

E-mail marketing – copy writing best practice

Written: September 2003

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Introduction

In the [last issue of WNIM](#), we looked at crafting effective e-mail creative. Topics included layout, use of images and we started looking at how copy should be structured from the headline, lead and through the main body to the close. In this issue we return to look in more detail at best practice for e-mail copywriting.

We start by asking how copywriting for e-mail differs from copywriting for print and what the implications of these differences are. We will then go on to look at more specific guidelines for copywriting by asking 8 key eCopy questions that everyone writing e-mail copy should be asking.

How does writing for e-mail differ from print?

To write successful e-mail copy, we need to adopt a new mindset based on how readers interact with e-mail.

Three of the most important differences are:

1. Readers scan, don't read, e-mail

The scanning behaviour of online readers is well known. For example, Nielsen (1997) reports on research that shows that in a test, 79% of test web users scanned, while just

16% read word-by-word. Since we tend to read 25% more slowly from a computer screen, this behaviour is likely to be exhibited in all on-screen copy, whether web or e-mail.

One implication of this is that we should write less copy when writing for the web or e-mail. Nielsen suggests 50% of the original for web copy. We can suggest that for e-mail, which tends to be read in a smaller window, and in a different context, this should be even shorter.

To achieve brevity, Steve Krug, author of *Don't Make Me Think!* (Krug, 200), suggests we should:

1. *Omit needless words!* He says we should remove half our original words and then strive to remove half again.
2. *Marketing happy talk must die!* Avoid that introductory text intended to make the customer feel comfortable or extol the virtues of a company.
3. *Instructions must die!* This refers to online forms rather than e-mails where it is achieved through making the options clear without extensive text. For e-mail we can argue that instructions are often useful to explain to the reader what they need to do to redeem the offer and to convert them to action. But we can certainly keep instructions succinct.

Krug's comments were originally focusing on web pages, but some e-mail marketers seem to have taken him literally with e-mails simply becoming a list of bullet points. As with any rule, there are exceptions.

If every e-mail becomes a list of bullets it becomes difficult to differentiate and explain your offer, or to engage and then have a dialogue with the reader.

Of course the other implication of scanning behaviour is that we should make our e-mails scannable! Nielsen suggests these as approaches to this:

- highlighted keywords (we will look at different forms of highlighting for text and HTML e-mails later in this article)
- meaningful, not 'clever' sub-headings
- bulleted lists
- one idea per paragraph
- the inverted pyramid style, starting with the conclusion.
- half the word count (or less) than conventional writing

2. E-mail is conversational

Although we receive many unsolicited communications, many of the e-mails we receive are from work and friends.

Cyberatlas (2003) reported research from Jupiter Research that showed that in 2003 for 4,000 US adults, the main types of e-mails from different sources were:

- SPAM 44% (up from 35% the year before)
- Friends and family 31%
- Opt-in (business) 16%
- Work or school 5%
- Other 4%

So we are used to using e-mail in a conversational, informal way with friends, family, or work colleagues. It follows that copywriters can be more conversational with e-mail than other media, and this can help us get closer to our prospects and customers.

Some have said we should 'Write like you talk' – a good test is to ask whether you would say it someone face-to-face. If not it is probably the 'marketing happy talk' we referred to above.

Other ways to make e-mail conversational is to use simple words and use colloquial expressions.

Pronouns such as 'I', 'we', 'you', 'they' are also effective. Some talk about the 'we-we test' – reviewing the E-mail to see whether the emphasis is on the sender 'we' or the recipient 'you'. The example below shows an e-mail that passes this test:

'You already know how easy it is to get instant online insurance cover from Norwich Union. But did you know that Norwich Union can also offer you online access to low-cost life-cover. For example, £X would cost you as little as £Y per day.'

3. E-mail readers are cynical

The figures above show that in some cases, approaching half our e-mail is now SPAM. With offers for holy water, losing weight while sitting at your computer, receiving millions from the deceased relative of a government member, every e-mail reader is going to be super-cynical about what you are offering. So, professional E-mail marketers have to work extra hard to establish credibility and prove their benefits. So, as you write, put yourself in the position of a cynical customer who is fed-up of insincere and bogus offers – how are you going to prove that you are a credible supplier?

