

How much of copywriting is writing?

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15 Mar 2017

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Picture: Supplied

Contrary to what you might believe, not even half of the copywriting job is the actual writing. If I were forced to apply a ratio, I'd say only 40% of creating copy is actually putting words onto a page. The magic bullet that differentiates the successful copywriters from the less successful ones is the other 60%.

So if you've ever interviewed a copywriter, employed a copywriter, worked alongside a copywriter, or wanted to be a copywriter, you should know that:

1. Copywriting is problem solving

Long before the words start flowing, the copywriter is thinking about, and trying to solve, a business problem – in words. To illustrate what this looks like in practice, here are five of the problems I've helped clients to solve in the last seven days:

1. A new veggie juicing company wants to create brand awareness, achieve differentiation and share information via a short-term radio campaign.
2. A large listed holding company needs its umbrella brand to stand out from its better-known subsidiaries in the media and the marketplace.
3. A pharmaceutical association wants to position itself and its core message more centrally in the mind of the consumer, via digital and print media.
4. Complaints handlers at a nationwide call centre need writing training to help them handle irate or disappointed customers with tact and diplomacy.
5. A wellness company requires a concise brochure that compels prospective clients to request deal-closing presentations from them.

2. Copywriting is listening

Most professional copywriters will tell you that most clients give terrible briefs, if they give briefs at all. A good writer must be able to take a good brief, whether or not the client knows how to give one, by getting the client to talk.

This is why such a big part of copywriting is listening – and then translating the client's distinct pieces of input into usable nuggets of insight and value.

So the copywriter's job is to ask and understand, among other things:

1. What's the objective?
2. Who are we trying to reach?
3. What will resonate with this audience?
4. What's the reader's problem?
5. What's the proposed medium?
6. What's relevant and what's not?
7. What do they already know?
8. Are there any must-not-mentions?
9. Are there any style preferences?
10. What's the ultimate call to action?

3. Copywriting is learning

Over the years I've written about machines that manufacture bricks, ethnic hair products, a silicon toilet trainer for toddlers, wind farms, a company that creates corporate puppets, a dust mite spray, big trucks that shred confidential papers, close protection security services, a diarrhea product, and magicians.

Along the way I've had to learn about those sectors, industries, services, products and niches – in sufficient detail to write convincingly about them. A big part of copywriting is being able to get to grips, quickly, with the critical facts of the client's offering, and being able to quickly take in a huge amount of info.

The reality is: this variety keeps me going. It's why I choose to do what I do.

4. Copywriting is pretending

If a copywriter can't put themselves in the shoes of the reader, they can't create a compelling link between the reader's

problem and the client's solution. They can't really know what's relevant and what will resonate, or what the reader might already know and what the copy might need to explain or unpack.

That's why it's the copywriter's job to ensure that the writing meets the needs of the reader and speaks to the reader's agenda (not the company's), while translating 'inside' info into layperson-friendly content. The copywriter acts for the reader – and must often educate his/her client about this advocacy-style role.

5. Copywriting is convincing

You can be the world's most talented poet, creative writer, producer of jaw-dropping concepts, and designer of epic scenes in your head. But if you can't also sell, you can't write copy. At least, not the sort of copy that gets results.

Let's not forget that the point of all this problem solving, listening, learning and pretending is getting the client's audience to think, feel or do. You might, for instance, need to persuade the reader to try something new, believe something different or feel driven to make a call, visit a website or accept a meeting request.

Every successful piece of copywriting needs a clear desired outcome, and every word, phrase and sentence needs to be targeted at that 'big ask' or final result.

6. Copywriting is designing

It took me a couple of years in this business to learn that copy doesn't just have to read beautifully and drive action, but it also has to look right on the page.

It has to exert a minimal brain burden on the reader, while leading them from one message to another. It has to extend, often, to headlines, subheads, teasers, pull-quotes, text boxes, meta-data, social media repurposing, and infographics.

For many copywriters, a big part of copy creation is copy design and formatting.

Now, a copywriter doesn't (usually) have to be able to wrangle complex design programmes, or lay out an actual brochure, but it helps a lot to be able to plot the visual unfolding of the text for optimal user experience and engagement.

7. Copywriting is cleaning

Agency copywriters might disagree with me on this one, but it's my article so I guess I can say whatever I like. Here goes: part of copywriting is cleaning up.

Yes, I mean proofreading and editing. I don't believe that the two jobs should be carried out by different people (barring the usual publication-specific subbing that may be needed for long-form copy appearing in print or online). My belief has always been that a copywriter who can't edit effectively is doing only half the job.

The bottom line?

There's a lot that goes into producing good copy, long before the magic words roll across the page. So in case you were wondering why copywriters charge what we charge, why it takes longer to create great work, or why we ask so many questions, my hope is that, now, you get it. It's because we're multi-talented ;)

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.

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