

B-to-B Insights: Can a Computer Write Better Copy Than You?

There's been a lot of talk lately about companies developing software that can write copy.

Naturally, copywriters are both a bit skeptical and a bit nervous that, if the software works well, it will put them out of work.

And, although copywriters might be skeptical, examples of machines pushing humans out of jobs abound. For instance, when self-service, push-button elevators were introduced in the 1920s, thousands of elevator operators throughout the country were out of a job, including Joe, a gentleman who worked the elevator in my father's office.

The copywriting software company getting the most PR currently is New York-based Persado. A Venture Capital Dispatch Blog post for The Wall Street Journal ran a headline on Jan. 22 that boldly proclaimed: ["Persado Raises \\$21 Million to Replace Human Copywriters With Computers"](#).

But, as it turns out, the WSJ misinterprets what Persado's software is really doing. So let me set the record straight, based on a recent interview I conducted with Persado CMO David Atlas.

The Reality

First, the software does not write copy in the sense that you or I might write a sales letter, ad, landing page or brochure. It cannot do what we copywriters do – yet.

Atlas explained that the Persado algorithm is limited to creating persuasive sentences with a maximum length of 600 characters.

So far, Persado is mostly used to write email subject lines, Facebook ads, text messaging for mobile marketing and short-form landing pages.

"Persado solves a mathematical word puzzle to figure out the best sentence," says Atlas. "It automates the creation of small sentences optimized for persuasion in digital marketing that drives action."

Atlas calls it “algorithmic copywriting.” He says that key elements involve “experimental design,” “natural language processing” and “semantic neighborhoods.”

Close, But not Exact

Persado is not even close to true artificial intelligence (AI), in that it cannot think like a human copywriter or feel emotion.

Should true AI, as portrayed in movies such as “The Terminator,” or “The Matrix,” come to be, being replaced as a copywriter will be the least of my worries.

What happens is the software sends emails with thousands of different subject lines to a marketer’s e-list. A lot of Persado customers are large online retailers and financial services firms, such as Neiman Marcus, Overstock.com and American Express.

Within these many versions and permutations of a subject line or mobile message, the software is able to measure response and test short phrases and even single words.

As the company’s website explains, “Persado maps the marketing language that applies to your brand, creating thousands of variations of a marketing message.”

“Typical A/B testing will send out only a few messages, then go with the one that gives the best response,” says Persado’s PR person Kirsten McKenna. “Persado can send out thousands of permutations of the same message to determine which would be the most successful.”

The software codes the words in those test messages based on the emotions they evoke, using that to come up with the most optimal marketing message.

The algorithm composes new subject lines incorporating the winning words and phrases, considering all combinations of emotions, features and format options.

The software discovers the most persuasive emotions, and generates language that drives the greatest response. It then, according to McKenna, “linguistically engineers a message that has the emotions, features, calls to action and stylistic components that drive increased engagement, opens, clicks or conversions.”

Armed with this tested database of results, the Persado software can indeed compose or “write” subject lines and other persuasive sentences, such as calls to action that beat copy written by humans.

For instance, Citibank saw a 65 percent boost in open rates and a 117 percent increase in clickthrough rates for emails with subject lines generated by Persado vs. subject lines written by humans.

On one test for another Persado customer, the subject line written by the human copywriter was “Up to \$250 to spend on all ships in all destinations. 2 days left!” The clickthrough rate was 1.34 percent.

The subject line generated by the Persado software, “Not kidding! You qualify: experience an incredible vacation with us. :-)” produced a clickthrough rate of 4.09 percent – three times greater than the human copywriter.

“We have never lost to a human,” Persado founder Alex Vratskides told The Wall Street Journal. “I’m a mathematician, and I can guarantee you, [writing winning copy] is like getting a needle in a haystack. We built the haystack. The human brain does not work that way.”