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AN INTRODUCTION TO COPYWRITING

“A copywriter is a salesperson behind a typewriter.”*

That quote comes from Judith Charles, president of her own retail advertising agency, Judith K. Charles Creative Communication. And it’s the best definition of the word *copywriter* I’ve ever heard.

The biggest mistake you can make as a copywriter is to judge advertising as laypeople judge it. If you do, you’ll end up as an artist, entertainer, or, worse, a clown—but not a salesperson. And your copy will be wasting your client’s time and money.

Let me explain a bit. When ordinary folks talk about advertising, they talk about the ads or commercials that are the funniest, the most entertaining, or the most unusual or provocative. A prime example is the annual creative TV commercial extravaganza broadcast during the Super Bowl. These are the ads people point to and say, “I really like that!”

But the goal of advertising is not to be liked, to entertain, or

* Yes, I know you use a PC, laptop, or tablet, and not a typewriter. But we were using typewriters when Judith said this back in 1982 or so, and I’ve decided to let the quote stand as is. Substitute “PC” or “mobile device” for “typewriter” in your own mind, if you like.

to win advertising awards; it is to sell products. The advertiser, if he is smart, doesn't care whether people like his commercials or are entertained or amused by them. If they are, fine. But commercials are a means to an end, and the end is increased sales—and profits—for the advertiser.

This is a simple and obvious thing, but the majority of copywriters and advertising professionals seem to ignore it. They produce artful ads, stunningly beautiful Web site design, and clever commercials whose artistic quality and creativity may rival the finest feature films. But they sometimes lose sight of their goals—more sales—and the fact that they are “salespeople behind keyboards,” and not literary artists, entertainers, or movie directors.

Being creative by nature, advertising writers naturally like ads that are aesthetically pleasing, as do advertising artists. But just because an ad is pretty to look at and pleasant to read doesn't necessarily mean it is persuading people to buy the product. Sometimes cheaply produced ads, written simply and directly without a lot of fluff, do the best job of selling.

I'm not saying that all your ads should be “schlock” or that schlock always sells best. I am saying that the look, tone, and image of your advertising should be dictated by the product and your prospects—and not by what is fashionable in the marketing business at the time, or is aesthetically pleasing to some creative people who deliberately shun selling as if it were an unwholesome mental chore to be avoided at all costs.

Some people say (erroneously) that no one reads anymore and we live entirely in a visual age. To that, Carlin Twedt of Ragan Communications replied, “Sure visuals are gaining in popularity, but words are still a communicator's most precious commodity.”

As a creative person, you naturally want to write clever copy and produce fancy promotions. But as a professional, your obligation to your client or employer is to increase sales and

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gain new customers at the lowest possible cost. If a banner ad online works better than a full-page magazine ad, use it. If a simple postcard gets more business than a four-color pop-up mailer with a sound chip, use the postcard.

Actually, once you realize that the goal of advertising is selling (and copywriter Luther Brock once defined selling as “placing 100 percent emphasis on how the reader will come out ahead by doing business with you”), you’ll see that there is a creative challenge in writing copy that sells. This “selling challenge” is a bit different from the artistic challenge: instead of creating aesthetically pleasing prose, you have to dig into a product or service, uncover the reasons why consumers would want to buy the product instead of others in its category, and present those sales arguments in copy that is read, understood, and reacted to—copy that makes the arguments so convincingly that the customer can’t help but want to buy the product being advertised.

One of the greatest advantages of digital marketing is that results can be measured quickly and accurately. This makes it difficult for copywriters to defend creativity or humor should the metrics—page views, time spent on page, click-throughs, conversion rates, opt-ins, and sales—underperform other e-mails and Web pages used by that same client.

