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inside



eMarketing

the essential guide to online marketing

2nd edition

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and the minds of Quirk

13. online copywriting

What's inside: An **introduction** to online copywriting reveals that content is king, and gives you the **key terms and concepts** needed for this chapter. **How it works** discusses personas and the **importance of layout** and some **HTML basics**. Writing online, you will need to look at **short copy**, which includes the all important **call to action, features and benefits**, and **writing PPC adverts**. **Long copy** still requires attention to the elements that make sure you are getting read, and we look at the all important **SEO copywriting**. The **Web is full of neologisms and buzz words**, but you'll keep on top of them with our **tools of the trade**.

introduction

When it comes to the Internet, content is king! The copy on a web page is a hardworking multi-tasker. It needs to provide information to visitors, engage with them and convince them to take a desired action as well as conveying brand ethos. It also needs to provide context and relevance to search engines. And it needs to achieve all this without appearing to be trying too hard.

Whatever your involvement with the Internet and eMarketing, copywriting is fundamental. Whether writing an email to a colleague or PPC adverts for a new product launch, learning how to write effective online copy will make you a better communicator.

Online copywriting involves everything from the copy of a web site, to the content of an email and all things in between. From 800 word WebPR articles to three line PPC adverts, if it's being read on a screen, it's online copy.

key terms and concepts

Above the fold The content that appears on a screen without a user having to scroll.

Active verb A word that conveys action or behaviour, and in a call to action, tells a prospect what to do.

Benefit The positive outcome for a user that a feature provides.

Call to action Also, CTA: words used to encourage a prospect to take a particular action.

Dynamic keyword insertion In paid search advertising, this allows keywords used in searches to be inserted automatically into advert copy.

Feature A prominent aspect of a product which is beneficial to users.

Mass customisation Tailoring content for many individuals.

Persona A character used to represent a group of visitors to a web site.

PPC Pay Per Click usually refers to advertising on search engines.

Sender alias The name that is chosen to appear in the sender or from field of an email.

SEO Search engine optimisation - aiming to improve rankings in search engines.

SERP Search engine results page - what you see when you perform a search on a search engine.

USP Unique selling point - what makes your offering different to your competitors'.

how it works

When writing for the web, it does not mean that traditional approaches to copywriting need to be ditched. The foundations remain. The first step you need to take is to research your audience, understand their needs and **write copy that solves their problems** while engaging with them.

Knowing your audience will guide you in determining the topics that they want, and help you to organise information in a way that makes sense to your audience. It will direct the tone of your copy, as well as the content.

However, the Internet has led to an audience of one (Price and Price, 2002). What does this mean? While your audience is not literally one person (and if it is, thank your mum for reading your web site, but spend some time on growing your readership), it is not a vast, vaguely defined crowd. Instead, online we have many niche audiences who are used to being addressed as individuals. Online, many of the individuals in our audience also exchange information via blogs, forums and other forms of social media.

Holly Buchanan of Future Now (www.futurenowinc.com) sums this up with three questions you should ask:

1. Who is my audience?
2. What actions do I want them to take?
3. What information do they need in order to feel confident taking action?

personas

Personas are based on the profile of readers of your copy – the visitors to your web site. Creating a profile is all about considering the needs and desires of your web site visitors. For example: how do they make purchase decisions: do they compare lots of service providers before selecting one, do they make lists of questions and call in for assistance with decision making, or do they make purchase decisions spontaneously based on a special offer?

Web site copy can be structured in such a way that it caters for several personas, but you need to spend time understanding their needs before you are able to write copy that addresses these needs.

Understanding the profiles of your readers is an important process, and the best copy usually results from extensive time spent figuring out your audience.

copy that is easy to read

Online copy is judged at first glance by readers not just on its content, but first and foremost on its layout. It needs to appear to be easy to read before a user will choose to read it.

tip

Sometimes it helps to write for just one person. Pick out someone you know who fits your audience, or make someone up, and write for that person. In copywriting, this person who fits your audience is a persona.

A good online copywriter will also be able to use basic HTML to layout copy, knowing that it is the appearance of the page that will get his words read. It should be easy for users to skip and skim the copy, and it should be easy for them to find the parts that are most relevant to them.

