



# The Write Way

Becoming a Successful Writer

Susan Crossman

# *The Write Way*

**By Susan Crossman**

## **The Magic of Marketing**

The head of the marketing agency I wanted to work for leaned back in his chair and lit another cigarette. He squinted at me through the choking haze of smoke swirling around his head and he gave me a keen, appraising look. I had set up this interrogation weeks earlier when the agency's Vice-President told me I had passed the first round of interviews and it was up to The Boss to either green light or deep-six my application. We were only three minutes into the interview and already it wasn't looking good.

The Boss finally leaned forward in his chair and, still squinting, said nothing. I was reminded of Clint Eastwood in one of those cheesy old Western movies. Clint would squint mercilessly at the landscape, too, and then head out to gun down a whole town full of nasty characters. Although I was wearing, as I recall, a cream coloured suit with a pretty turquoise blouse, I wondered, for a moment, if I actually looked like someone of evil intent. This interview was not getting any better.

A massive cup of coffee balanced precariously on a tall and very messy stack of papers on the edge of The Boss's desk, and a jumbled bookshelf off to the left invited my attention. A gumball machine stood on a stand in one corner of the office and a heavy stressed leather jacket had been flung, artistically, almost, over the chair beside me. And still he said nothing.

I sat and looked around the room, pretending that this kind of silence between two strangers was a perfectly normal part of my professional career. I wondered what on Earth this

guy was thinking. It was the verbal equivalent of waiting for someone to blink and I was determined not to be bullied into blinking. The Boss needed a copywriter. I was, at the very least, a writer, and I had experienced quite a lot of success in my field, up until that very brittle moment in time. Fresh from a year off as a new mother, I was looking for a job that did not require a lengthy commute and I figured, in the cocky way of the very young, that I could do anything. Even write marketing copy. Even without any experience. Even without any training.

How hard could it be?

I leaned back comfortably in my own chair and crossed my ankles, as I had been taught to do as a young girl. I casually leaned down and tugged my portfolio out of the battered briefcase I had dug out of the bottom of a closet, and I set the accordion file containing my clips on the only corner of the desk that had not been attacked by the kind of creeping clutter that begs for professional attention. I waited. He waited.

Finally, after what seemed like enough time to finish seven innings of an average baseball game, the great man spoke.

“So?” he said.

“So?” I repeated. It would have been nice if he could smile, and I thought he might have quite a nice face if he ever deigned to wrestle it into a cheerful expression. As it was, he looked dour and critical. He had a beard and a mustache, hair down to his shirt collar and gray-blue eyes that were framed by exceedingly long eyelashes. He was tall and lanky. Graceful. Possibly sleep deprived. What on Earth did this man want?

“So you say you’re a writer.” It was a question. Not a very nice one.

“I *am* a writer,” I said archly. He instructed me to pull out my best clips and I did. Feature articles from the London Free Press, a daily newspaper. Feature articles from Canadian Press, the nation’s newswire service. Press releases, speeches and media backgrounders from the Ontario Ministry of Health, THE largest provincial ministry. In. All. Of. Canada. One after another I pulled them out of my file and pushed them across the desk for his review. After approximately 184 seconds he looked at me and snarled.

“What is this crap?” he asked. My heart sank. It was the best I could do, in point of fact, and plenty of people had told me it was great stuff.

My introduction to marketing was less than stellar. But I got the job anyway. What followed was three years of metaphorical head-banging and actual hand-wringing, loud arguments and quiet consolations, discussions, explanations, frustrations and breakthroughs as I teased out of my reluctant mentor the strategies and techniques that were to turn me into a solid marketing copywriter. He patently did not want to teach me. But I was the best he had found and, dad gummit, he was going to work with me.

The problem, dear readers, is that writing marketing copy is nothing like writing news articles or press releases or briefing notes. Those communication vehicles require, more or less, little more than the solid recitation of factual information. They require great research and interview skills, a nice way

with people, a solid sense of how to organize information and a terrific command of the written language. A little wide-eyed guile doesn't hurt. And a plan is essential. It's not that it's easy to do all of the above. It's just that it's much easier than writing hard core marketing copy.