Of course, Judith Charles and I are not the only copywriters who believe that salesmanship, not entertainment, is the goal of the copywriter. Here are the thoughts of a few other advertising professionals on the subjects of advertising, copywriting, creativity, and selling:

My definition says that an ad or commercial has a purpose other than to entertain. That purpose is to conquer a sale by persuading a logical prospect for your product or service, who is now using or is about to use a competitor’s product or service, to switch to yours. That’s basic, or at least it should be. In

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order to accomplish that, it seems to me, you have to promise that prospect an advantage that he's not now getting from his present product or service and it must be of sufficient importance in filling a need to make him switch.

—Hank Seiden, Vice President, Hicks & Greist, New York

For years, a certain segment of the advertising industry has been guilty of spinning ads out of whole cloth; they place a premium on advertising's appearance, not on the reality of sales. The result: too many ads and commercials that resemble third-rate vaudeville, desperately trying to attract an audience with stale jokes and chorus lines. On its most basic level, [the advertising] profession involves taking a product, studying it, learning what's unique about it, and then presenting that "uniqueness" so that the consumer is motivated to buy the product.

—Alvin Eicoff, Chairman, A. Eicoff & Company

Those of us who read the criticisms leveled at advertising around the world are constantly struck by the fact that they are not really criticisms of advertising as such, but rather of advertisements which seem to have as a prime objective finding their way into creative directors' portfolios. Possibly the best starting discipline for any creative man in any country is the knowledge that the average [consumer] does not even know that an advertising agency, creative director, art director, or copywriter even exists. What's more, she couldn't care less if they do. She's interested in buying products, not creative directors.

—Keith Monk, Nestlé, Vevey, Switzerland

Of course, I have never agreed that creativity is the great contribution of the advertising agency, and a look through the pages of the business magazines should dramatize my contention that much advertising suffers from overzealous creativity—aiming for high readership scores rather than for the accomplishment

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of a specified communications task. Or, worse, creativity for self-satisfaction.

—Howard Sawyer, Vice President, Marsteller, Inc.

When your advertising asks for the order right out front, with a price and a place to buy and with “NOW” included in the copy, that’s hard-sell advertising, and it should invariably be tried before any other kind. Advertising is usually most beautiful when it’s least measurable and least productive.

—Lewis Kornfeld, President, Radio Shack

Viewers are turned off by commercials that try so hard to be funny, which is the present product of so many agencies. The question that comes to mind is, “Why do these people have to have characters acting like imbeciles for thirty seconds or more just to get the product name mentioned once or twice?”

Are they afraid to merely show the product and explain why the viewer should buy it instead of another like product? Possibly the most stupid thing advertisers do is allow their agency to have background music, usually loud, rock-type music, played while the person is trying to explain the features of the product.

Frequently the music is louder than the voice, so the commercial goes down the drain. More and more people are relying on ads for information to help them decide which product to purchase. The entertainment-type ads on TV are ineffective.

—Robert Snodell, “Why TV Spots Fail,” *Advertising Age*

Humorous ads are troubling because you have to create a link to the product and its benefit. Often, people remember a funny ad but they don’t remember the product.

—Richard Kirshenbaum, Co-Chairman,
Kirshenbaum Bond & Partners

Direct marketing . . . is the only form of accountable advertising. It’s the only kind of advertising you can ever do where you can trace every dollar of sales to every dollar of costs. Major

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corporations using traditional advertising have no idea which advertising is effective. If you employ direct marketing you can tell exactly what works.

—Ted Nicholas, *How to Turn Words into Money*
(Nicholas Direct, 2004)

Copy cannot create desire for a product. It can only take the hopes, dreams, fears, and desires that already exist in the hearts of millions of people, and focus those already-existing desires onto a particular product. This is the copywriter's task: not to create this mass desire—but to channel and direct it.

—Eugene Schwartz, *Breakthrough Advertising*
(Boardroom, 2004)

Ads are not written to entertain. When they do, these entertainment seekers are little likely to be the people whom you want. This is one of the greatest advertising faults. Ad writers abandon their parts. They forget they are salesmen and try to be performers. Instead of sales, they seek applause.

