

5 Ways to Improve Your Web Copy Immediately

by Jonathan Kranz

In the literary world, “good writing” may be notoriously difficult to define. But on the Web, good copy has two clear, easily understood objectives: 1) It elevates your search engine rankings and; 2) it attracts qualified traffic and holds the attention of your prospects and customers. If yours is an e-commerce site, your copy must also assume a third role as a virtual salesperson capable of closing the deal.

On the Web, your words carry a lot of weight. Fortunately, you can build verbal muscle, fast. Following are five tips, hints, and suggestions you can apply *right now*, with a minimum of time or technical hassle, to dramatically improve the effectiveness of your website writing.

1) Write informative, keyword-rich hyperlinks.

Text hyperlinks enjoy a privileged status on the Internet. Search engine spiders value the text within them more highly than ordinary body copy. More important, they’re virtual tour guides for your visitors: Good links direct your readers to the destinations they seek. But when they’re poorly composed, your readers may overlook important content or be misdirected to irrelevant pages.

Why be stingy with words? There’s no penalty for length, so make your text links as informative as possible. Instead of click here for more information, load your link with appropriate keywords that tell readers what they can expect upon arrival, such as compare laser printer prices, features and print speeds or download Whiff & Poof’s top ten life science stock picks for the upcoming quarter.

2) Use headlines and subheads.

Headlines attract attention, whet the reader’s appetite and encourage investigation of subsequent text. Subheads break long blocks of text into smaller, less intimidating pieces, and provide a content summary to the large number of readers who will scan your text. They’re standard features of articles and brochures, yet remain underused on the Web where they have an additional advantage: The formatting devices used to distinguish heads and subheads, such as bold print, italics, or a larger font size, give them added weight with search engines.

A page about graduate degrees for educators, for example, might lead with the following headline, “Weekend certificate programs for working K-12 teachers.” The subsequent subheads would not only interrupt the monotony of long copy, but communicate the most important elements of the story at a glance: “Finish your degree in just 14 months,” “We’ll bring the courses to your school,” and “Enroll online in minutes.”

3) Include alternate spellings.

Many common word and phrases, such as e-mail (email) and Web sites (websites) have legitimate alternate spellings. In the traditional print world, this ambiguity is tackled by consistency -- you pick one spelling and stick to it.

But on the Web, this is a rule you should break. Since you cannot control the spelling a searcher may use, anticipate them all. If you provide a “business to business” service, you’ll want to express the phrase in its common aliases, including “business-to-business,” “B-to-B,” and “B2B.” (Just as there are exceptions to rules, there are exceptions to breaking them: If your site’s reputation rests on editorial quality, you may want to sacrifice some search engine optimization by sticking to consistent spellings and maintaining the integrity of your brand identity.)

4) Become ruthlessly specific.

Print out your Web pages -- or the drafts of the Web pages you intend to post -- and grab a yellow highlighter. Mark every phrase that reeks of broad abstraction (“enterprise process solutions”), vague promises (“exceeding customer expectations”), and empty boasting (“best in class services.”)

Now take a look at your page. Good copy should have very few, if any, streaks of yellow. Bad copy will look like a field of dandelions. Pull the weeds. Replace all the yellow copy with specific promises, facts, benefits, features, and other pieces of concrete evidence that can support your causes and claims. You might transform the previous parenthetical examples thusly: “enterprise process solutions” becomes “browser-based manufacturing and inventory control”; “exceeding customer expectations” becomes “a 30% decrease in material waste in just 60 days, guaranteed”; and “best in class services” becomes “recognized as the industry standard by the Institute for Chemical Forensics.”

5) Learn from your Web stats.

Chances are, the provider who hosts your website, or the internal IT people who monitor your servers, create thorough daily reports of your site traffic. Sadly, too few writers have access to these reports or, if they do, take advantage of it.

These Web stats contain a wealth of information of enormous practical value, including:

- **Referrer data:** These are the source pages of links that were used to access your pages. Some of these will be search engines, of course. But others will be blogs and other content-rich sites. Consider this data as a clue to the kinds of copy and information that attracts attention -- and encourages others to build links to your site.
- **Search queries, search words:** The keywords people used that led them to your site. Read these carefully; you’ll find search terms you’ll want to apply more liberally in your Web copy. (Conversely, you’ll discover that words you thought were important fail to show up -- which means they’re not being used to find you.)
- **Request report:** A ranking of your files/pages by requests (popularity). Look here to see which content really pulls (and should be expanded) and which fall flat (and may be candidates for deletion.)

And one final suggestion...

Consider your Web site content an evolving work in progress, rather than a one-shot project that requires monumental effort and is then otherwise abandoned. Unlike printed materials, Web pages may be revised quickly and inexpensively. New content can be created, published and assessed within days (sometimes even hours), so it pays to experiment. Apply the preceding

writing tips, then watch the Web stats for the results. To paraphrase the instructions on shampoo bottles, “Revise, review, repeat.”

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