

Effective Copywriting

A large, stylized, blue letter 'C' is positioned in the bottom right corner of the page. The background features a network of white lines connecting circular nodes on a blue gradient, with several overlapping light blue circles.

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About This Book

Writing for the Web has many facets and uses. As one of the most sought-after and needed skills, it has often become an exercise of bringing together a brand with a voice. This eBook takes a look at many different aspects of copywriting in the online sector. From avoiding pitfalls to optimizing content and turning words into marketing tools, this book highlights the real-world experiences of Smashing's authors. Perfect for those looking to get into the world of content development for online platforms, this eBook expertly pinpoints the key things one must know before beginning a journey into copywriting.

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Quick Course On Effective Website Copywriting

BY PEEP LAJA 🍷

Many dismiss copywriting as something that ad agency people do. Truthfully, all of us need to pay close attention to copywriting if we want to achieve our business objectives.

The goal of a “regular” text is to inform or entertain. The goal of Web copy (and ideally your website in general) is to get people to do something – to sign up, make a purchase, or something similar. Hiring a professional copywriter can be very expensive, which is one of the reasons why this is a valuable skill to have yourself.

“I don’t need to learn copywriting, I write based on how it sounds to me.”

Think you don’t need to learn copywriting?

David Ogilvy, the father of modern advertising, addressed this in his book Ogilvy on Advertising¹. One of his copywriters told him that he had not read any books about advertising; he preferred to rely on his own intuition.

Ogilvy asked him: *“Suppose your gallbladder has to be removed this evening. Will you choose a surgeon who has read some books on anatomy and knows where the gallbladder, is or someone who relies on his own intuition?”*

What distinguishes top experts from mediocre players is that the best know more. You can write better copy if you know more about it.

The Process Of Writing Great Copy

Everything is easier with the right process. If your approach to copywriting is “I’ll just try to be convincing”, you’re setting yourself up for failure.

You don’t even need to be a “natural writer” to come up with excellent copy, you just need the right process and some key principles about writing copy that sells.

The best processes are simple, as those are the ones you actually use.

Here are the six steps of effective copywriting process:

1. <http://www.amazon.com/Ogilvy-Advertising-David/dp/039472903X>

1. Research: customer, product and competition.
2. Outline and guideposts.
3. Draft copy.
4. Conversion boost.
5. Revise, rearrange.
6. Test.

And now let's get to the details:

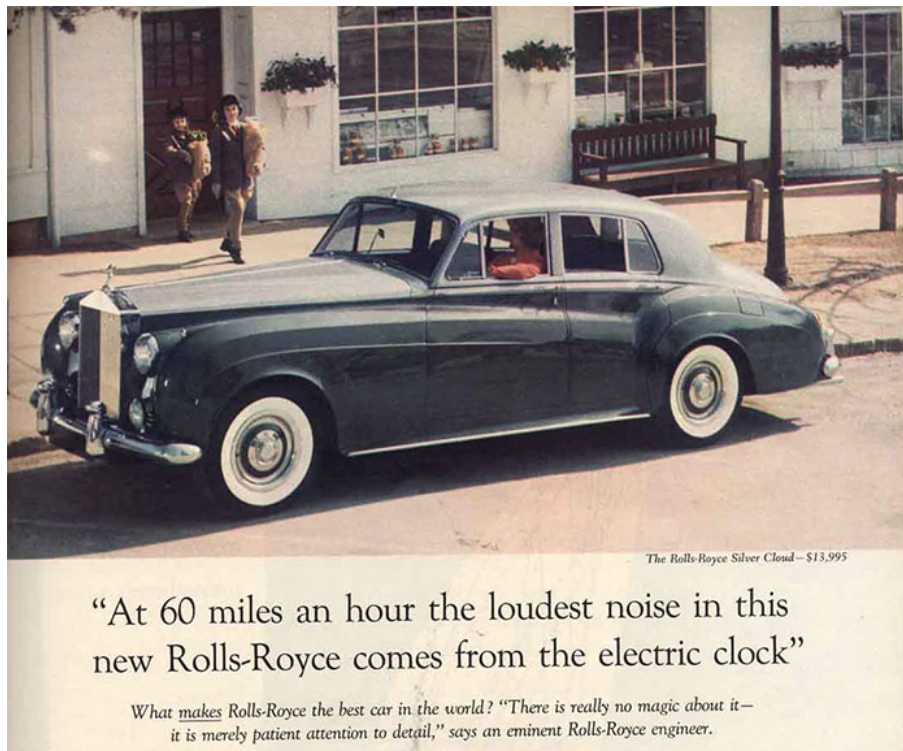
1. Research

This is often the most time-intensive part of your copywriting.

"You don't stand a tinker's chance of producing successful advertising unless you start doing your homework. I have always found this extremely tedious, but there is no way around it."

— David Ogilvy

David Ogilvy had the task to do copywriting for a Rolls Royce ad. He spent three weeks reading about it before he came up with the headline and the rest of the copy. While he was talking about advertising, it equally applies to your website copy — the goal is to get people to do something.



Ogilvy's famous Rolls Royce ad.

You need to figure out why people buy the product, how they buy it, what they use it for, and what really matters to them. If you don't have this figured out, you really cannot write a copy that works. When it's your own business that you're writing copy for, things go much faster, of course, as you know the product and the competition.

GAUGE THE COMPETITION

You need to be aware of your direct competition, how they present their product, and what claims they seem to be making. If you are not selling something unique, you are selling as much for your competition as you are selling for yourself. Being "like" others or choosing to be "one of the leading providers of" is a losing strategy.

Neuromarketing research² tells us that differentiating our claims is the key to talking to the old brain, the decision making part of our brain. Our whole business identity should be different from the competition, and the claims we're making about our product should stand out.

2. <http://www.amazon.com/Neuromarketing-Understanding-Buttons-Customers-Brain/dp/078522680X/>

GET OUT OF THE OFFICE

The answers are not in your office and you won't have eureka-moments at brainstorming meetings (working solo is far more effective³ anyway). You have to interview people. Don't waste time interviewing random people, you need to talk to your ideal customers and find out what's on their minds.

Find out what they think about your kind of product, what language they use when they talk about it, what attributes are important to them, and what promises would most likely convince them to buy it. Pick the last 10 to 20 customers (who still remember their purchasing experiences), and ask them these questions (recording the interviews is a good idea, but ask for permission):

- Who are you? What do you do? (customer profile)
- What does our product help you do? (helps you understand how they use it, tells you words they use to describe our product)
- Which parameters did you compare on different options? (which features matter)
- What were the most important ones? (key pains to solve)
- Which alternatives did you consider? (competitors we have to look at)
- What made you choose our product? (our key advantage)
- What were the biggest hesitations and doubts before the purchase? (things we have to address in the copy)
- Were there questions you needed answers to, but couldn't find any? (necessary information to provide)
- What information would have helped you make the decision faster? (same as above)
- In which words would you recommend it to somebody you know? (words they use to describe our product)

Take note of the exact wording they use. Your copy needs to match the conversation in your customer's mind. If you talk about "scribing devices" and he needs a pen, there's a mismatch.

My point is that when customers see the product described in words they have in their mind already, then you've got their attention.

³ http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/01/30/120130fa_fact_lehrer

2. Outline And Guideposts

Next step: write the outline. Guideposts are the markers that help you write the content.

Writing an outline usually only takes a few minutes and provides a road map for the rest of the project. It allows you to complete the work faster and ensures that you stick to the flow.

The outline structure will depend on the page you're writing the copy for. The main pages you need a well thought-out copy in place are your home page and product pages.

Here are outline templates I personally use, and you can copy them. I've tweaked and tested them over the years, and this model works the best for me.

HOME PAGE COPY

Your home page copy structure depends a lot on your business. A nail salon would have a different approach from an e-commerce store; a website selling mobile app design courses is different from a hosting company. Hence, it's basically impossible for me to give you an outline template for your home page.

What IS universal is the value proposition. Every home page needs one (unless you're a very well-known brand)

A value proposition is a promise of value to be delivered. It's the primary reason a prospect should buy from you. The value proposition is usually a block of text with a visual.

There is no one right way to go about it, but I suggest you start with the following formula:

- **Headline:**
What is the end-benefit you're offering, in one short sentence. Can mention the product and/or the customer. Attention grabber.
- **Sub-headline or a two-to-three sentence paragraph:**
A specific explanation of what you do/offer, for whom, and why is it useful.
- **Bullet points:**
List the key benefits or features.

Here's a list of useful value proposition examples⁴ you can check out.

4. <http://conversionxl.com/value-proposition-examples-how-to-create/>

PRODUCT PAGE COPY OUTLINE

Product page is where you sell the value of your product and where the user takes action (adds to cart, sign up, makes a purchase, etc.).

1. Name of the product.
2. Value proposition: what's the end-benefit of this product and who is it for?
3. Specific and clear overview of what the product does and why is that good (features and benefits).
4. What's the pain that it solves? Description of the problem.
5. List of everything in the product (e.g. curriculum of the course, list of every item in the package, etc.).
6. Technical information: parameters, what do you get and how does it work?
7. Objection handling. Make a list of all possible FUDs (fears, uncertainties, doubts) and address them.
8. Bonuses (what you get on top of the offer).
9. Money-back guarantee (+ return policy).
10. Price.
11. Call to action.
12. Expectation setting: what happens after you buy?

What you now have in place is like a skeleton. Next step would be to start writing the draft version of the copy by filling in the blanks.

3. Draft Copy

Start filling in the blanks in the template above, and keep these points in mind for the style of your writing.

AVOID JARGON AND BLANDVERTISING

The goal of the copy is to connect with the reader, and guide them towards an action.

“Human relationships are about communicating. Business jargon should be banished in favor of simple English. Simplicity is a sign of truth and a criterion of beauty. Complexity can be a way of hiding the

truth.”

— Helena Rubinstein

Using complicated, fancy words does not make you seem any smarter or your solution any better — it just turns everybody off. Who wants to read something that doesn’t feel like it’s written for them? Talk to people like a real human. If you wouldn’t use a phrase on your website in a conversation with a customer, then don’t use it.

In addition to fancy words, avoid meaningless phrases. What do “on-demand marketing software”, “integrated solutions” or “flexible platform” really mean anyway?

Or useless phrases like “changing the way X is done”, “paradigm shifting ...” or “exceeding customer expectations” — stop the nonsense. These bland phrases have long lost any meaning, and you will just waste precious attention time. You can see a list of the top 100 most overused buzzwords and marketing speak in press releases [here](#)⁵.

Another thing to avoid — superlatives and hype. Saying things like “the best”, “world leader”, “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” will just ruin your integrity. People don’t believe such claims anyway (even if they’re true).

What to do instead? Be specific.

BE SPECIFIC

Specificity converts.

“Clearer and more specific subject lines convert better.”

— [Bob Kemper](#)⁶, Senior Director of Sciences, MECLABS.

While in that specific quote Bob was focused on subject lines, this principle applies equally well to all copywriting. Specific is believable, specific is attractive, specific is convincing. Don’t be vague, be specific.

“We have the best coffee in the world” vs “Our estate earned the ‘world’s best coffee’ title at the Specialty Coffee Association of America’s Roasters Guild for the third year in a row.” Which claim is more believable?

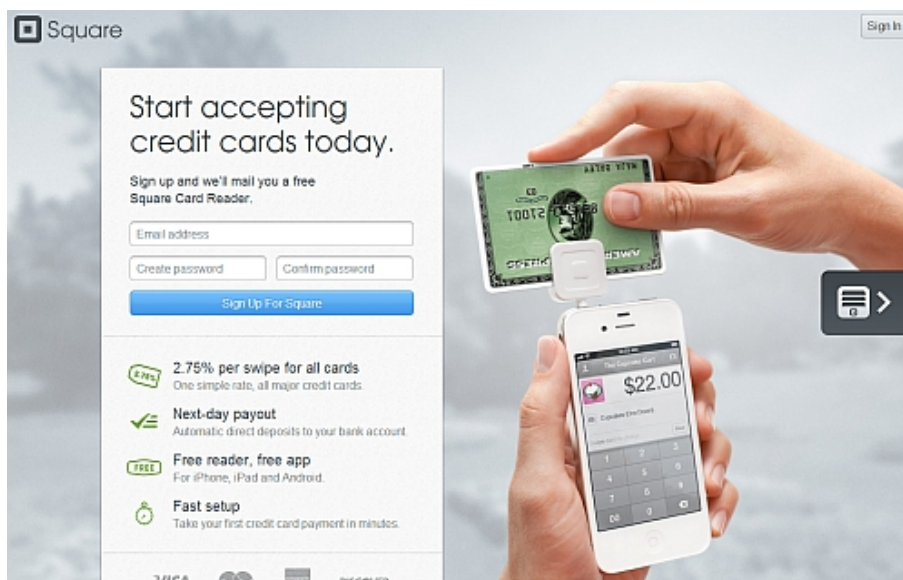
You can use a superlative if you back it up.

[Here’s an example](#)⁷. Can you understand what they offer?

⁵. <http://www.adamsherk.com/public-relations/most-overused-press-release-buzzwords/>

⁶. <http://www.marketingexperiments.com/blog/research-topics/copywriting-research-topics/writing-meaningful-copy.html>

⁷. <https://squareup.com/>



Specific headline. Specific call to action with a specific explanation of what they get when they sign up. Specific benefits listed. Specific image to show the product in action.

IT HAS TO BE ABOUT THEM

Remember the old brain I mentioned before?

Our brains have three layers, and the oldest part — the old brain — is the decision-making part.

The “Old Brain” is the part that humans and their predecessors have had the longest — like 450 million years or so. So the part of the brain that controls decisions is fairly primitive and mostly concerned with survival.

If your copy is about you (your product, your company) and not the prospect (his problems, his life), you will fail. Make it about them. Too many companies start by stating “our company was founded...”, “we offer ...” or something especially useless like “welcome to your website”.

Instead of saying “we specialize in dog training”, say “train your dog in two weeks” — move the focus from you to the benefit they will receive. People care about themselves — not you — and whether your website can be helpful in some way.

HOW MUCH INFORMATION SHOULD I PROVIDE?

Tests have shown that 79% of people don't read⁸, they just skim. However, 16% read everything.

Those 16% are your main target group, the most interested people. If people are not interested in what you are selling, it doesn't matter how

⁸. <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html>

long or short your sales copy is. If they are interested, you should give them as much information as possible.

Complete information is the best sales copy. A study by IDC⁹ showed that 50% of the uncompleted purchases were due to lack of information. They can always skip parts and click the “buy” button once they have the information they need. But if they read through the whole thing and they’re still not convinced, then you have a problem.

This is why you should always strive to say everything that can possibly be said about your product. You cannot be there in person to explain and answer the questions, so your copy needs to do it for you.

ALL AT ONCE OR MAKE THEM CLICK?

Long form copy¹⁰ works just great, but it’s not necessary to provide all the information on a single page. It’s okay to move supplemental information onto a different page (layer, popup, etc.) and just link to it.

For instance, Amazon often hides full technical information of products behind a link — since it’s only interesting to the hardcore tech savvy customers (and most customers are not).

Technical Details

- 1.6 GHz Intel Core i5 dual-core processor
 - 2 GB DDR3 SDRAM
 - 64GB Flash Storage
 - 11.6-inch LED-backlit glossy widescreen display Intel HD Graphics 3000 processor
 - Ships in Certified Frustration-Free Packaging
- > [See more technical details](#)

Product Details

Item Weight: 2.4 pounds

Shipping Weight: 5.5 pounds ([View shipping rates and policies](#))

Shipping: Currently, item can be shipped only within the U.S.

Full technical details available after clicking a link.

The important thing is that all the information needed to make the decision is on a single page. Don’t make people ~~work~~ click to read stuff that you want them to read anyway (like features, benefits, testimonials, pricing, etc.).

9. <http://www.idc.com/>

10. <http://econsultancy.com/us/blog/7909-short-vs-long-form-hitting-the-target-with-landing-page-depth-2>

WHEN, WHERE AND IF AT ALL SHOULD I SHOW THE PRICE?

Some people think that the price drives readers away, and they should hide it somehow – or make it hard to get to. While there is truth in that sometimes, it's mostly false.

Consider this:

1. People always want to know how much things cost.
2. If you don't publish the price, have a "get a quote" form instead. But if your competition does, they may get the client.

You should always make the price easy to find, but for more complex / expensive products *communicate the value before the price*.

Let's say you're selling a copper vase. Price: \$990.

Seems expensive. But what if you knew that it was designed by Andy Warhol and previously used by Kurt Cobain? If you know who these people are and respect them, this changes everything, and it might seem like a steal instead.

So communicate value before price.

If your price is cheap, you want people to know it. If it's expensive, the price qualifies the right people who are convinced to buy your copy. Giving price details also convinces your reader of the image and brand value of your product.

4. Conversion Boost

Once you have the content in place, it's time to give it a conversion boost. The goal of the website copy is to convert the reader into a buyer (or subscriber, lead, etc.). There are certain things we can do to improve the conversion rate (the percentage of readers that take action) of the copy.

We'll use three guides here to make the copy sell better:

- Conversion frameworks.
- Science of persuasion.
- Neuromarketing research.



Conversion boost. Image credit [APM Alex¹¹](#).

CONVERSION FRAMEWORKS AND WHY THEY MATTER

Conversion frameworks are a structured approach for increasing website conversion rates. The most prominent ones have been fine-tuned over the years and have been proven to boost sales.

While the conversion frameworks apply to a website as a whole, they can also be used as frameworks to improve sales copy.

There are [many¹²](#) [conversion¹³](#) [frameworks¹⁴](#) around, let's use one of them as an example:

$$C = 4m + 3v + 2(i-f) - 2a$$

This is not a lesson in physics, but a conversion formula developed by [Marketing Experiments¹⁵](#). Translation:

C = Probability of conversion

m = Motivation of user (when)

v = Clarity of the value proposition (why)

i = Incentive to take action

¹¹. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/28misguidedsouls/5522310921/sizes/m/in/photostream/>

¹². <http://www.invesp.com/conversion-framework.html>

¹³. <http://www.widerfunnel.com/conversion-rate-optimization/the-six-landing-page-conversion-rate-factors>

¹⁴. <http://www.marketingexperiments.com/methodology-marketingexperiments.html>

¹⁵. <http://www.marketingexperiments.com/>

f = Friction elements of process

a = Anxiety about entering information

Summary: The probability of conversion depends on the match between the offer and visitor motivation + the clarity of the value proposition + (incentives to take action now – friction) – anxiety. The numbers next to each character signify the importance of them.