These are some approaches to overcome cynicism and build credibility through e-mail:

- Try to achieve 'connection' with the reader to show that you understand them by using customer language and buzzwords
- Spell out the benefit the feature gives. For the example a bulleted list could use different fonts or formats to emphasise benefits.
- Backup with facts and numbers
- Build testimonial elements into your e-mails such as customer quotes, number of customers, client names and independent reviews and awards.

Eight testing copy questions:

We will now look at a series of questions based on those in Chaffey (2003) which you can use to evaluate your copy or that produced by colleagues and agencies.

eCopy Question 1. Does your copy excite?

You have a great offer, but have you supported the offer by writing enthusiastically to appeal to the reader's emotions?

For the consumer you are offering riches, dreams and experiences – does the copy effectively communicate how your offer will improve their life?

For the business person you are offering time, knowledge and control – does the copy effectively communicate how your offer can help them 'work smarter'?

The copy also needs to excite from the outset – see Question 7 for tips on headlines.

eCopy Question 2. Does your copy convince?

You may believe that your service or your offer sells itself on its features because you believe in it. But the recipient is less likely to be a believer – they don't have the interest or knowledge you have. Have you backed up your promise with enough detail to convince the reader that the offer is worthwhile? Is the unique selling point clear?

The style of writing also needs to enthuse about these benefits? This may be difficult if you cannot personally relate to the customer's needs – sometimes difficult for technology markets. The only way to succeed is to develop empathy with your reader by researching, and maybe even living the role as actors do.

eCopy Question 3. Is your copy natural?

We have said that e-mail is a social, conversational medium – we mainly use it to chat to friends or communicate to colleagues. So we want to avoid our e-mail reading as if it was written by a machine.

If you can make copy conversational; write at the same level of your audience and make it flow naturally then you will get closer to the reader and predispose them to what you are offering. However don't overdo the informality – some e-mails seem as if they are written by someone you have known from 'back at school'.

eCopy Question 4. Is the copy length right?

Let's look at the extremes. Which is best – short copy or long copy?

There can be no right answer because it depends on purpose. Most people answer that short is best since the reader doesn't want to read your carefully crafted words, just WIFM – 'What's in it for me'?

My view is that you can combine short and long copy in one e-mail. For those who are more likely to respond to short copy you use the introduction and the start of the main copy which is above the fold.

For 'the scanners' who scan through the whole e-mail you may impress with detail, provided that detail stands out.

For 'the readers' who read every word and want the details you need the long copy.

I would argue that the e-mail cannot be too long as long as it is relevant and entertaining and another call-to-action and summary of the total copy are included at the start.

These 'E-marketing Insights articles' are long in comparison with many web articles, but that is not necessarily bad – many readers want additional insights which they can then print out and read offline. Getting a reader to print an e-mail is often a good outcome for the marketer.

Some argue that the detail can always be put into a link to a more detailed web page, but I think that this can cause loss of focus – once the reader clicks through to their web browser you have lost control.

eCopy Question 5. Did you repeat yourself?

This is a difficult one.

Direct mail wisdom says repeat to reinforce.

E-mail wisdom says the reader doesn't have the time to see information repeated. However, I think some repetition is desirable. Reinforcement of messages is effective in any media.

We need to repeat and build on what is available in the subject line in the headline. Then, because the reader has scrolled, repeating the offer in the final call-to-action makes sense.

eCopy Question 6. Which copy stands out?

You have satisfied yourself that you can answer the other questions, but now, looking at the big picture, what will the scanner notice - what techniques have you used to *emphasise* the key points in your e-mail.

In text e-mails you have these options to make copy stand out:

- CAPITALISATION, particularly in text e-mails, but don't overuse it.
- The SPACE before and after words and between lines is powerful in highlighting offers or calls-to-action.
- Bulleted lists using asterisks or dots.

You can see that text e-mails are limited. But in HTML e-mails, we have much more scope for emphasis – perhaps one of the reasons why in many markets, HTML e-mails receive

higher response rates. With HTML we can use the options for text e-mails listed above, but also:

- *Text formatting* – bold and italics. But take care since italics may be difficult to read in small point sizes. Never use an underline which looks like a hyperlink – readers will try to click on it.
- *Font sizes* – large font size as headings or separate messages work well for scanners.
- *Font colour* – using a different copy from body copy using vibrant colours such as red and orange.
- *Graphical animations of copy* – but make sure your animation doesn't prevent the message being viewed by scanners
- *Hyperlinks* - blue underlined hyperlinks attract the eye online.

eCopy Question 7. Do we have a powerful headline?

