9.3: Core principles

Writing for an audience

In marketing and advertising, knowing your audience is vital. It will guide you in developing your content strategy, determining the topics they are interested in, and help you organise information in a way that makes sense to them. It will direct how you express your copy for your audience.

Step one of writing for digital is to ensure you have researched your audience and understand what they want. Once you have a clear idea about this, you can figure out how to fulfil those needs using your copy. Smashing Magazine (2015) recommends answering the following questions:

1. Who are you writing for?
2. What is the main message you want to get across?
3. Where does the action take place (where will it be read)?
4. When is it relevant?
5. Why is it important (what's the goal)?

For example, your answers might look like this:

1. Who: First-time moms
2. Message: Our baby kit can help you
3. Where: Parenting forums/magazines/social media
4. When: Immediately before and after the birth of a child
5. Why: Because first-time moms need help (and because we want them to buy our product).

When you are researching your audience, there are two useful concepts to bear in mind, the audience of one, and personas.

The audience of one

According to Price and Price, audiences were traditionally thought of as a vast and vaguely defined crowd (Price & Price, 2002). Because the web provides a voice to individuals and niche groups, the concept of this mass audience is disintegrating.

Price and Price go on to argue that the Internet has led to an audience of one (Price & Price, 2002). What does this mean? While your audience is not literally one person (and if it is, thank your mum for reading your copy, but spend some time growing your readership), it is not a vast, vaguely defined crowd either. Instead, the web has many niche audiences who are used to being addressed as individuals. Indeed, The Economist Group (2015) confirms that personalised marketing is becoming more granular, helping to create specialised customer experiences that will keep them coming back.

The individual that you have in mind when you are writing could also be called a persona.

Take the time to think about **how** web and mobile content is consumed in the physical world. It's usually an exclusive action, so write your copy this way.

Personas

A persona is a profile that a writer creates to embody the characteristics of the target audience for whom he or she is writing.

Personas are based on the profile of readers of your copy. Creating a profile is all about considering the characteristics of your readers and their needs and desires. When you are building this profilethere are a number of things that you should consider about your audience:

- Are they primarily male, female or a mixture?
- How old are they?
- What are their other demographics and psychographics?

Once you understand these simple characteristics, you can ask yourself some more in-depth questions. If you are selling something, questions could include:

- How do they make purchasing decisions?
- Do they compare many service providers before selecting one?

- Do they make lists of questions and call in for assistance with decision making, or do they make purchase decisions spontaneously based on a special offer?

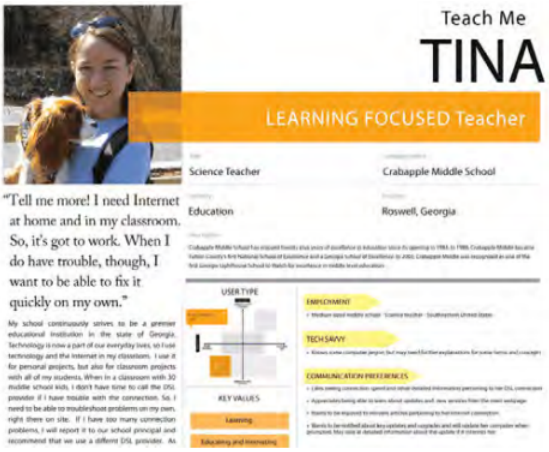

Figure 9.3.1: A sample persona *Adapted From UXMag, n.d.*

Understanding the reader profiles of your readers is an important process and the best copy usually results from extensive time spent figuring out your audience.

Tailoring your copy to your audience does not necessarily limit you to one persona.

Digital copy can be structured so that it caters for several personas. Consider that your various marketing channels may have different audiences, so ensure that you have a persona for each main platform you use. However, you need to spend time understanding their needs before you are able to write copy that addresses these personas.

Types of web copy

Whether it is long or short, the purpose of content is to communicate a message. Communication implies that the message has been both received and understood. The considerations covered here are aimed at ensuring that when you distribute a message, it is communicated effectively to the people whom you want to receive it.

