

What a tangled Web we weave

Rebecca Camilleri & Ella Tassi

IT'S a familiar scenario. You've just entered a Web site to be greeted by powerful, brand enhancing images, maybe even a seductive flash introduction to really whet your appetite, only then to be assaulted by a barrage of stiff, formal, hard-to-read copy.

Here's an example: "Our mission is to revolutionise the implementation of seamless integrated solutions by establishing mutually-beneficial alliances which enable us to satisfy our customers' needs profitably and deliver real-value to our share-holders."

Yuck! You've been there—we all have. It's absolute, mind-numbing guff!

For years now, Web re-searchers and usability experts have been preaching that nothing will turn online visitors away more quickly than irrelevant, poorly written content. Yet here we are in 2001, supposedly the information age, and still it exists, in abundance.

Including mission statements on Web sites (often linked from the homepage) unfortunately is still commonplace, but hopelessly misguided.

Frequently, it's a sign that a business has little understanding of the Web space that they occupy. In fact, one may argue that mission statements do not have a place in any medium whatsoever, but that's another axe to grind and issue to explore.

Write to impress (your online visitors, not your boss!) and make it relevant.

Good online content strategy starts with understanding the needs of your online audience and developing content accordingly.

While this may sound like a trite statement, the proliferation of poorly written sites on offer, suggests this point needs to be underlined, and then spelled out in neon lights.

Beware of the company-centric model, which includes information that companies love to spout far and wide, rather than what the customer really wants to know.

Director Joe Bloggs may be terribly proud of his company's humble beginnings as hard-working Scottish immigrant stonecutters, but it's doubtful anyone else will be.

Adopt a client focus, consider their needs carefully and learn about their online behaviour. If you're a fashion retailer of sunglasses for example, are your site visitors really interested in your share price and corporate structure?

Perhaps they might be interested in the retail price of your Polaroid wrap-arounds and local stockists. Many a frustrated, Web-raged visitor has gone in search of the latter information, only to find the former.

It's important to remember that the Internet, unlike television, is a niche medium, so copywriters and online editors have almost unprecedented freedom to write in the style and tone of the target audience.

Don't be afraid to speak to them in their language.

Don't try to impress them with big words—they won't be.

And if you don't know who your target audience is, get to know them, and don't even consider developing the content prior to achieving this.

If management insists you speak to a broad audience, be prepared for your message to be substantially diluted and lose impact.

You need only look as far as the trends of magazine publishing to see the demise of broad, mainstream titles, and the rise of specialist and niche titles.

Rather than address the masses online, it's far wiser to segment your home page into customer categories (rather than product/service offering).

Using the sunglasses retailer again as an example, the home page could offer separate entry points for retailers, the public, and investors.

One of the drawbacks of the Internet as a communication medium, is that it can at times be technical, sterile and lacking the warmth of a human voice. This sterility is amplified in the banal wastelands of corporate Web sites.

It's therefore vital to convey warmth and energy through online communication, and breathe life into the words.

This warmth cannot be achieved by regurgitating the annual report or offline brochure.

It's too bland for the more sophisticated tastes of the discerning "netizen".

Use language that's friendly, direct, honest and open. Where appropriate, humour can be used effectively to help bond with your online audience, but once again this depends on how intimate you are with them.

Writing good Web copy is not unlike writing an email message: it's quick, clear, conversational and unequivocally factual.

The emphasis is on communicating key points of information, not selling. Consider the email message below:

Dear Simon

You are cordially invited to the bi-monthly marketing meeting in the stylishly outfitted boardroom on Monday April 17. Make no mistake Simon, it promises to be an event not to be missed.

Not only will our honourable managing director be in attendance, but our multi-talented operations manager will make a special appearance to provide his invaluable input.

Remember Simon, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so don't delay, act now and confirm your attendance by response email.

We have used an extreme example to make a point. The first thing the message recipient will do is scan the text to locate the key words—marketing meeting, Monday April 17, managing director, operations manager, response email.

Like a computer processing the message, the recipient deletes all the fluff—the extraneous words and unnecessary adjectives.

After that laborious chore, they may feel a bit frustrated that their time has been wasted in such a pointless exercise.

Think about how an online reader may feel having to swim through lengthy, verbose Web copy—that's if they bother staying at all.

For many businesses, it's time to rethink your corporate communications.

Remember your online customer is at least as media-savvy and cynical as you are.

The Internet is filled with thousands of voices communicating with each other. It's a virtual experience, but the language they use is real.

Businesses really need to engage in meaningful dialogue with their customers. This can only be achieved with relevant content and open, direct communication that makes visitors feel comfortable and as if they belong on your site.

Writers Ella Tassi and Rebecca Camilleri are directors of LUCID Marketing Communications. LUCID provides specialist copywriting and editing services for interactive media and online content. T: (03) 9428 8858.

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