How to apply this to your copy:

- Is your value proposition easy to understand and perfectly clear? Would everyone understand what you offer and how it's beneficial to them?
- Go through your copy and see if there's any way to make your statements clearer.
- Communicate value: don't just list features, turn them into benefits.
- Make a list of all possible questions, doubts and objections that prospects might have in the buying process. Address them.
- Make the buying or signup process as easy as possible, remove everything that is not absolutely necessary.
- Add microcopy¹⁶: explain why you need certain data and what happens after they give it to you.
- Provide full information: what happens after they buy, what can they expect, when is the product shipped, what's the delivery time.
- Add risk reversal: what kind of guarantees are in place? What happens if they don't like it, or it's not what they thought, etc?

THE SCIENCE OF PERSUASION

Persuasion has been researched thoroughly. Mr. Cialdini¹⁷ is undoubtedly the biggest authority on the field. His books¹⁸ are bestsellers and have been on the “must-read” list for marketers and copywriters for years.

In his research, Cialdini came up with six scientific principles of persuasion that will help guide you to become more effective at getting people to do what you want. In case you're not familiar with those principles, then here's the summary:

¹⁶. <http://bokardo.com/archives/writing-microcopy/>

¹⁷. [http://influenceatwork.com/Book-Dr--Cialdini/Robert-Cialdini,-Ph-D-\(1\).aspx](http://influenceatwork.com/Book-Dr--Cialdini/Robert-Cialdini,-Ph-D-(1).aspx)

¹⁸. http://www.amazon.com/Robert-B.-Cialdini/e/B000AP9KKG/ref=ntt_athr_dp_pel_1

Principle 1: Reciprocity

People feel obligated to give back to others who have given to them.

How to use it: teach your prospect something useful in your copy, give away free stuff, and better yet — add value to your prospects long before you even start to sell them something.

Principle 2: Liking

We prefer to say “yes” to those we know and like.

How to use it: talk/write like a human, connect with the reader, share details about yourself. Blog. Be friendly and cool (like Richard Branson, Oprah, Gary V).

Principle 3: Social Proof

People decide what’s appropriate for them to do in a situation by examining and following what others are doing.

How to use it: show how many others are already using your product. Show off your numbers. Use testimonials. Link to 3rd-party articles.

Principle 4: Authority

People rely on those with superior knowledge or perspective for guidance on how to respond AND what decisions to make.

How to use it: Demonstrate your expertise. Show off your resume and results. Get celebrity (in your niche) endorsements.

Principle 5: Consistency

Once we make a choice/take a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressure to behave consistently with that commitment.

How to use it: Start small and move up from there. Sell something small at first (a no-brainer deal), even if you make no money on it. They now see themselves as your customer, and will most likely return to make a larger purchase.

Principle 6: Scarcity

Opportunities appear more valuable when they are less available.

How to use it: Use time or quantity limited bonuses. Limit access to your product. Promote exclusivity.

WHAT NEUROMARKETING TEACHES US

Research in neuromarketing (put together in this book¹⁹) reveals interesting things about our brains.

¹⁹. <http://www.amazon.com/Neuromarketing-Understanding-Buttons-Customers-Brain/dp/078522680X>



Neuromarketing study in action. Image credit: [SMI Eye Tracking](#)²⁰.

We're usually trying to talk to the "new brain" – the sophisticated one – but it's the brute "old brain" that makes all the decisions, so we need to dumb it down. Here's the formula for talking to the old brain:

Selling probability = Pain × Claim × Gain × (Old Brain)

1. First you need to identify the prospect's pain and make sure they acknowledge the pain before you start to sell them anything. Then, you've got to differentiate your claims from your competitors. The strongest claim is the one that eliminates the strongest pain.
2. Next, you have to show convincing proof to back the claims up. The "Old Brain" is resistant to new ideas and concepts, so your proof must be very convincing. Show tangible evidence, data, before & after comparisons, testimonials, and case studies.
3. In order to reach the old brain, you need to start with a "grabber" – something that really gets the attention²¹ ("if you're selling fire extinguishers, start with fire", like Ogilvy said). Second – the "Old brain" is visual, so use a big picture to illustrate and reinforce your message. Visuals get to the brain much faster than words. Best visuals show contrast – before/after, beginning/end, then/now.

²⁰. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/smieyetracking/5546677366/sizes/m/in/photostream/>

²¹. <http://conversionxl.com/how-to-grab-and-hold-attention/>

How to apply it to your copy:

- Start with a grabber – something that evokes emotion.
- Address the pain from the get-go.
- Use a big picture next to your value proposition, one that the prospect can identify with.
- Are your claims different from the competition?
- Add proof to your claims in all possible formats.

5. *Revise And Rearrange*

Done with conversion boosting? Now enjoy a full night of sleep and come back to the copy in the morning.

A fresh look a day later will help you spot inconsistencies, missing information, and flaws in the general flow of the copy. Use this time to add more information, rearrange the order of different blocks and fix the typos (spelling mistakes can cost you customers²²).

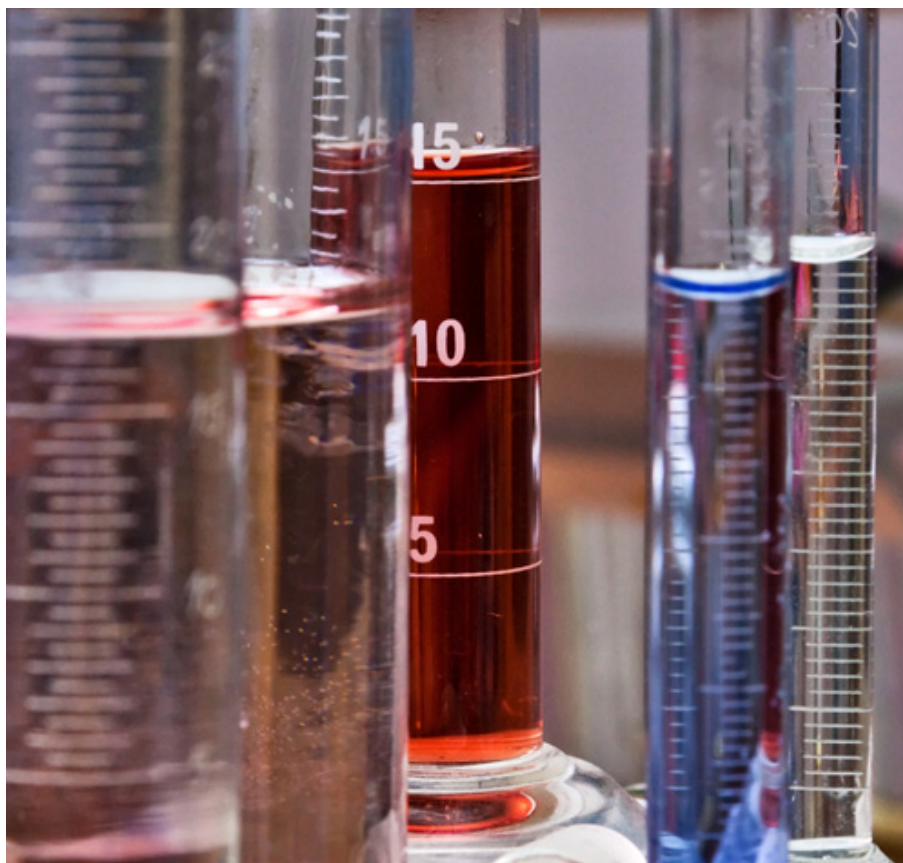
Before you publish the sales copy, it always pays to get two or three other people to read it and give you feedback. You want feedback from your ideal customers – do they get any questions that were left unanswered? Is there any part that needs to be made clearer? And peers – other marketers or entrepreneurs. What could make the offer better and more credible?

Once the editing is complete, you can make it live on your website. Don't guess whether the headline or value propositions are as good as they can be, immediately launch two versions of the copy and test them.

6. *Test*

There is no good way to predict how well the copy will do. Sometimes the conversion rates can skyrocket overnight. Sometimes the new copy turns out to be a downright dud.

²². <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-14130854>



You need to test your copy. Image credit [Horia Varlan](#)²³.

Maybe it's because the offer is weak. Perhaps the headline is the bottleneck. It's impossible to put the finger on the problem as all you have are hypothesis. The only way to know is to test.

Don't trust a copywriter who says he always writes killer copy on his first try. Nobody does.

Most common problems:

- Your value proposition is poor.
- The offer doesn't match the audience's needs.
- The headline is weak.
- It's not clear how the visitor benefits from this.

Start with [A/B testing](#)²⁴ value propositions, and go from there.

²³. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/horiavarlan/4273968004/sizes/l/in/photostream/>

²⁴. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/06/24/the-ultimate-guide-to-a-b-testing/>

Conclusion

Writing great copy is a skill you have to learn just like anything else. Use the outline and the tips to get started on the right track. Stephen King, the famous writer, said that if you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. I believe the same goes for writing great copy.

The best Web copy is not the one that uses sophisticated persuasion and mind manipulation techniques. The best copy provides full information about the product, its benefits, and makes it clear whether it's the right one for the user. 🍷

Five Copywriting Errors That Can Ruin A Company's Website

BY BRAD SHORR 🍷

No matter how brilliant a website's design, no matter how elegant its navigation, sooner or later visitors will decide whether to take action because of something they *read*. In the end, the effectiveness with which a website converts visitors hinges on words. If a new website is going to hit all the right notes, its content must be just as well crafted as its design and programming. However, as you might imagine, there are many ways to go wrong with content in a Web development project.



*Image Credit*²⁵

The errors discussed in this chapter have the potential to undo a website and are issues that I run up against time and time again in my nearly 12 years of producing Web content. Half the battle in avoiding these traps is simply recognizing them: all too often, content is handled as an afterthought, hurriedly completed to meet a project's deadline. I

²⁵. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rvoegtli/4921147774/>

hope these content tips will help you stay ahead of the game and build a better website in your next project.

Error #1: Writing Inwardly

Having worked in-house for many years, I've felt victim to the inward-focus syndrome on many occasions. It's easy to do. You spend all day dealing with the intricacies of your products and services. You've made a huge intellectual and emotional investment in every product innovation and point of differentiation. You love thinking about your products, you love improving them, and you love talking about them. It's only natural that you want to shout from the rooftops and tell the world your product's story in all its splendor.

Problem is, the rest of the world isn't interested in your story. Customers don't have time to admire your greatness. They're too busy searching for ways to make life better for themselves. A high-level Web page answers one question of the reader above all: What's in it for me? To illustrate, we'll stick with products, although this applies to other types of pages as well.



It's not about you.

A well-written category-level product page talks a bit about features, a little more about benefits and a great deal more about the *experience*. This last element is especially important and exactly where most pages come up woefully short. Let's use a mundane example of this principle in action by considering a hypothetical Web page for a packaging machine:

Feature: *Up to 100 cycles per minute.*

Benefit: *Faster production.*

Experience: *Getting more product out the door per shift means*

you'll blow away your productivity goals and be a hero. You might even get a promotion.

A typical Web page written about this machine would be 80% features and 20% benefits. However, if I were writing it, I'd budget 50 words on the features, 100 words on the benefits and 150 words on the experience.

Please note:

1. Setting a "word budget" forces discipline. Not only that, it relieves the anxiety over having to determine how to approach each individual product page, thus eliminating one of the biggest causes of delay in Web development projects.
2. Focusing on the experience forces you to >think about the target audience of the page in question. The experience I described speaks to an operations person. If my audience is made up of C-level executives or purchasing agents, then I would need to describe a completely different experience. If I'm writing for all three audiences, I may have to rethink my word budget. In any event, having an audience in mind prevents a Web page from devolving into that cursed, watered-down, "everything for everyone" messaging that says absolutely nothing.
3. The purpose of a high-level page is to get people interested in the product. Once they're interested, they may crave more information about features and benefits. Perfect. Tell the long version of your story on a detail-heavy product sub-page. Companies need not neglect features and benefits; they just need to suppress the urge to hit visitors over the head with them the minute they walk through the door.

To see how this plays out in real life, consider this [conversion optimization case study](http://www.abtests.com/test/212001/homepage-for-httpwww-designcourse-com)²⁶, documented on ABtests.com. A firm achieved a 200% increase in conversions by replacing [feature-oriented copy](http://www.abtests.com/screenshot/4c63ef76894923ec3cce7a5ca46644d2/a.png)²⁷ with [benefit-oriented copy](http://www.abtests.com/screenshot/4c63ef76894923ec3cce7a5ca46644d2/b.png)²⁸. The high-converting page focuses on what the applicant wants, rather than what the service (DesignCourse.com) offers:

- "Become an amazing designer."
- "Start earning real money."

²⁶. <http://www.abtests.com/test/212001/homepage-for-httpwww-designcourse-com>

²⁷. <http://www.abtests.com/screenshot/4c63ef76894923ec3cce7a5ca46644d2/a.png>

²⁸. <http://www.abtests.com/screenshot/4c63ef76894923ec3cce7a5ca46644d2/b.png>

- “It’s fun and exciting.”
- “No tests, no hassles.”

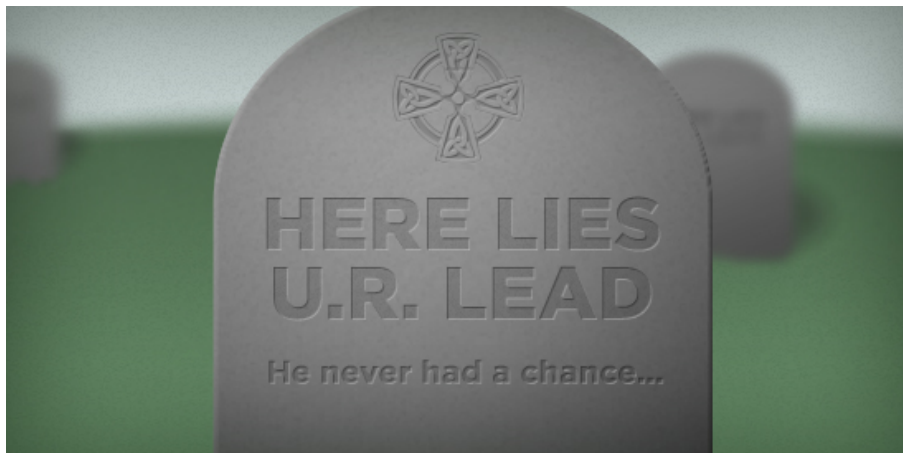
If you’re still not convinced, listen to legendary copywriter John Caples, who is quoted in *Made to Stick* (page 179) by Chip Heath and Dan Heath:

“Caples says companies often emphasize features when they should be emphasizing benefits. ‘The most frequent reason for unsuccessful advertising is advertisers who are so full of their own accomplishments (the world’s best seed!) that they forget to tell us why we should buy (the world’s best lawn!).’ An old advertising maxim says you’ve got to spell out the benefit of the benefit. In other words, people don’t buy quarter-inch drill bits. They buy quarter-inch holes so they can hang their children’s pictures.”

QUICK TIPS FOR WRITING OUTWARDLY

- Before you start writing, collect feedback from customers and prospects. Ask them why they buy from you, why they don’t, and how doing business with you has affected them.
- Start with an outline. Associate every feature with a benefit and every benefit with an experience.
- Have a customer read a draft and then explain to you why they would want to buy the product. If the customer “gets it,” you’re a star.
- Do the same thing with a person who knows nothing about your product and industry. If that person gets it, you’re a rock star.

Error #2: Burying The Lead



If they can't figure it out, you're dead.

Websites are a poor medium for subtlety. Visitors decide whether to stay on your website within a few seconds. If you can't communicate why a page is important to them immediately, your conversion opportunities will vanish. Look at the two paragraphs below. Which conveys your most important message more quickly?

"Your most important message is here., sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum."

Or:

"Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate your most important message is here. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum."

Online marketers like to sneer at newspapers, but we can learn a lot from print journalists. For instance, they don't bury the lead. To illustrate, here are a few leads I recently pulled from the Wall Street Journal:

- “Companies cranked up hiring in April to the fastest pace in five years...”
- “European markets snapped a three-session losing streak as gains in the banking sector and better-than-expected US jobs data for April sparked a rally.”
- “Women may have fared better than men during the recession, but they are not making up lost ground as fast as men in the recovery.”

Now look at your Web pages. How do your leads stack up? Are you leading with the main point? Are you giving visitors a reason to read further? If an in-house writer is not familiar with Web writing techniques, they may approach the project as if they were writing a novel, assuming that visitors will read their new website from start to finish.

This assumption is disastrous. People skim and scan Web pages, their eyes bouncing around like pinballs. For any given Web page, visitors are likely to read the headline and the first few lines of text; beyond that, any body content they read is gravy. Expecting someone to read an entire page of content sequentially from beginning to end is wishful thinking, period. The most important words on the page must be the easiest to find, read and comprehend.

QUICK TIPS FOR UNBURYING THE LEAD

- Before writing, ask, What is the key takeaway I want visitors to have after they visit this page? That’s your lead.
- Highlight your lead idea in a bold font. This is especially helpful when you can’t work it into the first sentence.
- Use plain language.
- Keep your most important points above the fold, as sub-headings, as the first sentence of a paragraph and as bullet points.

Error #3: Mediocre Meta Material



Meta titles appear in browser tabs.

Some of the most important text in a Web document isn't the on-page content at all. Certain meta elements have an enormous impact on the user experience, brand awareness and conversion. Meta elements are bits of HTML code that are read mainly by search engine robots. However, two meta tags in particular speak to humans as well, and mastering them is critically important for copywriters.

- **Meta Title**

The meta title describes the subject matter of the page and is ideally 65 characters or fewer. Visitors see the meta title in their browser tab and in search engine results; it is the most important piece of information that Google and other engines read on a given page.

- **Meta description**

The meta description, ideally 155 characters or fewer, is a snippet of text that is displayed under a link on a search engine results page (SERP). The meta description has little if any SEO value but is important for conversions.

META TITLES

Because Google values meta titles so highly, including primary keyword phrases in them is imperative, preferably towards the beginning of the title. For human readers, a title tag should clearly and straightforwardly describe the nature of the page. In addition, the tag can also carry a branding message.

