Copywriting for the WEB

A Guide on the Basics of Copywriting for the Web

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A Guide on the Basics of Copywriting for the Web

BY: WORDPRESS BARISTA

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Many people don't realize that writing for the web is very different than writing for print. In fact, we do not read a website in the same way that we read printed material. We will cover three characteristics which affect how a web user will react to your online content.

First, web users are active, not passive. So if they cannot find a reason for staying on a site, then they will leave it. Sometimes a person will leave 15 seconds after they have actually gotten there.

Secondly, if your text is too long, then they are less likely to read it.

Thirdly, if you want a web user to believe what you have to say, you have to be able to backup the hype.

If you want to ensure that your readers understand how your website works and what it can do for them, you need to take into account that they're web readers and produce copy accordingly.

In this guide, we will look at the basics of producing good copywriting for the web. Let's dig in – and make your website copy EFFECTIVE!

Your friendly geeks,

Cathy Tibbles
Why Writing Copy for the Web is Different

One of the most important reasons as to why copywriting for the web is different is that the mindset of those who are going to be reading is different.

More often than not, most web pages will be found via a search engine. This is very significant, as it means that the person reading your site has been looking either for you or someone like you. So that puts them in control. They will be focused on finding a particular product, service or piece of information.

So anyone visiting your site for the first time and has found it via a search engine will have a few questions in mind. “Have I come to the right place?” also “Will I find what I’m looking for at this page or site?” Finally, they would be asking themselves “Do I feel that I can complete the task now, here?”

It is vital that you answer these questions in both your headline, and any sub-headlines you may have. Your headlines need to be able to secure a response from this visitor immediately.

In order for this to happen, your writing needs to provide answers so that the visitor knows exactly what they are looking for.

What is important when writing any copy for the web is that you reassure any visitors that they are in the right place, and that they should continue to read on.
In order to keep your visitors at your site, you'll need to know what they are looking for – you'll need to know them.
Visitors Are Important to You

If you fail to plan, then you are likely to fail in your endeavor of producing great copy. If you wish to provide effective copy, it is important to know your visitors.

First, you should anticipate the questions of your website’s visitors. Normally, there are four questions that a user will have that will need to be answered.

1. What am I doing here?
2. How do I do it?
3. What is in it for me?
4. Where do I go from here?

So if your site’s design and navigation cannot provide an obvious answer to these questions, then you should look at using copy in order to explain them. It is important that the answers to these questions should be obvious to all your users, and not just those visiting your site for the first time.

Half of website visitors will only glance around to find their answers and quickly leave if the answers are not obvious. The other half, who will try to find answers, may not succeed if the navigation is not intuitive and easy to use.

Next, when planning, focus on your core audience. Remember, you will not be able to reach everyone, so make sure that the copy you produce addresses your site’s most
important visitors directly. So, spend time explaining what the site can do for them in particular. If you want to make it more effective, focus in on your ideal visitors and write directly for them.

However, if you are targeting more than one type of visitor to your site, then make sure that you can direct them to different pages. Remember - a visitor will go somewhere else if they do not feel your site has something of value to offer to them in particular. So when providing them with facts, let the facts speak for themselves. Make your descriptions compelling, although not excessive. Many visitors will simply skip a site if they feel it is too full of hype (just bear in mind that some hype will almost certainly be necessary in order to excite your visitor).
It is vital that during the planning stage of your copywriting for the web, you understand what it is – exactly - you hope to accomplish.

You have already determined that you need to increase direct sales, build a subscriber base, circulate information, or provide technical support. But in order to do this, you need the right words.

To recap, you’ve decided who your ideal customers are, and what they really want; we know we will have 15 seconds or so to grab their attention and answer their important questions (see chapter 2).

Now, we need to realize that without a proper plan to target our audience we'll miss out on people who are looking for our expertise and products.