To communicate the intended message effectively, content needs to be:

- Clear and concise
- Easy to read
- Well-written
- Well-structured.

Content written for the web can be divided into two broad categories, short copy and long copy. The division is by no means scientific.

Short copy

On the web, writers often have very little time and space to get a message across to a visitor, and to entice them to take action. This is especially true of banner and search adverts but is also important across all digital marketing disciplines. Probably the most important short copy anywhere is the call to action.

Call to action

Users scan web pages and look for clues on what to do. Tell them. A call to action is a short, descriptive instruction that explicitly tells a reader what to do, for example, 'Click here' or, 'Buy this now'. Any time there is an action you want a reader to take, a call to action should instruct them on what to do. This means using active verbs when you write, and crafting hyperlinks to be clear instructions that resonate with your visitors at each step in the conversion process.

Also, know where to place your call to action so that it makes sense to a reader's eye. For example, depending on the structure of your page, it might be better to start with your call to action and then to qualify it. In other cases, ending the page with your call to action may have a stronger impact on the reader as they may be more likely to act once they have the information they need to do so. This depends on your product and the action you want your audience to take.

Banner advertising involves clear calls to action, and they can also be used in social media posts, search adverts, content marketing and more. Call to action copy is not limited to short copy. Email newsletters and promotions should also make use of calls to action and we even see them all over web pages. Each piece of online copy should be written with a CTA or at least with the question, “What’s next?” in mind.

Figure 9.3.2: CTAs should be clear and enticing *Adapted From Screenshot, Lynda.com, 2016*

A good call to action resonates with the action the users need to take, as opposed to the technical function that is performed. For example, if a user has entered an email address to sign up to your email newsletter, the action button should say ‘Sign up’ and not ‘Submit’. Make sure you write your instructions for humans. Think about what real people prefer to read!

Also consider what actions mean offline. For an email newsletter, ‘Sign up’ can have very different connotations from ‘Subscribe’. Furthermore, ‘Subscribe’ is very different from ‘Subscribe for free’.

Whereas subscriptions have connotations of costs, ‘Sign up’ does not carry the same burden. However, ‘Subscribe for free’ could imply greater value as something that would normally carry a cost is available to you for free.

Note

Since the call to action is key to converting customers, this is an important element to test. What iterations of your main call to action could you try?

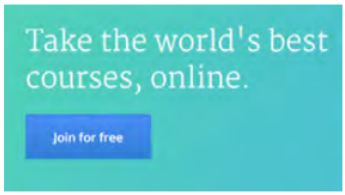

Figure 9.3.3: A Coursera CTA. Good CTAs are short and to the point *Adapted From Screenshot, Coursera, 2016*

Titles and subject lines

Note

The Huffington Post is well known for publishing articles with compelling headlines. Visit www. huffingtonpost.com to have a look at how they grab the reader’s attention.

Titles and subject lines often form part of a body of long copy. However, they are important enough to be discussed as stand-alone short copy. Titles and subject lines are there for a very important reason, they tell a reader whether or not they should read further. They are the gateway to your content.

Consider the following titles:

- Guide to online copywriting
- Ten steps to online copywriting that sells.

The second title conveys more information and excitement to the reader, which helps the reader to make a decision to read further.

Subject lines are like headlines for emails, and can make the difference between an email being deleted instantly and being opened and read. As with a headline, which should be carefully crafted like the headline of a newspaper, use the subject line to make it clear what the email is about. For example, if there is a promotion in the email, consider putting it in the subject line as well.

> **Note**
>
> An email subject line is the first cue your audience receives to help them decide whether to open an email or not. How can you make it count?

Figure 9.3.4: A direct, enticing email subject line *Adapted From Screenshot, email*

Titles, headlines and subject lines need to be both persuasive and enticing. Consider what need your copy is meeting for your readers, and express that first. Highlighting a benefit to your readers upfront means they are more likely to engage, even if they don't necessarily need your product or service at the time.

