

WRITE  
MORE  
GOOD

BY WAYNE GEYER

SOMETIMES, THE PERFECT HEADLINE MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN YOUR DESIGN. CHECK OUT THESE 4 STEPS FOR BRAINSTORMING AND WRITING FROM A DESIGNER TURNED COPYWRITER.

I started my career as a graphic designer. But at my first two studio jobs—and even in college—I was "the designer who writes." Now, as a freelance copywriter, I work almost exclusively with graphic design firms. And over the years, I've noticed a couple of things about designers and words.

First, a lot of designers tell me, "I wish I could write." But most of the time, their anxiety about expressing their ideas in words seems to stop them before they even get started.

I've also worked with a number of firms that claim to "do advertising" for their clients. But too often, their approach comes with some baggage. They rely too heavily on beautiful imagery and overly simplified messages, hoping that making their target audience feel good about the product or service is enough.

As a designer turned copywriter, I understand where my fellow creatives are coming from. I appreciate a visually driven ad as much as the next guy. And when it comes to communication, less is definitely more. Still, we're in the business of words and images. That means, sometimes, you just need to sit down and write some headlines and copy.

So, in this article, we'll look at four ways to improve your copywriting: defining a message; translating that message into headlines that push beyond puns; writing simple body copy for an ad; and editing your client's copy for clarity and style.

The good news is this: If you can write something boring, you've already completed the first step. If you can be a smartass, you're well on your way to writing headlines. And if you hate the phrase "world-class solutions" as much as I do, then chances are you can locate it in your clients' copy and come up with a suitable replacement.

Problem solved. You've written your way out of a wet paper bag—or at least out of that latest hot client project.

## DEFINE THE MESSAGE

"Where do I start?" you might ask. Well, let's start at the beginning. What are you trying to say? If you can clearly and plainly state the intended message, then you can define the problem. Of course, figuring out what to say can sometimes be harder than deciding how to say it. But defining your message is possibly the most important step in copywriting, and it can make it easier for you to come up with a creative solution. Think of the process of defining a message as a series of three steps;

- research or input
- distilling or refining
- identifying and stating the message

My research process probably isn't much different than that of most designers. I'm looking for interesting nuggets or details that stand out as potentially intriguing to an audience. At the same time, I'm filtering and distilling lots of information. As communicators, our job is to feed our audience information in bite-sized pieces—and in a particular order, I find it helpful to ask myself, "What does the audience need to hear?" I also ask, "What needs to be addressed in a separate campaign, or in a different medium, or not at all?" I like the way one Dallas agency describes the objective in its creative briefs: "What's the single most important thing we need to communicate?" More, often than not, it's some version of this answer that will become the big idea for a great campaign.

As you filter out the less important details, start writing out the message until it succinctly solves the communication problem. In fact, try writing it in five words or less. The end result might even sound like a tagline or slogan—but resist the urge to make it sound creative for creative's sake. You're looking for the essence of the problem. For example: "BMW's are **kmtodrive**."

Remember, you can't say everything in a single brochure, website or ad. You can only say one thing well. The client might want to talk about fun, fuel economy and luxury. Some of those talking points can be incorporated as secondary information. But for this exercise, gather, distill and refine until you've arrived at a singular thought.

## TRANSLATE THE MESSAGE

Once you can clearly state the intended message, you can start to explore creative ways to express it. Let's look at some techniques for creating headlines:

Headlines are simply a more interesting way of translating a plain, simple marketing message. So just start "thumbnailing" with words and see where it goes. If you're stuck (and you probably are, or you wouldn't have read this far), here are some guidelines:

**1 WRITE THE MOST BORING HEADLINE POSSIBLE**  
Again, it's about identifying the intended message first, and then worrying about how to dress it up. Once you've defined your message, it's easier to measure your creative ideas against that standard.

**2 USE THE FACTS IN YOUR FAVOR** The American Heart Association wanted some ads encouraging people to sign up for CPR courses. During the research and input stage of the process, the designer and I learned a few interesting facts. First, many people put off learning CPR because they fear having to help a stranger. Second, *of the* people who learn CPR, 80% actually end up helping a friend or family member. These two contradictor' points inspired this proposed all-type concept: "If you're worried about giving CPR to a stranger, relax. Odds are, it won't be a stranger."<sup>1</sup>

Too many times, designers will reject facts and figures as hard-sell. Conversely, they'll simply present them in a headline and expect the reader to infer their emotional impact. But it's all in how they're delivered. I think this example provides enough innuendo and surprise to let the reader participate in the message.

**3 BE THE SMARTASS IN THE BACK OF THE ROOM**  
Think of those dry, humorless facts that your client wants to mention as your high school history teacher. Let the facts be the "straight man," then counter with a "punch line" that cements your celebrity status in the yearbook (or maybe an advertising annual). I was once tasked with promoting a grand opening for a new location of "America's oldest jeweler." Part of the event was a display of rare pieces—including a "Philadelphia Bowl" designed to commemorate the signing of the Constitution. Normally, I might have dismissed the company's claim to being "America's oldest jeweler" as secondary information and instead focused on getting

customers in the door to see the collection. But I was intrigued by [the idea that "America's oldest jeweler" might have been around long enough to see the founding of America itself. So I found a way to combine both ideas. Our print ad showed a photo of the bowl with the following headline: "As America's oldest jeweler, one of our first clients was, of course, America."