Here is an example of a strong meta tag, taken from the services page of a client of mine:

Enterprise-Level Credit Card Processing, Merchant Accounts | BluePay²⁹

At 68 characters, we've gone slightly over our recommended maximum. But having branding keywords (i.e. BluePay) at the end is OK: Google may truncate the last few characters, but visitors will see the branding message in their browser tab, especially if they bookmark the page. The title tag will further extend brand awareness if the visitor tweets the page³⁰ or likes it on Facebook:



Title tags appear in Facebook link posts.

META DESCRIPTIONS

Bauman Rare Books

Books and autographs from the 15th to the 20th century, specializing in **rare books** and first editions.

www.baumanrarebooks.com/ - Similar

BookFinder.com: Search for New & Used Books, Textbooks, Out-of-...

Search engine that finds the best buys from among 150 million new, used, **rare**, and out-of-print **books** for sale. Includes **textbooks** and international titles.

www.bookfinder.com/ - Cached - Similar

Amazon.com: Rare & Collectible Books

Find, shop for and buy **Rare & Collectible Books** at Amazon.com.

www.amazon.com/b?ie=UTF8&node=2056775011 - Cached - Similar

Meta descriptions appear in search engine results under the page's title.

A meta description can set your page apart from others on a SERP. Here are seven tips for crafting a good one.

1. Don't overuse keywords. This will make your description look spammy. For example, "We have promotional coffee mugs, custom mugs, custom coffee mugs, and custom mugs for coffee."

²⁹. <http://www.bluepay.com/processing-services/merchant-types/enterprise>

³⁰. <http://twitter.com/#!/bradshorr/status/72754174365929472>

2. Don't use multiple exclamation points!!!! Excessive punctuation can be interpreted as aggression. It pushes people away.
3. Avoid extravagant claims. They undermine your credibility.
4. Include an incentive to click through to your page:
 - "Order one, get one free."
 - "10% off your first order."
 - "Learn how our service can reduce operating costs up to 15%."
5. Focus on the user benefits of your product or service.
 - Bad example: "High R-factor insulation."
 - Better example: "Insulation to keep your home warm and toasty."
6. Mention your location if you are a local business. This helps searchers instantly connect your business to their need.
7. Establish your credibility:
 - "In business since 1965."
 - "BBB accredited."
 - "Over 5000 satisfied customers."

(Whereas title tags are always displayed, description tags are not. To-day, Google doesn't always pull meta descriptions into its SERPs; instead, it might excerpt on-page content related to the user's search terms.)

QUICK TIPS FOR META MAGNIFICENCE

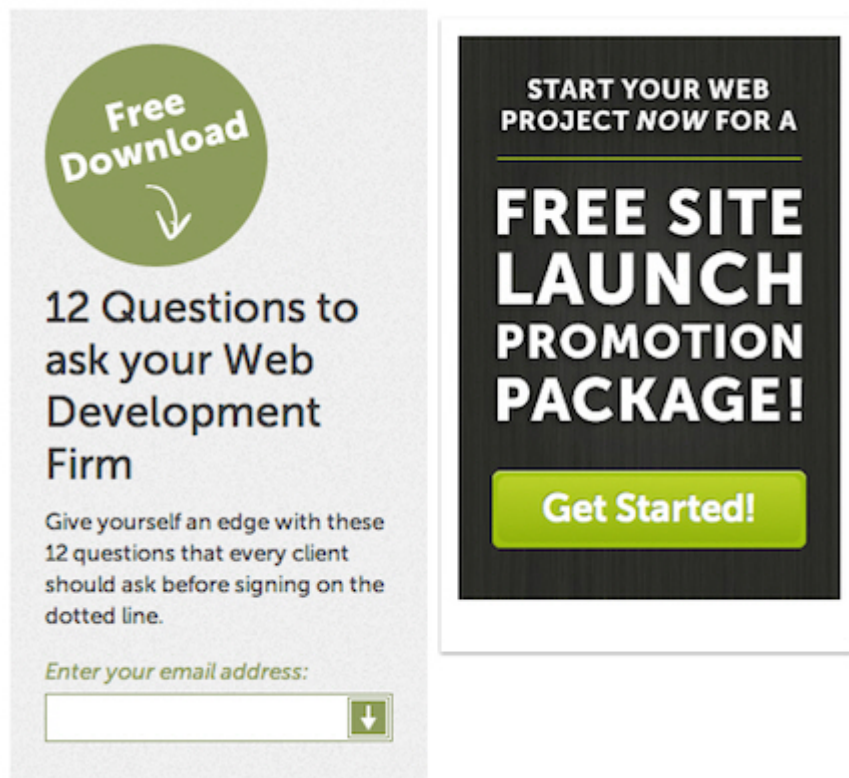
- If an SEO is working on your project, have them generate title tags based on their keyword research, and then tweak as needed.
- If you do not have an SEO, back up a step and reflect on why you are building the website. I believe that an unoptimized website is not worth building.
- Title tags should be consistent in style and form to enhance the user experience. Meta descriptions need not be consistent at all.
- Because of character limitations and the need for concision, writing these tags can be time-consuming. Remember, though: you don't have

to achieve perfection for launch. Tags can be changed at any time, and analytics experts often suggest that they should be.

Error #4: Saying Too Much

Brevity is the soul of conversion. Find out why.³¹

Error #5: Weak Or No Calls To Action



Strong calls to action from our company's website.

Assuming that you've written a brilliantly persuasive page, it's still next to worthless without a strong call to action (CTA). It's flat out wrong to assume that visitors will be so inspired by your brilliant copy that they will pick up the phone and call, or fill out an online form and beg you to contact them.

In the real world of Web marketing, visitors want to be led. If they have to stop and think about how to take the next step, you've already lost them.

³¹. <http://www.straightnorth.com/brevity-is-the-soul-of-conversion/>

CTAs generally fall into one of four types, listed here in descending order of commitment:

- Place an order;
- Enroll, subscribe, enter;
- Get a quote;
- Learn more.

Recognizing the need for a call to action on every page is step one. Matching the right CTA to the page is step two. High-level product category pages normally call for a “soft” CTA, such as “Request more information” or “Schedule a consultation.” In contrast, detailed product-level pages require a “hard” CTA, such as “Order now.”

A call to action must be clear and compelling:

- “Order now to save 15%,”
- “Get your artist’s rendering within 24 hours,”
- “Learn the 5 secrets to permanent weight loss.”

Calls to action are strengthened by:

- Testimonials: It’s worked;
- Credibility statements: It’s reliable;
- Warranty or guarantee: It’s risk-free;
- High value: It’s worth having;
- Urgency: It’s now or never.

Unfortunately, the calls to action on business websites often seem like afterthoughts: vague, lame and boring. Remember: customers want to be led. Effective leadership requires more than “Call for more information.”

One last vital point about CTAs: having a primary and secondary CTA on each page is often a good idea. A prospect may not be ready to order, but they may be willing to download a white paper that they would read and remember. Today’s white paper could be tomorrow’s conversion.

FIVE CASE STUDIES THAT ILLUSTRATE THE POWER OF STRONG CALLS TO ACTION

- [Hyundai](#)³² increased conversions by 62% by adding SEO text, bigger pictures... and a CTA.
- [RIPT Apparel](#)³³ added “Limited 24-hour availability” to its CTA and increased sales by 6.3%.
- [Notify](#)³⁴, by the Weather Channel, redesigned its landing page to focus on the CTA. Conversion rates increased by 225%.
- [Express Gold Cash](#)³⁵ changed its CTA from “Submit” to “Request a pack” and improved its conversion rate by 47.7%.
- [Natural Air](#)³⁶ increased conversions by 590.6%(!) by adding a CTA with pricing.

TWO TIPS FOR STRONG CALLS TO ACTION

- The main reason why firms don’t include strong CTAs on their website is that they don’t *have* them. Before getting too far into website development, conduct a brainstorming session to begin the process of identifying action steps that website visitors would be eager to take.
- For CTAs to be effective, design and content must be joined at the hip. The position of an arrow, the font and color of a button can make or break a call to action. Don’t segregate your writers and designers. We’ve found that a team approach to Web projects fosters continual interaction between all contributors and results in a far better product all around.

Keep Your Eye On The Conversion Ball

In case you haven’t noticed, or you skimmed to the end, as Web readers often do, the errors and fixes discussed above revolve around one thing: conversion. One of my favorite quotes comes from advertising icon David Ogilvy. He said, “If it doesn’t sell, it isn’t creative.” Ogilvy, arguably the greatest copywriter who ever lived, understood the primacy

³². <http://www.abtests.com/test/281001/sign-up-for-hyundai>

³³. <http://visualwebsiteoptimizer.com/split-testing-blog/how-ript-apparel-increased-their-sales-by-6-3-ab-testing-case-study/>

³⁴. <http://www.abtests.com/test/199001/landing-for-notify-by-the-weather-channel>

³⁵. <http://www.abtests.com/test/205001/other-for-express-gold-cash>

³⁶. <http://www.abtests.com/test/170001/landing-for-nature-air>

of persuasion. You may prefer a soft sell or a hard sell, but if your Web page isn't selling, why is it there? 🐼

RESOURCES AND TOOLS

- My favorite [character counter](#)³⁷, handy for composing title tags and meta descriptions.
- Test readability with [this awesome online testing tool](#)³⁸.
- Detailed information on [content-related SEO topics](#)³⁹.
- Twelve pithy [journalism-inspired writing tips](#)⁴⁰ for the Web.
- Modern words of wisdom: for spot-on copywriting technique, read *Don't Make Me Think*⁴¹ by Steve Krug.
- Classic words of wisdom: perhaps the greatest “how to” copywriting book of all time, *Tested Sentences That Sell*⁴² by Elmer Wheeler is available online.

³⁷. <http://www.lettercount.com/>

³⁸. http://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp

³⁹. <http://www.seomoz.org/learn-seo/on-site-topics>

⁴⁰. <http://www.cyberjournalist.net/news/000118.php>

⁴¹. http://www.amazon.com/Dont-Make-Me-Think-Usability/dp/0321344758/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1307384115&sr=8-1

⁴². <http://www.elmerwheelerbooks.com/Table-of-Contents.html>

Design With Dissonance

BY TAD FRY 🍷

You might consider yourself knowledgeable, but you’ve probably never heard of this powerful communication and design technique that I’m about to share. I’m sure you’ve seen it in practice but never knew it was working on you — that’s how good it is. I’m here to shed light on this technique so that you can use it as an approach to your design or writing.

See what I did there? I introduced you to dissonance by using the technique itself. If used correctly, it can enhance your approach to design and copywriting in certain projects. Welcome to designing with dissonance!

What Is Dissonance?

To understand dissonance, knowing first what consonance is would help. Consonance is when you feel comfortable with your beliefs; a certain harmony exists in how you’re feeling right now. You feel good. Dissonance occurs when something disrupts your consonance. It challenges your beliefs and makes you feel uncomfortable. You feel bad, or you think to yourself, “What the heck is going on?”

So, why should you know about dissonance and consonance? How are they relevant to design and writing? They are relevant because they are the key ingredients in cognitive dissonance⁴³, one of my favorite theories of Leon Festinger⁴⁴.

Festinger’s basic hypotheses for cognitive dissonance are as follows:

1. The presence of dissonance, of being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance.
2. In addition to trying to reduce dissonance when it is present, the person will actively avoid situations and information that would likely increase it.

⁴³. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance

⁴⁴. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Festinger

Why Should You Use Dissonance?

We are going to focus on the first hypothesis as a new way to design and write. Put simply, it stipulates that we always want to reach consonance when we experience dissonance. May the persuasive madness begin!

We often try to convince people to use our solutions through our writing and design. In your attempt to persuade them, design with dissonance as a way to challenge their beliefs, and then introduce your service as a way to help them achieve consonance.

Writing With Dissonance

My introduction to this chapter uses dissonance. I suggested you were knowledgeable but that you haven't heard of this technique. If you felt uncomfortable about not knowing this technique, then perhaps you chose to read on in order to learn it and feel comfortable again. And because I'm also a detective (well, not really) and possess mad deductive-reasoning skills, I can infer from the fact that you've read this far into my chapter that the dissonance may have worked on you! Aside from my attempt in the introduction, some amazing articles in our industry use dissonance beautifully.

AN ESSAY BY PAUL SCRIVENS

A good example is Paul Scrivens' essay, "You Are Not A Designer And I Am Not A Musician⁴⁵." I love this essay, and many designers have shared it with their peers. Here's an excerpt, in which he begins to use dissonance:

No, you are not a designer. You are someone that can piece together some stuff in Photoshop or add the right pieces of code in XHTML/CSS. You aren't the person that creates experiences. You aren't the translator of ideas that people never thought could be produced visually. You aren't the person that can toss their own style to the curb and come up with something even greater because of it...

We live in a world of hobbyists and the majority of our peers are hobbyists parading as professionals. They are not designers.

But you could be. Maybe. Just take the time to study like the greats before you. Push your limits. Test your boundaries. Designers like to work within their comfort zone because they know what they will like. Make something ugly to help you come up with some ideas on how to

⁴⁵. <http://journal.drawar.com/d/you-are-not-a-designer-and-i-am-not-a-musician>

make something beautiful. When you need inspiration create your own.

Scrivens has disrupted your consonance here, which created dissonance. He challenged your beliefs. He blatantly told you that you are not a designer. But in the midst of your dissonance, Scrivens offers solutions: he suggests that you study like the great designers before you, and he makes recommendations on how you can find your own inspiration to become a designer. These are solutions you could follow to bring you back to consonance. Cognitive dissonance at its finest. Yes, you could have simply dismissed Scrivens' attempt at dissonance, but then the theory would have worked even then; you wanted to maintain your beliefs and feel comfortable.

AN ARTICLE BY WHITNEY HESS

In her article “You’re Not a User Experience Designer If...”⁴⁶, Whitney Hess demonstrates wonderful writing with dissonance. She could have taken the easy way out and written it as the “Top 10 Ways to Be a Better User Experience Designer,” but I doubt it would have had the same impact as the real article had on that glorious day when user experience designers shared it with their peers to defend their work.

Dissonance was possibly created when designers read the title of the article. I’m sure many designers must have thought, “How dare she say what I am and am not. I must read on to refute this nonsense!” But as they read the article, they would have found Hess offering a list of things that do not make them user experience designers. The list might have made them psychologically uncomfortable (dissonant), but they may have decided to act on the list items to make themselves feel more comfortable and to bring back consonance. The article challenged beliefs and fostered great discussions.

A Project Built On Dissonance

You can base an entire project on dissonance. McKinney⁴⁷ made an amazing online game about surviving poverty and homelessness, called Spent⁴⁸. Visitors are challenged to live on \$1000 a month. Most people think that it’s easy to make a living and act like no one has an excuse. They accept the challenge because it seems easy enough. In the end,

⁴⁶. <http://whitneyhess.com/blog/2011/04/23/youre-not-a-user-experience-designer-if/>

⁴⁷. <http://mckinney.com>

⁴⁸. <http://playspent.org>

they walk in the shoes of someone less fortunate and begin to understand their hardships.

We see dissonance right away on the main page, “But you’d never need help, right?”

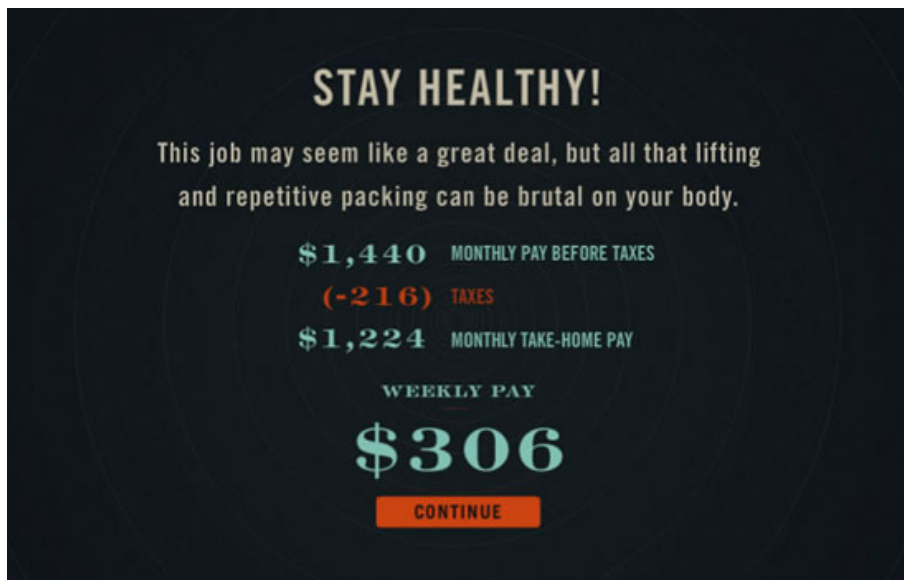


We feel psychologically uncomfortable and try to correct it by accepting the challenge. We are then presented with the following narrative:

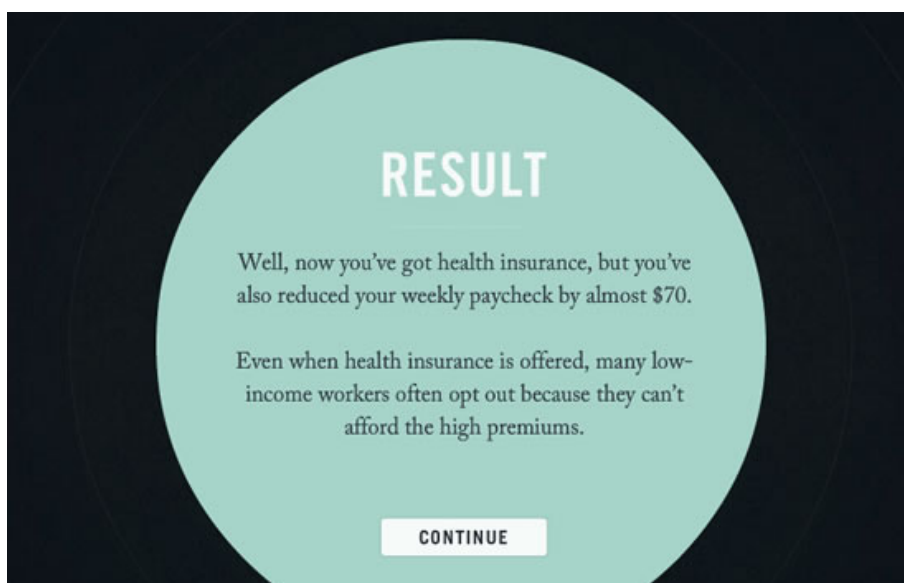
*Over 14 million Americans are unemployed.
Now imagine you're one of them.
Your savings are gone.
You've lost your house.
You're a single parent.
And you're down to your last \$1,000.*

Then we are asked whether we can make it through the next month or would like to “Find a job.” If we choose the latter, we are presented with current job openings: restaurant server, warehouse worker or temp.