Search adverts

Search adverts have very limited space and time to get a message across and there is plenty of competition for a reader's attention. These few lines of copy need to work hard to ensure a top return on investment. Search adverts typically follow the same basic structure and have strict character limits for each line. The new Google expanded ads are as follows:

> Heading1 – Heading 2 (max. 30 characters each) One description field (max. 80 characters) www.DisplayURL.com (uses your final URL's domain with two optional "path" fields max. 15 characters each).

> **Note**
>
> Read more about this in the Search advertising chapter.

With a limited character count, it can seem daunting to communicate information that entices the right people to click through and also differentiates you from your competition. Testing variations of copy is the best way to determine what works best for your campaign. While copywriters are not generally responsible for writing paid search ads, they are often brand custodians and should review all copy representing a brand.

Social copy

Social media allows brands to have conversations with their customers and fans. This gives consumers a powerful voice and the ability to tell brands what they want. There are a few considerations to keep in mind when creating content for social media.

- **Research is vital.** Understand what type of content community members want. Meaningful and relevant content is more likely to be shared. Hashtags are fairly important for many platforms so research any hashtags you use to avoid making costly mistakes, like DiGiorno did with its use of the #WhyIStayed hashtag. This hashtag was part of an awareness campaign for domestic abuse and was used in tweets explaining why users had chosen to stay in abusive relationships.

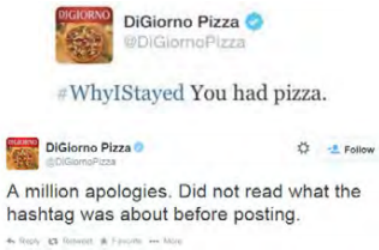

Figure 9.3.5: DiGiorno research fail From *Adapted From PoMoFo, n.d.*

- **Remember that it's a conversation.** Your content must be personable and appealing. Use personality and convey the humanity of your brand in order to generate conversation and encourage comments.
- **Write shareable content.** Offer value and be insightful. Ultimately you should aim to create an overall perception that your brand is the thought leader in its industry. Shareable content is credible content.
- **Avoid overly promotional content.** Community members are likely to see right through a sales pitch. Instead, think about how your content can be useful to your reader. Remember, with content, value to the reader should come first, with value to the

brand as a secondary consideration.

- **Have a solid communication protocol.** These can be internal guidelines for organisations to follow on how they use and communicate on social media platforms. This also ensures consistency, which is very important for creating a brand personality for readers to engage with.

Figure 9.3.6: Relevant and on-brand social media copy *Adapted From Claire's Digital Marketing Blog, 2016*

> **Note**
>
> All of these points are covered in more detail in the chapters on Social media platforms and Social media strategies.

Long copy

Online copywriting is not just about short, sharp calls to action and attentiongrabbing headlines and adverts. It also covers longer pieces of content.

Longer copy has advantages. Primarily, it allows you to provide more information and encourage the reader to convert. You can foster a relationship with a reader, whether it is on a blog, through email communications, or through articles and news releases. With more words and space available, you are able to build a voice and a personality into your writing.

The expression 'long copy' is somewhat misleading. As online readers behave slightly differently from offline readers, it is unlikely that a skilled copywriter will be called on to create copy for the web that is longer than 800 or 1 000 words per page although, of course, there are exceptions to this.

Long copy needs to be structured and formatted so that it's easy for attentionstarved web readers to digest. Web users tend to scan pages quickly to determine whether or not they will read further. Specifically in longer copy, you need to take this into consideration.

There are many types of long online copy including website copy! Here, we will focus on a few that are useful for marketing:

- News releases
- Articles for online syndication
- Emails
- Blog posts
- Advertorials
- Website.

Bear in mind that this is by no means an exhaustive list.