Targeting is used to figure out which readers' problems can be solved by using your particular product. It is therefore vital that you become an expert in relation to every single benefit that your product offers. Then, once you are able to determine who you need to target, you can begin to search them out. So start building a profile of those people who will benefit from your product the most. Once you know who they are, then begin by repeatedly using strong web copy, and the most compelling benefits your product has to offer.
Keep in mind that your target audience is normally smarter and more knowledgeable than the typical visitor to a site.

Build your strong web copy to your target audience with the following outline:

1. Demonstrate understanding of what the customer wants.
2. Use a tone that resonates with your target audience.
3. Describe your solution in an easy fashion.

What is most important is that you think about all three of these things in equal amounts, and do not allow any one of them to overshadow the others.
How to Write Effective Copy for the Web

In order to write effective copy for the web, there are two primary areas that you should look at. These are the page title and the META descriptions. Both of these are usually the first two things that a person will see when searching the web for a particular product or service.

However, this does not actually apply to all search engines or directories as some will not show the META description at all. In some cases, they will show a snippet of the content from your site.

Below we provide a list of particular areas that you should focus on in order of importance.

1. Page Title – This is the first thing that any visitor will see when carrying out a search on the web.

2. META Description – Usually the second thing the visitor will see when carrying out a search through a search engine or directory.

It is important to remember that both of these are likely to be produced on the Search Engine’s Results Page (SERP’s).

Heading Tags – This will relate to specific subjects within your site.
4. Visible Content – This is another area of importance that you should focus on in order to produce effective copywriting for the web. These are provided below in order of importance.

a. Link Text and Title Attribute – This is frequently displayed as a “tool tip”. Which is a short message that will appear when the pointing device (cursor) pauses over a particular object.

b. Alternate Text Tags – This should be for an image and is not to be used for stuffing with keywords that do not apply to it.

c. META Keyword Tags – Unfortunately, due to severe abuse by unethical marketers and uneducated consumers these are not as strong as they used to be. In fact, most search engines will no longer be looking at these as a keywords you use in these tags are can be found in the visible content on the page.

So effective copywriting for the web can only be achieved if you carefully research your keywords and keyword phrases. What is the point of writing any copy, if you do not know what words that your target audience is searching for? By targeting the correct keywords and keyword phrases you are taking one of the most important steps in writing effective copy.
How to Find Effective Keywords and Keyword Phrases

Search engines are the most important tool on the web for bringing new customers to a site. Many people who have never heard of your site will land there or at someone else's site by using a search engine. Unfortunately, search engines are not psychic and not very intuitive either. They will not be able to find what people are actually looking for but rather what they are asking for.

But just how do you know what people are asking for? There are a number of different ways in which you can get ahead of the competition in relation to people's search habits. There are many effective programs around and one of the free ones is Google's own Search Insights tool found at [http://www.google.com/insights/search](http://www.google.com/insights/search).

Search Insights tells you how popular (in % of total searches) your terms are. And it gives you the top related keywords as well. Once you have some popular keywords, you need to do one more thing – enter that keyword/phrase into Google to see how many results it garners. If you have a popular keyphrase that garners millions and millions of hits, are you likely to be able to successfully compete with that? If on the other hand there are only a few hundred thousand, you ARE more likely to rank highly for those searches.

The goal is to find a keyword or phrase that fits right in the middle – you need phrases that attract the most interest, but the least competition. By using these keywords and phrases, search engines and directories will find your copy more appealing. So when it
comes time for people who are looking for a particular product or service, then your site should be one of the first they see in their search results.

Let's take an example – our site is “Wordpress Barista”. When we look in Google, for “Wordpress Barista” we are first on the list. But when we type that into the Search Insights – low and behold – there are ZERO (in %) of searchers looking for that phrase.

When I type in “WordPress” I can see that it is 91% of searches. But “WordPress Theme” is 100. Which makes sense, when was the last time you entered one word into the search engine?
Keep it Short and Sweet

You are looking to keep your visitors coming to your site and also get them to return. This section addresses how to keep your visitors happy and returning!