When we make our choice (in this case, warehouse worker), a description of the job is shown and we continue:



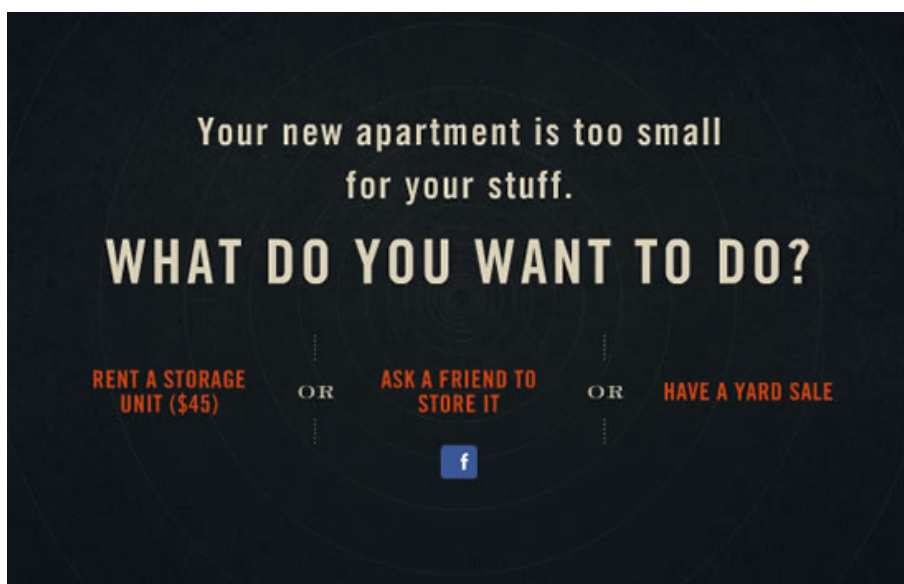
We continue to face more choices that make us uncomfortable, such as whether to opt in for health insurance. If we opt in, we see the impact on our finances, which helps us understand something meaningful about low-income workers.



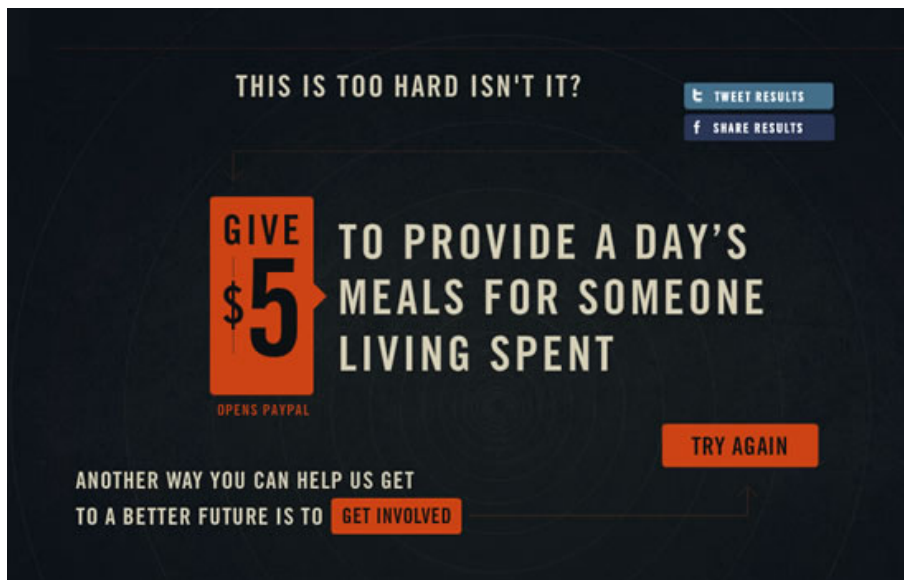
We then need to choose where to live relative to our place of work. Living closer means higher rent, while living further away means higher transportation costs. You are then asked to pay your rent and transportation costs.



And then we are presented with even more uncomfortable situations that create yet greater dissonance!



When we finally reach our tipping point and want to correct the dissonance, we can get out at any time. A small link in the corner reads, “I can’t do this.” And then we are asked to take action and help by getting involved:

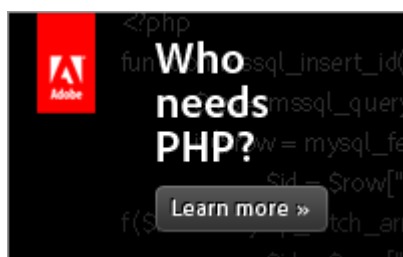


As you can see, the website creates an intense experience of dissonance. And it offers a way to help us reach consonance by donating, sharing and getting involved with Spent⁴⁹.

More Dissonance In The Wild

As mentioned, dissonance is already being used, and you might not have even noticed its power. Let's look at some attempts at cognitive dissonance, where businesses challenge our beliefs and then suggest their services as a solution.

ADOBE



If you're a PHP developer, Adobe will definitely disrupt your consonance by asking, "Who needs PHP?" The ad leads to Business Catalyst⁵⁰, where Adobe explains how you can build database-driven applications without writing code!

⁴⁹. <http://playspent.org/>

⁵⁰. <http://businesscatalyst.com/landing/webapps-snippets>

A BOOK APART



“The HTML5 spec is 900 pages and hard to read. HTML5 for Web Designers is 85 pages and fun to read. Easy choice.

HTML5 is the longest HTML specification ever written. It is also the most powerful, and in some ways, the most confusing. What do accessible, content-focused standards-based web designers and front-end developers need to know? And how can we harness the power of HTML5 in today’s browsers?

In this brilliant and entertaining user’s guide, Jeremy Keith cuts to the chase, with crisp, clear, practical examples, and his patented twinkle and charm.”

The introduction to *HTML5 for Web Designers*⁵¹ creates dissonance by suggesting that we don’t have the time or energy to get through the HTML5 spec. It recommends that we use this book to learn the important parts of the spec, which will bring us back to consonance.

37SIGNALS

Projects Manage Themselves with Basecamp.

Millions of people use Basecamp, the leading online project collaboration tool.

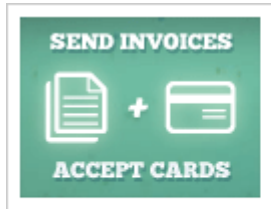
The subheading for 37signals’ Basecamp⁵² is powerful. Knowing that millions of people are using Basecamp to get stuff done and that you’re not one of them might challenge your thinking. Are you missing out?

⁵¹. <http://www.abookapart.com/products/html5-for-web-designers>

⁵². <http://basecamphq.com/>

Are those people more efficient than your team? You might consider using this product to gain efficiency.

BLINKSALE



Tired of PayPal? [Signup for Blinksale with Blinkpay.](#)
Just \$24/month for both.

For those of us who use PayPal, Blinksale attempts to create dissonance through its ad on [The Deck](#)⁵³ by asking whether we are tired of our current service. Some of us feel that PayPal is a good enough service, but Blinksale claims to be the easiest way to send invoices online. With our beliefs challenged this way, we might decide to look further into what Blinksale has to offer in order to resolve our dissonance.

Where To Start?

If you'd like to apply cognitive dissonance, I suggest starting simple so that you can A/B test and gather feedback more easily. Then, you could incorporate more of it as you become comfortable with applying the theory. For now, start by using dissonance in a few of the headlines on your website to convince people to do business with you. Take the boilerplate headline that we see on most freelancers' websites:

"Hello. My name is Tad Fry, a Web developer and designer who makes websites."

Apply some dissonance:

"Your competitor's website is better than yours. Let's work together to change that."

This might be blunt, but we want to challenge beliefs. If someone feels that their website is better than their competitors' but then is challenged by your headline, they might be inclined to call you to resolve

⁵³. <http://decknetwork.net/>

their dissonance. If you want to appear less provocative, you could phrase it as a question.

“Is your competitor’s website better than yours? Let’s work together to change that.”

Even though we are phrasing it as a question and the potential customer might agree (consonance), we are still creating dissonance because they might not have even considered that their competitor’s website might be better. We’ve now made it less direct and perhaps less insulting. Getting the right balance between dissonance and a respectful tone is sometimes difficult, but as with most of our work, gathering feedback and making changes based on it is important. This brings up another part of the theory.

In his book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (see pages 3 to 18), Leon Festinger writes (18):

“The strength of the pressures to reduce the dissonance is a function of the magnitude of the dissonance.”

We might prefer to be more direct, because that will create greater dissonance, which would put more pressure on the audience to reduce it. Again, it comes down to how much dissonance you want to create without insulting the visitor or completely missing the target. After all, the visitor could achieve consonance simply by choosing not to listen to you at all – which is why testing your work is so important.

Now Go Forth And Challenge Beliefs!

Hopefully I’ve whetted your appetite for this approach. I encourage you to look more into the theory, which is more involved than this introduction. And that’s the beauty of it. The various degrees of dissonance offer new approaches to your next design. Try adding dissonance to just a headline or page element at first. Be careful not to insult; you simply want to challenge beliefs and offer your product as a solution. 🐼

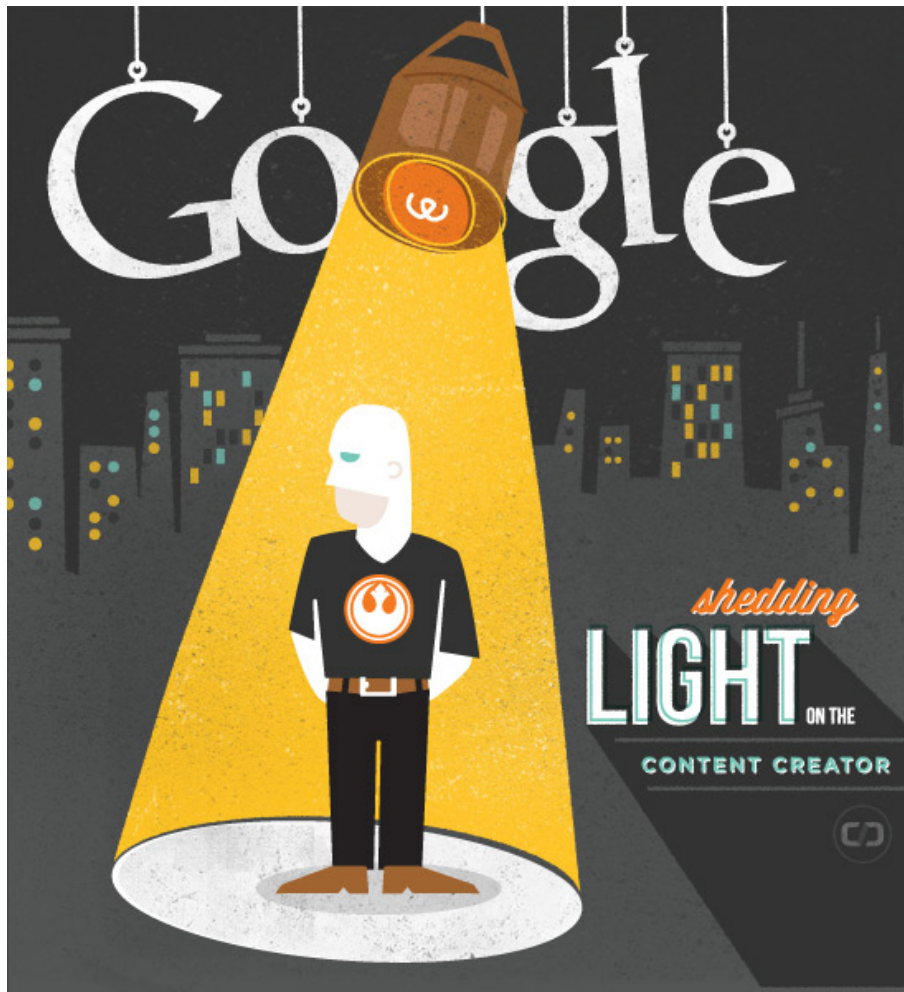
How Content Creators Benefit From The New SEO

BY BRAD SHORR 🍷

Due to big changes in the SEO landscape, designers, photographers, videographers and writers have new opportunities to build their reputation, expand brand awareness and generate more leads. This chapter describes five important developments that content creators should be aware of, and then we'll outline several ways to capitalize on them.

Five SEO Developments That Favor Content Producers

Thanks to self-publishing and social networks, the world is drowning in content. Google's response: make it easy for searchers to drill down to exactly what they are looking for. Today, we can perform a search and look at the results all together in one big chunk, or we can carve off just a piece. We can look at search results from complete strangers, from people we know or from both.



In the past, search results simply connected keywords to websites. Today, in pursuit of an easier way to drill down, Google also connects keywords to social networks, user behavior and authors. Here are five ways this is playing out, and why it's all great news for content creators.

1. PERSONALIZED SEARCH

While search engine users are accustomed to getting objective results on search engine results pages (SERPs), Google now serves up “subjective” results as well. When logged into Google and with personalized search turned on, you will see SERPs that include results based on your Web browsing history, as well as content authored or endorsed by your social connections.

Personalization can radically change what you see in regular searches and image searches. Here is a Google image search that demonstrates the difference. My search for “how to use twitter” with personalization turned *off* yields the following:



Image search without personalization.

With personalization turned on, the results look like this:

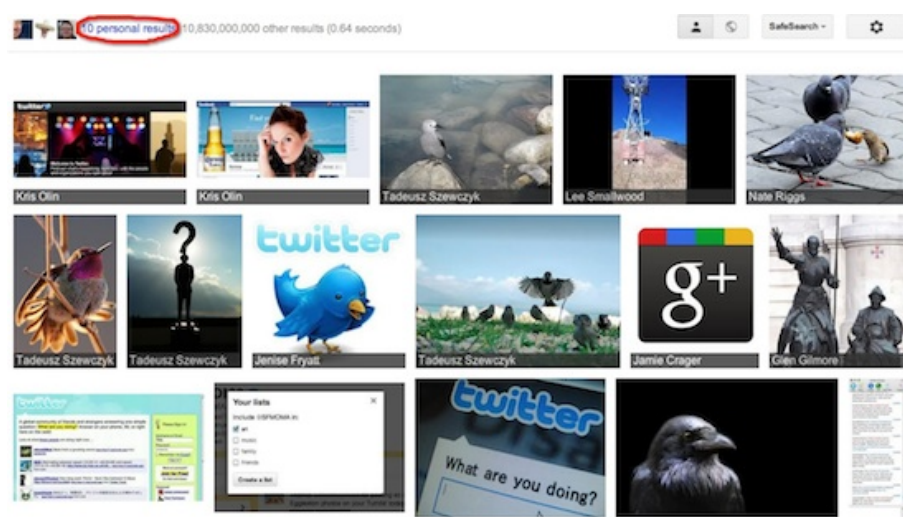


Image search with personalization.

Notice that the first two rows of images are completely different. At the top of my personalized search, I see 10 images associated with my Google+ connections. With personalized search turned on, I also have the option to view *only* my personal results.

This is intriguing. Google is doing everything it can to encourage personalized search. It has a selfish interest in doing so: it wants as many people as possible to be logged into Google for as long as possible, using Google products, providing Google with data and being exposed to personalized Google ads. As personalized search gains traction with users, content creators will be able to gain a lot of search visibility in three ways:

1. **Creators become visible to their direct connections.**

Content associated with a particular creator will get top position in personalized searches conducted by people who have circled them. Imagine what would happen if a creator tripled the number of circles they were in, or if Google began to incorporate Twitter and Pinterest follows into its personalized search results.

2. **Creators become visible to their indirect connections.**

If a creator's content is endorsed by someone in the Google+ network, the content could appear in the personalized results of searches conducted by that person's connections. The ripple effect can extend a considerable distance.

3. **Creators become visible to people who visit their website.**

If someone frequents a creator's website, Google will serve that creator's content in their personalized searches.

The trend: As time goes on, expect Google to get **smarter** about how it ranks personalized content, and for Google to **cast a wider net** across social networks to retrieve it.

Quick tip for creatives: Strengthen and broaden your social connections to give your work more exposure on search engines. Keep looking for better ways to bring new visitors to your website, and to keep them coming back.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SHARES

One factor that Google considers in evaluating a page of content is its social shares. Google sees likes, +1s, tweets and other types of shares as indicators of content quality and trustworthiness. This is reasonable enough: a blog post with 1500 retweets has more clearly established value than a comparable post with five.



Social sharing is more important than ever.

At the moment, how much value Google accords to social shares is still unclear, which is fair enough because many questions remain unanswered. Is a tweet more or less valuable than a like? How do you evaluate the authority of the person doing the sharing? How are people gaming the system to inflate the number of shares?

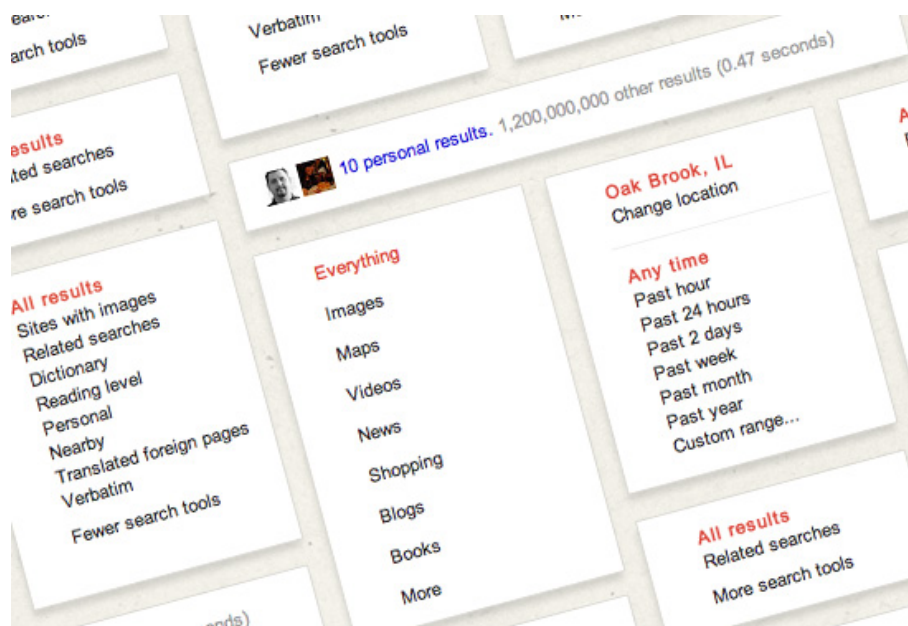
Nevertheless, we should expect social sharing to grow in importance for SEO. First, there is demand: people would love to consider social endorsements for certain types of searches, provided they have confidence in the data. Secondly, there is self-interest: Google is committed to its social network, Google+, and isn't about to ignore it on its own search engine.