—Claude Hopkins, *Scientific Advertising*
(Bell Publishing, 1920)

The advertisements which persuade people to act are written by [copywriters] who have an abiding respect for the intelligence of their readers, and a deep sincerity regarding the merits of the goods they have to sell.

—Bruce Barton, Cofounder,
Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO)

A good advertisement is one which sells the product without drawing attention to itself. It should rivet the reader's attention on the product. It is the professional duty of the advertising agent to conceal his artifice.

—David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*
(Atheneum, 1963)

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The “literary quality” of an advertisement, per se, is no measure of its greatness; fine writing is not necessarily fine selling copy. Neither is its daring departure from orthodoxy, nor its erudition, nor its imaginative conceits, nor its catchiness.

—James Woolf, *Advertising Age*

I contend that advertising people are too tolerant of fluff copy, too eager to produce the well-turned phrase to bother with the hard-fought sale.

—Eleanor Pierce, *Printer's Ink*

If there are two “camps” in advertising—hard-sell versus creative—then I side with the former. And so do the experts quoted above.

The Copywriter's Handbook is written to teach you how to write copy that sells. For copy to convince the consumer to buy the product, it must do four things:

1. Get attention.
2. Communicate.
3. Persuade.
4. Ask for a response.

Chapter 2 shows you how to write copy that gets attention. You'll learn to use both headlines and pictures as attention-getting tools. (And you'll learn to make them work together.)

Chapter 3 is a primer on writing to communicate. It provides rules for writing clear, concise, simple copy that gets your message across to the reader both online and offline.

Chapter 4 presents guidelines on persuasive writing. It will teach you to be a salesperson as well as a writer.

Chapter 5 presents step-by-step instructions that can help you prepare effectively for any copywriting assignment.

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In chapters 6 through 17, you learn how to apply these copywriting principles to a variety of media both online and offline.

In chapters 18 and 19, we discuss various options for getting your copy written, designed, and produced, including graphics, visuals, and layout.

HAS THE INTERNET CHANGED COPYWRITING FOR BOTH WRITERS AND READERS?

The major event that has taken place since the publication of the first edition of *The Copywriter's Handbook* is the rise of the Internet as a marketing medium and channel of commerce.

Many readers of the first edition have asked me, "Are the copywriting techniques *The Copywriter's Handbook* teaches still applicable in the Internet era in general, and particularly to writing for the Web?"

The answer is: well, yes and no. The core of persuasion is pretty much the same. What has changed is what today is known as the "sales funnel" or "customer journey." Or as the great copywriter Gary Halbert astutely observed: "Fundamentals never change but current *variations* of how to best use those fundamentals are something you must always stay on top of."¹

Undeniably, the Internet has revolutionized marketing because of its speed, accessibility, ease, and low cost: sending an e-mail marketing campaign is faster, easier, and less costly than distributing the same promotional material through the mail or running it as magazine ads or on TV. Facebook ads can directly target the prospects you want to reach through access to consumer ads. Also, you know the preliminary results within minutes of broadcasting your e-mail or your ads going live. In direct mail, it sometimes takes weeks before you know how well you've done.

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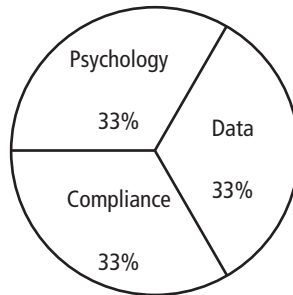
THE THREE KEYS TO WRITING COPY THAT WORKS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Here are three ways the Internet has affected the manner in which copy is written, evaluated, and tested today:

1—Human emotion. First, good copy used to be primarily driven by an understanding of human emotion. That was the main factor that guided good copywriters to create winning copy.

But today, there are not one but three key factors that influence how you create copy and make it work: human emotion, data, and compliance (fig. 1.1).

Fig. 1.1: Copywriting is based on three factors: human emotion, data, and compliance.



