Kathy Lawrence

Making the most of copywriting in marketing

The power of words on the customer journey

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Contents

Preface

The value of this book for you

“Oh good grief. Yet more content in my mailbox.”

I feel your pain.

So a really quick explanation of what this book is and why it might be useful.

Successful marketing campaigns draw on the skills of many. Analysts, strategists, planners, managers, designers and more. Amongst those is the copywriter.

This book is about making the most of copywriting skills right across a campaign, from creating awareness to closing the sale, and onwards into a continuing, fruitful relationship.

Images attract attention but it’s the words that make the sale. That’s my view and you’ll find plenty more of my opinions scattered around this book. They’re the result of years of hands-on experience working both with agencies and directly with client organisations of all sizes, across multiple industries and geographies.

It's a short book. That means I've had to apply focus to my subject.

I've talked particularly about copywriting for large B2B sales where numerous influencers have to be convinced that the proposition is a valuable investment.

But there's useful stuff here for everyone. The ideas can work for both business and consumer audiences. They can apply just as well to a six-month intensive negotiation as an e-commerce sale that takes seconds.

That's the explanation.

Here's the book. I hope you enjoy it.

Chapter 1

Building blocks

Words are the key to the brand.

- Tone of voice
- Writing style
- Guidelines for all

“You’re who? About what?”

I regularly find that after the first contact with a marketing team about a project, I'm fired up and inspired to start writing copy straight away.

Fortunately, experience has proven that there are a few things to get straight before any writing begins.

Things like what the client's business is all about, what they sell, and the specific goals of a particular campaign. And why any of this would impress the chosen target market.

Agreeing these points, and then writing them down so everyone can read them and agree them again, makes for a much better chance of success first time around.

These documents are created under different names – copy briefs, copy platforms, project briefs – but their role is always to ensure the team are all working from the same place.

Let’s start with the brand.

Known to the general public as the “I can’t believe they’ve spent so much on designing a logo”, the brand means much more to everyone in marketing. It’s why the business exists, its ethos, and how it shows itself to the world in everything it does and says.

Within that framework, “tone of voice” is how the business speaks. Anything from quirky and direct to grave and weighty, the tone of voice reflects how the business feels it can best connect with its customers and stakeholders. And tone of voice can be applied right across the organisation, in written communications and in how people talk to customers, partners, media and each other.

A copywriter writes the best copy if there are clear guidelines on tone of voice. And if an organisation isn’t clear about those guidelines, then the first task is to work out together what the tone of voice will be.

It’s also important to understand the products, the services and the business.

In my ideal world I’d be taking a tour of the factory, a flight in the jet, a day in the spa – whatever gets me under the skin of the client’s business. In a not-so-perfect world I have to satisfy my quest for knowledge by asking the right questions. Not just about what the business is and what it offers, but why it believes that it deserves to have customers.

The third thing to clarify is the role of the campaign. Is it simply to raise awareness of the business? Introduce a new product or service? Make a time-limited offer? And what action do we want the reader to take after seeing the message?

Get all these aspects set down before the project starts and progress will be far less bumpy.

Chapter 2

The big hello: marketing campaigns

Getting the conversation started.

- Email campaigns
- Print and post
- Ads

“You didn’t know you wanted to hear from us, but you’ll be glad you did ...”

The customer journey in this book is going to start with the marketing campaign. Online, in print, by phone or in person, it's about telling a specific, segmented audience about a product or service that is going to help them do their jobs better in some way.

These are the campaigns that focus on one important message. They might be selling something tangible and obvious – upgrade to our new servers because of all these benefits. They might be about the brand – come to our golf day and feel good about us and yourself. They might be a special offer – buy now and save.

Who's the audience?

Knowing the audience is key. In the days when print reigned supreme, I'd ask whether the audience for the piece I was writing was technical or business, and whether it was aimed at workers at the coalface, management or board level. The answer would invariably be "Well, yes, all of those really".

With HTML emails, we can be smarter. I'll often write four or six different versions of the same story to tailor the message to the needs and aspirations of different groups of people. For example, I'll put efficiency and ease of use as top benefits for technical managers, but promote improvements to the bottom line for C-level readers.

What do we say?

With marketing campaigns we're usually working on a series of communications to drive the message home and elicit some action. So I would write an introductory piece, with a follow-up, and maybe a "last-minute" reminder for time-limited offers.

How much do we say?