There were many times during my marketing apprenticeship all those years ago when I felt my heart tackled by terror and my legs gripped by a strong urge to run. Was I ever going to figure this out? On many panicked mornings, as I drove to the office, it seemed unlikely. And I did. Finally.

It would have helped to have had a little context from which to work and so I'll pass along to you my favourite definition of marketing. Actually, it's my own definition, and one I developed after the umpteenth person asked me, "So, what is marketing, anyway? I would love to help you avoid some of the struggle I experienced before I landed on this key piece of information. Marketing seems to be a monolithic topic, full of mystery and mayhem, and it is certainly a vast subject area that one could spend decades exploring. Some people do.

But at its heart, marketing is quite simple: it encompasses all of the activities you need to do in order to start conversations with people who are likely to buy from you. Like create a website, a Linked In profile, a You Tube video or a direct mail piece. Or maybe launch an email marketing or pay per click campaign, deliver a speech, write a blog or send out a newsletter. The possibilities are endless and most of them require you to write something.

Writing strong marketing copy requires you to give up any illusion you have ever had about what is important in the

world. Because most of us assume that what's important to us is important to other people as well. We think that we need to send our potential customers avalanches of information that tell them how amazing we are. **Gong!**

When you're writing your web content, or any marketing material, really, you rarely want to write about how great you are. Because your perfect client doesn't really want to hear about you. Your perfect client wants to hear words that demonstrate how well you understand the agony he or she is going through in getting through just one more day of their lives without the assistance you can provide. They want to know that you understand, down to the smallest detail, how much they are suffering. They want a ray of hope in a bleak world.

**They want to know that you understand their pain.**

But first of all you have to know who "they" are.

**Rule number one in writing your web and other marketing content is to figure out who is going to buy what you're selling.**

The answer is not "everybody." Nor is it "anybody." Out there, somewhere, is a demographic of individuals who are the perfect recipients of what you have to offer. And the more narrowly you can define them, the easier it is to get them to flock to your product or service. Trust me on this one.

You want to know things like how old they are, what they do in life, what kind of car they drive and how old it is. Automatic or standard transmission? Maybe they prefer public transit because it's better for the environment. Do they have

kids or grandchildren, a university education or a desire to improve the world? The more you know about your perfect customer, the more you can address their problems.

Which is where the pain part comes in.

What keeps them up at night? How are they suffering? What do they want more of or less of? What makes them crazy and what makes their heart sing? You want to crawl inside the skin of your perfect customer and wear their lives so you know, really *know*, down at the drooling, bended knee pit of their worst day, how you can help them get back on the fast track, where they really belong.

And what *can* you do to help?

While you're lying on your belly on the floor beside your perfect customer, and they are stifling whimpers of frustration as they manfully pretend there is nothing wrong, you want to gently, very gently, paint for them a picture of how you can help their miserable wind-sucking problem disappear into thin air so you can transform their world into a complete masterpiece of comfort and delight.

Of course you are never, Ever going to lie to anyone in your web copy. Always Tell the Truth. Which requires a little work on your part because you need to figure out what the Truth actually is, and that's why you need to go through an in-depth branding exercise before you even consider writing your own web copy.

What is your Truth?

For Pity's Sake, Brand Yourself! You need to find out what it is you do that no one else can do, and for this you need

to go through a branding process. This is a microbial course of discovery in action that many entrepreneurs and business people sidestep because it is so much bloody darned work. It requires a level of self-analysis that borders on therapy. It is time-consuming and, if you do it with the assistance of a branding expert, it does cost money.

And it is worth every dime. Knowing the ins and outs of your brand delivers a wealth of information that is exceedingly useful in developing your web or other marketing copy. What do you offer and why is it better? Who do you serve and how do you serve them? What are your competitive advantages? What are you less adept at delivering? What promises do you and your brand make to your customers and clients? How much do you charge? And so much more!

If you're hiring a copywriter, you can hand all of that written, codified branding information over to him or her and avoid the need for in-depth interviews or time-consuming telephone conversations that might start with the lurching, painstaking question, "So...what exactly do you *do*?" Your branding documentation explains the whole schmeer in minute detail and gives your copywriter (and your graphic designer, by the way), a passel of priceless information that can help them present you precisely the way you need to be portrayed.

