

Mark Shaw

Copywriting

*Successful writing
for design, advertising
and marketing*

Second Edition

For Leilah, Sam and Fin

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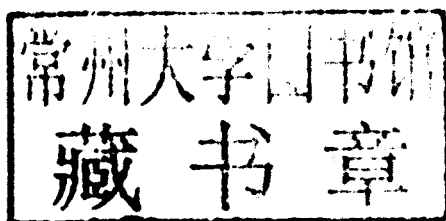
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Preface

What's the big deal about copywriting? There's so much writing out there in every shape and form on every topic and field, and everyone is writing and publishing copy all the time these days. Why don't we just let people get on with it? Well, the enormous volume of self-published, un-edited writing is the very reason why the skills and techniques of copywriting are more essential than ever before. A friend of mine recently described the situation as "we've all got Maths GCSE but we wouldn't do the company accounts, so just because we've got English GCSE why do we think we can write great copy?"

Since publishing the first edition of this textbook I have spent a few years presenting the key points, lecturing to students and running seminars for businesses. I've had feedback from around the world, and this is typical of the fantastically random feedback I receive:

A few weeks ago I found Your book "Copywriting. Successful writing for design, advertising and marketing" in Lithuanian book store. I think it's very interesting and really practical to use in different cases. Would like to thank You for this treasure and ensure it will accompany me in the way I am struggling with the words.

I am a student of Vilnius University, Kaunas Faculty of Humanities, Lithuania. Studying marketing and commerce management for master degree. Your book is a good guide for preparing various tasks and helpful source of original ideas. I believe it would be a perfect tool for students of design, advertising, marketing, public relations and even philology. In my opinion it would be worth to translate it to my native language and let Lithuanians improve their skills in writing, editing, and creating presentations. (sic)

We've not translated into Lithuanian just yet, but we launched the Chinese edition earlier this year, and it's very exciting to feel that the skills and techniques I've developed over the course of my career are valued internationally. This is not because of vanity but because the world of branding and messaging is becoming unified, and is increasingly seen as a mature and essential element in normal business practice.

I run a brand and design agency called Liquid Agency Europe and we spend most of our time responding to challenges related to brand management and messaging. Graphic design will always be at the core of branding, but it is increasingly about staying within the brand guidelines. Where in the recent past impact and differentiation could be achieved through pure design thinking, these days it is the way an organization creates and manages its content that is the real unique proposition in the marketplace.

At the heart of everything in this book, and also in the way Liquid Agency practises brand management for global clients, are the values that are behind the brand. A brand is described in various ways as "anyone's experience of you", "someone's gut instinct about your organization" or "what people say about you when you leave the room". One thing is for sure, your brand is not simply your logo. Your brand is the promise that your business makes to its target audiences, and that promise has to be delivered accurately if you are to build long-term relationships with your customers, suppliers and employees. Increasingly, businesses are being designed from the point of view of the customer experience, with every point of contact being shaped to suit their requirements.

Understanding your own brand takes a bit of thought, and as a copywriter you will do well to follow these processes to identify the qualities within your business that make you who you are, and which you will be promising to your audiences. These qualities are formed from the values within the business.

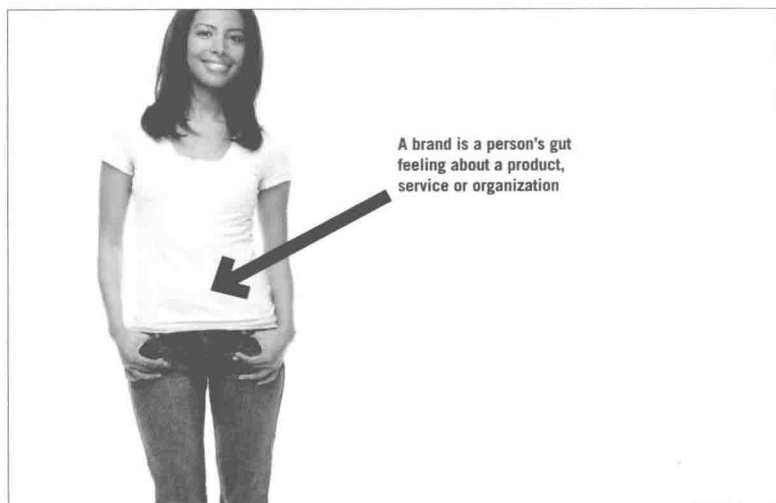
Values are the bedrock of any organization, and are made up of attitudes and beliefs. When you take a copy brief, you will be picking up all sorts of insights into the attitudes and beliefs within an organization. Keep a clear note of these, and build a picture of the values that you are drawing out. Present these back to your client to double-check them, as these will form the foundation of your messaging.

