



An interesting tale about University John and Old Pro - and why knowledgeable copywriters have never been more valuable than they are right now...

I write copy. *Selling* copy.

Copy for marketing, advertising and promotional campaigns. Not TV, but pretty much everything else.

I love copy. Always have. I love the *challenge*. Because, trust me, getting your copy read and acted upon, is more difficult now than it has ever been.

The reason for this is simple. It's all about where the power lies. In days gone by, it used to be with the marketers, the agencies and the brand.

Not any more.

The Mad Men are gone. More's the pity. Because the industry could really benefit from their expertise and knowledge right now.

Today, it is the recipients of our communications that are firmly in charge – and they know it, too. They are more savvy and street smart than ever before – and they don't fall for bullshit and laziness anymore.

They demand **respect, recognition and reward.**

So, when you're crafting selling copy, you have to work bloody hard to get the attention of every one of them.

Then, you have to work even harder to convince them that what you're selling, offers them an attractive benefit – and, also it should remind them of what they would lose or miss by not buying it.

The ultimate challenge - and the hardest of all - is to get them to respond, or take a positive step towards a sale.

In today's crazy industry, this is where the fun starts...

Because, playmates, I'm going to let you in on a little secret.

The marketing arena these days is polluted with some very strange individuals, most of whom believe they are much cleverer and more talented than they really are.

And the bigger their title, the worse they seem to be.

It seems to me, that, in the main, today's marketers really don't appear to understand anything about anything anymore.

And top of the pile when it comes to their lack of knowledge, is copy. The enormous power of the written word.

Many times in the last 10 years or so, I have been close to becoming Son of Sam, when dealing with these brainless berks. Especially, the 20-something graduates.

Oh boy, that group are something else...

Most of them don't seem to know what day follows Tuesday. Well, they wouldn't really, would they? They've been at University. The real world exists outside.

So, when these people find themselves in positions of reasonable power within marketing departments – and start issuing briefs to seasoned pros – then light the blue touch paper and stand well back.

Because, when it comes to the written word, grammar and punctuation, the vast majority of these people, are total imbeciles.

They can't write. They can't spell. They don't know what a comma is. They don't even know what it is for.

What's worse, is they don't think any of that stuff matters. They have spent the last 4/5 years texting and emailing, using abbreviations and language from the Planet Zog.

Some of them will have never written a letter in their lives. They don't know how to...

Here's an example of what I mean. It's a true story. Only the names have been changed to protect the guilty.

University John is appointed as Marketing Manager of a large retail furniture store. He replaces a wise and knowledgeable man, who retired after being at the store for over 25 years and in the retail industry for over 50.

John inherits an active database of 30,000+ existing customers. Because of the type of furniture sold at this store and the length of time they have been trading, the customer base is of an older profile.

John's job is to continue the work of his predecessor, generate footfall in the store and to sell products. To do that well, he needs to produce benefit-laden promotions that connect to his audience, in a language that they understand.

So, he does the following. He thinks about the challenge for 10 minutes over a cup of coffee. He quickly comes to the conclusion that he needs to get some new customers.

Those 30K old ones may be useful, but, after all, they were generated by someone else. He feels he needs to put his own stamp on the store. Deliver his own customers.

Yes, he thinks, that's the way to put my name in lights.

And, while I'm at it, he adds, I need to get more young people coming through the doors. These old fogies are OK to a point, but the store needs to be brought up to date.

Loads of young people coming in the store, is the way to go.

He has an incumbent agency. They have handled all the press advertising, posters and promotional collateral for the store, for over a decade. But they never handled the direct mail that was the vanguard of the promotions, plus a bit of emailing that became the support medium.

Those challenges were given to a specialist DM outfit. And, in truth, the agency has been peeved about that for years.

When University John goes to the agency for his initial meeting, he's met briefly by the Boss, then handed over to the account man - University Sam - who becomes his main contact.

They get on like a house on fire. Sam completely agrees with John's new strategy. "Forget the old 'uns. Let's spend more of the budget in attracting some new younger customers."

"What do you recommend, Sam", says, John.

"I think we should do a lot more digital". Especially social media. It's the way forward. Everyone's doing it. If you need to do some direct mail to that database of yours, we could tie that in as well, but I think we should start to move away from that.