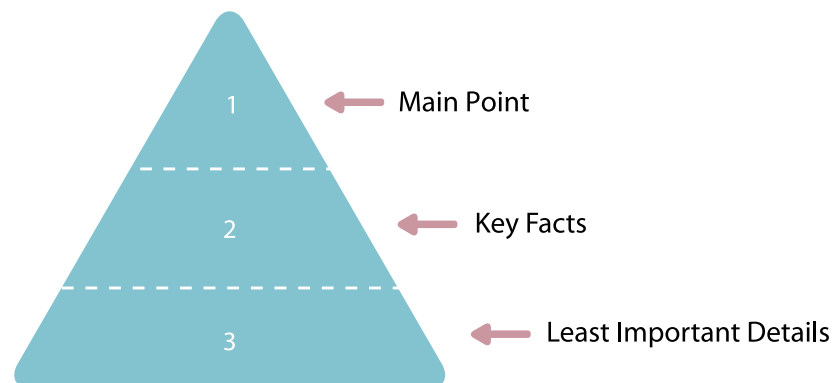
Online copy should be easy to scan. This means making use of:

- Bulleted and numbered lists
- Short paragraphs
- Clear and concise headings
- Bold and italics
- Descriptive links

It's easy to see this in practice.

Before	After
Tea has been drunk for thousands of years, and as people are growing more health conscious, tea sales are increasing. Personal preference plays an important role in making the perfect cup of tea. However, using fresh water ensures maximum oxygen in the tea, and warming the teapot first is standard practice. Tradition dictates one teabag per person, and one for the pot. Tea is served with milk, lemon, honey or sugar, according to taste.	Worldwide, tea sales are increasing as people are becoming more health conscious. Here are some tips on making the perfect cup of tea: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use fresh water (for maximum oxygen) • warm the teapot first • use one teabag per person, and one for the pot <p>The perfect cup of tea is based on personal preference and taste. Tea can be served with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • milk or lemon • honey or sugar

Because visitors need to decide quickly whether or not to read a page, the most important information needs to be at the top of the page. Start with the summary or conclusion – the main idea of the article.



While clever word play in headings and titles can attract some attention, online these need to be written as descriptively as possible. The copy is multi-tasking: not only is it informing visitors of what to expect, it is also telling search engine spiders what the page is about.

learning to use HTML

HTML stands for HyperText Markup Language, and it's the foundation of documents on the Internet. HTML tags tell browsers how to present content. HTML tags are in the brackets that look like arrows: < >

When writing online copy, you can use an HTML editor, where you insert the tags yourself, or a WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) editor which works in a similar way to a word processor.

Basic HTML is not hard to use, and will help you to layout your content. Here are some basic HTML tags:

- To bold: phrase you wish to bold
- To italicise: phrase you wish to italicise
- To underline: <u>phrase you wish to underline</u>
- To list :lines you wish to list
- To create a paragraph: <p>paragraph text</p>
- To insert a line break:

- To insert a link: phrase you wish to link

The tags also help search engines to identify how the content has been laid out on the page.

The best way to get to grips with HTML is to start using it online, where you can see how the tags work.

short copy

Online copy often has only a small amount of space and short amount of time to get a message across to a visitor, and entice them to take action. This is especially true of banner advertising and PPC adverts on search engines, but also is important across all eMarketing disciplines. Probably the most important short copy is the call to action.

call to action – telling people what to do

A crucial element to online copywriting is the call to action (CTA). Users scan web pages and look for clues as to what to do. Tell them.

A call to action is a short, descriptive instruction that explicitly tells a web visitor what to do. Banner advertising usually involves a clear call to action, and they can also be used in paid search advertising. Call to action copy is not limited to short copy: email newsletters and promotions should also make use of call to action, and we even see them all over web pages.

note

Use active verbs for sentences in the active voice. This sentence is in the active voice. Passive verbs can be used, but tend to make for less instructive copy. Passive voice is being used in this sentence.

Any time that there is an action that you want a web visitor to take, a call to action should instruct the visitor what to do. This means using active verbs when you write, and crafting hyperlinks to be clear instructions that resonate with your visitor at each step in the conversion process.

Passive sentence:

When your email has been received, an order number will be issued.

Active sentence:

Send us an email, and we will issue you with an order number!

A good call to action resonates with the action that the visitor needs to take, as opposed to the technical function that is performed. For example, if a user has entered an email address to sign up to your email newsletter, the action button should say “sign up” and not “submit”.

Consider as well what actions mean offline. Again with email newsletters, “sign up” can have very different connotations to “subscribe”. Further, “subscribe” is very different to “subscribe for free”. Whereas subscriptions have connotations of costs, “sign up” does not carry the same burden. However, “subscribe for free” could imply greater value – something that would normally carry a cost is available to you for free.