Keep your copy short and simple

What you should remember is that unless a visitor has been directed to a particular page on a site, more often than not, they will only read 1 or 2 lines of the text. So the longer your text is, the less likely they will want to read it. So if you can, do not add any long copy to any pages where visitors are not expecting it to be.

Also keep your copy simple. This matters as much as how long it is. It is important that your visitors are able to understand what has been written on their first reading. More often than not, on first 'scanning'. They do not want to have to spend time thinking about what you have written.

In most cases, you should be able to convey one key idea effectively in just one or two lines of writing. By writing any more than that, you are likely to ruin the chance of the first idea getting through to them.

Anticipate when visitors will be willing to learn more about something, and provide them with a link to another page of your site where they can get the needed information.
What if you do need to write long copy?

If you do need to include some longer copy, then organize it. Even if your visitors are expecting to find a page heavy with text, they may not actually be willing to read it. So in order to help them, divide any distinct ideas you have into separate paragraphs. Provide them with useful headings, sub headings and bulleted lists. This is a great way of introducing key ideas to them deliberately.

It is best to assume that not all the visitors to your site will read longer pieces in their entirety. So write copy that they will be able to skim through and let them read only the parts that they are interested in.

Although longer copy does not need to be as direct as short copy is, it should still be easy to read. You will find that those visitors to your site who have difficulty understanding what has been written, will stop reading it and/or visiting.

Make your Copy Lively

Keep your copywriting clear and write vividly. You should be aiming to write in a light, unassuming tone of voice. If what you have written is boring or overbearing, this will in turn affect the reader, and what you are trying to convey will not get through to them. So use a consistent voice throughout your copy. By doing this, visitors will more quickly recognize it and become familiar with it. The more familiar a site or subject is to them, the more effective it will be.
Other Essential Components for Good Copywriting

It is ever so easy to become a little sloppy with the vocabulary on your website, as well as the look. You may find it so easy that you become inconsistent in the terms and phrases that you use when describing a particular product, service, tool or feature on your site. So it is vital that you go through your site regularly and make sure that the terms you are using are used consistently. Also, that they are clearly communicating your message to your visitors.

Always be aware of the spelling, grammar and formatting of any copywriting that you produce. Many sales efforts have amounted to nothing just because of a simple spelling or grammatical error in the copy. I am not a proponent of complete grammatical correctness, as you can tell. I think there is room for conversational writing, but only if that is consistent in your site and services. But rarely is it necessary or acceptable to have spelling errors in your site! Spend time using a spell checker to ensure that everything is correct.

Expressive writing has its place! You'll see a lot of conversational grammar and expressive writing on Desperately Seeking WordPress. But we should all be judicious in our use of colors, exclamation marks, bold and italics – it can be more of a distraction than an emphasis if used incorrectly.

Another important thing to have is an understanding of the written language. Creating website copy is different from writing an article in a newsletter, or composing a custom
essay or book report or research paper. The language that you use must be very deliberate. It is important that you understand the language and how it exactly influences people’s buying behaviors. It is important that you know which words are strong, and which words are weak, and which words should be avoided at all costs. These words will be unique to your site and your target readers. The list of these terms will be invaluable as you create and edit your copy.

The following guidelines can help you create attractive and readable copy:

1. Formatting text on a page can break up large chunks of information. So wherever suitable, use bulleted, numbering, emboldened text, colored text etc., in order to make important information stand out.

2. Break up your paragraphs into easily digestible pieces of information. This will help to make your content stand out more. It will also help to make those important facts or sections stand out more.

3. At all times, refrain from adding two spaces after each full stop. Not only will you save time, you will also save space!

4. At the end of each paragraph, make sure that you press the return key twice and do the same after each section title.

For long copy keep these guidelines in mind:

1. Keep the column width reasonably narrow. The human eye finds it more difficult to track from the end of one line to the beginning of the next if the column is wide.

2. Use plenty of subheads, as this helps those who would rather just scan a page
before they commit to actually reading the whole thing. These subheadings should lead your visitor through the key points.