News releases

News releases are a staple of public relations. As the Internet grows, so does the overlap between PR and marketing. As a result, many copywriters are called upon to write news releases for online distribution as this is a standardised format for releasing information. Originally intended to provide information for journalists, news releases are increasingly being read by users bypassing the journalists. This means that they should be written in the brand tone, be accessible to the general public, and be optimised and formatted according to the principles of good web writing (more on those later). Also remember to focus on a compelling headline to win over your reader.

Figure 9.3.7: An online press release from Apple *Adapted From Apple, 2016*

Emails

> **Note**
>
> Read more about this in the Direct marketing email and mobile chapter.

Email as a channel is an integral part of many online marketing strategies. Of course, content is a huge part of this; it comprises the words in an email with which a user engages.

By nature, emails are the ideal medium for communicating and building relationships with your consumers. This customer relationship marketing helps to increase retention. Successful email campaigns provide value to their readers. This value may vary from campaign to campaign. Newsletters can offer:

- Humour and entertainment
- Research and insight
- Information and advice
- Promotions and special offers.

Figure 9.3.8: The Litmus updates newsletter *Adapted From Screenshot, DueSouth Escapes newsletter, October 2017*

Blogging

Blogs can be very successful marketing tools. They're an excellent way to communicate with staff, investors, industry members, journalists and prospective customers. Blogging also helps to foster a community around a brand and provides an opportunity to garner immediate feedback. This is an audience made up of players vital to the success of a company which is why it is important to get blogging right. A key consideration is the quality of your headlines. You have to convince your reader to grant you their attention.

Figure 9.3.9: A blog post on the Fast Company blog *Adapted From Screenshot, Fast Company Blog, 2016*

There is plenty to be gained from the process of blogging and obviously, the value, as with email marketing, lies in the content. This communication channel provides an opportunity for you to foster an online identity for your brand as well as giving your company a voice and a personality. This happens through the content you distribute as well as the tone you use to converse with your readers. There is more information on blogging in the chapter on Social media platforms.

Website copy

Website copy is a type of long copy, and the principles that apply to long copy in general also hold true for websites. Digital copywriters need to structure content effectively so that users want to engage with the site and read on. This is especially important when people access a site from their mobile phone, where the small screen size drastically reduces the content users will see before they scroll. Some ways to create digital copy that is usable and appropriate for an online audience include:

- Writing text that can be easily scanned
- Using meaningful headings and sub-headings
- Highlighting or bolding key phrases and words
- Using bulleted lists
- Having a well-organised site.
- **Limiting each paragraph to one main idea or topic.** The leading sentence should give a clear indication of what the paragraph is about. Readers can scan each paragraph without missing any essential information.
- **Cutting the fluff.** Get rid of meaningless turns of phrase and words that unnecessarily bulk up copy.
- **Removing redundancies.** These often creep into writing by accident, but you should work to eliminate them in order to get to the point.
- **Including multimedia wherever relevant.** Some readers may be more partial to video than reading, for example, see http://www.nytimes.com/ projects/2012/snow-fall/#/?part=tunnel-creek.

Writing in the mobile age

Because of the number of people who use the internet via mobile phones, content is usually written for mobile first these days. Here are some points on creating digital copy for all screen sizes that encourages interaction and achieves marketing and business goals.

> **Note**
>
> Read more about this in the Mobile channels and apps chapter.

- **Get to the point**. With limited screen space, there really is no room for wordy text. You need to determine exactly what your message is and get to the point quickly! This is particularly true for content above the fold.
- **Put the important bits up front**. This includes contact information and navigation links. Word these clearly so that people know what action to take.
- **Condense information to its simplest form**. Ensure that it still makes sense and is grammatically sound.

> **Note**
>
> Once users have decided to navigate further into your mobile website, you can increase the amount of copy on the pages.

- **Use a call to action upfront**. Mobile web users are goal-orientated so provide them with the next step early on.
- **Use headings and subheadings for scanning**.

Figure 9.3.10: Mobile-optimised copy vs. traditional web copy *Adapted From Mis, 2017*

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