Copywriter Frank Joseph writes, “There’s never been any marketing of any type that is not enhanced by emotion and sincerity.” Tyler Kelley of SLAM! Agency says, “I think we’re going to see the rise of digital marketing professionals who not only understand digital but understand people—how they think, what motivates them, and why they purchase.”²

An important point is that the Internet has not changed human nature, nor does people’s buying psychology change simply because they are reading your message online instead

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of offline. As Claude Hopkins wrote in his classic book *Scientific Advertising* (see appendix D):

Human nature is perpetual. In most respects it is the same today as in the time of Caesar. So the principles of psychology are fixed and enduring. You will never need to unlearn what you learn about them.

2—*Data analytics*. Human emotion remains important, but copywriting is increasingly driven by data as reported by analytics.

A white paper from Signal notes, “Decision-makers can no longer depend on experience, intuition, and secondhand information. . . . Data . . . is the single source of truth—the north star guiding marketers in a world where change is the only constant.”³ Or, as Jordan Pritikin from HubSpot puts it, “Great marketers listen to their numbers.”

Of the marketers surveyed by eMarketer, 55 percent said better use of data for more effective audience segmentation and targeting is among their three top priorities.⁴

You ignore data at your peril, because they show what’s working today. Also, quantitative measurement based on live data and tests trumps subjective opinion every time.

As for data and information used as source material for copywriting projects, there is so much raw data and content on the Web on every subject imaginable, some of my clients send me new links every five minutes for the project I am writing for them.

For decades, I always told clients more is better than less. But now I am rethinking that position. Sometimes there are thousands of articles on the topic. (I just googled “weight loss” and in less than a second was given links to nearly two million pages.) If I gave all two million articles on weight loss a careful reading or even a quick scan, I could not possibly make my copy deadline.

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Renowned journalist John McPhee says: “*Writing is selection.*”⁵ In an era of Information Overload, selectivity in writing is more important than ever.

Some marketers are so data-driven that they ignore strong emotional copy, which frequently generates higher response rates than the mediocre copy used in so many tests.

They also impose rules, based on their extensive testing of ads in their product category and preferred medium, which are contrary to what experienced copywriters think they know. For instance, one client in a niche industry finds that the optimal length for a half-page newspaper ad headline is 8 to 12 words. Longer or shorter and response drops. This is something I had never heard before writing for them, but their data trump my training, opinions, and instincts.

3—*Digital compliance.* You must follow the ad guidelines and rules for whatever search engine, social network, Web site, ad network, e-mail service provider, or other digital platform on which you want to run your ad. If you do not, your ad won’t run, and no one will ever see it.

Compliance with these requirements often makes it difficult to create online advertising that says what you want it to say.

For instance, as of this writing, Facebook rejects ads that talk about weight loss with specific promises (e.g., lose 10 pounds in 7 days). So how is one to run an effective weight loss ad there? And in 2018, Google dropped 3.2 *billion ads* that violated its advertising policies.⁶

Marketers are finding hacks around these restrictions. For weight loss and other health claims, product benefit ads have widely been replaced by food-based Facebook ads (e.g., “Top Doctors Say to Throw This Vegetable in the Garbage!”).

Smart marketers are increasingly finding honest and clever ways to get their stronger, bolder, more specific ads approved by Facebook and other media controlling compliance.

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Still, data and compliance restrict us in ways we didn't have to deal with back in the day. Copywriter Richard Armstrong sums up the debilitating effects of digital ad requirements #2 and #3 as follows:

“We've gone from ‘They Laughed When I Sat Down at the Piano . . . But When I Started to Play’ to ‘It's Feasibly Possible that the Correspondence Course Being Sold in this Advertisement May Be of Some Assistance in Helping You Familiarize Yourself with Learning How to Play the Piano If You're Willing to Put in Many Hours of Study and Practice.’”