The trend: Social sharing now has its biggest impact on standard search results. Expect Google to ratchet up the presence of share-influenced links in personalized results as well. For instance, we could start to see a variety of segmented search options that display content shared by a defined subset of your connections.

Quick tip for creatives: Make social-sharing buttons prominent to make it easy for people to share content on your website; actively engage in social media; and publish your content on websites where content is widely shared.

3. THE RISE OF SEARCH SEGMENTATION

In the old days, there weren't too many ways to slice and dice search results. Today, there are scores. Tomorrow, there will be hundreds.



Multiple search options create opportunities.

More segmentation means more opportunity for freelance authors to improve their search visibility based on the nature of their content. When results are lumped together in one big mass, it's challenging for a small enterprise to stand out. However, if creatives focus their content efforts on, for example, standing out in a particular segment, then they could capture a larger share of segmented searches. (An example of how to go about this appears in the "Reading Level" segment in the next section.)

Note, too, that segmented search offers a "personalized" option, where, again, users can zero in on content based on their browsing history and social connections.

The trend: Google will continue to categorize content to help users drill down to search results that are precisely relevant to their intent, rather than broadly relevant to their keywords. In particular, segmented search options for images and video will become much more sophisticated, in response to our insatiable appetite for visual content.

Quick tip for creatives: Stay current on how Google segments content, and shape yours to stand out in segments that are natural homes for your work.

4. MORE EMPHASIS ON QUALITY AND MORE TRANSPARENCY

For years, creatives have complained that "black hat" SEO tactics pollute rankings, pushing high-quality content down the page. However, as Google's algorithm grows more sophisticated, it gets better at combating black-hat practices — more great news for content producers.



Google is sending clearer SEO signals.

Google fights content spam by emphasizing quality in its algorithm and by being transparent in how quality is calculated. Quality has always been a focus; the current level of transparency is something new.

Google's Panda update⁵⁴, released in 2011, was a declaration of war against content manipulators. A primary goal of this algorithm change – and of many that followed – was to decisively penalize worthless content and to reward highly relevant, meaningful and trustworthy content.

In addition to the algorithmic measures, Google is taking the smoke and mirrors out of search by more openly communicating algorithm changes⁵⁵ to SEOs and the general public.

Why? In some cases, black-hat tactics were inadvertent, caused by website administrators using outdated techniques or misinterpreting Google's algorithmic intent. Furthermore, a good deal of high-quality content gets lost in the search shuffle because creators simply ignore SEO. More than ever, Google wants every website to be optimized and optimized properly. The more high-caliber content Google can serve up to users in SERPs, the more business it will do.

The trend: Google will push hard in this direction, devising more accurate methods of evaluating the relevance, substance and trustworthiness of content. It will get better at interpreting both the inherent quality of the work itself and the social-sharing data associated with it.

⁵⁴. <http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2011/05/more-guidance-on-building-high-quality.html>

⁵⁵. <http://insidesearch.blogspot.com/2012/02/search-quality-highlights-40-changes.html>

Quick tip for creatives: Stay up to date on how to communicate the quality of your text, images and video to Google. (Links to step-by-step tutorials on how to do this are provided at the end of this chapter.)

5. GOOGLE+ AND THE REL=AUTHOR LINK

Google enthusiasts see the Google+ social network as the greatest thing since sliced bread. Most everybody else thinks Google+ is less useful for marketing than sliced bread. But whether or not you like Google+, the network cannot be ignored for SEO. Content creators ought to take note of two particular aspects of the network.



*The **rel=author** link builds a creator's brand and search visibility.*

First, Google+ content gets indexed and ranked. In fact, when you publish original content on Google+, not only is it indexed and ranked, but it is given prime positioning in personalized SERPs. Images and video that are stored on Google or associated with personal pages on Google+ also receive greater exposure in search, as demonstrated earlier in the screen captures for image search.

Secondly, the **rel=author** link⁵⁶ associates a page of Web content with its author's personal Google+ profile. This is a technical mouthful, but it's a big deal for creatives. Google has begun to link content to its creators as well as its publishers. "Authorship markup⁵⁷," or "author rank," is being developed at a furious rate because people sometimes want the option of searching for content by a particular creator or want results ranked according to the authority or expertise of the creators.

⁵⁶. <http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=1408986>

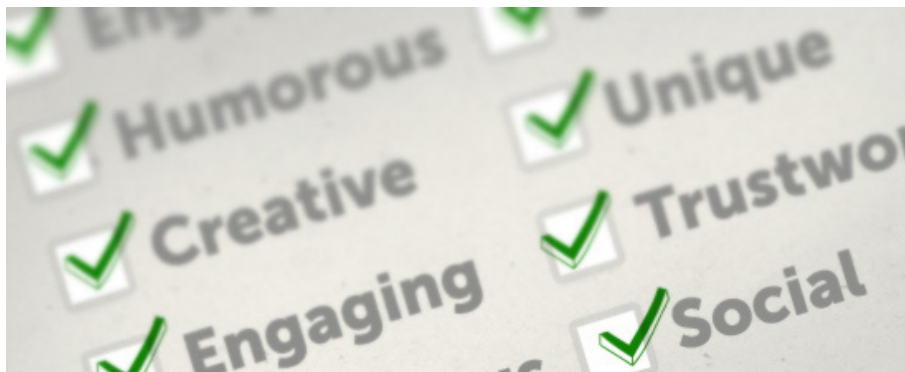
⁵⁷. <http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2011/06/authorship-markup-and-web-search.html>

The trend: High-authority creators will see their content become more visible in search results, and for that reason, publishers will need to seek out high-authority creators to boost traffic to their websites.

Quick tip for creatives: Set up a personal Google+ profile and incorporate the **rel=author** link into your published content. (Instructions on how to do this are provided in the next section.)

How To Capitalize On The New SEO

Given these recent developments, let's look at how authors can manage their content to increase its visibility and obtain all of the benefits that go along with that. Some of the following suggestions are technical in nature, while others are creative techniques that are not always thought of as aspects of SEO. However, with Google getting better at evaluating the quality of content, people are now less able to inflate the ranking of inferior content through technical manipulation and must instead treat the quality of their content itself as the linchpin of their SEO program.



CREATE HIGHLY SHARABLE CONTENT

SEO is no longer a game of mechanical keyword placement. In fact, SEO has moved even beyond a game of relevance and substance. For content to succeed in search today, it must be relevant, substantive and sharable. Content creators can use a variety of stylistic and marketing techniques to enhance social interest in their content, including the following:

1. Convert dry text into visually engaging content to generate immediate interest;
2. Provide consistently informative, well-researched and enlightening content that generates long-term interest;

3. Develop a unique voice and style;
4. Take a provocative stance or add humor when appropriate and compatible with the corporate style;
5. Provide detailed content on a topic that has not been widely covered (scarcity of information increases demand);
6. Attribute information to factual sources (trustworthy content is more confidently shared);
7. Link generously (encourage sharing by setting a good example);
8. Title content creatively to spark curiosity;
9. Use Web design⁵⁸ and typographic⁵⁹ best practices to optimize readability and scannability;
10. Embed video in blog posts and Web pages;
11. Display attractive and intuitive social-sharing buttons;
12. Give users an incentive to share.

SET-UP METHODS AND BENEFITS: USE THE REL=AUTHOR LINK

Here's a basic outline of how to set up **rel=author** links for your content. Google has a more thorough rundown⁶⁰.

1. Create a personal Google+ profile page with a high-quality headshot;
2. Validate your email address;
3. In the byline of any content that you create, set the anchor text to be your name as it appears in your Google+ profile, and link to your profile with a URL that looks like this: **<https://plus.google.com/102318046680468697385?rel=author>**.
4. When your content is published, link back to its URL from the "Contributor to" section of your Google+ profile.

Once your content is indexed, your Google+ profile picture and name, along with the publication date, title and description, will (sometimes)

⁵⁸. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/web-design-essentials-examples-and-best-practices/>

⁵⁹. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/typography-guidelines-and-references/>

⁶⁰. <http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=1408986>

appear in SERPs, in both standard and personalized results. This gives you more exposure, and it instills trust in users that the content has a human author, and that the author is reputable. This adds up to higher ranking and more people clicking through to your content.

Please note: Author attribution is still in the early stages of development. Google frequently changes both the procedures for setting up links and the presentation of author information in SERPs. The instructional link above should be up to date whenever you are ready to dive in.

How to set up different types of content:

- **Guest blog posts**

Set up a `rel=author` link somewhere in your content. The most sensible place to do this is either in the byline or in the bio area. If the blog doesn't accommodate such placement, then a `rel=author` link in the body of the post would work, too.

- **Infographics**

If you create an infographic, add a blurb below the image saying, "Infographic by [your name]," with a `rel=author` link.

- **Video**

Follow the same procedure as described above for infographics.

- **Dual authorship**

What if an article is coauthored or the author wants to credit a photographer? The best practice is to use only one `rel=author` link per page. If more than one link appears on a page, the first that appears in the markup will be the one whose name and image are featured in SERPs.

BRING BACK BLOG MARKETING

Blogs are back. In terms of social sharing, blog posts are far more likely to be shared than standard Web pages. In terms of segmentation, blog posts figure prominently in search segments such as news, time ranges and, of course, blogs. Here are some blogging techniques that fit especially well in today's SEO environment:

- **Incorporate the `rel=author` link into the byline of every post in your archive.**

This establishes you as the author and gives all of your existing content an SEO boost. Several WordPress plugins are available to automatically set up the links for single- and multi-author blogs. If you are using an-

other CMS, check with the developer to see whether and how it supports `rel=author` linking.

- **Ramp up guest blogging efforts.**

Getting published on highly authoritative, highly shared blogs has always been useful, and adding the `rel=author` link to your guest posts delivers even more value.

- **Blog directly on Google+.**

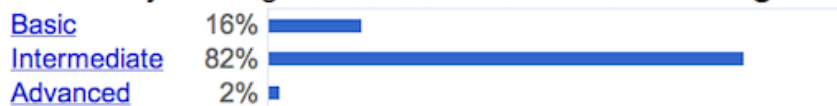
Earlier, we mentioned that Google indexes and ranks original Google+ posts. To take advantage of this, some “plussers” are actually writing lengthy original posts on the network. This strategy could be well worth testing, especially if you already have an active presence on the network. And it could work particularly well for photographers, designers and videographers, who can surround their visual content with keyword-optimized text.

CONSIDER THE READING LEVEL WHEN COMPOSING

Let’s consider an example of creating targeted content to capitalize on Google’s segmented search.

Depending on the topic, writing at a particular reading level could be quite advantageous for SEO. For instance, here is how Google categorizes content that matches a search for “social media marketing”:

Results by reading level for social media marketing:



If you wrote a post about social media marketing at an advanced reading level, Google would probably rank it very low in its fully aggregated SERPs. Because the vast majority of content (82%) is written at an intermediate level, Google assumes that is what searchers are looking for.

However, for segmented searches, it’s a different story. Writing an advanced article would probably make you highly visible to people drilling down to that reading level. And even though it’s a small group (2%), it could include people with a lot of interest and ready to take action.

Another possibility is to write a basic article about social media marketing. Here again, there is less search competition (16%), and there is a good chance that people who are new to social media will want to drill down to basic articles.

Google does not clearly explain how it defines these three reading levels. But its model, according to Google’s Daniel M. Russell, is based

primarily on input from teachers who have classified various pages of text. You can read more about [Google's reading level model](#)⁶¹ on Russell's personal blog.

The New SEO Formula: Relevance + Substance + Shares = Visibility

At one time, SEO was a fairly straightforward exercise in shaping content on a particular domain to rank highly on basically one flavor of SERPs for a given set of queries.

But as we've seen, Google now considers who created the content in addition to where the content lives, and query options have expanded thanks to the segmentation of search options. On top of all this, personalized search options enable users to view results based on the online behavior of themselves and their social media connections.

While technical expertise still matters tremendously in SEO, authorship is gaining ground, and quickly. Google is attempting to cut out the SEO middleman and make search a matter of directly connecting great content creators (as defined by the inherent quality of their work and their popularity) with searchers who will find great value in their content. This explains why Google is being more forthcoming about its algorithm: the maneuver levels the technical playing field and forces SEO practitioners to differentiate themselves through the content itself. What more could content creators ask for?

RESOURCES

Below are resources containing detailed information on content-related SEO techniques that should be of interest to creatives who market themselves and their work.

- “Author Information in Search Results⁶²,” Google Webmaster Tools Instructions on setting up **rel=author** links.
- “Google Evaluates Reading Level?!?”⁶³, Pure Visibility How Google evaluates reading levels and why it matters to writers.

⁶¹. <http://searchresearch1.blogspot.com/2011/02/search-by-reading-level.html>

⁶². <http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=1408986&expand=2&hl=en>

⁶³. <http://blog.purevisibility.com/2012/01/google-evaluates-reading-level/>

- “[Webmaster Guidelines: Quality Guidelines⁶⁴](#),” Google Webmaster Tools
Best practices for content quality.
- “[Image Publishing Guidelines⁶⁵](#),” Google Webmaster Tools
- “[Video Best Practices⁶⁶](#),” Google Webmaster Tools
- “[Search by Image⁶⁷](#),” Google
How image search works.
- “[Facebook + Twitter’s Influence on Google’s Search Rankings⁶⁸](#),” Rand Fishkin, The Daily SEO Blog

All images used for this chapter have exclusively been created by [Straight North⁶⁹](#). 🐼

⁶⁴. <http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=35769#3>

⁶⁵. <http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=114016>

⁶⁶. <http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=156442>

⁶⁷. <http://support.google.com/images/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=1325808>

⁶⁸. <http://www.seomoz.org/blog/facebook-twitthers-influence-google-search-rankings>

⁶⁹. <http://www.straightnorth.com/web-development>

How To Improve Your Branding With Your Content

BY RICK SLOBODA 🐼

Branding experts hit the nail on the head when they say that a winning brand conveys why you are your prospects' *only* solution. If you can't achieve that, you should at least convey why you are your prospects' *best* solution. Of course, the same logic applies to your clients. So make a compelling claim about your business, product or service, and back it up.

Are you the biggest or most popular provider of your type of product? Do you provide the widest selection of services? Do you leverage strategic partnerships? Create patented technology? Offer convenient locations? Or are you young and small, able to churn out customized solutions swiftly, unlike your much larger and slower competitors?



Image credit: [Emily Berezin](#)⁷⁰

Define your strengths and leverage them. Purposefully written Web copy that effectively tells your prospects why they should buy from you

⁷⁰. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mleak/163875483/>

or your client can make a world of difference on the sales front. In fact, if done right, it can actually disqualify the competition.

Here's an example. A client in the medical X-ray field had Web copy that contained vague statements such as, "We're dedicated to providing you with the highest level of professional service possible." That's not a hook. Any business can state that on its website, and most do. Some basic research revealed that the client is the only business in the region that owns and operates the most advanced medical equipment in the industry. As a result, it could provide the most accurate X-rays on the same business day. No competitor in its market could make the same claim.

That simple fact differentiated our client and became a large part of its selling proposition. That's conveying *real* value.

You Are What You Write

Through words, we form a personality, set a tone and create expectations – for better or for worse. When communicating in person, you have the luxury of giving and receiving verbal feedback and expressing yourself with body language and facial gestures, all in real time. Your prospects can peer into your eyes to help them decide whether to trust you and accept what you're telling them.

However, when potential clients visit your website, they don't have the same opportunity to size you up. Your online visitors can't look you in the eye, so they look to your messages to help them decide whether to trust your brand, your business and you.

Hence, the words you use on your website should project the personality of your products, services and business. Your Web copy must form and foster a clear verbal identity, reflecting who you are and who you strive to be. It signifies what you stand for and promise to deliver.

Service Offerings

Mac technical services and support.

Experiencing a Mac break-down is like getting struck by lightning. It's rare.

But if your Mac ever requires attention, you can rely on **Macinhome's** technical services and support experts. You and your Mac benefit from highly certified expertise, fast response times, around-the-clock service and competitive pricing.

Get Apple-certified onsite or offsite technical services and support tailored to you and your Mac's needs and schedule, today:

- **Software**
- **Hardware**
- **Windows**

Speak your audience's language. Your Web writing should put forth a "voice" that resonates with your intended audience. Macinhome⁷¹ connects with Mac enthusiasts by featuring Apple-influenced Web copy, including everything from smart, snappy comments to ending headlines with periods.

Consider the following copy from three auto manufacturers' websites. Mercedes, in the first excerpt, positions itself as the ultimate luxury vehicle:

"Enjoy bold, spirited styling with an air of sleek confidence. A distinctive radiator grille nose hints at the power that lies beneath the hood. The highly characteristic tail, with dual tailpipes will put a look of awe on the faces of all those you leave in the dust. The SLK-Class is the ultimate combination of classic sporty personality and effortless poise and assurance."

BMW boasts performance:

"Do bear in mind that 0-100 km/h in 5 seconds limits your chances of actually spotting the BMW M Coupe on the road. For that you can thank a 330 hp in-line six engineered to peak at an astounding 7,900 rpm. Raw power is unleashed precisely through a short-throw, 6-speed manual and is kept in-check by massive compound, cross-drilled brakes."

Volvo tries to make its name synonymous with safety:

"Preventative safety features like Dynamic Stability and Traction Control (DSTC) help you, the driver, avoid accidents by evading them. And nothing is safer for you than no accident at all. So every Volvo is

⁷¹ <http://www.macinhome.com/services/index.html>

equipped with a variety of innovative preventative safety features, many of which are, of course, uniquely Volvo, developed by Volvo safety engineers over years of research, design and testing, both in the laboratory and the real world.”

Each individual message builds on its respective brand to create distinctiveness and value, in a bid to engage the targeted audience. And the words that Mercedes, BMW and Volvo choose have a direct impact on each of their bottom lines.

What Does Your Brand Stand For?

