

Mind your online language

Plenty of ecommerce gurus have advised us about web site design, but what about copywriting? According to **Ella Tassi** and **Rebecca Camilleri**, the words you use online can have a huge impact on profitability.

Recent research by the US-based Poynter Institute and Stanford University has uncovered that not only is web copy a critical success factor, it can be more powerful than many of the design aspects.

Using an "eye-tracking" technique that follows readers' eyes as they move across a page, the Poynter Institute and Stanford University found that readers of online news repeatedly read the text before they looked at photos or other graphics. In its web site, the institute reported that by and large, "Briefs or captions get eye fixations first... The eyes of online news readers then come back to the photos and graphics, sometimes not until they have returned to the first page after clicking away to the full article."

This is exactly the opposite of the reading behaviour the Poynter Institute has observed over many years of studying readers of paper-based newspapers.

While it would be naive to assume this pattern applies to all web users across all web



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sites, the findings do raise the issue that audiences digest information quite differently on and offline. What has worked in the print media, may not necessarily translate well online. What's more, the impact of words can no longer be ignored.

Locally, research by Victoria University's School of Information Systems' head, Associate Professor Julie Fisher, concurs with the Poynter Institute's findings. Her research indicates that women, in particular, perceive the web site text as critical. Evidence indicates that women prefer the efficient and effective accessibility of information over slow-to-download graphics and design.

THE POWER OF THE (RIGHT) WORDS

When you stop to think about it, the importance of words seems obvious. After all, language is the key means through which we communicate and make sense of our surroundings. If you have ever visited a country in which the language was completely foreign, you will know how frustrating the experience can be in terms of finding your way around and attaining even the bare essentials. The same rule applies to a web site. If site visitors don't understand what you are saying – in terms of content, guidance text or the error messages – the most impressive of surroundings will not help them find what they are looking for, nor will it entice them to stay.

Dr Jakob Nielsen, the author of *Designing Web Usability*, says "Content is king. Forget animation and fancy design, web users want words".

Effective design is certainly crucial. However, for the greatest impact, the visual aspects of a web site must work together with the online words. Only by achieving congruence can you truly create an effective online experience. Words not only have the power, but also the flexibility to engage your specific target audience. Dependent on your business, the right words can position you as professional, conservative, youth-oriented, outrageous – or whatever is appropriate for your business needs. Be sure to choose your tone carefully and, whatever you do, be consistent.

WHAT IS YOUR WEB SITE SAYING ABOUT YOU?

Poor copy speaks volumes about an organisation and can have significantly negative repercussions. With web sites gaining popular-

ity as a point of reference in gathering information prior to committing to a purchase, content is becoming increasingly critical even for those sites not providing ecommerce solutions or online sales. Research by Taylor Nelson Sofres shows that in addition to 10 percent of internet users shopping online during a month, a further 13 percent shop offline as a result of information they found on companies' web sites.

The web site visit is a "moment of truth" for potential buyers. Just as poor customer service from a call centre or on the retail floor impacts your brand, so too does the online experience.

The challenge doesn't end with attracting visitors to your site. The real challenge is having them spend some time and leave your site with the right impression of your brand, organisation and products.

Interestingly, many organisations spend huge amounts setting up a web site – only to populate it with careless spelling errors and poor grammar. A recent article in the ezine *A List Apart*, warned that web copy is undervalued, under-funded and under-estimated.

It's a curious aspect to neglect, considering the smallest weaknesses in your web site can have a devastating effect. People take great delight in finding errors in what others have done – particularly if you are a well-known organisation. If a web site is filled with spelling errors, this will be the site visitors' lasting impression of your brand. Not only will they notice the errors, many will go as far as emailing you about them. They will ignore your product information, overlook the hours spent on building the architecture, and be completely distracted by how many spelling errors they can find.

THREE DEADLY SINS

A newly published book by Roger C Parker, *Streetwise Relationship Marketing on the Internet*, pinpoints three types of web sites that are doomed to fail:

1. Inner-directed web sites – ie, sites written from the company's perspective rather than the visitor's. A web site's degree of "stickiness" is generally reliant on its ability to capture the visitor's attention for a sufficient period of time, as well as enticing them to return for repeat visits. This will only be achieved if you are providing them relevant and unique information that is of interest to them. All signs of self-absorption over a customer-centric model should be avoided.