Messaging is the phrase that is being used increasingly to describe the way a business writes. The tools within messaging are typically a strapline or tagline, a word bank of commonly used phrases, a list of core messages that you wish to reinforce consistently and a tone-of-voice guide, which gives examples of the style of writing that reflects the values in the organization. If you're writing for business, you should start to familiarize yourself with these tools, as they are where the future of branding lies.

Branding is part of every business, no matter how big or how small, and you can play a crucial role in the success of an enterprise by helping it to use effective communication to build bridges and develop profitable relationships with its audiences. Digital messaging is all about creating bite-sized pieces of information that engage and direct the reader. Formats are increasingly diverse, with many new digital channels now in the mix. Customers pick up marketing messages on TV, in the press and from billboards as much as they ever did, and these are supplemented by websites, social media sites, Twitter accounts, mobile phone messaging, media screens in public places and just about every place we go. These messages need to be managed well to ensure that the same benefits and calls to action are communicated clearly and consistently throughout all of these touchpoints.

We need copywriters to do the best job of this communication. Too often these projects are left to managers who may know the product inside out but rarely know how to prioritize a message, shape it for a target audience and instil the values of the organization into the text. Copywriting is content design, and requires all of the design thinking that goes into any other creative aspect of a business. I am hoping that readers of this new edition will feed back their thoughts and experiences to me, and that we can build a network of new writers who can take on this challenge and show the world that great writing is the route to great business!

Mark Shaw
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A brand is a person's gut
feeling about a product,
service or organization

Introduction

Copywriters learning from bakers and swimmers

There was a baker in my village, and he had a Gold Medal Bakery that ranked with the best in the UK. His bread was truly something else. After I'd left home I always used to take one of his loaves with me, and when each one ran out I could never find any as good, anywhere.

He protected his recipe fiercely, and refused to tell anyone its secrets – not even his sons who worked in the business, not until he was ready. But then, unexpectedly, he fell off his perch. And with him went his recipe, forever.

The Gold Medal Bakery is now a memory, as are the loaves that we all loved, and the moral of this tale is that knowledge, no matter how precious, needs to be shared. If it isn't, it dies. If it is, it will live, and evolve.

One of the most common ways that knowledge can be passed on is in the form of a carefully prepared textbook. Theoretically, it should be possible for a complete non-swimmer to study an authoritative textbook on swimming, which explains and demonstrates all of the disciplines and approaches, then jump in the deep end and swim with style and grace.

How difficult can it be? He can see how easily swimmers cut through the water, and he can read and absorb all of the relevant principles and techniques. If he breathes, moves and applies himself properly it should be simple.

Except we know that this won't work. In reality, we learn to swim gradually, adapting to the watery environment and building our confidence over time, through trial and error.

So what about creative business writing? Can a well-prepared textbook teach you to be an accomplished copywriter, even if you've never written copy before?

Not if you've never written a word in your life before, but luckily for you, you're not a complete novice. You have been writing since you were a child, and you are already fully immersed in the world of words.

This textbook shares the knowledge about creative writing so that it can live and evolve, but it is not a guide to sales and marketing, and it is not a manual on grammar and punctuation. It aims to explain the processes that you can follow when writing copy, and reveal the secrets about how the best copywriters do it.

Writing copy is not as hard as it looks. It's the creative thinking that goes on behind the writing that is the challenge, and the focus of this textbook is firmly on these fascinating aspects of the rewarding field of copywriting.

You can dip in and out, or read it cover to cover and complete the exercises; either way I hope you will gain some valuable insights. The bottom line is that if you can understand who you're writing for, what you are really saying to them, what it takes to make this interesting and how to shape your messages to suit their preferences, you will be writing professional copy.

You know you can already swim, and now you have every opportunity to take on the best of them.

Getting to grips with copywriting

Fresh and original writing oils the wheels of every aspect of commercial activity, and language is a key element of many forms of modern design. Copywriting is not about copying – it's about communicating in an original way. You can put a sentence together, and your imagination is alive and well, so you have everything it takes to be a creative writer. All you need are some guidelines to help you figure out when your writing is good, and a little inspiration from some practitioners in the field.

Why do I need to know about copy?

Creative writing for business is challenging and rewarding in equal measure, and when it all comes together with great design to create innovative communications it can feel like the best job in the world. Copywriting is an essential part of the design communications mix, and those of us who do it for a living will tell you that crafting messages and telling stories is a rewarding mental process, even in the business context. You'll find that being able to generate a response from your audience is a valuable and highly sought-after skill.

Copy (or text, or words) used in design is a very particular type of creative writing that requires the inspiration of an artist and the control of a craftsman or craftswoman. In comparison to the rails on which the copywriter runs, the novelist or poet has no limitations. Poetry and storytelling are flights of the imagination, with no client or news editor to bear in mind. Whether the personality of the writer shines through directly or indirectly, this is the purest creative writing – it can take off in any direction, be as fictional as it wants to be and go wherever it pleases. Writing copy, however, is all about sticking to a brief, while paying homage to the creativity and style of the poet and storyteller.