Your Web copy needs to define who you are and what you sell and cater to your target market’s specific needs. Moreover, your Web copy requires a distinct and consistent voice that expresses the value of the relationship you’re seeking, accompanied by assurance. Only then can it forge a truly emotional connection with prospective and established customers alike.

MarketingAnd Delivers High-Performance Marketing Tools

Headquartered in San Diego, California, MarketingAnd, Inc. specializes in high-performance marketing solutions to help small- and medium-sized businesses achieve greater returns.

From the start, MarketingAnd proudly stood apart from conventional marketing agencies by embracing new technologies and going beyond standard media and creative services. In fact, our team’s been leveraging the Web, including:

- The first personalized Internet radio station (Imagine Radio).
- One of the first Internet marketing conferences (Web Attack).
- The first internet-based rewards program for radio and TV stations.
- The first live interactive TV promotion “Race to Riches” with Indy 500.
- The first interactive outdoor campaign utilizing keywords and speech-to-text technology.
- The first web form-to-phone lead generation application.

Bring a little bit of “you” into your website. While many businesses post employee photos on websites, why not quote employees in your Web content? By doing so, MarketingAnd not only brings a human element into its website, but effectively positions its staff as industry experts.

To build your brand with words, your Web copy needs to take into account:

- Existing perceptions of your products, services and company,
- The actual position you occupy now on these fronts.

Recognize the gap between these two points and how they compare to where you want to be. The difference needs to be made up through your communications, from your policies to your product packaging to your Web copy.

Following are some key elements to help you foster a relationship between your brand and your customers:

Word association

What are your core strengths? What do you promise customers? Invest time to determine what you're good at, thus focusing on your strengths. Your words in turn establish a relationship with customers by laying out your benefits, whether functional, emotional or self-expressive.

Image

Your words can sway consumers into associating certain attributes with your brand. This can shift how they see you in relation to the competitors in your marketplace, potentially even altering who you compete with. Some ingenuity can set you apart from the others to the point that your competition appears bland.

Character

Your Web copy should take into account where you come from, who you are and what you stand for. This is your guiding light. Be authentic. One step beyond your character could tarnish your integrity.

Culture

Your website content should reflect the values that give life to your business. While you don't need to list your core values, your Web copy should draw on this framework. Ensure that it resonates with the values in and around your business.

Personality

Your Web copy needs to bring to light your business' human characteristics, including everything from age to class to personality traits. Get creative with delivery. For instance, many businesses post employee photos on their websites. But why not actually quote employees in your Web content? It's a great way to put a human face to your company and promote your staff as industry experts.

Spirit

Does your Web copy represent the emotional elements and values of your business? Demonstrate authenticity and commitment to creating a spirit that's not only engaging but contagious.

So how can you differentiate your offerings? What's different about your approach? Perhaps you can leverage:

- Selection
- Experience
- Knowledge
- Credentials
- Expediency
- Style
- Technology
- Geography
- Alliances
- Resources
- Tools
- Customer service
- Or one of many other factors

There's no value in everyone knowing you if they don't know what you stand for and what you can do for them. Plus, the more reasons you give people to choose your brand, the less price becomes a factor in their purchasing decision.

Use words that clearly demonstrate how a prospective customer's world will be made easier, more lucrative, healthier, happier and so on, with you in the picture. This overall message can then be continually reinforced not just on your website, but also in print materials, advertising, trade show presentations, press releases and so on.

Never forget that words, like design, are the foundation of communication. They help us express, understand and learn. They are invaluable to influencing your visitors' decision-making process and loyalty.

Choose your words wisely. Failing to do so could result in a brand that's problematic, rather than a means to a solution. 🐼

The Art Of Content Marketing

BY CRAIG ANDERSON 🍷

A few months ago I went to collect a friend from hospital. Arriving early, I entered the waiting room and noticed in-house magazines stacked by the door. I picked one up, grabbed a coffee and took a seat.

The magazine read like a very long press release, blabbering on about patient-centric care and employee awards. I was quickly bored, so I read from my phone instead. The magazine failed in its purpose.

Effective content marketing holds people's attention. It gives you a distinctive brand, loyal fans and increased sales. You don't need a big budget to succeed, which is why good content marketing is the single best way to beat bigger competitors online.

Content marketing used to be about customer magazines and mailed newsletters. Now it covers blogs, email newsletters, eBooks, white papers, articles, videos and more. In this article, you will learn about content marketing techniques that you can apply to your business.

Prepare

Before creating content, you need to prepare. Think about your tone and style, where to find the best writers and how to organize your workflow.

TONE AND STYLE

Too many companies start writing content before their brand has a defined voice. This leads to inconsistency. It's like using one logo in your brochure, another on your website and another on your blog.

When speaking with people, you see their expressions and you adjust your tone accordingly. In a meeting, when you see that someone is confused, you clarify meaning, simplify sentences and speak reassuringly. The Web offers no feedback until your content is published, and then it's too late.

To get the right tone, think of the person who best represents your brand. The person could be fictional or real, and they may or may not work for you. Now think of adjectives that describe them. Once you know what you want, provide clear details and practical examples.

Let's say you run a travel agency that markets to young independent travelers. You want your representative to sound experienced, helpful and friendly. Try using a table like the one below to delineate what your adjectives do and don't mean:

	Experienced	Helpful	Friendly
Does mean...	Knowledgeable Write with authority, as though the knowledge was gained first hand.	Efficient Explain things clearly and positively. Make sure all relevant information is obvious and accessible.	Personal Use informal language, and write as though you are talking to one person, rather than a broad customer base.
Does not mean...	Condescending You know a lot but don't talk down to your customers. They probably know a lot too.	Pushy Promote your company, but not at the expense of good service. Always have your reader's wants in mind.	Unprofessional Make sure there are no grammar or spelling mistakes. Proofread carefully.

You'll also need a style guide, so that your authors write consistently. Should you use title case in headings? Are contractions appropriate? Check out [The Yahoo! Style Guide](http://styleguide.yahoo.com/)⁷² for ideas.

PICKING CONTENT CREATORS

Don't pick the wrong people to create your content. It's hard for a non-technical person to pick the best Web developer, and it's the same with content marketing. You need to know about content creation in order to judge other people's abilities. Some people suggest making everyone in your company a content creator, but this is a bad idea. Not everyone can be a good accountant, secretary or rocket scientist, and the same applies here. To succeed, you should pick the best.

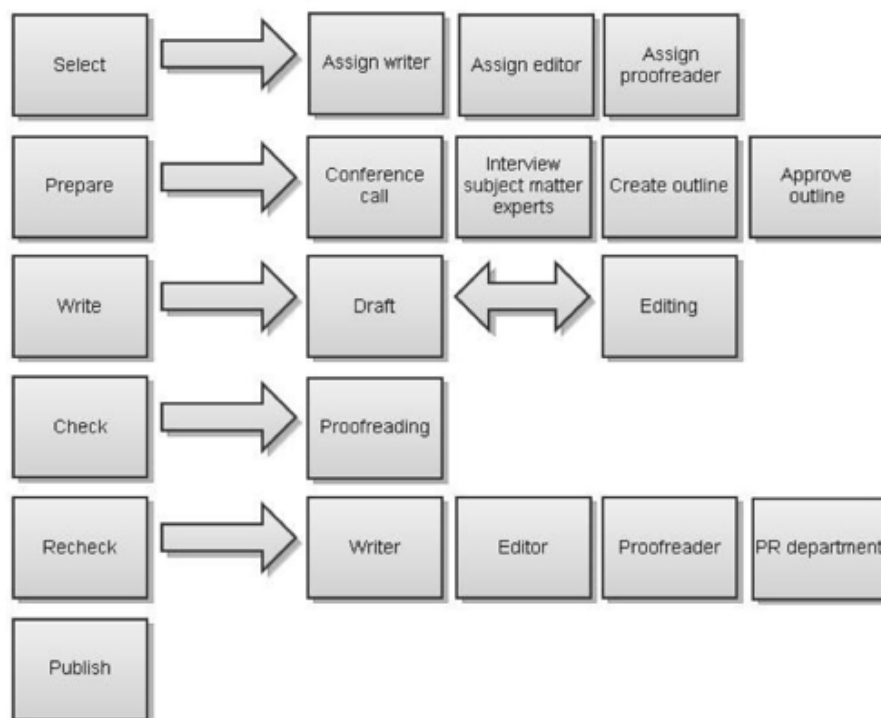
⁷². <http://styleguide.yahoo.com/>

Ask everyone who wants to be a content creator to write a sample blog post. Then you can find the best few people. Some might not be able to write but have interesting ideas. In this case, you'll need someone to edit their copy. Perhaps you want to raise the profile of a particular staff member. If they can't write, have someone ghostwrite for them.

WORKFLOW

Some companies have a simple workflow: one person does everything. The person researches, writes and publishes without any input from others. This model can work, but you'll see more success with a workflow that enables other people to take part. Have different people write, edit and proofread. It's a good way to catch mistakes and to bring more ideas into the process. Think about the best process for each type of content. One person might be enough for a tweet, whereas four to six people might be ideal for an eBook.

Imagine you've got a well-staffed company that is putting together a B2B white paper. You could organize your workflow like this:



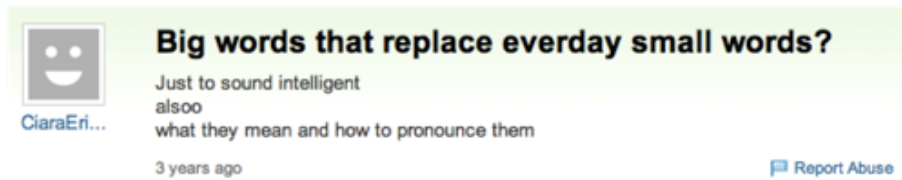
An example of how to organize your workflow in a well-staffed company.

Persuade

Your content should be persuasive. Pay close attention to how you speak and what you say.

USE SIMPLE LANGUAGE

Take the question below on Yahoo! Answers. To “sound intelligent,” this person would like to know “big words that replace everyday small words.”



Many people make this mistake. They use language that is unnecessarily complicated, usually to show off or to sound corporate and professional.

“Short words are best and the old words when short are best of all,” said Winston Churchill. So, don’t talk about “taking a holistic view of a company’s marketing strategy to deliver strategic insights, precise analysis and out-of-the-box thinking.”

Prefer “make” to “manufacture,” and “use” to “utilize.” While “quantitative easing” offers precision to economists, your personal finance audience would prefer “print money.”

Lauren Keating has studied the effect of scientific language⁷³ on the persuasiveness of copy. She found that most people respond best to advertisements that contain no scientific language. People found them more readable and persuasive, and they felt more willing to buy the product. Lauren’s conclusion was clear: copy needs to be plain and simple.

HAVE OPINIONS

Interesting people have opinions, and interesting brands are the same. Look at the amazing work of new search engine DuckDuckGo⁷⁴. It has positioned itself as the antithesis of Google, launching websites that criticize how the search giant tracks you⁷⁵ and puts you in a bubble⁷⁶. The strategy is paying off: DuckDuckGo is seeing explosive growth⁷⁷.

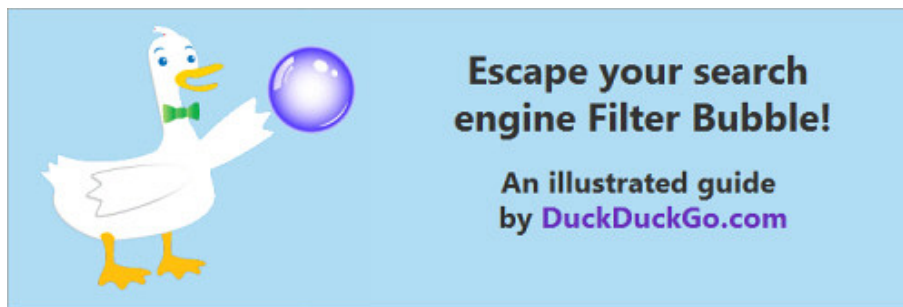
⁷³. <http://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/theses/09ARPS/09arpsk25.pdf>

⁷⁴. <http://duckduckgo.com/>

⁷⁵. <http://donttrack.us/>

⁷⁶. <http://dontbubble.us/>

⁷⁷. <http://duckduckgo.com/traffic.html>



DuckDuckGo⁷⁸ is an alternative search engine that breaks you out of your Filter Bubble.

While this strategy is perfect for defeating a big incumbent, you don't have to be openly hostile to your competitors. You can say what you think without mentioning their names.

Bear in mind that people are ideologically motivated. Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler's study, "When Corrections Fail"⁷⁹, describes the "backfire effect" of trying to correct people's deeply held beliefs. The authors found that contradicting people's misconceptions actually strengthened those opinions. If people see you as an ideological ally (like a political party), they are more likely to agree with you on other issues — even ideologically inconsistent or non-ideological ones. You can use your opinions to attract people to your company: converting the agnostic or validating the views of allies.

As a small-scale brewer, for example, you might have a strong opinion on ale, believing in craft over mass production. You might think the market is dominated by big businesses that sacrifice quality for quantity. In this situation, you could use content marketing to talk about the best way to make beer. By stressing how seriously you take the development of your product, you communicate your opinion to those who share it without directly criticizing your competitors.

Think politically: consider the popularity of your views and whether they will attract media coverage. Ideally, your opinions should be bold and popular.

SELL THE BENEFITS

In the same way that you sell your products and services, tell your audience the benefits of your content. This technique is essential if your audience doesn't know what it wants.

PaperlessPipeline⁸⁰ is a transaction management and document storage app for real estate brokers. Its founder, Dane Maxwell, had a

⁷⁸. <http://dontbubble.us/>

⁷⁹. <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/nyhan-reifler.pdf>

⁸⁰. <http://www.paperlesspipeline.com/>

creative idea to sell his product. The biggest problem for real estate brokers is recruiting. So, Dane invited them to a webinar titled “Recruiting Secrets of the 200-Plus Agent Office in Tennessee.” Brokers didn’t even know they needed to manage transactions, so he didn’t mention it in the invitation.

The Better Way to Get Transactions Done

Paperless Pipeline takes your real estate transactions and related documents online - without changing how you work.

- Access documents from any computer, any browser, anywhere. Show up to closing without paper.
- Turn in paperwork by scan, email, or direct upload.
- Stay organized with an "Items Needed" checklist for every transaction.

Try It Out
First 5 Transactions Free

100% free. No credit card required. Sign up in seconds.

Join the Crowd

Agents & Staff Using Paperless Pipeline

1 6 4 5 6

Contracts Submitted

2 0 3 0 8 0 2

Paperless Pipeline takes your real estate transactions and related documents online – without changing how you work.

In the webinar, he introduced PaperlessPipeline and explained how it enables brokers to recruit more agents. The webinar attracted 120 guests, and “16 ended up buying at the end,” said Dane in an [interview with Mixergy](#)⁸¹.

Imagine you run a company that develops technology for mobile phones, and you want to promote a new femtocell that boosts mobile reception in public spaces and rural areas. This technology could be valuable to people who want to improve mobile reception, but those people might not have heard of it.

So, instead of promoting the technology directly, offer content that focuses on the benefits. By using benefit-focused copy, you immediately tell the reader what’s in it for them.

Teach

Think about what your audience wants. People want to hear answers and to learn something new, so give them what they want.

⁸¹. <http://mixergy.com/paperless-pipeline-maxwell-interview/>

GIVE ANSWERS

Content marketing needs to offer practical advice that people can use. Readers have been trained to expect answers on the Web, and yet so much content fails to deliver.

Consider FeeFighters, a comparison website for credit card processing. One of its blog posts, Do You Know What Makes Up Your Credit Score?⁸², talks about the factors that affect your credit score. Instead of offering abstract advice and concepts, the post provides practical tips for improving your credit score:

Area #2: Your Credit Utilization Ratio

“The second largest determining factor in what makes up your score is the amount of credit that you have available to you in relationship to how much of that credit you’ve used. This accounts for 30 percent of your credit score. The optimal rate is 30 percent, which means that if you have \$10,000 in credit available to you, you should only be using about \$3,000 of it. One trap that some people fall into is believing that if they max out their credit cards every month and then pay them off at the end of the month, they’ll build their credit. But since that gives them a 100 percent credit utilization ratio, and that ratio accounts for 30 percent of their overall credit score, they’re really doing more harm than good.”

SAY OR DO SOMETHING NEW

Most content is boring and unoriginal, which is good for you. It makes it easier to beat your competitors.

You can make your content interesting by doing something new, without necessarily saying something new. For instance, you could write a comprehensive article on a topic that has only piecemeal information scattered across the Web. Or you could use a different format for a topic that gets the same treatment; rather than writing the fiftieth blog post on a topic, shoot the first video.

You can also make your content interesting by saying something new. An infographic by Rate Rush⁸³ compares the popularity of Digg to Reddit, creatively combining a bar graph and clock to present the data. Although Rate Rush is a personal finance website, with little connection to social news, its staff researched a topic they were interested in and drew attention by putting it to imaginative use.

82. <http://feefighters.com/blog/do-you-know-what-makes-up-your-credit-score/>

83. <http://www.raterush.com/pages/digg-reddit>



Our agency also researches things that we find interesting, and this has been a great source of content. In 2010, we polled around 1000 iPad owners⁸⁴ to find out how consumers use the device. It led to a slew of media attention.

You can do the same. Come up with an original idea to research, and then undertake a study. Also look into studies that your business has done in the past, because interesting stuff might be lying around. One of our clients looked through her company's research archive and found amazing material. She didn't spend any money on research but got a lot of great content, links and media coverage.

Captivate

Give your content more personality. Captivate your audience with stories and characters that will draw them in and keep them coming back.