A visual thinker could simply put a logo beneath a photo of the bowl, give the dates of the exhibit and call it a day. But why miss an opportunity to create a tone of voice for the brand? Best of all, clients love it when you can use their bragging points in such a direct, yet engaging way.

**4 HUMOR = SURPRISE** In his book "Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy," Jay Sankey breaks down the concept of humor to its essence: We laugh because we're surprised. So, if you want to write a funny headline, start by taking readers in one direction—and then surprise them. 'The Speedway Club at Texas Motor Speedway, for example, combines a country club atmosphere, with the excitement of live auto racing. Members get exclusive perks, including meeting the drivers. So when Dallas agency MasonBaronet and I teamed up on some ads to promote membership, one of the concepts we pitched featured a photo of NASCAR icon Jeff Cordon, along with this headline: "Giggle. Scream. Faint. Then introduce your wife."

This headline does a lot of work in just a few words. It lets the reader know that he can meet a driver, which speaks to the exclusive nature of the Speedway Club. It certainly connects with a fan's passion for the sport. And including the wife in the idea tells the reader that it's not just about beer and racecars.

**5 WHAT HAPPENED FIVE MINUTES BEFORE OR AFTER THE PRODUCT CAME ALONG?** Thinking visually for a moment, what does the world look like with or without your client's product or service? Remember the TV spot where a guy sprinkles Tabasco on his pizza, then gets bitten by a mosquito and the mosquito explodes in a ball of fire? I didn't work on that. But the message is clear—"Tabasco is really hot"—and the ad answers the question, "So, what happens five minutes (or even a few seconds) after we introduce this product into a given situation?"

## WRITE THE BODY COPY

You've written an arresting headline. You've got the perfect image and created a layout that captures the essence of the message. Your audience is on the hook. They're willing to read a little more. But the client has given you three pages of bullet points to incorporate. Fortunately, you know that your task is to stay focused. At the same time, don't just throw a URL at the bottom of the layout and waste a chance to create a dialogue. You need some copy. And for that, you need a plan. Here's a guide for getting your point across in just a few sentences:

**SENTENCE 1: PLAY OFF THE HEADLINE** Lead the reader into the body copy by restating your headline in a different way. Avoid writing a caption that simply repeats the main idea.

**SENTENCE 2: TURN THE CORNER** Brace yourself for the unpleasant business of actually having to sell a product or service. Then use this sentence to introduce that product or service.

**SENTENCE 3: ANSWER "SO WHAT?"** With your headline and visual, you've told the reader that your product is the answer to a problem they may have. Now, you need to link the product to some kind of benefit. What's in it for the reader?

**SENTENCE 4: TIE IT TOGETHER** Put a nice little bow on the whole package with a conclusion that recalls the headline and image, and restates the message.

**SENTENCE 5: CALL TO ACTION** Don't be afraid to ask the reader to do something. Buy, test drive, click, call or write a congressman. Don't expect warm, fuzzy typography to get them off their couches.

Give yourself bonus points (and lighten your layout) if you can do all of this in fewer than five sentences. Sometimes one line is all it takes to sell a benefit and summarize an idea. Just make sure (the reader understands what he or she needs to take away from your ad.

## SMOOTH THE COPY

Clients write their own marketing materials to save time and money. Unfortunately, the result is that the message often ends up being written from an insider's point of view rather than being written for a specific audience with a unique set of needs.

So when you open a text document that reads more like an overly inflated sales letter than a brochure, here are a few things you can do to re-position that copy so that it connects more closely with the customer:

**1 FIND THE STORY** Somewhere in that laundry list of credentials is a real emotional or financial message. People who read marketing materials are interested in

benefits—saving time, saving money, feeling empowered. These are the things your target wants to read about. Move them to the forefront, and convince your client to save the bragging for a sidebar.

**2 FIND THE FUNKY GRAMMAR** In their efforts to sound professional, many clients end up writing copy that's stilted, stuffy and formal. Even worse, they get themselves into some ridiculous grammatical situations, all in an effort to sound like they know what they're doing. One of my pet peeves is a sentence that starts with descriptive adjectives. "Scalable and robust; our world-class solutions provide ..." Your filter: Who talks like that? Instead, restructure the sentence so that it's more natural. "Our world-class solutions are scalable and robust." Then see item No. 3.

**3 LOSE THE JARGON** While you're cleaning up that awkward grammar, you might want to explain to your client that everyone and their mother sells "world-class, custom solutions." Business has a language all its own, and that language has no place in marketing communication. The whole point of branding is differentiation, so why let your clients use the same "me loo" vocabulary as everybody else? Grab a thesaurus, and find a better (read; more natural) word for "robust."

**4 SHIFT THE FOCUS** Again, we're talking to an audience, not to ourselves. Replace bullet points built on "we" and "our" to messages aimed at "you" and "your." Make it relevant to the reader. Speak to the benefits they want.

**5 SPELL IT OUT** Without insulting your reader's intelligence, don't hesitate to state your intended message plainly and directly. Ask for their business, their confidence and their trust. Tell them what you want them to know—in the context of their interests, Answer, "So what?"<sup>1</sup> To do this, I use a lot of what I call "transitional" words or phrases. These include, "in other words," "that means" or even, "so." Transitional words or phrases are cues to the reader that you're about to spell something out for them. Use them to get to the point for your audience.

Like an eye for typography or good drawing skills, writing is another craft that must be honed and exercised over time. But you can do it. You still might have to resist the urge to pick up the latest design annual for inspiration. That's OK—even I still sneak a peek now and then. ■■■

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