Given that our audience probably didn't know they wanted to hear what we have to say, we've got to get in there fast to convince them to read on. Every word has to work hard for its pixels.

So I keep it short. I start with benefits and keep talking about benefits. I give just enough detail to make this sound like a proposal that could work.

And together with the designer I make the call to action big, bold and clear.

What I don't believe we should do is get over-excited by the number of calls to action. It's tempting to stuff an email with video, case studies and white papers, but to start with, I like to keep it simple or we can lose the message.

I prefer to invite the reader to click to find out why this offer gives them the benefit they need. That might be to cut costs, bring new efficiencies to the order process, reduce maintenance time, make them look great to their team - or any other relevant, honest and persuasive possibility.

I believe...

Sales campaigns have to be very clear about answering a need or an aspiration, or the potential customer will just move on, slightly puzzled.

Chapter 3

The click's the thing: heading for the landing page

Every step on the journey leads to the next.

- The full proposition
- The reasons why to buy
- The clear call to action

*“Now we’ve got your attention,
let us tell you more”*

If we're going to the effort of grabbing people's attention with a marketing campaign, then we absolutely have to follow through. Waving them off vaguely to the home page to find their own way to offers is Totally Not Helpful.

What do we say?

The landing page is a key part of a marketing campaign. It follows up what we've said in the ad, the direct mail, the flyer. It gives more detail. It answers immediate questions. It makes it incredibly easy to pick up the phone to ask further questions, arrange a meeting or, if the offer is simple, head straight to the ordering process.

How much do we say?

We've piqued people's interest enough to get them here, so let's do some serious convincing.

We need some text to expand the message. And we can make supporting information available from this page. Brochures, case studies, talking heads, product specs, white papers and market reports can all help to strengthen the argument. Some of these may be readily available, others may need to be written. But I recommend choosing links wisely, and introducing them on the page to make them relevant to the reader in this context.

I'd rather see this supporting collateral on the campaign's landing page than in the email. It's easier for the reader to stay on track and be guided along the path to purchase if we keep it simple.

I believe...

"Find out more" should actually mean *more*. A potential customer who follows a link to a website or brochure and finds exactly the same copy is an abandoned purchase waiting to happen.

Chapter 4

Take a deeper look: it’s all here on the website

It’s all about why this business and not another.

- What it is and what it stands for
- Offers and their benefits
- How it works for customers

“This is who we are and what we do”

At this point the key is to keep potential buyers in the funnel to move them directly to the buy button.

That's naturally easier with established customers who already know and trust the business.

New customers are more likely to want to look around for themselves. They'll be expecting it to be easy to:

- **Find out more** about the business, if they don't know it already
- **Discover** how capable the business is at delivering on its promises
- **Buy** instantly or get in touch to talk more

That means that when a visitor does take a diversion away from the landing page, the rest of the website has to make sense to them in the context of the campaign, as well as (of course) being a brilliant, informative site for all comers.

What do we say?

Good navigation's a must and good designers will make that happen.

As a side-effect of a copywriter's despair at clichés, it's tempting to suggest tab titles that are different. But people have come to expect tabs like "About", "Products", "FAQs" and "Contact", so that's what we should give them.

Then we have to look at what we say on those pages. And for every page, every paragraph, even every sentence, we need to think about why our readers would want to know this.

How much do we say?

A website page has no word limit. But the more we say, the less likely the reader will be to get to the end. And vast quantities of content can become unmanageable and – worse – start to age. There's nothing like out-of-date content for losing a potential sale.

Packaging website content into easy-to-assimilate chunks makes sense. We keep it short and focus on the benefits. We provide further dropdowns or links to data sheets and white papers for the more technical reader. We point to case studies for proof of capabilities.

And we shouldn't forget to actually explain what the business is and what it provides, not just in the "About" section but on the home page. It's surprising how many times companies have to be reminded to tell people what they actually do.

There is one page that causes more headaches for designers and copywriters than any other, because it regularly defies tone of voice guidelines. That's the profiles of directors and board members.

These are generally supplied without permission to meddle. So the best we can do is check for grammar and fit them into a common font.

I believe...

Websites that have a lot to say can get in too deep, too fast. Writing from the bottom up can avoid that. Write the detail first, and then the overarching summaries.

Chapter 5

Downloads and handouts: collateral makes the difference

Use it to prove it.

- Brochures
- Case studies
- References
- White papers
- Data sheets
- Presentations

“Whatever you need to know, we can tell you”

White papers, data sheets and product specs. Not sexy but actually very fulfilling in different ways.

