

How To Write Words That Sell To Make People Buy

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Copywriting: (n) *The art of writing promotional material for websites, brochures, advertisements, emailers, proposals etc.*

I had the good fortune to have Apple Computers as one of my advertising clients. They asked us to come up with a series of headlines for a 24-page brochure to get rid of a bunch of old stock. The headlines we presented were fantastic! Amusing, outrageous, quirky. We were set to scoop the awards pool. But when the research came back, the headline that out-pulled all others was – wait for it:

“Save \$2,000 on an Apple Mac computer.”

Can you believe it? All that creative muscle we’d thrown at the campaign, and the headline that won, was, without doubt, the world’s most banal.

The campaign however, went on to generate vast sums of revenue for the company and was widely touted as one of their most successful direct marketing campaigns. Not for the first time I was surprised at how sometimes the simplest things in advertising are often the best.

I’ve never forgotten that lesson.

I often think of it when I see small business ads that try to be clever or funny. What a waste of space! Small business advertisers do not have the time or money to run clever or funny ads. They need ads that pull a result, every time. We want people to stop, read and say either “I have to have that NOW” or “I must find out more about that NOW”.

If you have an advertising agency working for you, advise them ever-so-gently that their amusing, outrageous or quirky ideas can take a back seat for a minute whilst you try out some boring old direct response techniques. You need to break the news to them that they may not win any Gold Lion awards this year - they will however, be comforted to know that they will have a job for the foreseeable future.

If you’re writing copy for yourself, take note of some of these ideas, try them and watch the results. You know full well how expensive advertising can be, so it’s in your interest to make sure your advertising works.

Spend 80% of your time getting the headline right.

Let’s start with the most important component of any direct response advertisement: The Headline. If you can capture the attention of your target market, you’ve succeeded. If you don’t, you’ve wasted every cent. The headline is the No. 1 component for capturing attention so spend at least 80% of your time getting it right.

You might be surprised to know that of the 500,000+ plus words in the English language, there are a few key phrases that have more ‘grunt’ than most when it comes to capturing attention. Here’s a few of them:

1. How To...
2. The Secret Of...
3. Do You Make These Mistakes...
4. A Breakthrough...
5. How Would You Like...
6. What Everybody Ought To Know About...
7. Confessions Of...

Here's an example of how these phrases can be used in headlines:

1. How To Raise Your Child's IQ Before It's Even Born
2. The Secret Of Being Wealthy (Without Working Like A Dog)
3. Do You Make These Mistakes In Job Interviews?
4. A Breakthrough Idea For Those Who Want To Act In Movies
5. How Would You Like To Earn A Six Figure Income From Home?
6. What Everybody Ought To Know About Buying Inner-City Apartments
7. Confessions Of A Disbarred Lawyer

Now, they may sound a bit cheesy here, all lined up in a row, (and they certainly won't win any creativity awards) but like 'em or not, they work. And who cares about creativity when the cash is rolling in?

Here's another way to keep those cash registers ringing:

Keep it simple:

For some reason, something happens when we pick up a pen and start to write 'copy'. The urge to sound pompous, authoritarian and self-important takes effect and we end up writing as if we had a quill stuck up our nether regions.

Here's an example:

"We are proud to announce that Smithers and Sons Pty Ltd has now been in business for over 50 years. We pride ourselves and set great store in our customer service. We also guarantee every aspect of our work."

"Now, what's wrong with that?" I hear you ask. Well, quite frankly, a lot. In fact, everything. Here's why. Let's break it down.

It's clear they want to reinforce three features of their business:

1. They're experienced
2. They offer great customer service
3. They guarantee their work

If that's the case, wouldn't it be better if they actually *told* us what's in it for us rather than telling us how good they are?

For example, they could have said:

1. "Your investments are in safe hands. After 50 years in business, you know we're here to stay." (i.e. we're experienced)

2. "You can sit back and relax as our Representatives come to your home at a time that's convenient to you and your family." (i.e. we offer great customer service)

3. "You can buy with safety because all our work is guaranteed – you get a 100% money back refund if you are not completely satisfied – no worries, no hassles." (i.e. we guarantee our work)

Can you see what's changed? The pompous 'We' words have been replaced with 'You' words. This automatically converts the phrase into a customer-focused statement that outlines a clear benefit. When you tell the reader what's in it for them, you'll engage them instantly.

Tips:

1. Replace "We", "Our" and "I" words with You words.
2. Give examples of how your product will benefit your customer

Banish abstract words:

When pushed for time or in the absence of meaningful product benefits, it's easy to revert to using abstract words. Abstract words are words that have been so over-used; they cease to have any meaning. Repeat offenders include:

1. Experienced
2. Productive
3. Strategy
4. Co-ordination
5. Analysis
6. Efficient
7. Customer Service
8. Technological
9. Implement

Here's a classic example of a telemarketing company using abstract words to advertise their business.

"A telephone marketing campaign takes experience and productive planning. It means understanding the strategy, co-ordinating the message, the execution and the analysis. It also requires efficient customer service and technological and human resources to implement it."

Does anyone really believe this advertisement will have an impact? No, but the business owner will argue that it makes them sound efficient and professional. And that's the trouble. It might *sound* professional, but it's completely ineffective. When we see a bunch of abstract words in a sentence, our eyes glaze over. The result? We switch off.

Copywriting is about turning complex ideas and messages into simpler ideas and messages. Making things sound pompous, technical and officious is not the sign of a good copywriter; in fact, it's quite the reverse. Overusing abstract words is a sign that you either haven't given the copywriter a fully detailed brief about why you're better than the next, or they're just lazy copywriters.

Tips:

1. Avoid abstract words. Replace them with the simplest word you can think of.
2. Get detailed information about your product. It's easier to avoid abstract words when you have real benefits to talk about.

Use numbers in your headlines:

Try using well-known phrases as headline grabbers to capture attention. Then, adapt them to suit your target market. Here's a few examples:

Well-known list:

The 10 Commandments

The 7 Deadly Sins

7 Habits Of Highly Effective People

Making them your own:

The Millionaire's Ten Commandments

The 7 Deadly Sins Every CEO Makes

7 Habits Of Highly Effective Engineers

Tips:

If you're going to use a number in your headline, it sounds more believable if you use an odd number (3, 7, 9, 101) or a number ending in 0 (10, 30, 50, 100).

Philip Duthenberry, a famous copywriter, once said:

"Copywriting is the second most lucrative form of writing.

The first, of course, is ransom notes."

Well may he joke, but Duthenberry was onto something. Copy costs. A lot. So it's in your interest as a business owner to either learn how to do it right or learn how to evaluate the copy you are being given by your advertising agency copywriters. This article might go some way towards helping you do that. If it doesn't, call me and I'll give you a free 30-minute critique of your advertising to make up for the time you spent reading this. But beware: no punches will be pulled!

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