Although compliance is important, what constitutes compliance is sometimes open to interpretation. The rule of thumb, though, is this: for each 10 percent closer you get to perfect compliance, your response rates drop by 10 percent. The plain and simple truth is that overly zealous compliance in many cases results in weaker copy.

ONLINE ADVERTISING COMPLIANCE GUIDELINES

Amazon Advertising Policies

<https://advertising.amazon.com/resources/ad-specs/en>

Facebook, Instagram, Audience Network

<https://www.facebook.com/business/help/223106797811279>

Google Advertising Policies

<https://support.google.com/adspolicy/answer/6008942?hl=en>

Microsoft Advertising

<https://about.ads.microsoft.com/en-us/resources/policies>

SOME GOOD NEWS FOR OLD-SCHOOL COPYWRITERS

The good news for you is that the vast body of the copywriting techniques and selling principles you've learned throughout your career, including the ones in this book, remain viable and effective.

Well then, has the Internet changed anything for your readers? Yes, plenty—and here are the changes I see:

1. The Internet, computers, video games, and other screen-based electronic media have caused a reduction in the human attention span. Being concise has always been a virtue in writing, but now it is even more important. This does not mean that long copy doesn't work, that people don't read anymore (as some erroneously claim), or that all copy should be minimal (some of my video sales letter scripts run to sixty-five hundred words). It does mean you must follow the wise advice of Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style* and “omit needless words,” keeping your copy clean and concise.

2. Readers are bombarded by more ad messages and information overload than at any time in human history. As Yale librarian Rutherford D. Rogers once said, “We are drowning in information and starving for knowledge.” That means you must strive to make your copy relevant to the reader, understand what keeps him or her up at night, and address that need, desire, want, or fear in your ad.

3. The Internet has made consumers more savvy, training them to shun promotion, better able to spot hype, and become increasingly skeptical. Both in print and on the Web, buyers often prefer educational-type advertising material: advertising that respects their intelligence, does not talk down to them, and conveys useful and practical information they perceive as valuable in solving their problem or making a purchasing decision.

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4. Copy that is mostly information rather than sales is today called “content marketing.” Advertising that *looks* more like an article than a paid ad is called either an advertorial or “native advertising.”

5. Your prospects are busy and are pressed for time. Convenience and speed of delivery are big selling points today for products and services, as is time saving.

6. Marketers now have the option of putting their product information in print material, online, or a combination of the two. “Multichannel marketing campaigns” typically alternate promotions between print and digital.

7. Because print and digital to a large degree have become integrated, the sales funnel and customer journey—the steps marketers take to generate leads and sales, as well as the buying process the customer goes through—are multistep and more sophisticated than they were before the advent of Internet marketing. Chapters 11 through 17 cover these changes in detail.

Here’s good news for copywriters: because of the rapidly growing use of digital marketing and all the new channels it has spawned, copywriting is a critical skill—both online and offline.

Why? Consumers today are better educated and more skeptical. Thanks in part to the Internet, they have easier, faster access to product information and pricing for comparative shopping. There are more products and brands to choose from, and also more advertising messages—commercials, e-mails, banner ads, mailers—competing for our attention.

As a result, our prospects are bombarded by more communications than were previous generations of consumers. There are more than a billion Web sites they can visit, and over eight hundred channels of television they can watch. Not to mention the hundreds of e-mails and even a dozen or so telemarketing calls some of us get each day.

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With all of that information competing for the prospect's attention, you have to work extra hard to make your promotion—whether print or online—stand out and grab the prospect's attention. And of course that means one thing primarily: strong copy with a message that readers actually care about.

Yes, lists, media, and offers are tremendously important. But you can identify, fairly quickly and easily, those lists and offers that work best for your product. Once you've found the right lists, ad networks, and offers, then the only additional leverage you have for boosting response is through—you guessed it—copy.

Writing is critical to success on the Web. As Nick Usborne points out in his book *Net Words*, "Go to your favorite Web site, strip away the glamour of the design and technology, and you're left with words—your last, best way to differentiate yourself online." In marketing, whether on the Internet or the printed page, copy is still king.

