



How to be an effective writer, not a useless word-stringer

Plus, some useful copy tips and secrets to make your communications more effective...

I was in beautiful Cape Town a few weeks ago.

While I was there, I was discussing the art of copy with my client and good friend, Eckhard Marshing - who happens to run the biggest mail order company in South Africa.

Eckhard is a very smart man. And, very successful. He is also a kindred spirit when it comes to the proven techniques of writing copy for response.

We both share massive frustrations about how the art of copywriting and the power of words, have been virtually dismissed as unimportant by the marketers of today.

I mentioned to Eckhard about how, on the long trip down, I had opened my 'plane file' and revisited some very old industry articles, by a number of the copy greats.

One of them was Herschell Gordon Lewis.

What's so interesting about the work of the greats in the DM industry is how relevant their views continue to be. Advice and recommendations they gave decades ago, are still as valid now as they were then.

The reason is simple, as I have shared with you many times before.

“Times change, but people don’t”.

The words, phrases and techniques that influence people to do positive things – like fill in a coupon, complete the response form, pick up the phone, click the link to the landing page, reply to an email, visit the store – are the same today as they were over 80 years ago.

Yet most marketers continue to ignore this vital fact. That’s why most of them last less than 12 months in their jobs. (Fact. In the UK, at any rate)

Anyway, I thought this month, that I would repackage a few of Herschell’s best points and incorporate them in this new Copycat for you.

Trust me, you can only learn from the great man. Here we go...

What did they mean by THAT?

If those are the thoughts of the reader of your letter, email, ad, website page, radio spot or anything else for that matter - then clearly, you haven’t delivered your sales message effectively or professionally.

As a writer, words are your weapons. They are the arrows in your quiver.

You should always strive to use the most effective ones. The words that make people do positive things.

A lot of writers today are lazy. They’re happy to fire blanks in a war in which their competitors are using high-velocity bullets.

Their campaigns will fail. No question. And they will blame everyone and everything - instead of themselves.

Remember, as a writer, you should always be in charge. Professional writers are force-communicators, as Herschell always used to call them. It is not a two-way street between the writer and the reader.

The writer should be in control at all times.

But, whenever a writer lapses into a casual acceptance of the first word or phrase that comes to mind - unconscious of the greater specificity at hand – then that writer loses that control.

So, don’t take a slipshod, journeyman approach to the copy challenge. If you do, your results will match your approach.

Here’s a few tips for you to consider, starting with ‘Reply’ or ‘Respond’.

Is there a difference between ‘reply’ and ‘respond’?

Yes. And it’s *significant*.

If you're asking a target-individual to answer your advertising or mailing, the chances are, that *reply* will bring you more numbers than *respond*.

Why?

It's simple, really. It isn't because *respond* is a more upscale word. It's a simple rhetorical conclusion - when you *reply*, you make no commitment.

When you *respond*, you do.

A *reply* is just an answer. A *response* is pretty much an answer with knobs on. So when we write '*Please respond within 14 days*', we can (however subliminally) sometimes scare the reader.

The flip-side of this concept is using the word when it applies to you. You don't just *reply* to a complaint or question, you *respond* to it.

Using words that enhance what you're selling isn't all that difficult if you ask yourself, after writing each paragraph:

Have I used the right words to entice the reader a little more?

Here's a great example from an advertisement for the Jan Hagara Collectors' Club that I've seen Herschell use many times.

Bulleted copy tells the reader what they get when they become members of this club. Here are the bullets as they were originally written:

- A cloisonne membership pin
- ID card
- A years' subscription to the quarterly newsletter. (Worth more than the \$22.50 alone!)
- A custom-designed 3-ring binder
- Exclusive right to buy product available only to club members

In my view, each one of those bullets has a rubber nose.

They are limp. Flaccid. Uninteresting.

And delivered with the impact of a slap around the face with a wet fish.

Here's how it should have been done:

- Genuine cloisonné, membership pin
- A personally signed membership card
- One full year's subscription to the quarterly Newsletter. (This alone is worth more than one year's fees!)
- Custom binder to protect valuable Certificates and the Newsletter
- Exclusive offers available only to club members

Those bullets are saying the same things. But saying them better.

Much better.

Let's look at each bullet closely.

A *cloisonne membership pin* suggests little or no worth. And, as we know, no exclusivity equals no value.

The word *Genuine* adds value, and even slapping the acute accent over the final e helps enhance this premium.

An *ID card* is something you flash at the train inspector, or doorman at your favourite club. An ID card suggests little value.

A 'personally signed membership card' makes a lot out of a little.

Aside from the bad grammar, *a years' subscription* isn't as valuable as *one full year's subscription*. The word *alone* is also misplaced in the original.

If you are set on using it, that word should lead, not follow, so it enhances the selling point.

Capitalising the word *Newsletter* also adds importance.

Used in the way above, *Custom-designed* and *3-ring binder* fight each other. And we can buy 3-ring binders at the stationery store for tuppence-halfpenny these days, so there's little value.

It's sensible to lose '3-ring' and give the prospective member a reason for how the binder could be used.

What you see above is an interesting exercise. It's also a snapshot of what the professional writer does for a living – using the best words and phrases to deliver the selling points as effectively as possible.

How well do we do it? Well, the answer to that - the true test – is, of course, in the eye of the beholder.

If we have done it well, then the required responses will appear, in attractive numbers.

Words are our weapons, remember? And awareness of even minor differences in word use will increase response.

Here's something else to make you think...

Is there a difference between 'anything' and 'everything'?

To the word-stringer, *anything* and *everything* may appear to be similar words. To the wordsmith, they are not.

Far from it, in fact.

We've all seen word-strings such as...

"You'll save on anything and everything you see in this store, during the sale."

Well, that phrase in itself, shows clearly that these two words are quite different. If they were the same, we'd use just one of them.

Now, suppose we do use just one of them, which one should it be?

"You'll save on *anything* you see in this store, during the sale."

Or...

"You'll save on *everything* you see in this store, during the sale."

Simple.

'Everything' is much stronger than 'anything' in this context, as it suggests more. 'Anything' is singular and 'everything' is more encompassing.

Here's a final little secret – 4 magic words

I'm going to give you 4 magic little words that can be the difference between reader-acceptance and reader-antagonism.

These words are not only the difference between the reader thinking the writer has transmitted a helpful message or a useless message, but they can also be the difference between reader-adoration and reader-scorn.

We live in a sceptical world. No one believes anything anymore.

But, by using these 4 words, the writer can avoid the reader's objection to any dramatically-delivered point or statement.

Just start the sentence this way...

'As we both know...'

So, playmates, when you are creating copy, try to be a wordsmith – not a word-stringer. Harness the power of words. Words that influence.

Words that move people. And words that SELL.

Don't write copy that *describes* - as an awful lot of writers do these days.

If you do, then be prepared for campaign failure. Describers aren't wordsmiths. They are word-stringers.

We all have to suffer the work of word-stringers. They ramble. They waffle. They go around the houses to get to the back door.

They normally talk about themselves. Or their company.

Or how long they have been in business.

And how great they are.

Their copy bores us. It doesn't influence us in any way, shape or form.

Which means they will have failed.

In these extremely tough times, that's unacceptable and could perhaps cost them their jobs as well.

Keep the faith



P.S. I know, I know. My new website is late. My fault. It's simply down to pressure of work and my crazy travelling. But, it's nearly there. And you will soon be able to enjoy the exclusive stuff and loads of FREE downloadable marketing advice and observations – and much, much more.

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