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The 'So-What?' Principle for Writing Good Website Copy

I am about to hand you the most worthwhile website writing tip ever devised. It is so simple, yet so effective, that from now on your website copywriting will shine forth like a good deed in a naughty world. But, first, a short preamble.

As I bounce around the Internet, I see that many so-called copywriting gurus are adamant that copywriting for websites is completely different from copywriting for press ads, brochures and the like. They also go on to say that there exists some kind of secret website writing cornucopia, the location of which is known to only a few, but the key to which can be yours if you subscribe to their website copywriting course.

I am here to tell you that the contents of their course would probably get the average trainee at any decent ad agency fired on the spot, were he or she to adopt its precepts. Despite this, the myth that website writing is somehow different from any other kind of promotional writing is gaining ground; and it is being perpetrated not only by charlatans, but also by people who ought to know a good deal better.

Yes, I will agree that the 'reading' of websites is somewhat different from the 'reading' of what we might term terrestrial copywriting. And the reason is this. Having performed a Google search, people are confronted by so many options that they are quite negligent in their perusal of any given website. On the other hand, if they arrive at a site that pleases them mightily ? one that provides a good, benefit-filled headline, plus body copy that not only answers all their questions, but also soft-sells them at the same time - then they will linger.

The truth is immutable. The rules of copywriting for websites are exactly the same as the rules for writing anything else that is trying to sell a product or service. It must be clear and lucid. It must be simple and uncomplicated. And it must make some kind of offer or give some kind of promise. These, however, are not such attributes as you will find on the average website, because the average website ? being average ? contains no sales message, no product benefit and no offer or promise.

I shall now digress for a moment. The following two precepts are the oldest in the professional copywriting manual; and I have been proselytizing them for years.

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Nobody is listening, of course, so I shall repeat them; and I shall repeat them because they are important.

The first rule of successful copywriting is that every piece of promotional material should contain a headline. This headline should say exactly what it is that you are selling. And it should also give a very good reason for buying it.

The second rule of successful copywriting is that body copy should reinforce the benefit of owning the product by stating clearly what will be missed if the potential customer doesn't buy: i.e. the product features; plus the facts and figures of size, weight, and operational statistics. Not to mention the price. Always remember, people don't buy products, they buy the benefits of owning them.

But that's purely by the way. Let's return to our main thrust. People write to me all the time acknowledging that a website stands or falls in the eyes of the general public on the quality of its writing (good search engine optimization is all in the writing, too, but that's another story.) They say they have spent hours re-writing their Title, Description and Keywords meta tags, followed by the enjoiner that they have done everything possible to make their Home page body copy acceptable to both search engine and punter alike.

So I visit their website and the first thing I see when the site opens is a headline that says something like: "This is the website of Burlington R. Cade. You are welcome to it!" This so-called headline is followed by a stick of body copy which begins: "Burlington R. Cade is based in Stub Toe, Nebraska and has been in business since 1977?" My correspondent then goes on to ask why, in all reasonableness, is (a) the offending site not listed on any of the major search engines and (b) why the few simple souls who do visit the site (by accident, presumably) don't stick around?

The answer, of course, is that neither the headline nor the body copy makes it worthwhile for any search engine or punter to want to stick around. But we are about to change all that, because here's that website writing tip.

It's a tip that, used correctly, will tell you in no uncertain terms whether you have written a good headline or a great stick of body copy. And also vice versa. It was given to me 40 years ago by a benign Copy Chief when I stepped across the threshold of my first ad agency. It is called the "So what?" principle.

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Allow me to give you an example of 'So What?' in action. If you produce a headline that says: "Our Widget works twice as fast as any other Widget," and then ask yourself 'So What?', it immediately becomes clear that the line is bereft of a sales proposition. Because there is no obvious benefit to the potential customer. His unspoken question: 'What's in it for me' remains unanswered.

On the other hand, if you write: "Our Widget works twice as fast, so you do the job in half the time," then the 'So What?' has been answered. Your customer can cut his production time by 50%.

Likewise, were you to write: "Our Widget is so small, it fits into the palm of your hand," you simply invoke 'So What?' Which results in: "Our Widget fits into the palm of your hand, so it goes wherever you go." In this case, the benefit is portability.

Simple, isn't it? And it can be applied to body copy just as readily as it can to headlines. Given this, we should now be able to expunge forever from the Net such crass headlines as: "You are entering the wonderful world of Mandy Lifeboats!" And also to such dreadful sticks of copy which begin: "Mandy Lifeboats left university with a modest arts degree and not enough money to buy lunch, but she has never looked back?" Because 'So What?' should spell out to young Mandy that nobody gives a hoot. It goes without saying, however, that I am taking no bets on it.

If this has been useful, please do let me know.

About the Author: Pat Quinn is an award-winning UK copywriter who also operates a search engine optimization service. Because it's all in the writing! Here: <http://www.search-engine-mechanics.co.uk>.

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