

How to write irresistible copy for your website

Andy Maslen

Imagine you're in a jostling crowd of editorial professionals on the concourse at Waterloo Station. It's 17.48, and your prospect – we'll call her Jo – is racing towards Platform 6 for the train home. She's looking forward to seeing her husband and her two children, Sophie and Eddie.

You're there to pitch, but so are hundreds of others. All vying for her attention. All shouting at once. And, depressingly, all shouting the same thing. (Well, almost. Call them variations on a theme of 'me'.)

Pick **me!** I love words. I've been correcting my big sister's thank you letters since I was three.

No, **me!** After a successful career as a technical author I launched my own freelance editing business.

It's **me** you want! I have a wall full of editorial diplomas and ran Penguin's production department for five years.

To her, their entreaties sound like aural wallpaper. At best. At worst, she doesn't hear them at all. The station announcer, on the other hand ...

This is a platform change announcement. Would passengers for the 17.50 to Salisbury please go to Platform 18.

Now she's really panicking.

How to make your web copy stand out in a crowded marketplace

So, what *are* you going to shout? I suggest something like this.

Jo! I've got Sophie and Eddie on the phone.

The screech from heels on shiny floor tiles as she skids to a halt silences the baying of your competitors. She turns, finds your face in the crowd and rushes over.

About the author

Andy Maslen is the author of the bestselling Gabriel Wolfe, Stella Cole and Inspector Ford series. As a copywriter, Andy spent 30 years convincing strangers to part with their hard-earned cash using the power of words. In 2007, he wrote the first of five books on copywriting, *Write to Sell*, now in its third edition and a perennial bestseller. In 2015, Andy wrote and self-published his first novel, *Trigger Point*. Three years and 11 more novels later, he won an unagented three-book deal with Thomas & Mercer and gave up the day job to concentrate on writing crime. He still self-publishes two book series, for which he writes all the advertising copy.

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'Actually, the kids are fine,' you say, 'but I did want to talk to you about copyediting.'

Now, before you stop reading in disgust at this shallow and self-defeating ploy, let me explain. Your site has to say something so *compelling* that were you to yell it out as your prospect was about to catch a train, they'd stop and run back to you.

A run-down of your qualifications, experience or love of language – or even authors – is unlikely to work. What *will* work is a brief statement of the problem they are facing right now. And how you can solve it for them.

If I were looking for a copyeditor, and I came across a website that began, 'You're a great storyteller, but sometimes you wonder whether your sentences could be sharper, your chapters tighter, your novels more compelling,' I would read on, probably while nodding.

Why does this work? Because, like every other human being on the planet, authors are primarily interested in themselves. *Their* needs. *Their* wants. *Their* fears. So if you address those matters in your web copy, you'll be speaking to them about the things they care about.

And notice how the second clause not only outlines their problem, but shows them the benefits of working with you.

Of course, there will come a point in this one-sided conversation where you will need to establish your bona fides, but it isn't now.

Let's say you're meeting this person face to face. Possibly on the concourse of a major London railway terminus. What's the first thing they're going to say to you? Is it, 'Let's talk about you'? No. It's, 'How can you help me solve my problem?' Once you've explained, *then* they will ask you, 'How do I know I can believe you?'

What makes a reader stay on a web page? (And what makes them leave?)

By now, you may have figured out the answer to this question. If not, consider the following aphorism, which I hope one day to see among other inspirational quotes on writing.

A fascinating book is never long enough, a boring book never short enough.

The same goes for websites. Readers will stay on a web page for exactly the amount of time that it holds their interest. You can help by following these five rules:

Keep readers on your web page

1 Focus on the benefits of your service, not its features.

The 'So what?' test

To figure out when you are talking about a benefit, try this simple test.

- You say something about your business.
- Your prospect asks, 'So what?'
- You explain, 'That means ...'
- They repeat their query.
- You explain some more.
- They stop asking, 'So what?'

The last thing you said was the benefit.

2 Convey information through stories, not concepts.

For actual examples use the past tense, first person. 'When John came to me with his novel, I ...' For hypothetical examples use the present tense, second person. 'You send me your manuscript, possibly feeling a little nervous. But don't worry! I make the process not just painless but fun.'

3 Use 'you' more often than 'I'.

4 Keep your sentences to an average of 10–12 words.

5 Use the active voice. (I feel confident in not needing to explain this term here.)

How to communicate quality, and justify your fees

If you're a CIEP member, I'll assume your written English is on point. So, from style to substance.

- You communicate quality by explaining *exactly* what qualifies you to solve your reader's problems and how you go about it. In other words, this is where you get to talk about yourself.
- You have war stories of projects completed, publishers and authors worked for, awards won, speeches given, articles written.
- If you're brand new to the business, major on your academics, your career history, your achievements to date.
- Having grabbed their attention, and shown them, convincingly, how working with you will solve their problem, your final task is to ask for the order. That seems like a fitting way to end this paper.

Three tips for a compelling call to action

The golden rule of selling is to ask for the order. You fail, you starve.

1 Only ask them to do one thing.

If you offer a free review of a page of their writing, tell them to do that. If you want them to complete a form, that. Not both.

2 Make it obvious what to do.

Don't hide your call to action. Put 'Contact me' in the main navigation. Have a text link on your homepage too. Make that every page.

3 Never begin with 'If ...'

Use the imperative mood instead. 'If' suggests that you're not even sure they should be contacting you. Contrast the power of these two calls to action.

If you would like to work with me, please call me on 07790 000999.

Send me your sample pages now and you'll have my professional suggestions within 24 hours.

Here's what you should *really* shout

Let's end where we began, on the concourse of Waterloo Station. Jo is rushing past you, intent on catching the 17.50. Everyone else is wallpapering the air with sonic irrelevances. You open your mouth, inhale deeply, and shout:

| Jo! I know how we can sell an extra fifty thousand copies of your next book!

Written by Andy Maslen

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