The more information a business can give its customers, the greater chance that they will believe they are making the right choice. And the stronger the business case they can put together to convince stakeholders and decision makers.

These are documents that need to work in print and on the website. Online and offline layouts may be different, so we need to think about whether the words – titles, lengths of sections, and box-outs for example – need to change too.

At the same time it’s useful to remember that hard-copy documents grow a life of their own. We can’t control where they end up, who will read them, or how long they will be kept. So we need to make sure they work as standalone sales tools, complete with a description of the business, contact details, and date of publication.

What do we say?

This is about backing up the sales messages with the hard facts in digestible form. It's a longer, more detailed way of telling the story. And it's collateral for people who want to spend time getting to the heart of the detail.

It's very easy to "put the boring voice on" when we're talking about the details. But copy can still be clear, easy to navigate, and directed at a real human being.

How much do we say?

References and case studies prove our point

This is the story in action. The chance to prove that the promises come true.

References and case studies are a great example of the same information being applied in two different ways for different purposes.

References are a sales tool, used mostly by organisations responding to requests for proposals to prove their expertise and experience. When I write references I talk to the sales or account manager to find out about the customer, their needs, how those needs were met, and the benefits of the solution and the relationship. I write knowing that several of these references will form a chapter in a much bigger document that will be shared only with a prospective customer, so I keep the story to the point and write around a page of A4, depending on what there is to say.

Case studies are a sales tool too, but with a different role. Case studies are invaluable. They're publicly available and prove capabilities to potential customers who want to know that my client is up to the job. It's proof because it's the actual end customer who's telling the story and providing the quotes.

In creating case studies I build on the interview that's already taken place with my client's sales or account manager to find the background to the story, but then I interview the actual customer. Their input on why they chose to work with my client, what my client achieved on their behalf, and the resultant benefits are at the heart of the case study. That means of course that the end customer has to be fully involved in the process, by agreeing to the story, being interviewed, and providing permission to publish.

Because these stories are likely to be dropped into a designed PDF format, it's good to have a limit on the word count. A double-sided A4 including headings, quotes and image works pretty well.

Writing case studies can be a pleasure for all concerned. It's good to have a conversation with people who are enthusiastic about the challenges and successes in their work, and they're generally delighted to find someone who wants to hear about them.

Brochures are the complete package

Brochures make great standalone pieces that tell the whole story of the product or service within the context of the business. And stories flow from the hook at the beginning to the conclusion at the end.

A brochure looks at the challenges for customers, how they can resolve the issues, and why my client is the best choice to deliver the solution. It may not be a hard sell but the underpinning message is that my client's approach has too many benefits to ignore.

Data sheets and white papers

A double-sided data sheet is a handy document to give the basic but necessary facts.

White papers can be as long as the technical folk think they should be.

As a copywriter, I can shape the format and make the words as clear as possible. But technical documents need the input of the technical experts, so it’s a partnership.

Occasionally experts and brand guidelines do butt heads, so a copywriter with a sideline in diplomacy is a great asset.

Presentations

We’re talking about support documents for face-to-face meetings now, rather than downloads from the web. They’re a great asset for salespeople, provided they’re actually meeting their needs. And no one knows if they do unless someone asks the sales team what they need.

The most effective strategy is to create a deck for the new product or service that slots seamlessly into the company’s overarching deck. Presenters can pick and choose the slides they need for each customer situation. Because the branding is clear, no one can see the joins.

What I always find strange though, is a common determination to ignore the Notes sections when people create the slides. It's generally agreed that slide text should be as brief as possible, so the audience doesn't slip off into reading rather than listening. That means the presentation's authors should use the Notes section to add all the additional information that makes that slide work, regardless of who is talking around it. Without it, decks are limited in their persuasiveness.

I believe...

The reuse, recycle, repurpose mantra has served well for some time now. But to keep customers from utter boredom, it's important to remember the term is "repurpose" - not "endlessly copy and paste".

Chapter 6

Feeling loved beyond the sale: building relationships

Keeping communication open.

- Newsletters
- Offers

“This is just the beginning. Sign up, follow, log in and hear about more great stuff”

Loyalty can't be assumed, and businesses have to work hard to build long-term, successful customer relationships. It's long been said that retaining customers is a much lower cost activity than finding new ones, and marketing is in a good place to help.