There is only one way to know what call to action works best on a web page, in an email, on a banner or in an advert: test, test, test!

features and benefits

Writing compelling copy means conveying to readers why they should perform an action. While features may seem all important, you need to communicate the benefits of the features to the user.

- **Feature:** a prominent aspect of a product or service which can provide benefit to users. It describes what the product does.
- **Benefit:** the positive outcome for a user that a feature provides. It can be the emotional component of what the user gets out of the product.

Features and benefits are very different. Features are what are important to the company that provides the product or service. Benefits are what are important to those who decide to use the product or service.

For example, consider a home entertainment system. Features could include surround sound and a large flat screen television. The benefit: a cinema quality experience in your own home.

Persuasive writing makes use of features, benefits and active verbs to create appealing messages for your personas:

Enjoy cinema quality movie nights in your own home with a surround sound home entertainment system.

PPC adverts

PPC adverts have a very limited space, and very limited time, to get a message across, as well as plenty of competition for a user’s attention. These four lines of copy need to work hard to ensure a top return on investment.

PPC adverts follow the same basic structure:

Heading

Two lines of advert copy,
Which can be displayed on one line
[www.DisplayURL.com](#)

When the copy of the advert matches the user’s search term, those words are often displayed in bold in the advert. This makes the advert stand out more, and can improve click-through rates.

For example, if the search term used was “roses”, an advert with “roses” in the copy might look like this:

Roses for Valentine’s

A dozen red roses for your love;
Fast, free delivery in RSA.
[www.flowers.co.za/roses](#)

Using keywords in the advert copy can help to improve click-through rates. However, this can mean writing thousands of adverts – one for each keyword in the PPC campaign! The paid search advertising platforms have a neat tool to bypass this problem: **dynamic keyword insertion**.

Dynamic keyword insertion allows for the search term used to be inserted into the advert copy. This means that you can write one advert, and every time it appears for a different search term, that search term will be inserted into the advert. In the copy for the advert, it looks like this:

{keyword:alternative word}

note

Refer to the chapter on PPC advertising for Google’s editorial guidelines.

The brackets indicate that this is where the dynamic keyword should go. The copywriter also needs to select an alternative keyword to show if the search term used does not fit into the space available.

Google's tutorial on dynamic keyword insertion has the following examples which explain this best.

Advert text created:

[Brand New {Keyword:Phones}](#)

Huge selection of phones. Great prices.
{Keyword:phones} in stock. Free shipping!
www.BestDealer.com

Adverts as seen by searchers:

Ad 1 - Keyword: *nokia n90*

[Brand New Nokia N90](#)

Huge selection of phones. Great prices.
Nokia n90 in stock. Free shipping!
www.BestDealer.com

Ad 2 - Keyword: *samsung d500*

[Brand New Samsung D500](#)

Huge selection of phones. Great prices.
Samsung D500 in stock. Free shipping!
www.BestDealer.com

Ad 3 - Keyword: *motorola razor silver*

[Brand New Phones](#)

Huge selection of phones. Great prices.
Phones in stock. Free shipping!
www.BestDealer.com

With some limited word count available, it can seem a daunting task to communicate information that entices the right traffic to click-through, and differentiates you from your competition. Testing variations of copy is the best way to determine what works best for your campaign.

long copy

Online copywriting is not just about short, sharp call to action copy, however web users tend to scan pages quickly to determine whether or not they will read further. Even when writing longer copy, you need to take this into consideration.

Longer online copy allows you to foster a relationship with a reader, whether it is on a blog, through email communications or through articles and news releases. With more words and space available to use, you are able to build a voice and a personality into your writing.

getting read: titles and subject lines

Titles and subject lines are there for a very important reason: they inform a reader whether or not they are likely to want to read further. They are the gateway to your content.

Consider the following two titles:

- *Guide to online copywriting*
- *Ten steps to online copywriting that sells*

The second title conveys more information to the reader, information that helps the reader to make a decision to read further.

Subject lines are like titles for emails, and can make the difference between an email being deleted instantly and being opened and read. Subject lines also work hand in hand with the "from" field of an email. Both these fields usually appear side by side in an inbox, and are used to determine relevance, familiarity and trust.

Use a consistent and easy to recognise sender alias – the "from" field – so that readers can recognise your emails easily. With familiarity and trust established using this field, the subject line can be used more creatively.

