

Website Copywriting Basics



One of the most challenging tasks you'll face when developing a website is copywriting the content for it to move your audience into some sort of desired action.

In general, online writing styles are different from print. Just as print has different styles for prose, poetry, editorials etc, the online media usually commands different styles for different types of online assets: Banner ads, webpages, email, reports and reviews etc.

In this issue, we will address the basic pointers for copywriting for a website.

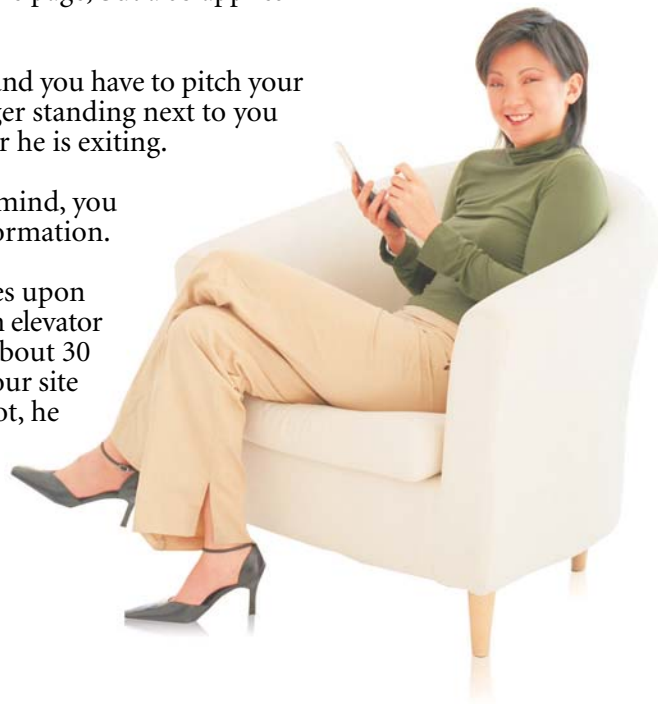
Think 'Elevator Pitch'

This is most critical for the home page, but also applies to most of your other pages.

Imagine you are in an elevator and you have to pitch your product or service to the stranger standing next to you before the elevator hits the floor he is exiting.

When you adopt this frame of mind, you strip away all non-essential information.

In reality, when a visitor chances upon your website, it is very close to an elevator pitch situation. You have only about 30 seconds to convince him that your site is worth exploring further. If not, he will click away.



Answering 'What's In It for Me'

In our 6 years of developing websites for companies, it was only recently that we came across a client that put 'About Us' BELOW other sections like her "Product Catalogue" and "Services Offered". This client clearly understood that visitors are first and foremost interested in her products and services.

Too many online marketers fail to understand this, or if they do, they are unable to convince their management otherwise.

Website visitors spend precious time downloading and reading your webpages. Therefore each page must offer something for him/her.

Adopt a change in your mentality.

Ask 'Would the customer like to have this information?' instead of just 'What do I want to tell the customer?'. For eg, a question like 'Should we display our prices?' - depending on the mentality you adopt, you might answer this question differently. Adopting a customer frame of reference will help you maximize the relevance of your website to the customer and keep them on your site just that much longer.

Forget Linear

Most people read print media in a linear manner. That is, they will read paragraph after paragraph to its logical end. On a webpage, this is usually not the case.

The presence of hyperlinks enables a reader to jump from one page to another.

Your website will look more like a tree with multiple branches leading to different pieces of information. To write effectively, you will need to help the reader make decisions every time he comes across a branch junction. Structure your content into different levels: Overview, Summary, Details, Gory Details (only if necessary).

An overview gives the reader a high level view of how your content is structured. Think of it as a general orientation map.

The summary page allows you to describe a few products on one limited sized page. The description should be about 50 words +/- . This information should be just enough to help a visitor decide which details he wants to read.

The details page usually contains between 200 – 500 words. This number of words allows you to pack all the product / service information within the limited confines of a typical webpage. If you think a much more detailed description is necessary, put it one level down.

Think Visually

The webpage is a visual communication tool but it is more difficult to read text on a computer screen than in a magazine or book. You must therefore make it easier for the reader to digest your words.

Some commonly used techniques are listed below:

- **Tier your words**
Create 'Headings', 'Sub-headings', 'Sub-sub-headings' etc. Using effects like bold and colours help distinguish these important statements further. This approach allows a reader to quickly summarize the content of your webpage without having to read every word.
- **Short paragraphs**
Make your paragraphs short and group related information into a single paragraph. Be as brief as you can be. This way, your copy will be less intimidating to read, and will pack more informational punch.
- **Bullet points**
Instead of using prose that runs on and on, try using bullet points instead. They are a good visual way to organize information and make your copy more readable.
- **Colours, Fonts**
Use colours, font type and font sizes to highlight important words and to section your copy. Another common online technique is to shade the background a different colour to highlight a particular section of copy.
- **Tables**
If you are making comparisons, or creating a long list of features, try using tables. The table dispenses with the need for prose, allowing you to whittle the information down to the barest minimum, greatly enhancing its readability. Take the example below:

Prose Form:

The 3 series come in various engine capacities and prices. The entry level 320i has an engine capacity of 1995cc with a price tag of S\$155,800*. The 325i's engine has 2497 cc and costs S\$182,800*. Further up on the ladder is the 330i offering a 2996 cc engine and accompanying price of S\$209,800*

Table Form:

Model	Engine Capacity (cc)	Price
320i	1995	\$155,800*
325i	2497	\$182,800*
330i	2996	\$209,800*

While the table form may be a less interesting read, it's easier to understand.

Stick to Conventions

Your website copy will include various instructions and signs to help your reader navigate through your site. In the interest of usability, you should, as a general rule, stick to conventions. Use 'Home' not 'Introduction', 'Details' or 'More' instead of 'Dig Deeper'. There is room for creativity, but make sure it does not detract from simple understanding.

Differentiate Selectively

Bearing the comments in point 5 above, there is still room for creativity. A good example is a feature we implemented for a client showcasing over 500 discounts at restaurants all over Singapore. Instead of simply implementing a 'Search' for restaurant, we called it 'Restaurant Recommender'. Using the restaurant recommender a visitor can search for a restaurant by;

- ▶ Cuisine ▶ Budget
- ▶ Location ▶ Ambience

As an illustration of how much difference a simple word change can make, the 'Restaurant Recommender' phrase attracted thousands of enquiries every month whereas 'Search' generated only hundreds.

Common Sense

Finally, the common sense stuff. Avoid jargon, and abbreviations. They serve only to confuse your reader. The only exception to the rule is if you are writing for a website targeted at a very specific audience e.g. neurosurgeons, computational fluid dynamicists or atomic physicists.

Also avoid empty promises and boasts. They make you sound insincere, and with the proliferation of disreputable sites and scams on the internet, customers are naturally wary. Do not use words that will trigger their 'scam' early warning systems.

Well, that's all we have time for this month.

Next month we will touch on the topic of Search Engine Optimization and Search Engine Marketing. This field is emerging as an exciting and cost effective method of marketing for small and medium businesses. So stay tuned.

PS: Found this newsletter informative and useful? Email us with your comments, questions or other topics you would like covered at custservice@designdepot.com.sg