Keeping in touch in some way reminds customers that the business is still here and has more to offer now and into the future. Major customers will be assigned account managers, but for any size of customer, maintaining contact by print or email is a low-cost way of opening the door to further sales.

What do we say?

Newsletters are a great choice for keeping the relationship bubbling along – provided there is enough useful information to go into them.

If someone in the organisation wants to start a customer newsletter for a particular sector, it's worth talking about their ideas for content for the next few issues. If they can't fill three issues, the newsletter is going to fade away just as it's getting started. That's not good for credibility.

While customers will in some way have given you permission to drop the missive in their inbox, it doesn't mean they're anxiously awaiting news or will even welcome it. So it's important to choose subjects judiciously. Do they want to know there's a new reception in a minor office? If they never go there, probably not. Do they want to know that there's a new support number for UK customers? Definitely.

Quality of content is really important. Everything that a business sends to its customers should support the brand, and be well thought out, intelligently crafted and meaningful.

Sometimes we want to highlight one key offer. That becomes a campaign in its own right, and we're back at the beginning of this book, looking at how to attract attention and move customers through the purchasing journey.

How much do we say?

As with every communication, newsletters need to be written on the basis that there is a limit to time and attention. Although customers may have signed up for the newsletter, they still need to be persuaded to read. An introduction, tasters of one or two informative new stories on the blog, maybe a couple more links to popular older features, and a signoff, make a newsletter that is probably more than enough.

I believe...

That we need to step into the customers' shoes and scrutinise every story we want to publish with the question, "So what?" If the answer is "Errrm", we don't use the story.

Chapter 7

How do you do content?

Where copywriting fits into content management.

- High-quality writing
- Copyediting for tone of voice and accuracy

“You have got to see this”

“Content” is a shortish word that covers a huge jumble of words and images, from the brilliantly valuable, through the entertaining, to, sadly in some cases, the dregs of the barrel.

The aim of content for a business is to create an online “billboard” of interesting ideas that will attract followers, spark conversations within communities, and make stories for journalists.

What do we say?

As a copywriter, as opposed to a content producer, I am interested here in the words that a business would be proud to publish on its blog and trumpet to the world.

This is less about creating an overt sales message and more about promoting the credibility and authority of the business within its market, as well as creating greater brand awareness.

In the business-to-business world I believe content needs to have some element of value for the recipient. So just being hip or funny isn't enough. There needs to be some form of information sharing that helps a customer to do their job more effectively.

In many organisations members of the company team are encouraged to write blogs and articles. That's fantastic if it works because these are the people who understand the business. How the copywriter can help is by looking at the content from the outsider's point of view to feed back on areas that aren't as clear as they could be. A copywriter can also lightly edit the copy to ensure it adheres to brand guidelines.

There is plenty of brilliant content out there that doesn't need the input of a copywriter, from infographics to movies and more. Although, of course, there's nothing that can't be improved with a spot of checking for typos, errors and branding consistency.

How much should we say?

When I was masterminding a website that was essentially a collection of contributed blogs from experts and inhouse staff, I asked for 700-1000 words. Less, and there wasn't enough room to say anything truly useful. Longer, and you could start to see the padding appear.

I believe...

Asking a writer to create content without giving them access to inhouse subject specialists is totally bizarre. Let the experts work together to create something the customer will want to read.

Chapter 8

Doing a David Attenborough

“Think. Write. Think. Review. Think. Send.”

This book may finally appear as a slimline discussion of the copywriting role, but there's been a great deal of writing, discarding, rewriting and editing taking place over months to get to this point.

As it's a book about the writing process, I thought it would be useful to emulate David Attenborough's approach at the end of his brilliant programmes about life on this planet, and explain more about what went on behind the scenes. I don't have the deep sea divers or the fearless producers, but explaining why this book is written the way it is may provide useful insights.

1. Staying true to the audience

I started this project by creating personas. These are the people that I believe will find this topic useful. Once I'd described them in writing, I attempted to keep them in mind throughout the writing. But see point 2.

2. Staying true to the topic

I once asked author Libby Purves if the characters in her latest novel had behaved according to her plan. She replied interestingly that they hadn't. One character had been destined to die early in the novel, but he just refused to do so and ended up as a leading character.

If it sounds a little odd that fiction writing can take on a life of its own, then it might seem positively weird that a non-fiction book can behave in the same way.