⁸⁴. <http://cmccopywriters.com/ipad-consumer-usage-study>

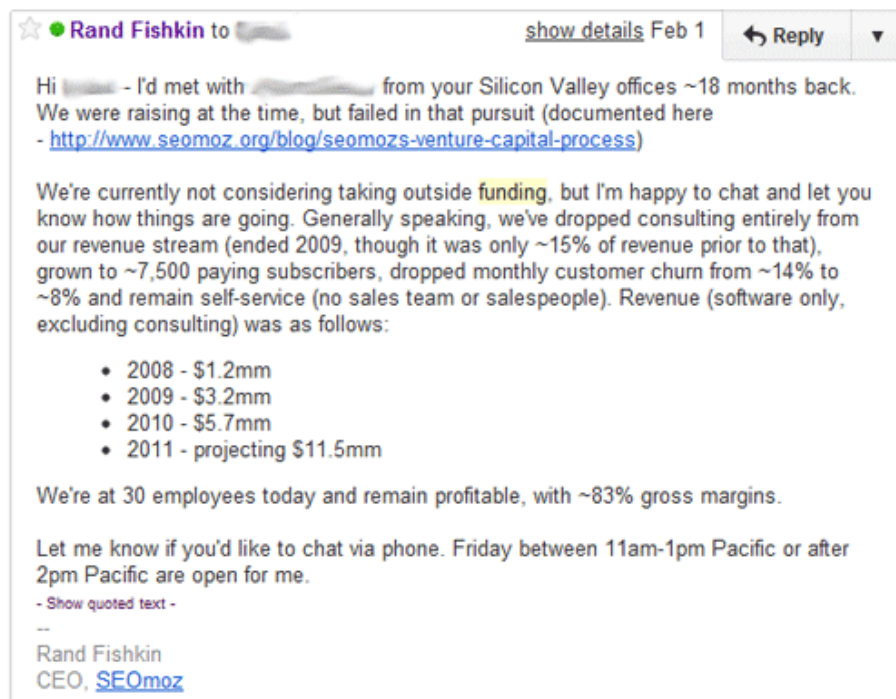
TELL A STORY

Telling a story is a great way to connect with readers. According to a number of studies summed up by Rob Gill⁸⁵ of Swinburne University of Technology, telling stories can be useful in corporate communication. Storytelling is fundamental to human interaction, and it can make your content more compelling and your brand more engaging.

Citing Annette Simmons' *The Story Factor*, Rob says this: "It is believed people receiving the narration often come to the same conclusion as the narrator, but through using their own decision-making processes." Told through a story, a message becomes more personal and relevant. The reader is also more likely to remember what was said.

Rand Fishkin is the co-founder and CEO of [SEOMoz](http://www.seomoz.org/)⁸⁶. Instead of sharing only positive accounts of his business, he also writes about difficulties such as his failed attempt to raise capital⁸⁷:

"Michelle was the first to note that something was 'odd.' In a phone call with Neil, she heard him comment that they 'needed to do more digging into the market.' In her opinion, this was very peculiar.... Tuesday morning we got the call; no deal."



An email shared by Rand Fishkin in his post⁸⁸ about SEOMoz's attempt to raise funding.

⁸⁵. http://www.prismjournal.org/fileadmin/8_1/Gill.pdf

⁸⁶. <http://www.seomoz.org/>

⁸⁷. <http://randfishkin.com/blog/128/misadventures-venture-capital-funding>

⁸⁸. <http://randfishkin.com/blog/128/misadventures-venture-capital-funding>

Brands need stories, and stories need people, suspense, conflicts and crises. By reading SEOmoz's content, and seeing both the positive and negative, you become immersed in its story.

Ikea is another example of a brand that tells stories that generate opinions about its company. For instance, it plays up its Swedish roots⁸⁹ and paints a romantic image of a wholesome and natural society. Its website is full of stories that contribute to this effect.

A survey conducted by the B2B Technology Marketing Community⁹⁰ showed that around 82% of LinkedIn users found that telling a story through case studies was the most effective form of content marketing.

Sometimes you'll want to use anecdotes to make a point, and sometimes you'll write a post or tweet to build a narrative. When you're cultivating a story, keep the information simple, and don't be afraid to repeat points here and there; some readers might have missed what you said before.

Always mix interesting stories with useful information; fail to do this and your audience will feel you're wasting their time.

USE REAL PEOPLE

Think of your favorite writers. You've probably seen their photos and heard them speak. Likewise, people need to see and hear your employees, so use pictures, audio and video. This will bring your audience closer to your brand.

Jakob Nielsen has studied⁹¹ people's reactions to images online. He used eye-tracking software to discover that people ignore images that seem decorative, random or generic. They even ignore generic images of people. But when they come across a photo of a "real" person, they engage with it for a longer time.

People prefer to get involved with a company with which they feel a personal connection. But introduce your employees gradually; as with any story, introduce too many characters too early and you'll confuse your audience.

89. http://www.ikea.com/ms/en_GB/about_ikea/the_ikea_way/swedish_heritage/index.html

90. <http://www.slideshare.net/hschulze/b2b-content-marketing-report>

91. <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/02/study-shows-people-ignore-generic-photos-online/>

Summary

Develop a compelling tone of voice. Don't assume that anyone can write amazing copy, because they can't. If you want the best content, then you need the best writers and thinkers.

Produce something informative that people will want to read. Give your brand a personality and your business will benefit across the board, from recruitment to sales. Warren Buffett looks for businesses protected by “unbreachable moats,” and no moat is more unbreachable than a brand with a story, ideas and opinions. 🍷

Content Meaning

BY JOSH MEDRANO 🐼

You’ve heard the questions before. “*The design looks great, but what are you trying to communicate?*” “*Where’s the message in your design?*” “*Did you use this texture here for a reason, or is it just design for design’s sake?*”

Okay, enough with the questions. I’m supposed to be answering these, right? (Sorry, another question.) Well, our jobs as designers is to think of these questions before presenting something to our client, professor, peer or anyone with an opinion we value.

I’ll let you in on a little secret that really shouldn’t be much of a secret at all: content is king, and your design will never dethrone it. We live in a world where ideas sell, and everyone is buying.

Where’s the Good Stuff?

Because content is so crucial, here are a couple of guidelines to keep in mind:

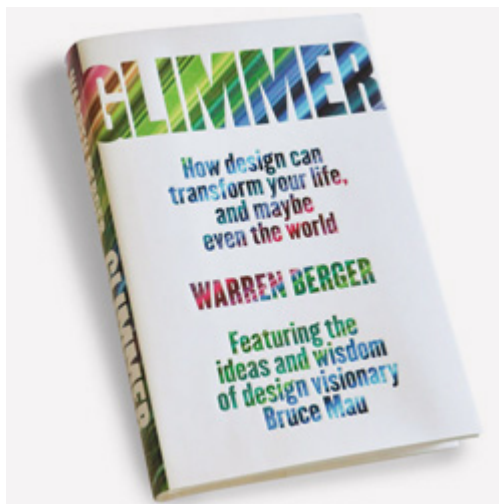
- Start with something good, something that will make other people think, “*I wish I had thought of that.*”
- Follow this with a great concept or great idea. Having either of those is more than half the battle.

You see, products that are aesthetically engaging but that do not have engaging content are quickly forgotten. Products that are promoted far more than they should be will often run their course and fade out much more quickly than the time they took to spring to life. Take commercials. You see them every day, and sure, they’re often humorous — but wait: what is it they’re trying to sell me? Have you noticed that the funnier the commercial is, the duller the product? You need the best of both worlds: beauty and brains.



Finding Action Through Your Design

To follow through with a great concept, you must be passionate about your work. And you must be passionate not only about visual stimulation (we all like to look at nice things, after all), but about what will inspire people to remember you as a designer and, more importantly, to think and act. That's what good design does: it gets people on their feet, sends them to stores and defines their lifestyle. Let's look now at two pieces that have had a great influence on me as a designer.



First, CNN published an article a couple years back titled “Can Design Change the World?⁹²” In it, journalist and author Warren Berger, who had just recently published his book *Glimmer: How Design Can Transform Your Life and Maybe Even The World*, said:

⁹². http://articles.cnn.com/2009-11-06/tech/berger.qanda_1_design-prototyping-solving?_s=PM:TECH

“When people talk about design changing the world, it tends to sound a little grand and ridiculous, because they think of design as, in one fell swoop, changing the world and solving our problems.

What design actually can do, it can solve problems on a case-by-case basis around the world. As it does that, it changes the world, because it changes the reality for people wherever the situation is happening. If design can change water delivery in a certain part of the world, then it changes that part of the world for those people. That’s the way design changes the world.”

I’ll admit that I used to wonder about this. I often asked myself whether I was actually making a difference in people’s lives or whether people perceived designers merely to be the turtle-necked, hoity-toity types who made websites and fliers for pointless events. When I read Berger’s explanation of the case-by-case solutions around the world, it really made me appreciate what I had chosen to do for a living. It helped me understand that, although I was creatively answering my client’s questions, I was solving problems nonetheless. Do yourself a favor and read the article; some really thought-provoking ideas in it opened my mind to the cause-and-effect nature of “pushing pixels” all day at work.



The second piece is a small segment from one of my favorite books, *The Art of Looking Sideways* by Alan Fletcher:

“... Design is what happens between conceiving an idea and fashioning the means to carry it out. Whether big stuff like painting a picture, making a movie, creating a commercial enterprise, or small stuff like rearranging living room furniture. In short designing is what goes on in order to arrive at an intelligent equation between purpose and construction, thus converting a problem into an opportunity.”

You see, it’s an opportunity for all of us to make the most of what we do, wherever we are. Whether you work at a large firm or are indepen-

dent, every job you carry out is just as significant as the last. So, treat it that way. This is good design. It's about finding the opportunity in someone else's problem.

Problem-Solving Recipes



Here's a little insight into how I go about finding answers to question — or rather, how I solve someone else's problem⁹³. Great solutions beget great ideas. I know this might sound a bit “red pill, blue pill”-ish, so let me explain.

A FEW POINTS ON STRAIGHTENING OUT YOUR OBJECTIVES:

1. Analyze the job you're working on. What's the problem? What is intended to be accomplished?
2. Create a mental catalog, a word matrix. What do I know about this? What can I link it to?
3. Mix and match. Play with meanings. What's old? What's current? What does and doesn't work?
4. Review. Is it good? Does it fit? Does it do what it's supposed to?

I'm sure a lot of us have learned the “Start at 100 and reduce” technique. It's great for what it is, but if you're familiar with the problem, why not start at 0 and add only the elements you need? I think you'll find this to be not only faster and easier, but also more satisfying.

“Add, don't subtract.”

It's about using intuition to see what needs to be there and what doesn't. 🐼

⁹³. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2011/08/24/design-solving-problems/>

10 Ways To Put Your Content In Front Of More People

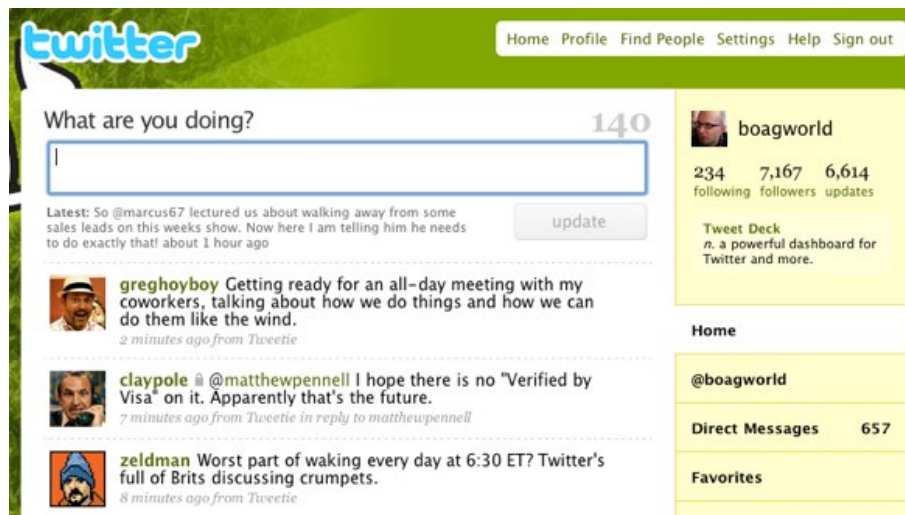
BY PAUL BOAG 🍷

Which is more important, driving traffic to your website or encouraging as many people as possible to see your content? Believe it or not, they are not one and the same. Too often, we as website owners live and die by Web analytics applications. We fret about bounce rates, unique visitors and dwell time. However, when we focus so heavily on the performance of our website, we miss a fundamental point: we should aim to expose users to our content, *not* our website. The website is a tool to showcase our content, but it is not the only tool that does this.

Organizations with truly successful websites understand this principle. Take, for example, the following: Amazon's primary objective is to sell stuff. YouTube aims to use video content to carry advertisements. Twitter facilitates "tweeting." (Who knows what its business model is!).

In each case, the content matters, not the website. That is why each company provides numerous ways to access its content beyond the website. From Amazon's affiliate scheme to YouTube's embed feature, these companies can reach audiences that may never visit their websites.

Twitter is probably the best example of all. How often do you actually read or post tweets via the Twitter website? If you are like me, the answer is very rarely.



The majority of users do not read tweets via the Twitter website.

The lesson here is obvious: as website owners, we need a broader Web strategy to release our content from the shackles of our websites. How do we do this? Below are 10 opportunities that you can integrate into your online strategy.

While the points mentioned below will refine your strategy to deliver content to more people, they can not serve their purpose without an appropriate environment. In the age of social media and the rise of interactive web-applications such as Facebook, Twitter etc. building a community around your website is the most important way to drive traffic and keep the users coming back.

Using forums, polls, comments and engaging users in the global conversations via external services turns out to be a silver bullet for gaining more exposure and winning more loyal visitors. Once you are building a community around your site, it's time to think about more refined strategy that will help you to put your content in front of more people – and this is where the tips below will come in handy.

1. Target The Desktop

eBay⁹⁴ recognized that it needed a desktop application. Many people make a living selling on eBay, and these people need desktop software that streamlines their business processes. They need desktop notifications, faster and more desktop-like interaction and easier access to eBay features.

⁹⁴. <http://ebay.com>



eBay Desktop⁹⁵ (not longer available online): eBay saw an opportunity to bring the functionality and content of its website to the desktop.

Using a platform such as Adobe AIR⁹⁶, you can easily put Web-based content and functionality onto the desktop. This is exactly what eBay did, and it has proved very successful among the company's power users.

As a website owner, you should consider whether a desktop application is right for you. Do your users need desktop features, offline access or better integration with the operating system?

2. Going Mobile

It won't be long before the Web is accessed by more mobile users than PC users. In many countries, this has already happened. Traditional websites often render poorly or are hard to use on mobile devices. They do not take into account the context in which a mobile user browses the Web⁹⁷. Approaching the mobile Web as a separate channel to your traditional website, then, is critical.

Here are some methods of delivering content on the mobile Web:

- **Create a mobile-optimized experience.**

Optimized mobile experiences take into account small screens, differ-

⁹⁵. <http://desktop.ebay.com/>

⁹⁶. <http://www.adobe.com/products/air/>

⁹⁷. <http://boagworld.com/usability/content-is-dead-long-live-context/>

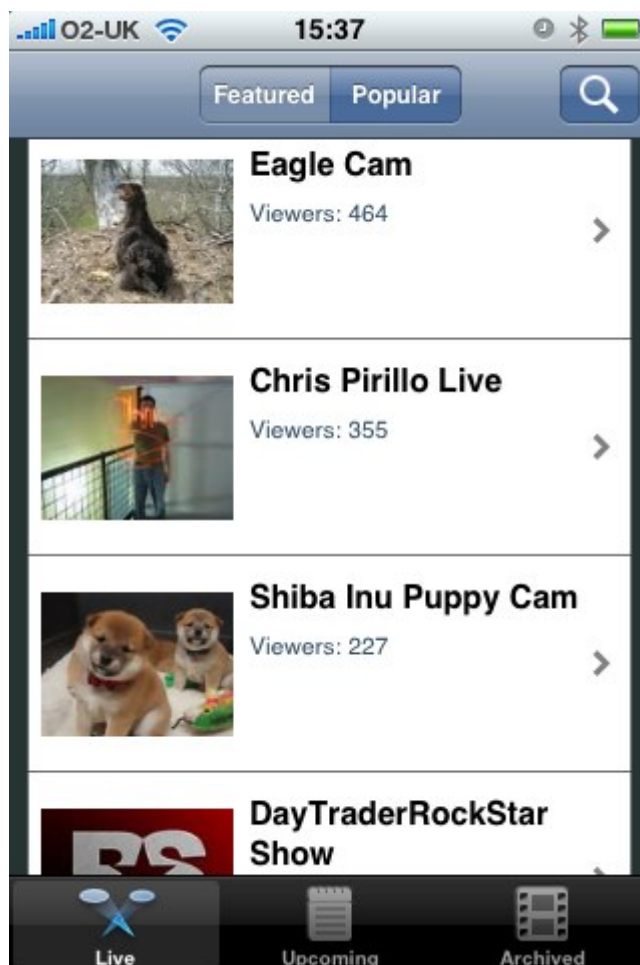
ent input devices and the numerous other unique characteristics of the mobile Web.

- **Use text messaging.**

Text messaging is ideal for notifications and updates. It is a perfect complement to your website and a way of keeping users informed.

- **Build mobile applications.**

Mobile platforms such as the iPhone and Android make it increasingly easy to build applications that run directly on mobile devices. They allow you to make your content available even when the user is not connected to the Internet or away from their PC.



Video-streaming service uStream makes its content available on the iPhone⁹⁸.

Pushing your content to mobile devices is ideal if your target audience is often away from the computer or requires access to your content “in the field.”

⁹⁸. <http://lifehacker.com/5135175/ustream-iphone-app-available-in-app-store>

3. Start Tweeting

Twitter has so much hype at the moment. However, it does provide a unique opportunity to reach a larger audience with your message. The question is, how best to use it? Some organizations use Twitter as a broadcast tool, turning it fundamentally into an alternative to RSS. An example of this is [BBC News](#)⁹⁹ or [CNN](#)¹⁰⁰, which provide latest updates via the service.



[CNN](#)¹⁰¹ uses Twitter as a broadcast tool, turning it fundamentally into an alternative to RSS.

However, using Twitter as a broadcast tool misses its true power. Organizations that really “get” Twitter include [Zappos](#)¹⁰² and [Omnifocus](#)¹⁰³. They use Twitter as a way to engage with their followers and even provide customer support.

Use Twitter as a way to engage with your audience. If a number of people work on your website, encourage them all to tweet, rather than having a single branded account.

⁹⁹. <http://twitter.com/bbcnews>

¹⁰⁰. <http://twitter.com/cnn>

¹⁰¹. <http://twitter.com/cnn>

¹⁰². <http://twitter.com/zappos>

¹⁰³. <http://twitter.com/omnifocus>

4. Write For Others

Writing for other websites is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate your expertise and spread your message to a larger audience than would otherwise be possible through your own website.

Do not limit your words of wisdom to your own website. Look for other editorial websites and blogs that speak to your own audience and offer to write for them. After all, your audience visits many websites other than your own. Why limit your writing skills to your own blog when you can reach new audiences by writing for others?