As a copywriter with years of experience and a mountain of exclusive training behind me, I can make highly educated and extremely intelligent guesses about what your brand might be. I'm right a great percentage of the time. But do you really want to leave the definition of your business over to someone who is not you? What if you chance to hire a writer who *doesn't* have the scars, bruises and haggard appearance that

summarize a life of learning marketing the hard way? What if they are full of confidence and bravado, and sit before you with clean fingernails and a collection of really great bohemian scarves...only to tell you they think it would be a great idea to highlight your previous job experience on the Home page of your website?

There might be times when that's a great idea. But generally, **NO!** Don't do it!

Talk about your perfect client's biggest challenges. And mention how you can make their life better.

### **Technicalities**

There's a lot of technical information available on the web that is about as captivating to read as a university text book. And some very smart people get paid enormous amounts of money to research, analyze and quantify marketing information for those very same textbooks. There is a place for that. But most small business owners are light on their feet and low to the ground. They don't have a lot of time to spend on anything other than revenue generating activities. They want the straight goods and they want to know where to spend their time and money so they get the biggest bang for the buck.

So what are the straight goods of marketing copywriting? Aside from the points we've covered above, here's what I've learned:

#### **Use great headlines.**

- They keep people reading.
- Action words are good, too (e.g. "Supercharge Your Sales!")

- Numbers work well (e.g. "The Five Expert Secrets of Writing to Sell")
- Words that speak to results are effective (e.g. "Double Your Revenue in Three Months or Less")
- And ask questions (e.g. "Are These Writing Mistakes Costing You Money?")

There is currently some debate as to whether it's a good idea to use your keywords in headlines and I fall into the camp that stands in the middle of the internet playground wondering, "Well, why *wouldn't* I use keywords in a headline, if I can do it with finesse?"

#### **Keep it short.**

Especially on the web. Statistics say you have anywhere from three to nine seconds to grab and hold a reader's attention so don't waste a single one. Use short, simple words, rather than fancy ones, vary the length of your sentences and include numbered lists or bullet points for maximum impact. You aren't out to impress people with your vocabulary here. You are attempting to start conversations with the people who might want to buy what you are selling.

#### **Put your most important information up front.**

Most readers are not going to stick around to the end of your web page, although some do. If you're offering special pricing on an item for this week only, tell your readers sooner, rather than later, and make sure you stress *why* your product or service is important to your readers.

#### **Stress the benefits of what you offer.**

It's nice that you're selling a pen that doesn't leak but what's

going to matter to me, the reader, is what's in it for me. I'm a lazy thinker sometimes so connect the dots for me. Sure, tell me the pen doesn't leak but also point out that, as a result, I never again need to deal with inky and potentially embarrassing messes in my laptop bag or jeans pocket.

### **Use Active Voice.**

Rather than tell me that “items broken during delivery will be returned to the manufacturer by our staff” say “our staff will return all items broken during delivery to the manufacturer.” When you were in grade school, you might have seen that one expressed as “The dog was walked by the boy.” It would be turned into “The boy walked the dog.” Active voice represents a much more efficient use of words than passive voice, and it gets the point across much faster and with greater impact.

### **Use positive words instead of negative ones.**

“We want you to enjoy the benefits of lower payments” glides into the hearts of your readers so much more easily than “We don't want you to struggle with high payments.”

### **Be assertive.**

And stand up for how great you are. A statement like “We try to do our best on every project we undertake” does not fill me with confidence. But if you say “We aim to outperform the competition on every project we undertake,” you'll get my attention!

### **Be specific.**

It's great to hear that your product or service helped many consumers or businesspeople succeed last year. But I'll be more convinced if you tell me how many people you affected, and how your efforts increased their success. Did their revenues or

savings increase by an average of 29%? Did you help them increase their customer base by an average of 18%? Did they notice a drop in complaints from customers or family members of at least 27% because of what you did? Give me the details!

### **Engage the senses!**

Embed words in your copy that give audio, visual and kinesthetic depth to your language. Is your product colourful, shiny, glossy or beautiful? Can people hear the words of praise their partners will be heaping on them when they show off their latest purchase from your establishment? Will they feel an intense pride of ownership or a heady thrill of achievement because of something you've sold to them? What emotional vibrancy can you include in your copy? Sense-oriented words rock the world of your reader – engage them!