Journalists and copywriters are commercial writers, but the essence of their roles is completely different. In most cases journalists have to create the story from scratch, usually by following leads. They will have to research the facts to get to the heart of the matter, discover the different viewpoints and opinions and bring this material together accurately and coherently. Articles are often written to a tightly defined structure, while features can allow more room for individual expression and the interweaving of the writer's viewpoint. The message has to be factually correct, balanced and fair, but the writer is allowed to take a stance, which could reflect that of the newspaper or, in the case of a regular column, the writer's own opinion.

Copywriting borrows from all other fields of writing in its quest for creative expression, but there is no room for your personality in the copy that you write; you are simply a scribe, a hired mouthpiece for your client, and it is the **brand's** voice that must come through, loudly and clearly. The starting point, whether you're working on a one-off project or are writing copy every day, is to set aside your ego, forget all ideas about expressing your own thoughts and put on the company overalls. You'll be surprised how well they fit and how good you look in them.

"If you are a writer of novels, or plays, or poetry, you can write and take your own time, generally speaking. But in advertising, you've got deadlines, you've got to have the idea, and it's got to be a great one, and you've got to have it Tuesday morning."

David Ogilvy

Good writing makes things happen

In Mesopotamia, the earliest cuneiform writing was developed to record ownership of animals and goods. Writing was at the heart of trading, and its invention was the catalyst for the dawning of modern civilization. It is now one of our greatest forms of expression, and, whatever the brief, is a powerful tool for all types of business. The techniques of creative copywriting are really about finding the most natural way to communicate well with others.

Business has one aim: to deliver a profit. Everyone in every sort of commercial enterprise is trying to sell a product or service for more than it costs them to produce it, and make an honest profit to live off. Selling – which is what you're doing when you're writing copy – used to be a case of steering customer demand by pointing people in the direction of the leading brands.

Before the competitive nature of the global marketplace really hotbed up, all you needed to do to have a viable business was to identify and satisfy a customer need. Our abundant times have created a huge amount of choice, and with choice comes competition: it is no longer enough to hold up your hand and tell your customers where you are; you now have to tell them why you are

better, why they should bother to knock on your door and why they should keep coming back to you.

There has been an enormous increase in the different media that can be used to reach customers, from blogs and microsites to talking retail displays and email campaigns. Customers now have even greater control over which of these messages they will give the time of day to, which means the results we can achieve through traditional advertising and marketing are increasingly less predictable. The reality is that we as customers consciously select and deselect the promotional and advertising messages that we wish to listen to.

Innovative graphic design is a powerful way to catch and hold the attention, but we're becoming a bit blasé about stunning visuals, amazing concepts and slick photography, and they no longer have the power to make us sit up and think as they used to. The messages they carry and the way those messages are expressed are the essence of effective communication.

It is not enough to splash out on expensive media campaigns and expect high-profile visibility alone to deliver results. If the customer isn't watching, or doesn't like the message, you won't attract a response. The starting point has to be to select the best way to reach people, whether this means sticking posters at the top of ski-lifts or sending specific text messages to shoppers as they pass your store. Then you must make sure the overall message you're communicating is targeted, relevant and inspiring. For this you need great copy.

The attitudes and principles that apply to copywriting for external customers apply equally to any written or verbal communication. The clearer and more accurate your communication, the more successful you will be.

"I'm sure that everything a man does is grist for his copy mill. I'm sure of that – what you've done and what you've experienced – if you can put more thinking and more interesting things into your copy, you're that much more provocative."

Bill Bernbach

What's stopping you writing great copy?

Your essential objective as a copywriter is to create clear, easily understood messages that target a defined audience and encourage them to do something for your client. If you get to know the basic processes and avoid the common pitfalls, you'll find that this is not as difficult to achieve as you might think.

Being a natural creative writer will give you a head start, but it is not enough in itself, and you do not need to be a natural writer to be a good copywriter. Some agency writers have got by on their natural talent for decades, and actually have little idea about process or technique.

One of the latest executions from a long-running and consistently award-winning campaign, this uses a few simple words to speak volumes to an intelligent target audience.

Great minds like a think.

“A writer should be joyous, an optimist ... Anything that implies rejection of life is wrong for a writer, and cynicism is rejection of life. I would say participate, participate, participate.”

George Gribbin

The best way to write copy is to focus completely on the true nature of the target audience so that your messages are crafted with them in mind. This will produce compelling copy and your reader will feel at home with your writing. Using a clever play on words, a pun or a quick witticism is becoming less important than being able to craft a well-constructed, stimulating message.