About the author

Paul Boag is the founder of UK Web design agency [Headscape](#), author of the [Website Owners Manual](#) and host of award-winning Web design podcast [Boagworld.com](#).

Whenever I write for other websites, they almost always include links back to Boagworld and Headscape. The screenshot features an example from one of my previous [Smashing Magazine's articles](#)¹⁰⁴.

Of course, any article you write for others should be more than shameless self-promotion. The owners of those websites will want quality content that fits their website and is of interest to their audience. For example, I recently wrote an article for a website whose audience consisted of franchise owners. If I had simply written about how great Headscape was, I doubt the article would have been published. Instead, I shared a case study of our experience in working with a franchise-based business. The content was both relevant to the publication and useful to its audience. However, it also raised our profile among a base of potentially new customers.

What websites exist that reach your target market? Would they consider publishing some of your content? How could you rewrite your content to make it more appealing to them?

5. Embrace Facebook

Another option for expanding your Web strategy beyond the website is [Facebook](#)¹⁰⁵. Explaining the importance and reach of Facebook is surely

¹⁰⁴. <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2009/02/10/10-harsh-truths-about-corporate-websites/>

¹⁰⁵. <http://www.facebook.com>

unnecessary. However, you may be tempted to dismiss it because your target market is not teenagers, who are normally associated with these kinds of social networks.

What may surprise you is that Facebook is no longer confined to a younger demographic. In 2009, the number of users between 35 and 54 has jumped 276%¹⁰⁶, to over 6 million people.



Carsonified Fan Page on Facebook¹⁰⁷: Facebook has introduced fan pages, which are public-facing profiles for organizations.

So, how do you reach your audience on Facebook? Here are three good starting points:

- **Create a group.**

Groups have been around for a long time and are ideal for building a dialogue with those already interested in your product or service. You can easily invite people to participate, and those people in turn can invite others. This makes groups ideally suited to viral marketing.

¹⁰⁶. <http://www.istrategylabs.com/2009-facebook-demographics-and-statistics-report-276-growth-in-35-54-year-old-users/>

¹⁰⁷. <http://www.facebook.com/carsonified>

- **Create a fan page.**

Fan pages are basically public profiles for organizations rather than individuals. Unlike groups, pages are public-facing. This means they can be seen by non-Facebook users and are indexed by search engines. Fan pages are perfect for building long-term awareness and for reaching people both inside and outside of Facebook.

- **Create an application.**

Facebook allows third parties to build applications that can be added to user profiles. These range from games to RSS feeds. Unlike with pages and groups, building applications requires some technical skill. However, the possibility of users embedding your content in their profiles makes this an attractive proposition, if you have appropriate content.

Of course, Facebook is not the only social network. But it does have considerable reach and provides some the best tools for reaching its massive audience.

6. Develop A Widget Or API

The ultimate way to distribute content has to be by providing an API or widget.

An API gives other Web developers access to your content, allowing them to build applications and websites around it. Using an API, developers can do anything from embed your content on their websites to build desktop applications that offer advanced functionality.

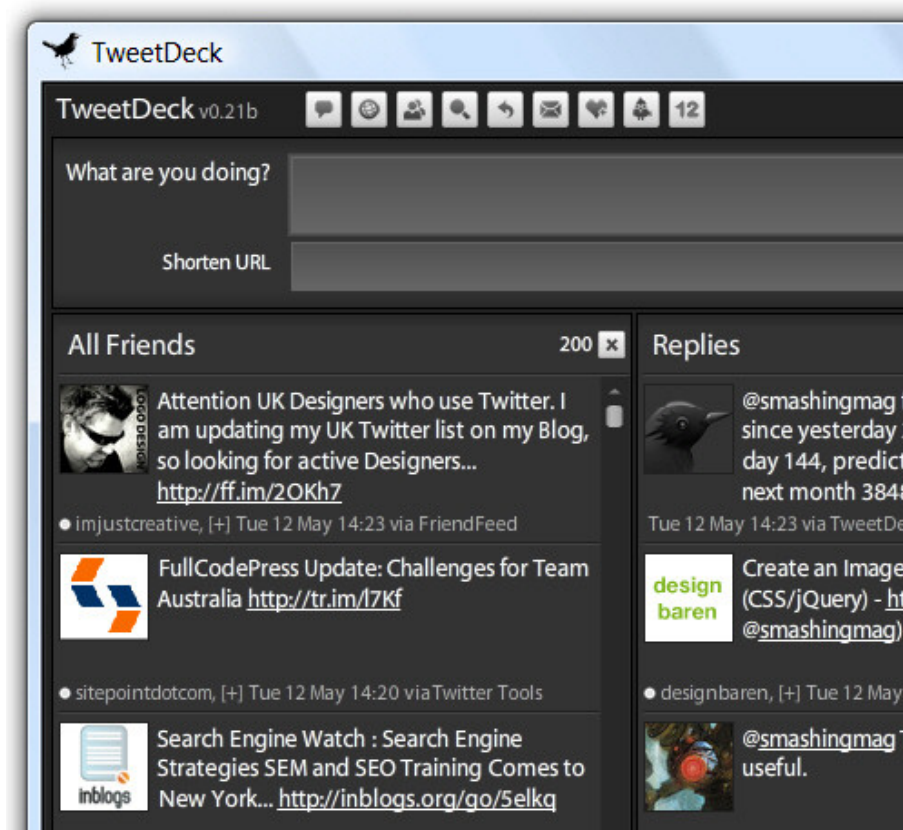
Twitter really gets APIs. When was the last time you viewed or posted tweets from the Twitter website? Chances are, a long time ago. Because Twitter offers a powerful API¹⁰⁸, thousands of developers have built all kinds of applications that allow you to view and post tweets. The actual service that Twitter provides is in fact very basic; but its API makes it possible to do everything from viewing tweets on a Google map¹⁰⁹ to posting photos¹¹⁰ and audio¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁸. <http://apiwiki.twitter.com/>

¹⁰⁹. <http://twittervision.com/>

¹¹⁰. <http://twitpic.com/>

¹¹¹. <http://audioboo.fm/>



Tweetdeck¹¹² is just one example of the powerful applications that can be built using the Twitter API.

Unfortunately, APIs have some drawbacks. They require a considerable level of technical expertise to implement. As a result, they are of use only to developers. What about the rest of us? How do we add third-party content to our websites? That's where widgets come in.

A widget is typically a small piece of code that you can copy and paste into your website. Literally thousands of widgets¹¹³ are available. They allow website owners to use the content and functionality of other websites quickly and easily. Widgets are used to embed YouTube videos, show your Amazon wish list and display your location on a map.

Widgets are powerful because they are easy to implement. This means anybody can add them, thus allowing you to distribute your content much more widely. Widgets are also easier to build than full APIs. This makes them a good starting point for those wanting to put their content in front of more people.

¹¹². <http://www.tweetdeck.com/beta/>

¹¹³. <http://www.widgetbox.com/>

7. Offer Better Feeds

Not all approaches to putting content in front of more users have to be as time-consuming and complex as developing an API. Doing one other thing could increase your views within minutes.

Users increasingly rely on RSS feeds to consume content from websites. This is especially true for news, articles and blog posts. However, some website owners are so obsessed with driving traffic to their websites that they provide only teasers of their posts via RSS. To read a whole article, the user is forced to click through to the website.

This approach to RSS is counter-productive. When a user is browsing a large number of feeds, they are less likely to read your content if they have to leave their news reader to do it.

To maximize users' exposure to your content, ensure as much of it as possible is displayed in the RSS feed itself. Require users to click through only when absolutely necessary.



Google Reader¹¹⁴ (recently shut down) displaying a partial RSS feed: many websites truncate their content in RSS because their advertising revenue is based on page impressions. They see driving as much traffic as possible to their website as being in their interest. This is a short-sighted.

It is also important to note that when users read content from an RSS feed, they do not have the context of your website. Ensuring, then, that

¹¹⁴. <http://www.google.com/reader/view/>

your content stands on its own and that your copy incorporates calls to action is necessary.

8. Use Multimedia

Of course, limiting your content to the written word is becoming increasingly unnecessary. Creating audio and video content has become a trivial task. Services such as YouTube¹¹⁵ and applications such as Audio-Boo¹¹⁶ make production and hosting easy.

Also, pioneers like Diggnation¹¹⁷ and Wine Library TV¹¹⁸ have shown that users care more about quality content than high production values. Both shows essentially have presenters speaking to a single locked-off camera. This kind of production value can be achieved with a consumer camera and basic editing software.

That said, creating popular content is harder than it appears at first. Many organizations believe that simply uploading their latest product demonstrations to YouTube will generate millions of views. That is simply not the case.

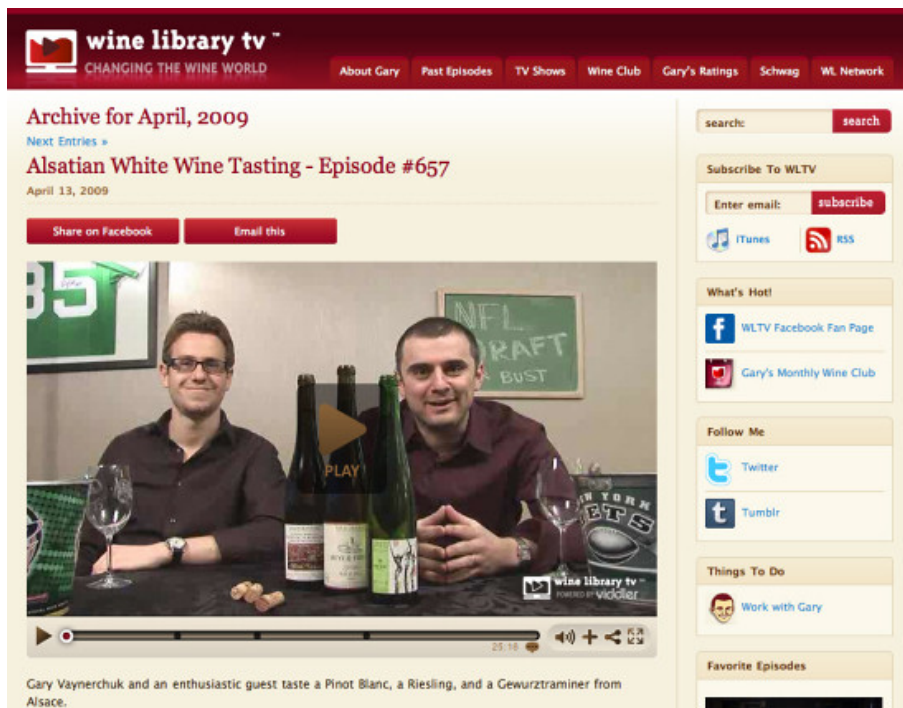
Good rich media content has to be engaging if people are expected to watch it and, more importantly, recommend it to their friends. This can be done through a passionate host, great content, humor or shock value. With thousands of videos uploaded everyday, standing out from the crowd is important.

¹¹⁵. <http://youtube.com>

¹¹⁶. <http://audioboo.fm>

¹¹⁷. <http://revision3.com/diggnation/>

¹¹⁸. <http://tv.winelibrary.com/>



Wine Library TV¹¹⁹ proves that great content and a passionate presenter are more important than production values.

However, don't forget that your content has to be appropriate to your target audience. Shock tactics may work well with a teenage audience but may not go down so well with middle-aged business executives!

9. Start Streaming

The next wave of multimedia on the Web will be not pre-recorded material but rather live streaming. Services such as Ustream¹²⁰, Qik¹²¹ and Justin TV¹²² are all fighting to dominate this space. Each offers the opportunity to stream live content on the Web at zero cost. This makes the barrier to entry extremely low.

The main benefit of this approach over pre-recorded material is interactivity. The live format allows viewers to engage with the presenter in real time via chat. This brings a host of opportunities, including, but not limited to, the following:

- **Live product demonstrations.**

Live streaming allows you present your products and services while

¹¹⁹. <http://tv.winelibrary.com/>

¹²⁰. <http://www.ustream.tv/>

¹²¹. <http://qik.com/>

¹²². <http://www.justin.tv/>

taking questions from the audience. This is considerably more powerful than showing pre-recorded promotional videos.

- **Community sessions.**

If you run an online community, live streaming gives you the chance to engage with that community on a much more personal level than with the written word. Social news website Digg has run a number of “Town Hall” meetings in which its user base engages directly with the CEO and founder.

- **Online training.**

Finally, live streaming is a perfect environment in which to provide remote training. Whether the training is on using your product or selling online workshops, live streaming allows users to both hear and see what you are doing.



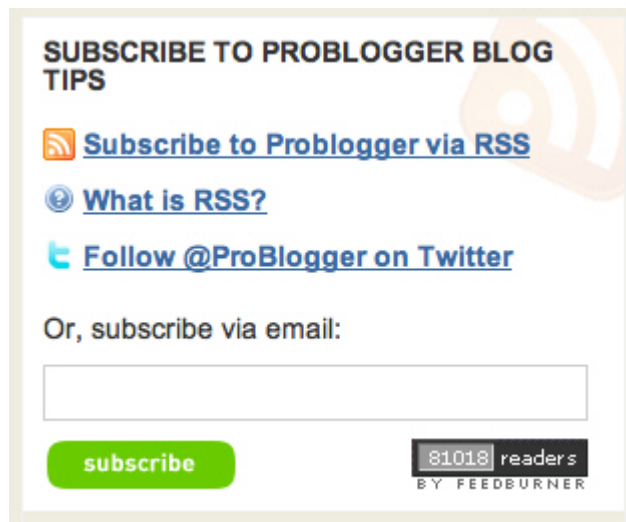
Social news website Digg has run a number of Town Hall meetings in which its user base engages directly with the CEO and founder.

Live streaming is still relatively immature, and few are taking advantage of this new opportunity. Your company has a real opportunity to differentiate itself through its use.

10. Don't Forget Email

Amidst all this talk of video, audio and APIs, it is easy to forget the tools we have always had for reaching beyond the confines of our website.

Although not the sexiest tool on our list, email had to make it on before the end of this chapter. Email should be a key tool for keeping your content in front of users. Obviously, email can be used for a lot more than syndicating content. However, for the purposes of this chapter, it can be used to subscribe to your content. If users can subscribe to your content via RSS, they should be able to do it also via email.



ProBlogger¹²³ allows its readers to subscribe to his RSS-feed via e-mail.

Fortunately, there are services such as AWeber¹²⁴ and MailChimp¹²⁵ that make this easy. FeedBurner¹²⁶ is an option, too; however, it lacks subject line customization and has very limited design customizations available. You can find more information about why FeedBurner isn't good enough in the article [FeedBurner's Free RSS-to-Email Syndication: Why You Can't Afford It](http://www.uxbooth.com/blog/feedburners-free-rss-to-email-syndication-why-you-cant-afford-it/)¹²⁷. With one of these services implemented, users can subscribe via email with a single click of a link on your website.

A word of warning, though. If a user subscribes to your content via email, they are not giving you permission to spam them indiscriminately. If you fail to respect their email subscription, you are in danger of losing that user and inciting them to post negative comments on your website, which could put off others.

¹²³. <http://www.problogger.net/>

¹²⁴. <http://aweber.com/?318292>

¹²⁵. <http://www.mailchimp.com/>

¹²⁶. <http://www.feedburner.com/>

¹²⁷. <http://www.uxbooth.com/blog/feedburners-free-rss-to-email-syndication-why-you-cant-afford-it/>

Conclusion

There was a time when a website was enough. Now, your website needs to be just one small part of your overall Web strategy. Expecting users to come to you is naive. Instead, take your content to them, whether on a social network like Facebook's or a mobile device like the iPhone. 🐦

About The Authors

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¹²⁸. <https://plus.google.com/102318046680468697385?rel=author>

¹²⁹. <http://www.straightnorth.com/internet-marketing>

¹³⁰. <http://www.straightnorth.com/web-development>

¹³¹. <https://twitter.com/bradshorr>

¹³². <http://cmccopywriters.co.uk>

¹³³. <http://cmccopywriters.co.uk/content-marketing>

¹³⁴. <http://cmccopywriters.co.uk/web-copywriters>

¹³⁵. <http://cmccopywriters.co.uk/ecommerce-copywriters>

¹³⁶. <https://twitter.com/cmccopywriters>

¹³⁷. <http://www.joshmedrano.com>

¹³⁸. <https://twitter.com/joshmedrano>

¹³⁹. <http://headscape.co.uk/>

¹⁴⁰. <http://boagworld.com/websiteownersmanual>

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¹⁴¹. <http://boagworld.com/books>

¹⁴². <http://boagworld.com/books/clientcentric/>

¹⁴³. <http://boagworld.com/podcast/>

¹⁴⁴. <http://markitekt.com>

¹⁴⁵. <http://conversionxl.com/blog>

¹⁴⁶. <http://www.webcopyplus.com/>

¹⁴⁷. <http://twitter.com/tadfry>

¹⁴⁸. <http://tadfry.com/articles>

¹⁴⁹. <http://getratio.com>

About Smashing Magazine

Smashing Magazine¹⁵⁰ is an online magazine dedicated to Web designers and developers worldwide. Its rigorous quality control and thorough editorial work has gathered a devoted community exceeding half a million subscribers, followers and fans. Each and every published article is carefully prepared, edited, reviewed and curated according to the high quality standards set in Smashing Magazine's own publishing policy¹⁵¹.

Smashing Magazine publishes articles on a daily basis with topics ranging from business, visual design, typography, front-end as well as back-end development, all the way to usability and user experience design. The magazine is – and always has been – a professional and independent online publication neither controlled nor influenced by any third parties, delivering content in the best interest of its readers. These guidelines are continually revised and updated to assure that the quality of the published content is never compromised.

About Smashing Media GmbH

Smashing Media GmbH¹⁵² is one of the world's leading online publishing companies in the field of Web design. Founded in 2009 by Sven Lennartz and Vitaly Friedman, the company's headquarters is situated in southern Germany, in the sunny city of Freiburg im Breisgau. Smashing Media's lead publication, Smashing Magazine, has gained worldwide attention since its emergence back in 2006, and is supported by the vast, global Smashing community and readership. Smashing Magazine had proven to be a trustworthy online source containing high quality articles on progressive design and coding techniques as well as recent developments in the Web design industry.

^{150.} <http://www.smashingmagazine.com>

^{151.} <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/publishing-policy/>

^{152.} <http://www.smashing-media.com>