

Seven rules for making words count on your business web-pages. Helpful hints from a writer who understands.

Words on the Web

1. Website copy

Millennium cyber-boom turned to bust; but what did we learn? Not enough, judging from a many of today's business websites... The experience of dotcom meltdown confirmed that business success depends on substance rather than hype - there is no future in powerful advertising that can't deliver. Despite the headline crashes, web-trading continues and grows, though most business websites are still failing to deliver significant results. So far, the winners in web-trading are businesses who have learned some extra tricks, but had already established themselves through traditional trading methods.

The Internet is not traditional. It is a new medium that demands new rules of combat. Poised between printed magazines and broadcast television, web marketing uses elements from both media, plus new features of its own. Like printed magazines, it combines words and images; like television, it is beamed remotely to users who choose what they see by clicking buttons. Unlike TV or printed media, Internet marketing is open and affordable for businesses of all levels, whether multi-nationals in prestigious concrete-and-glass towers or sole traders in home offices. It is the most democratic and the most universal communication medium that the world has seen, allowing us to broadcast to a world-wide audience our sales messages, our prejudices and our mistakes.

Yes; you can make yourself look very silly in front of a large number of people. Errors with your graphics may cause site visitors to grimace; spelling and grammar goofs will make them laugh at you. This medium is not yet mature, and nothing shows its immaturity more than the standard of word usage on the web. Forget, for the moment, the whiz-bang sites of super-traders and look at the companies listed in your local Yellow Pages. All types of businesses have websites these days - after all, it costs less to publish a web-page than to place a small ad in a local newspaper. Because it is cheap and easy, web publishing is often treated casually. Take a look.

Your website may look pretty, with smart navigation bars and well-chosen pictures. But it is words that tell customers the information they need. Words are not *as* important as the pictures, they are *more* important. True, you can destroy a site's image by over-use of visual effects, but that is rarely the problem with small business websites. The quality of the text determines whether your site is taken seriously; 'sticky content' matters, so you need to choose words with care.

Let me give you a few simple rules.

Rule 1. Get the spelling and grammar right

If you are no good at spelling and grammar don't display your ignorance to the world. Use your spell-checker, of course, but people who rely on Microsoft to correct their English are soon shown up by mid-Atlantic terminology. Learn how to do it right but, in the meantime, get someone else to check your text or even to write it for you.

Rule 2. Web visitors are impatient - reward them with quick headlines

High Street behaviour applies on the net - people look at your shop window (the Home Page) then wander in to browse the shelves. If something catches their interest they look closer. If they don't find what they want, they walk out.

Rule 3. Keep Home Page text to the minimum

Say just enough to index your site, but avoid details. Most visitors are browsing and you need to win your audience before blasting them with too many words. Separate casual visitors from committed enthusiasts, rewarding the committed with shortcuts to all the information they could wish for, but sparing casual visitors the deepest mysteries of your trade. An over-wordy Home Page will frighten away many of the people who searched for your page and *all* of the people who found it by accident. Don't hit visitors with an encyclopaedia of industry jargon as soon as they click on your site.

Rule 4. Create a hierarchy-

Build your message through a hierarchy of pages that draws potential clients into your territory. Click one should provide headlines and small, but attractive images (Home page); click two should expand the details on the visitor's selected subject; click three should give them the full story.

Rule 5. When they get to the substance, give them an easy read

Why do you need that extra sentence? Does that exclamation mark increase the impact, or make you look trivial? Avoid the kind of sentences that need re-reading. Be descriptive, but avoid clichés ("excellent!" is not a description). Trim out unnecessary adjectives and almost all adverbs (if you feel the need to add an "-ly" word, you have probably chosen the wrong verb). Keep paragraphs brief so readers can focus easily. They can mark their place with a finger if they are reading a book, but website copy is on-screen.

Rule 6. Use readable language in the right style for your subject

When you get to the meat of your message - product specifications, service descriptions, technical details and client appraisals - you can pile on the words. But keep it readable. Give each subject a beginning, a middle and an end, just like a good story. Choose appropriate descriptive words that make your point without over-hyping the subject or using excess words. Write in an appropriate style and, if you're not sure how, see how professional writers handle language in your industry's magazines. Edit, and edit again to cut out unnecessary, ambiguous or long winded text. Recognise the relative difficulty of reading from a computer screen, compared with a magazine.

Rule 7. If you don't have the right skills, get someone else to write your copy

Recognise your own limitations and that quality counts. Writing is as much an art as drawing and painting, and no technology replaces artistic flair. If you can't draw you wouldn't exhibit your doodles in an art gallery. So why put your untrained word-skills on public display? But, if you have a way with words - welcome to the web.

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