Understand the heart beating at the core of your message, consider the make-up of your quirky audience and their particular habits, such as their buying patterns, and make sure your copy plays to these at all times. Most of the copy that you will be working with will require clear, uncomplicated writing about what you are selling that clearly presents the benefits, not just the features. A creative or conceptual idea should always underpin your approach – you can establish this by giving careful consideration to your overriding message or **call to action** and explaining how the audience can respond.

Too much analysis can hamper creativity. There's no right or wrong way to go about writing copy, yet there are several patterns that you can follow. Every writer will do this slightly differently – you should find the best way of developing your own unique approach that blends proven techniques with your own preferred way of tackling a brief.

Take aim, you're targeting your audience

Whatever the brief, you will have a message to communicate to a specific audience. Build up a profile of this audience, develop an understanding of what they're like and what their situation is, and decide on a style of language that they will relate to. A good word for this process is **profiling**, and anyone can do it.

The most comprehensive briefs can give you an in-depth picture of your audience based on economic profile, geographical location and even the type of street they live on, the papers they read and cars they drive. If you haven't been given this sort of information, you can compile it yourself without having to leave your desk or search Google, simply by using your common sense and experience to determine the characteristics of the people in your audience.

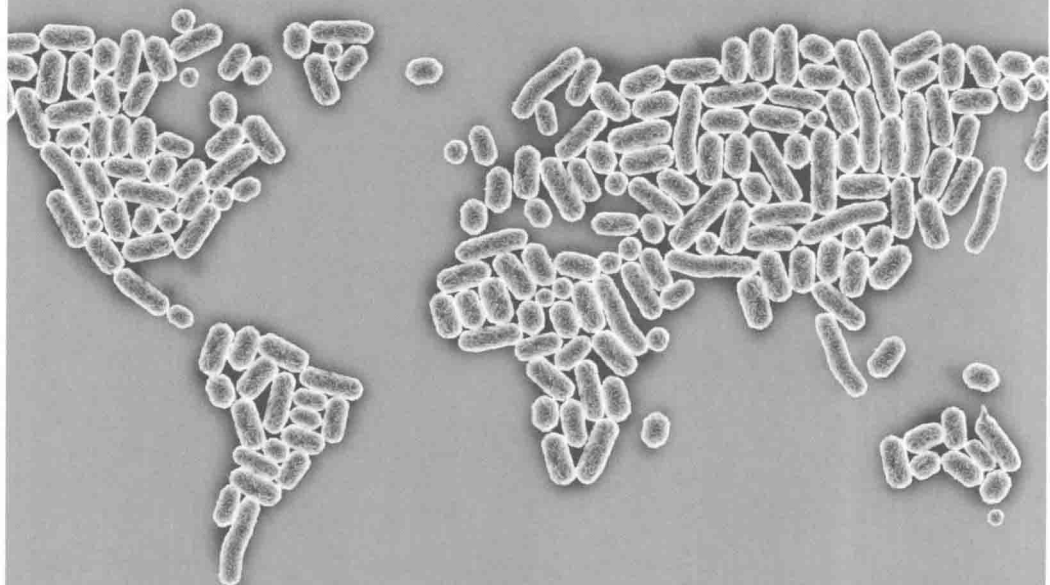
You'll be surprised how much you already know about your profiled audience. For example, if you're writing toiletries product copy for women aged between 25 and 40 you may be given the insight that they're professionals, with a reasonable disposable income, and are regular shoppers with the client. An image – a stereotype – will come to mind immediately.

What can your profiling add to this? Well, think it through. It's likely that our 25- to 40-year-old women are busy looking after a family, or juggling home responsibilities with work, or pursuing a career that takes up all of their time. Being this busy will mean that they are living with stress. At the point when they read your copy they are likely to be tired and not have much time. When they stand in the store with your product in their hand, they have their kids with them, or have sore feet, or are being jostled by other customers. How do you cut through all of this?

Now you're building up a picture of a real human being and are writing for someone who is bright, and enjoying life, but who's being distracted and has a lot on her mind. You need to make sure that your messages focus on helping to reduce her stress (and don't expect her to study the text for very long). You need to catch her eye with a strong product name and description, the **tone of voice** you use should be friendly and on her level, and you'd better have something good to say – a clear benefit or an inspiring proposition – otherwise you're wasting her time.

By contrast, if you're writing advertising for the business customers of a computer supplier your profiling will again tell you how to develop this tone of

NHS
National Patient Safety Agency



a whole world in your hands

Germs cover territory fast. There could be up to 4.6 million
of the little blighters colonising your hands right now.

Wipe them out.
Clean your hands.



Taking an ugly subject and turning
it into an imaginative concept,
this poster works very hard by
keeping the message short, sweet
and benefit-led.

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