailor your ‘sense of urgency’ to suit your product or service.

9. Add testimonials from happy customers:

“Many people use [XYZ product] every year. Here are just a few of the comments from our satisfied customers...” [Insert genuine testimonials or very brief case studies. Be specific. Wherever possible, include the full name / company / location / URL of the endorser. For example:

“This is truly great product. I’d recommend it to anyone in the automotive business...”

John Smith, CEO, Acme Products, Birmingham. www.acmeproducts.com

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is infinitely more believable than:

“This is truly great product. I’d recommend it to anyone in the automotive business...”

John Smith

Finally, add your headline to the top of your letter:

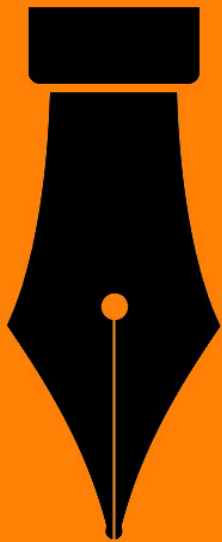
Be as creative as you like with your headlines, but never be clever simply for the sake of it. The best headlines always get straight to the point and relate powerfully to the principal benefit of your product. It should always include at least one or more of the following elements: a promise, proof, curiosity, self-interest or reward.

Appendix - 2

A copywriter's check list

A critical check list for completion prior to beginning a copywriting assignment:

1. DESCRIPTION. What product or service are you offering?
2. PRICE. How much does it cost?
3. OFFER. What exactly are you offering - e.g. Special price, free consultation, free trial, time-sensitive offer, etc? What is the objective of the project and what do you want to achieve? For example telephone / email enquiries, lead generation, direct sale, etc?
4. FEATURES. List all the special features of your product or service. What does your product do? What service does it perform? How does it work? How is it used?
5. BENEFITS. What will it do for my prospects? What specific problems does it solve? How will it make or save them money, save time or work, make their lives easier or better?
6. USP. What will my product or service deliver that my prospects can't get anywhere else? Or how and why is it new, better than, different from what's already available? Is it unique or exclusive? What, if anything, sets it apart from the competition – price, service, quality? How does it compare with others?
7. YOUR PROSPECTS. Who are your main prospects? What are their job titles and responsibilities? Where is the 'pain'? What are their biggest concerns, fears, attitudes, possible objections? What main desire or fear does your message tap in to?
8. DATA. If you are sending out a sales letter / email, what data list will you be using? Is it reliable? Will it need cleansing or updating prior to use?
9. TESTIMONIALS. Gather together all letters, emails and comments from satisfied customers, including, where applicable, media quotes and celebrity endorsements.
10. LIMITATIONS. For example, envelope size, shape size and / or weight of mailing, etc.
11. PAYMENT METHOD. Cash with order, pay when received, pro former, trial period, cheque, money order, standing order, direct debit, Visa, Master Card, American Express, PayPal, etc.
12. GUARANTEE. For example, 100% money back after 7/30/60/90 days, etc.
13. BACKGROUND RESEARCH. Consider competitor and other websites.
14. REVIEW DATA. Review conversion / analytics data from previous campaigns, if available / applicable.
15. SEO. If you are writing web copy, list the countries / cities/ towns / geographic areas that you wish to target.



THE SALES COPY MASTER CLASS



About the author

Kent Austin is one of the UK's leading sales, marketing and digital copywriters. With over twenty years' hands-on marketing experience, he has been instrumental in generating multi-million pound revenues for his clients. He works regularly for some of the UK's most successful creative and marketing agencies including M&C Saatchi, Archibald Ingall Stretton, Publicis, Syzygy, 23red and DBB.

Kent is a recognised expert in the field of guerrilla marketing for small to medium sized businesses including digital and direct marketing, Pay-Per-Click advertising and search engine optimisation.

Recent assignments include a major rebranding exercise on behalf of Russia's premier cultural city, Saint Petersburg. Print and digital projects include writing the official brochures for the 2011 *24 Heures du Mans* Peugeot Sport race team, the Citroën Total FIA World Rally Championship Team and the Nissan GT1 World Championship Racing team, as well as extensive brochure output for Kia Motors Corporation.

Kent has also worked on high-profile advertising campaigns for clients in the international film distribution industry including Nigel Marven's *Pole to Pole*, and the US hit TV series *The Martha Stewart Show* and *The Janice Dickinson Modelling Agency*.

He writes regularly for several marketing-focussed publications, including *Marketing Week*, *B2B Magazine*, *Marketing*, *Third Sector*, *Market Leader* and *Campaign*, on subjects as diverse as corporate social responsibility, Twitter semantics and the lesser-known virtues of Swiss wine.

Kent Austin holds a BA Honours degree in English from the University of Sussex.