But once you're in the flow, the fingers take over and the text forges a path of its own. There's a temptation to cover everything you've ever learned and experienced. Doing that is an indulgence though, and I've removed a huge amount of content from this book to keep the focus.

It's the same process for keeping the audience in mind. If it's not relevant to the people the author is aiming to reach, it has no place in the book.

3. Too chummy or plain bossy?

Throughout most of this book I've written as if you, the marketing specialists, and I are a team already, talking about how "we" can rise to the challenge of marketing campaigns.

That's partly because I've seen enough content telling people what they should do to last well into my dotage. All those articles about "21 things you should do before you get out of bed in the morning", "Here's why you need to completely change the way you work", and "Reasons why you need to attend three conferences a week if you want to stay relevant" can be hugely frustrating, overbearing and even patronising. I don't want that.

It's also a great way to keep the writing active, rather than passive. If I write "this needs to be done", there's no sense of who needs to do it. If I say "we need to do this", it's taking responsibility for making stuff happen.

On the other hand, one of my editors argues that using “we” in written conversation with people you/we don’t even know yet is presumptive and suggests that a relationship already exists. I hope you don’t find it so, as I’ve gone for “we” anyway. I work with marketers and agencies as part of their team, so I think “we” makes sense.

4. Creating a journey

I wanted this book to be a useful read from start to finish, but also something that you can dip into at any point.

As the subject is the customer journey, that’s been an obvious path for the book to follow.

I’ve aimed to keep the chapters fairly short, with consistent headlines to make the flow obvious and the arguments easy to follow.

To introduce the main body of the book, I’ve begun with an explanation of what the book is about and the benefits you could gain from reading it. I’m going to end it with reasons to believe in me. And, while not making a major issue about the call to action, you will find contact details if you'd like to discuss your copywriting requirements.

The chapters are of different lengths. Consistency is great, but, on the other hand, shaking things up a little keeps life more interesting. Chapter 5 on collateral is particularly long compared to the others. I thought about breaking this chapter out into separate areas, but rejected the plan as it didn't fit the flow.

5. Copyediting and proofreading

The copyediting and proofreading process is about working through a piece of writing to check for sense, consistency and correctness.

Having worked in publishing, I understand that when an author has worked hard on a piece, it's easy to become protective about it. Typo corrections are welcomed, but constructive criticism about direction and style are harder to take. It's a brave and diplomatic copyeditor/proofreader who can do the really useful job of arguing for change. (Mine were brave, put up with the sulking and foot stamping, and maintained a cheery exterior throughout.)

I've taken this writing and editing process in several stages.

The first round of feedback was to comment on the content direction. Would the readers understand what the book was about from the first? Did the flow work? Were there irrelevant passages or chapters? Was there anything missing? Importantly, did the title work?

The second round came once I'd incorporated (or dismissed) the proffered feedback, and this became a closer look at spelling, grammar, punctuation, consistency of style and areas of repetition.

Then we laid out the book into the design. At this point it became a proofreading exercise, checking that the pages and formatting worked. It's generally a good tip to print off any copy and look at it in a different context. It's surprising how many new issues come to light.

At the end of that process we published.

Chapter 9

Who am I to tell you what to do?

"That's how I write. Now here's the who, what, when and why."

I'm Kathy Lawrence - an established freelance copywriter, editor and journalist. I work under the Wrightwell brand.

Before launching my copywriting career, I graduated in Management Sciences from the University of Warwick, worked in sales and marketing at a large UK tech company, trained as a journalist, and was editor of a business technology magazine. Today I live and work in Surrey in the UK.

Having been in the copywriting business for 30 years, I've had plenty of time to write for a wide range of organisations in many market sectors, from startups to globals.

Below are a few of the businesses that have used my words for websites, direct mail in print and digital, corporate magazines, newsletters, brochures, white papers, market surveys and reports, case study programmes, references, data sheets, brand books, blogs, ads, and more.

Tech

- Aerohive
- Agovo
- Cameo
- Deltascheme
- IBM
- Interxion
- Oracle
- Phoenix
- Proofpoint
- Red Box Recorders
- Spendvision
- Symantec
- Xerox

Communications

- BT
- Vodafone

Healthcare

- Actelion
- LaserVision
- Shire
- Stallergenes Greer
- Veriton

Retail

- Motorola and Zebra

Financial

- FICO
- Montfort
- Qualco

Eldercare

- When They Get Older

Small business

- Propitas
- Surefire Print

Marketing

- Repucom
- Stellar Search

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