HOW ONLINE VIDEO HAS CHANGED COPYWRITING

Platforms including Vimeo and YouTube have flooded the Web with marketing videos ranging from twenty seconds to forty-five minutes or longer.

YouTube is the leading online video platform, with almost five billion videos watched daily, and three hundred hours of new videos uploaded every minute.^{7,8}

Back in the day, marketing videos were burned onto DVDs and sent to prospects by mail, or else shown to prospects by salespeople on their laptops. Some DVDs and video are still used as inserts in direct-mail packages or in video brochures.

There are four basic modes of learning: watching, listening, reading, and doing—the latter also called "experiential learning." The problem is, it's difficult to segment your market by

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their preferred learning mode. Therefore, we produce our content in multiple formats:

- Video mp4 files for people who like to watch.
- Audio mp3 files for people who prefer to listen.
- Books and e-books for readers.
- Workshops, training exercises, and other live events for people who learn by doing.

(According to an article in *ClickZ* [May 1, 2019], 73 percent of people who participate in a brand's experiential marketing are more likely to purchase the brand involved.)

Chapter 16 shows you how to write both short-form and long-form online videos.

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA HAS CHANGED MARKETING

Social media has changed the Internet in general and online marketing in particular in four important ways.

First, no longer do you need a huge ad budget to communicate your messages to the world. All you need is a free account on one or more of the social media channels and then to start writing posts, though boosted posts and ads are not free. (A "boosted post" means you pay Facebook to distribute your post to more people.)

Second, while some communications between two parties on the Internet are private, whatever you post on Facebook, whether text or photos, is for public consumption. So social media lessens the degree of privacy Internet users have.

Third, social media is more interactive than most other digital channels. Users can comment on other users' posts at their whim. Also, social networking is at times a contentious medium, with online arguments in lengthy comment threads sometimes getting rude, mean, personal, or ugly. Apparently,

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people feel comfortable insulting you while hiding behind their keyboard, saying things they would never dare say to you face-to-face.

Fourth, most social media networks sell advertising, which is often their primary source of income. And because the social networks are controlled by their management, they can reject any ad without the need to explain or justify their decision. So rather than a universal medium for free exchange of information, the advertising side of the Web is restrictive and tightly controlled.

Chapter 15 presents guidelines on how marketers should write for and use social media to build brands, generate clicks and conversions, and ultimately sell products.

HOW MULTICHANNEL MARKETING HAS CHANGED COPYWRITING

The major event that has taken place since the publication of the first edition of *The Copywriter's Handbook* is the rise of the Internet as a marketing medium and channel for e-commerce.

The problem for marketing managers, brand managers, small business owners, and copywriters is the growing number of marketing channels, planning how to integrate them into a successful campaign, and then creating a sales funnel for maximum results. A “sales funnel” is a planned sequence of communications that takes people from being unfamiliar with you to doing business with you.

For instance, many clients ask their copywriters to boost conversion rates on their Web sites. When the copywriter asks what the current conversion rate is, some clients often don't know, because they don't measure. (“Conversion rate” is the percentage of users who land on a Web site or landing page and order a product, download free content, or otherwise respond to the call to action.) But without a metric by which

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to measure and evaluate results, you have no way of knowing which copy is working best.

The other challenge created by the proliferation of marketing channels is “attribution.” In modern marketing parlance, attribution is knowing which promotion is the original source of the inquiry or order. In a multichannel world, proper attribution can be difficult, with clicks coming in from so many sources, often simultaneously. That’s a problem because the less accurately you can track attribution and ad performance, the less you know about what’s working for you and therefore which promotions you should continue to run versus which ads are bombing and should be cut off.

According to eMarketer, of the more than one thousand marketers surveyed, more than four out of ten identified “integration of marketing tools for greater efficiencies” as a top priority.⁹