3. Indent any key elements in your copy. This will help to add emphasis where it is needed. It also helps to break up an otherwise scary block of text. So, the longer the copy on the page, the more important it is for you to use sub headers and indents.

That sums up how to create not-only-pretty, but also readable copy.
Get a Headline that Grabs

The home page of any site is the key web page, especially if it is where you want a person to take some action, such as buying something or subscribing to something. So, one of the great ways of building momentum, and also increasing the number of people who act on this, is by creating some urgency. There are many different ways in which this urgency can be created, and below are just a few:

1. Provide them with an offer for a limited period of time.
2. Offer limited supplies of a particular product.
3. Offer them seasonal specials.
4. Why not offer them a free gift when they subscribe or pay for a particular item.
5. Daily deals – this is a great way of bringing in customers.

However, just a word of caution when using these types of tactics: It is important that you are both credible and honest with the visitors to your site. So if you are saying that an offer expires on a particular date or at a particular time, then make sure that it does. Just imagine how bad it would look if someone came back to your site the day after, only to find the offer still in place.

But there are other ways in which you can imply urgency on your site. You could show a page with the prices, and that they are the best prices to be found on the web at that time. With this method you are not providing a time limit or a limit on how much of the product is available. But by using a time stamp, you are also implying that the prices on
these products could increase at any time.

The whole idea of this method is to get people moving. So those who would normally be sitting on the fence will actually do something and make that all important purchase. But above all, you can sell with urgency as long as you do it with integrity – your reputation depends on it.
How to Go About Writing a Headline

So just how do you go about writing a great headline? It’s quite simple really. What you need to do is spend less time stressing about how to write your headline, and more time on figuring out what it should say.

Saying the wrong thing beautifully won't be as effective as saying the right thing poorly. Unfortunately, there are plenty of copywriters out there today who will give way to their own egos. You know the types who have a lot of big words and fancy sentences but manage to say nothing at all? Let's not be them!

So just how do you know what to say?

Focus your mind and copy on the desires and wants of your target audience, rather than on the product or service that you are trying to sell.

Why use hundreds of words when 1 or 2 will suffice? It should also be deeply engaging, interesting so that it excites those that come to your site. It should actually make them sit up and say “yes” to what you are offering.

For example, I get a lot of newsletters from various companies advertising their deals and specials. They use words like “free” and “awesome deal”. What really catches my attention are the simple ones like “Are you excited? You shouldn’t be.” Doesn't that peak your curiosity? Here's an excellent resource for understanding human psychology and
what makes us click something! [http://socialtriggers.com/](http://socialtriggers.com/)
Keep yourself out of the way, keep audience in mind, keep it short & simple, and you'll be on your way to producing a great headline.
Test the Tone of Your Headlines

When writing any copy, it is important that the headline you have at the top will set the tone for your whole site. In fact, this is the most powerful text on any page. So if it should fail to do what is required of it, then nobody is likely to even bother reading the body text. But no matter how many times you write and then rewrite the main heading for a page, you should test it.

The best way of doing this is by writing the best headline you can at first, and then write some alternatives instead. This plugin will help you test two of your best headlines until one is a winner – http://www.cogmap.com/blog/wordpress-headline-split-tester/.

The headline on any web page is the key to engaging both the attention and interest of the visitors to that site. It only takes a few selected words, which can result in a huge impact on page conversion rates.

So keep testing what you have with alternatives until you find the right one.
During the very early days of the web you would find all the text links were both blue and underlined. Even today, this still holds true...just take a look at Google, eBay, Yahoo or MSN, and all their links are blue, and are either underlined, or become underlined when the cursor is placed over them.

But just what is the point of this? When visitors are first entering any site, they are expecting the links look like this. Remember, it is important that any visitors to a site can figure out how it works in order to get to the pages they are interested in the most. So one element in this process is for them to figure out what text links look like. So if yours are blue and underlined, then you have nothing to worry about, as everyone will know what they are.