As with a title, use the subject line to make clear what the email is about. For example, if there is a promotion in the email, consider putting it in the subject line as well.

Titles, headlines and subject lines need to be both persuasive and enticing. Consider what need your copy is meeting for your readers, and express that first.

copywriting for seo

As well as the copy on the web page, HTML tags and Meta data are also used by an SEO copywriter. In addition to assisting you with structuring your content, these tags indicate relevancy and context to search engines. Some of the tags are used by screenreaders, and so they assist visitors with disabilities to access your content. The

Meta description can also be used by search engines on the search engine results pages (SERPs).

A keyword refers to the word or words that are used in a search query. Multi word keywords are sometimes referred to as key phrases.

The first step in SEO copywriting is **keyword research**. Having identified the themes of your web site and web pages, keyword research should be used to identify what keywords your target audience uses when searching for you.

Each page should be optimised for a primary key phrase, and can be optimised for a secondary and tertiary key phrase as well. Usually a web page is optimised for three key phrases, but can be optimised for up to five (though only if the page is very long). Any more than that and you are better off creating new, niche web pages.

In the chapter on search engine optimisation, there is more detail on the process of keyword discovery and keyword selection.

Below are guidelines for using key phrases on a web page:

page URL

The main key phrase for the page should be used in the URL for the page. Often, the URL is generated from the page title, so using the key phrase in the page title should ensure that it is in the URL as well.

page title

The page title appears at the top of a user's browser and should be able to tell them (and the search engine spiders, of course) what the main theme of the page is. The page title is limited to 66 characters (including spaces). The key phrase should be used as close to the beginning of the title as possible.

meta description

The Meta description is a short paragraph describing the page content. This summary is usually shown on the SERPs if it contains the search term searched for, which means that it needs to entice users to click-through. The spiders use the Meta description to deduce the topic of the page and the use of targeted key phrases is important here. Copy is limited to no more than 166 characters (including spaces).

meta keywords

The Meta keywords are a list of the words and phrases that are important on a web page. The use of targeted key phrases is important here, but remember: no keyword stuffing. The meta keywords are limited to 200 characters (including spaces).

note

Each page on a web site must have a unique URL, title, Meta keywords and Meta description.

note

Keyword stuffing refers to putting too many keywords into the Meta keywords tagging, and using keywords that are not relevant to the web page. Search engines can penalise this as a spam practice.

headings and sub-headings

Spiders assign more relevance to the text used in headings, so it is important to use your key phrases in the headings on your page. It also helps to structure your content.

Heading structures:

<h1> Page heading

<h2> Sub-headings

<h3> Information under the sub-headings

Having a good heading hierarchy is important as spiders use it to move through your page. The hierarchy indicates what is more important and how the content is broken up.

page copy

The number of times you use the key phrases is entirely dependant on how long the page of copy is. You want to optimise the page for the key phrases without their use being overt.

For SEO effectiveness, a page of web copy should not be less than 250 words. On a 250 word page you could use the primary key phrase eight times (this includes use in Meta data, headings, title and body copy) and the secondary key phrase four times.

The page should not be so long that the user needs to scroll and scroll and scroll again to get to the end of it. If you find the page is getting exceptionally long, consider breaking it into different sections. This way you could add more pages of optimised copy focused on one theme, instead of one very long page.

links to your optimised page

The text used to link from one page to another is considered important by the search engine spiders, so try to ensure that your key phrase is used when linking to the optimised page. The anchor text of links should include the key phrase of the page being linked to, and not the page being linked from.

images: alt text and title tags

Alt text refers to the "alt" attribute for the IMG HTML tag: this is the text that appears in the caption. It is used in HTML to attribute a text field to an image on a web page, normally with a descriptive function, telling a user what an image is about and displaying the text in instances where the image is unable to load. While this is handy for readers we also do it for another reason: search engine spiders can't read images, but they can read the alt text. The image title tag is what shows when you hover with your mouse over an image and can also be read by the search engine spider.

discussion

Why should you avoid requiring the user to scroll many times to read a page of content?

neologisms and buzz words

Sometimes the World Wide Web is referred to as the Wild Wild Web as it can seem to be an environment where anything goes. The ever expanding numbers of social media participants play fast and loose with grammar.

