



## ***What does a copywriter do?***

Like most of us, I'm asked from time to time what job I do. When I reply that I'm a freelance copywriter, I'm often greeted by a facial or verbal expression of puzzlement. I've even been asked how I decide who owns a particular copyright.

So, what is a copywriter? My Shorter Oxford English Dictionary contains this definition: "a person who writes or prepares copy, esp. advertising copy, for publication." Now, to be honest, that doesn't sound much of a career choice and it's not the way I describe the job when asked to describe what I do.

My definition of a copywriter is this: "a person hired to sell using words." I should add that this will be done in the most cost-effective way for the client hiring the copywriter. In other words, good copywriters communicate the message and achieve the greatest return on investment. Whether that return is sales, new leads, or simply a change in behaviour depends on the original aims of the marketing strategy. The work of the copywriter remains the same, however: to inform, to advise, or – more usually – to sell by making explicit the benefits and qualities of an idea, a service, or a product. This is done by *illustrating how the product can improve the lives of the potential customer*.

## ***What qualities does a copywriter need?***

Here is a short list of talents I think are essential for the job:

- a facility with words
- the ability to think clearly
- the ability to empathise
- an understanding of business
- an understanding of the psychology of selling
- a depth of general knowledge
- a free-ranging imagination
- a professional attitude



Let me explain what I mean by each of these and why they form part of the professional copywriter's essential tool set.

**A facility with words** might seem an obvious attribute for anyone who sets themselves up as a writer, be it a copywriter, a novelist, or a dramatist. When it comes to writing copy, however, there is little scope for building rapport with your audience. To a greater extent even than in a modern screenplay, the audience must be grabbed immediately. Then the words must convince them it was worth it to stay the length of the advertisement, direct mail piece, or brochure. Try this: sum up the concept of "The Sound of Music" in six words. Then remember "Go to work on an egg", one of the great copy lines and one that is still evocative decades after it was first used.

**Thinking clearly** is almost as important as a facility with words. Before a copywriter can create the copy best suited to the needs of the client, and which will have the required effect on the target audience, he/she must be able to reduce the marketing strategy, the product features and benefits, and the wishes and desires of the audience into a coherent whole. Without clear thinking, any copy produced becomes, at worst, a reflection of chaos and, at best, a poorly connected series of sentences and bullet points.

**Empathy** is a key characteristic of the expert sales person and is equally applicable to the sales person at the keyboard; the copywriter. To be able to convince a prospect to become a customer, for instance, it is necessary to understand what benefits the product or service on offer will provide. The more closely this understanding is allied to the personal needs and desires of the prospect, the more likely it is that a sale will be made. The copywriter's job, therefore, is not simply to understand the unique selling points of their subject, but also to get into the mind of their intended audience and explain to them how their life will change for the better after a purchase is made.

**Understanding business** means being able to align your copy with the needs of your client. That means understanding what most affects the bottom line. This can be the difference between a copywriter who produces copy and adds nothing more to the marketing process and a copywriter who can add value over and above the words contracted for. I'm not talking here about sticking your nose in and trying to tell people how to do their jobs: this is about bringing your experience to



bear when there may be some doubts expressed around the project. How many pages should the direct mail piece be? Should there be more than one item in the envelope? Is this enough for a four or eight page brochure? If you can advise as well as write and save your client money and increase sales, you can almost guarantee repeat business and an ongoing relationship that will be profitable for both parties.

**Knowing how and why people buy** can determine whether your copy will read well but create no customers or read well and meet your client's target conversion rates. I've already touched on empathy but there are a range of other sales techniques (including rapport) employed by 'live' sales people that can be used with copy to maximise the likelihood of selling. This is not the place to examine these techniques in any detail but all good copywriters will recognise the efficacy of sales skills and use them, when relevant, within their copy.

**General knowledge** not only makes you friends at the local pub quiz nights but allows you to exploit a wide range of information in new and arresting ways when trying to tackle a well-worn topic from a different angle. It could be that a manufacturer is trying to launch a product with an improved speed, strength, or weight. It could be that a company is trying to aim an old product at a new target audience. In both cases, replaying the same old advertisements won't cut it. The copywriter who can call on knowledge resources over and above the norm is immediately an asset when it comes to devising copy that chimes with the market.

Many 'creative' writers sneer at commercial writing. Hard to believe, I know, but I think there is a sense that commercial writing is somehow a refuge for the less talented writer. Whatever the rights and wrongs of that particular prejudice, - and there are certainly more wrongs than rights there - I am of no doubt that the copywriter who lacks a free-ranging imagination is as doomed to failure as the novelist who cannot get beyond the first chapter. **Imagination** is what allows the writer to see connections that are not immediately obvious when facts and policies are first discussed. Imagination is what lets the writer choose a particular word or phrase that conveys more than words identical in meaning would convey. Above all, imagination is what lets the professional commercial writer enter into the task at hand fully and with complete interest.



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That last point brings me to the attribute that, perhaps more than any other, determines the ultimate success of the professional copywriter: **attitude**. Other attributes can be sharpened through experience. A writer who starts with a poor attitude will never get the opportunity. What, then, marks the attitude of the professional? It comes down to two things, I think: courtesy and integrity. By courtesy I mean treating clients with respect at all times. When a client has behaved shabbily, remain courteous until paid and then simply refuse – politely – to work with them again. Integrity is what earns you the respect of your clients and lets you sleep soundly at night. In the end, it probably increases your bank balance, too. Do what you say you'll do and when you said you would do it. Ask a fair price for your work and let your client know when you expect to be paid. If you make a mistake, admit it and correct it. Do the work you have committed to do yourself and don't subcontract it out: that way lies quality control madness. Above all, remember that you are in business and your client is in business and the success of your work can impact the livelihood of others. Dramatic, eh? Perhaps, but sometimes it is easy to forget that a small company's marketing budget may take a year or so to regenerate if a campaign flops.

A copywriter's job is more complex than perhaps you imagined. On the plus side, that means it is inherently interesting and, the better you can apply the skills outlined above, the more interesting the job becomes and the more rewarding it can be – for you and your clients.

Thanks for taking the time to download and read this article. I hope you've found it useful. If you have any comments or questions about the article feel free to email me at the address below.

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