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2. Web sites that operate as a paper-based brochure rather than engaging in dialogue. While there are some circumstances where “brochureware” (ie publishing offline collateral such as a catalogue directly online) is appropriate, generally speaking web copy should be reworked to maximise the internet’s potential for interactivity and personalisation. Furthermore, most brochureware sites tend to be overwhelmingly text-heavy and require significant editing to achieve maximum “scanability”.

3. Transaction-oriented sites that leap straight into the sale rather than attempting to create longer-term customer loyalty. There is a famous New York cartoon showing a dog at a computer with the caption reading: “On the Internet no one knows you’re a dog”. This anonymity applies to small and emerging companies, or indeed any of the lesser-known brands. The internet has an enormous capacity to, through the use of “smoke and mirrors”, position your company as being a lot larger (or conversely, smaller) than it is in reality. While this is of great benefit, it’s also a huge responsibility. If your objective is to facilitate transactions – on or offline – you must first gain the consumers’ trust. A difficult task online as all they have to judge you by is your web site. As a consequence, a badly

constructed and poorly written web site can have a devastating effect on your brand.

WRITING FOR THE WEB

While many of the marketing communications principles are relevant across all media – such as the need to clearly identify your key message and target audience – web copywriting does introduce some new rules into the equation. And while the people who work within the organisation naturally know their business best, this doesn’t mean they’re necessarily the best people to write the web site copy.

In many ways, web site copy is more closely related to email copy than printed material. And just like email writing has evolved its own shorthand language, so too must web copy adapt to the online reader. Online it’s all about communicating your message efficiently and rapidly. Netizens don’t read – they skim, scanning for key titbits of information. Anything that requires too much effort to digest simply gets ignored. Understanding the patterns of online reading, and adapting your writing to the medium is crucial. Dr Jakob Nielsen advises that: “Often, users who are scanning text will read only the first sentence of each paragraph”. In addition, online reading is around 25 percent slower than reading print. The combined slow reading and scanning

behaviour should translate to online writing being about 50 percent shorter than its offline counterpart.

A good example of a web site which caters for the scanning-styled reader is www.webmasterbase.com, a US-based site which provides an information-rich resource for web developers. Rather than sending visitors scurrying with heavy blocks of impenetrable text, Web Master Base provides short, sharp snippets that capture your attention and encourage you to spend the time navigating through the site.

The copy must enhance the web site experience, not detract from it. Site visitors won’t labour through copious amounts of badly written copy. If their three-minute site visit entails slow-loading graphics and incomprehensible copy, you’ve just negated all the advertising spent on attracting them to your site in the first place.

At the end of the day, it’s all about making the web site experience easy and enjoyable. Good copy is rarely noticed, but bad copy is highly conspicuous. People shouldn’t have to read and re-read the text in order to work out what you’re trying to say. Poorly written content wastes consumers’ increasingly valuable commodity – their time. The reality is they won’t go back and re-read it, they’ll find another site. Your competitor’s site. ■

The 10 Commandments of web content

1. Be succinct – online readers scan, they don’t have the time to read.
2. Keep bullet points within six words – remember you’re making a point, not an entire argument.
3. Consistency, consistency, consistency – if it’s “realise”, it can’t also be “analyze”.
4. Use a warm, friendly tone. Avoid stiff, corporate or overly formal language – it’s not an annual report.
5. Know your audience and understand their motivations. Think WIFM (What’s In It For Me – ie the site visitor) and write accordingly.
6. Beware of jargon or industry-specific information, unless you can be sure of your audience’s technical proficiency.
7. Cull long sentences, shorten long paragraphs and use headings, sub-headings and links to break up the text.
8. Avoid the use of marketing hype – media-savvy, online readers tend to skim through “best ever”, “revolutionary” and “cutting-edge” to get to the point.
9. Use bolded text to grab their attention, but be wary of indiscriminate use, which can become an unwelcome distraction. Only underline words if it’s a link.
10. Check grammar, spelling and typos and then have a colleague check it again. Simple mistakes will make an otherwise sound organisation seem amateurish and foolish. ■