Website visitors are trained to expect navigation in a tabbed format across the top of the page or to the top right of the page beside the logo. If yours is there – your visitors will be able to quickly and easily navigate without having to expend any extra effort to figure it out.

Unfortunately, there are too many sites out there today which have no set appearance to their text links. Some may be underlined, others may not, some may be blue, and others may be orange. In some cases, they may be bold and others not. And the same is true for navigation links.
If you do not provide your visitors with a uniformed look to your text links and navigation items, you’re using the valuable first 15 seconds unnecessarily. And in worse case scenario, you can be adding frustration and turning them off every returning. When there are thousands of sites competing with yours, it is imperative that your visitors quickly and easily find what they are looking for.

Where the web is concerned, people’s interest in a certain subject can vanish in an instant. So you need to figure out ways in which you can minimize the “loss of their attention”. The only really simple way that this can be achieved is by making sure that all your text links are immediately recognizable, which isn’t difficult to accomplish at all.
When starting any copywriting, it is important that you are positive from the beginning to the end. You need to grab their attention at the beginning, and make them want more when they have finished. It is vitally important that you use your best material at both the beginning and end of your work.

So if you produce a weak finish, then your customers will walk away feeling disappointed. They will also have forgotten the strong opening that you had produced, as well as the great stuff that followed after. All they will remember is the feeling they left with.

So, just how do you apply this to writing copy for the web?

Think of your web page as a performance, play or story that you are presenting. Structure your web pages in order to have that all important stronger ending.
Conclusion

Apart from the fundamentals of good writing, impeccable spelling, good grammar and punctuation will go a long way in copywriting. The most important thing about producing good copywriting for the web is about grabbing, as well as keeping, the reader’s attention, and in the end providing what they need.

The needs of the clients, and thus the product you’re providing can range from a simple inquiry to a completed sale. Be clear on your product's benefits.

The main focus in order to produce effective copywriting is as follows:-

1. Keep it short and lively.
2. Be informative but friendly.
3. Be passionate about what you are writing on – but refrain from pitching your product until you’ve identified the need.
4. Make sure that you aim it specifically at your target audience.
5. Be aware at all times of search engines.

While lengthy details relating to your company’s history and statements are undoubtedly interesting for those that are involved, it is important to remember that those who are reading your site are looking to compare the benefits of your product to their needs. So make sure that you focus on this in your copy.
Remember that all the pages of your site are important, but the home page is the one where people will get their first impression of you. So it is vital you take particular care when producing this page.

Write your web pages first and foremost for your visitors, and not for you. Search engines need to know what your site and each page is about and they can’t deduce it – you have to be clear. Make sure that each page is focused around a particular keyword phrase.

But if you want to really do something that will consistently increase the number of visitors to your site; you will need to add more content. So make it a habit to add more content pages to your site regularly.

Keeping fresh content provides a number of immediate benefits:

1. Both new visitors and subscribers will know that they have something new to look forward to when they come to your site. So in other words, they know it is important that they keep returning to your site. This only helps to increase the value of your site in the search engine rankings as well.

2. Each new page you include may be indexed by Google and the other major search engines, and will be listed on their results pages. Also, by taking a little time in researching relevant keywords and keyword phrases, you will be optimizing these new pages, which in turn will achieve a much higher page rank listing.

3. By adding more new content pages, say 2 to 3 times each week, then Google and the other search engines will take note of this. This will result in them constantly evaluating your site.
Although this is not a path to sudden spikes in the traffic to your site, it is a tried and true way to ensure steady growth of traffic.

I urge you to regularly review your existing content and produce more high quality focused copy designed specifically for your target market. Plant it firmly on your web pages and watch your site grow.
Resource Guide

Our Blog: http://wpbarista.com/blog/

Search Insight (for keyword research): http://www.google.com/insights/search

Headline Split Tester: http://wordpress.org/extend/plugins/headline-split-tester/

Web User Psychology: http://socialtriggers.com/

Best Consistent Blog for Copywriters – http://copyblogger.com