Direct mail is SO yesterday."

"Exactly what I was thinking, Sam. Great, let's get some ideas from your people."

While this is happening, Old Pro, the copywriter from the DM agency that had handled the store's previous direct mail campaigns, paid John a visit.

It soon became clear to him that John had decided to place the DM business with this traditional agency – and, what's more, was embarking on a completely new strategy.

This meant ignoring the enormous successes that had been enjoyed in previous years, using personalised, well-targeted and well-written communications.

"John, why are you going down a new road, when the previous one has delivered such great success?" asked Old Pro...

"Because the store is old. I need to freshen up the image and make it more attractive to young people. The customers are old. They'll be dead soon. I need to replace them.

And direct mail is old. Email and social media has replaced it. I can get to many more people, with digital campaigns - and it's much cheaper.

What's more, I need to keep everything with one creative team, so things will be consistent. So, sorry, pal, we won't be needing your help anymore."

Old Pro smiled. "OK, that's your decision, but if I may be so bold, I think your comments and proposed approach are both highly flawed and I believe your new strategy will bomb. Big time.

In fact, to be totally blunt, I think it's fucking ridiculous, as you are completely ignoring what has gone before - and that's very dangerous.

I have a funny feeling that you will be needing my help again. And sooner than you think.

You know where I am."

Fast-forward eight months...

They were together again in the same office. But the positive University John of 20 weeks before, was gone. In his place was a nervous individual who looked terrible and was clearly under severe pressure.

"I need your help", he said to Old Pro. "Be delighted to provide it", was the reply. "Sales are falling off the cliff. I've been told to contact you, by the owners. They have told me that we must get the direct mail campaign back on track to the previous customers.

I don't want to do it. But I have been told I must - can you write and prepare a campaign."

"Of course. When can I have the brief?"

Old Pro left the office smiling. He'd been in situations like this, so many times before, especially in the last 5 years. Young bucks. Not worth a flying fart, most of them.

The next few weeks were problematical. The brief took 10 days to make an appearance and was incomplete when it did. After numerous discussions, it became somewhat clearer - and creative and copy were started.

When University John saw the letter draft, he immediately called Old Pro.

"This is no good. It's two pages long. No one reads more than one page these days."

"Bollocks" came the reply. Old pros rarely take prisoners. This one NEVER has.

Especially with young bucks who know fuck-all.

"In every copy test I have been involved in, long copy has outpulled short copy," said Old Pro. And anyway, I needed two pages to deliver your offer. If I tried to cram it in to one page, it will look a mess and it will fail. I won't do it"

University John ignored this and continued. "And your opening line has only three words. Six other paragraphs have two lines or less. What kind of copy is this?"

"Selling copy, my dear boy. SELLING COPY..

Copy that connects, influences and makes people do positive things. Like come into your store and buy. It's the type of copy that has been totally absent from your ads, website and appalling emails in the last 6 months."

The point was ignored once more. "There are too many commas, hyphens and stuff, I don't like it at all."

"Well", said Old Pro, "you don't have to like it. It's not aimed at you. It's aimed at people with intelligence and maturity.

People who know about words. People who understand the art of punctuation - and people who can - and like - to read."

The next few seconds of silence were quite interesting. It could have gone either way. By now, Old Pro didn't give a fuck.

The silence was broken by University John. "OK, I'll go with it. But I want it known that I am not happy with it – and not happy with your attitude either."

Old Pro was beaming from ear to ear, as he put the phone down in the cradle.

He was having lunch with the storeowner the next day. He suspected he would be told some interesting news about University John, probably before the first beers had been downed.

He was right.

Keep the faith



ABOUT YOUR AUTHOR

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Andy has been writing selling copy for over 32 years. He writes traditional and digital marketing campaigns, including direct mail, sales letters, emails, SMS's, PPC ads, media ads, websites, landing pages, brochures, radio scripts and much, much more.

He works with top clients in three continents and was inducted into the **Direct Marketing Hall of Fame** in February 2015, one of only two individuals in Europe with that honour.

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Andy launched an innovative new copywriting service late in 2019, called **Copy Chief** - which guarantees professionally written copy every time - for a fraction of the normal rate card cost.

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All Andy's [previous Copycat articles](#) are available to download and enjoy.