### **Avoid jargon.**

Your field may be rife with pet terms that people “in-the-know” fling at each other with confident abandon. But your ideal customer might not know what those terms are, and there's a good chance they will tune out if they hear them and feel confused.

### **Go easy on the adjectives.**

I love an adjective as much as the next writer but I have to tone it down when I'm writing marketing copy. *And* when I'm writing fiction, oddly enough. Come to think of it, it's a good idea to use adjectives sparingly in almost all the writing you do, fun as they are. Adjectives—words that describes things—detract from the masterful train of effectiveness that you're trying to create with your language. But if you want to add some rocket fuel to your writing style, latch onto a horde of powerful verbs (action words) and see what happens.

### **Tell a story.**

Everybody loves a story. It doesn't have to be a long one and it doesn't have to be on your home page. If there is something unique about how you came to be in business, and if it ties in with your commitment to quality products and services, tell your readers about that. It helps position you as a real human being and will capture our imagination in a way that facts and figures will not.

### **Use metaphors.**

Dr. Gerald Zaltman and Dr. Lindsay Zaltman of Harvard University did extensive marketing research a few years ago and determined that seven metaphors consistently increase buying behaviour in people living in pretty well every country in the world. And I haven't heard a single other copywriter talking about this! So be the first businessperson on your block to scoop the competition and when you write your marketing copy, include information that talks about: **Balance, Transformations, Journeys, Containers, Connections, Resources and Control.**

### **Include a call to action.**

A visitor has arrived on your site, read your headline and scrolled to the bottom of Page One. What is it you want them to do next? Download your free report? View your weekly specials? Call for a free consultation? If you want to keep the conversation going (and you do!) make it easy for readers to take the next step: but tell them what it is first.

**Include some testimonials or third-party endorsements.** But leave it open-ended. Some people don't care what other people think of your product or service—they want to decide for themselves whether you're any good at what you do, and you

want to respectfully invite them to do that. So while you might include a quote from a satisfied customer on the one hand, make sure you add in a comment that says, "But you probably want to check it out for yourself and we'd be pleased to answer any questions you have about the effectiveness of our product."

### **Avoid grammatical mistakes.**

Always proof your marketing copy and have someone else read it *before* you go live with it. Typos, spelling mistakes, confusing sentences, and the like, all damage your credibility and—whether you like it or not—they call your professionalism into question. My favourite grammatical reference book is still the Strunk and White classic, *The Elements of Style*. You can get a paperback edition on amazon.com for a few dollars or access the online version for free at [www.bartleby.com](http://www.bartleby.com).

### **Use images.**

People love pictures, and so do the search engines. One well-placed optimized image of an idea or feeling you would like to convey is still worth 1,000 words.

So what do you think? Does that help? Don't be discouraged if this seems daunting at first. Although there is a knack to writing marketing copy it all pretty much turns on whether you know who your perfect customer is, what they need and what you can do to make their life better.

The man who first taught me the tricks of the copywriting trade was a reluctant teacher at best. He was memorable, however, and his image has stuck with me for decades now, as have many of the others who've had a part in my development as a writer. Perhaps the best advice The Boss

gave me, however, occurred late one evening as we raced to meet yet another impossible deadline. It was the simplest piece of advice imaginable. And it was very, very powerful.

The Boss was tired of giving me detailed directions about phrasing and creativity, colour and benefits. He was tired of my technical questions and my inability to read his mind. He just wanted me to get it.

So he sat at his desk with his cigarette cradled in his right hand and his favourite pen balanced in his left. He leaned back in his chair and glanced thankfully at the can of beer he had parked neatly beside his ash tray. He sighed heavily and looked up at the ceiling for a long time, as though asking for just a little more patience, a little more time.

“None of that other stuff matters all that much, Susie,” he said finally. “Ya just gotta make it *cook*.”

So I did.

The Boss is gone, now, the victim of a heart attack that occurred some years before one might have expected him to leave us. But his advice still lingers, caught between the spark of the future and the dust of the ages.

Go ahead, readers. Make it *cook*.