With new services and products being developed daily, it can feel like the list of new words, and new ways to use words, is building faster than you can keep up with it. Dictionaries and reference guides celebrate this regularly with a "word of the year", usually one that has been in heavy use by the Internet audience for the three years preceding its entrance into a dictionary.

For example, in 2005, "podcast" was voted word of the year by the editors of the New Oxford American dictionary, while "blog" had its day in 2004 when it was declared word of the year by Merriam-Webster's Dictionary. The word "blog" was coined in 1999.

note

Firefox is a free, open source browser developed by the Mozilla Foundation. As well as having improved and safer browsing, you can download extensions that let you customise your browser. You can download it for free from www.mozilla.org.

Online services can quickly become verbs in everyday language, so we talk of "Googling something" instead of "searching on Google" and of "Facebooking someone".

Always remember that you are writing for your users first and foremost. If your content is aimed at cutting-edge early-adopters, then litter it with the latest buzz words. If your audience does not know the difference between Firefox and Internet Explorer, then be cautious when using a word that did not exist the day before.

Users dictate your copy.

summary

Copywriting is fundamental to any eMarketing activity. The underpinning factor for copywriting success is to write for your users first and foremost.

The very first step for effective copywriting is to research your audience and understand their needs. Then you can write copy that engages with them and solves their problems. Profiling your audience involves creating personas to whom the copy may be addressed.

Online copy needs to be easy to read, and so layout is important. Copy should be made easy to scan by effective use of paragraphs, bulleted lists and highlighting important words by making them bold.

One of the most important aspects of online copywriting is a strong call to action. Web users look for instructions and indications of what they should do. A call to action should tell them exactly what to do.

When it comes to long copy, compelling title and subject lines are important to make

sure your content is read. Internet users have a deluge of information vying for their attention, so you need to make it easy for a user to choose to read your content. Titles and subject lines should be compelling, while providing clear information as to what the content is.

Copywriting for SEO involves optimising copy for select key phrases in order to give context to search engines. A page can be optimised for up to five key phrases, but it is usually optimised for three of them. SEO copywriting involves the meta data and title tags, as well as the copy that is read on a page.

The dynamic nature of the Internet means that new words are entering into a user's vocabulary every day. For best copywriting, know your audience and use the language that resonates most strongly with them.

tools of the trade

The SMOG (**Simple Measure of Gobbledygook**) formula from Harry McLaughlin can be used to calculate the reading level of copy that you have written. A SMOG calculator, and instructions for use, can be found on his web site:

www.harrymclaughlin.com/SMOG.htm.

Alternatively, flesh.sourceforge.net offers a Java application that produces the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level and the Flesch Reading Ease Score of a document.

For an **online dictionary** and an **online thesaurus**, you can visit:

www.dictionary.reference.com and www.thesaurus.reference.com.

These both source a number of reference sources.

Thinkmap's **Visual Thesaurus** at www.visualthesaurus.com is also a thesaurus, but with an interactive map that lets you explore words. It's easy to spend a lot more time on this web site than you originally planned!

When it comes to **keyword research**, there are a host of tools available. Some are listed below:

- SEO Book - tools.seobook.com/firefox/seo-for-firefox.html
- Wordtracker - www.wordtracker.com
- AdWords - adwords.google.com/select/Login
- Trellion's Keyword Discovery Tool - www.keyworddiscovery.com
- SEO Chat's Keyword Suggestions for Google - www.seochat.com/seo-tools/keyword-suggestions-google

chapter questions

1. When writing for the web, why are descriptive titles better than titles which play on words?
2. Why should users dictate your content? List some ways that users' needs determine content.
3. Why does web copy need to be easy to read?
4. For some real online copywriting practice, choose an article in a magazine or newspaper, and rewrite it for an Internet audience.

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further reading

To get started on writing for the Web, *Hot Text – Web Writing That Works* is an easy to read and thorough resource. The web site for the book is www.webwritingthatworks.com.

www.copyblogger.com

– regular articles and case studies on writing online copy that converts.

www.wordwise.typepad.com

- Dan Santow of Edelman posts regularly on his blog with practical tips for improving your writing, whether it be emails to colleagues, blog posts, news releases or articles, and includes updates on neologisms, web words and style.

FutureNow's GrokDotCom.com published *Online Copywriting 101: The Ultimate Cheat Sheet* over two posts, providing 101 links to the best online copywriting references on the Internet:

www.grokdotcom.com/2007/10/29/copywriting-101

www.grokdotcom.com/2007/11/13/copywriting-101-part-2