Copycat suggests in WNIM 17 (<http://www.wnim.com/issue17/pages/copycat.htm>) that online as offline, many more people will read or remember a headline, than the body of an ad. While this is not proven online, many e-mail's do not have a title at all – online copywriters seem to think they aren't necessary because that's what the subject line is for. Not so! Headlines do help engagement if they build on the subject line to engage the reader.

In his excellent book on Online Copywriting (Bly, 2002), Robert Bly recommends the following approaches that can be used for e-mail titles:

1. Get a terrific benefit up-front
2. Appeal to personal self-interest
3. Get right sort of attention
4. Add news
5. Offer to teach
6. Ask a provocative question
7. Use 'Quotes'

eCopy Question 8. Will our copy achieve action?

We finish our eight questions with the most important question - whether our e-mail will achieve action. Arguably, this should be the first question, since then the whole copy can be structured around the outcomes we want to achieve!

Approaches that can help achieve action are:

- A text-based call to action in first screen (for the impulsive) and last screen (for those with the time to read).
- A time-limited offer which uses copy to encourage the reader to Click NOW!
- Instructions such as 'forward to a friend' or 'print this e-mail as a reminder' can be other useful outcomes.
- Using hyperlinks to highlight the offer at the right position in the paragraph.

As an example of highlighting the offer through a hyperlink, think of marketing to an IT manager to download a best practice guide. Which of these approaches do you think would be best?

A. Click below to receive your complimentary guide to reducing Total Cost of Ownership:

[FREE guide to reducing TCO.](#)

Sign Off

B. [Click here](#) to receive your complimentary guide to reducing Total Cost of Ownership.

or

C. To receive your complimentary guide to reducing Total Cost of Ownership, [click here](#).

or

D. To help you lower the costs of running your IT infrastructure we have a prepared a [complimentary guide to reducing Total Cost of Ownership.](#)

In A separating out the hyperlink on to a separate line does increase its prominence, but spoils the flow of the copy.

I prefer B rather than C since it is more direct and the eye will be more naturally drawn towards the underlined hyperlink at the start of the sentence within the copy as a whole. However, approach C can encourage the scanner to read the copy before the end of the sentence.

Design practice for web pages would favour approach D, which makes the call-to-action part of the copy. While this may work best for web pages where we are perhaps not seeking the hard-sell. For simplicity and encouraging action approach B is best.

Think carefully about the colour of the hyperlink. On the majority of web pages, Yahoo! And Amazon, for example, users are used to seeing a blue hyperlink on a white background. You will get a higher response with this combination because of familiarity. If other colours are used, high contrast is essential.

Quick reference – an e-marketing agency's guidelines

To conclude this review of copywriting for e-mail we look at some guidelines from David Mill, Director of full-service e-marketing agency MediaCo (www.media.co.uk) who are a WNIM partner. David Mill gives these best practice guidelines for e-mail copy:

Body Content

You have some 10 seconds to grab the *attention* of the recipient after they have opened the message. Therefore, the content should:

- *Be relevant and focussed.* The more it appeals to your audience, the better the results.
- *Make the objective obvious.* For example, 'Enter our competition to win' or 'Here is the latest news on...'. In addition, it's often good practice to take an early opportunity to tell the recipient why they are receiving the email. For example: 'You have received this newsletter because...'

With regard to the *message* itself, it should:

- *Be clear and concise.*
- *Written in plain language.*
- *Avoid jargon.* No buzzwords, jargon, funky phrases or punctuation unless expected by the target market.
- *Be kept short.* Short copy delivers results but, if it must be long, a synopsis or content list should be provided at the outset. HTML versions that can be viewed in one screen are also most effective. If they are longer, key elements should be viewable above the fold.
- *Be immediately of interest.* Having the key points and main click-through links in the immediately viewable area.
- *Be creative.* So it stands out from the crowd.

Generally speaking, the *content* should:

- Be compelling active voice and action verbs
- Talk about THEM not you
- Place them in the action
- Stress benefits not features
- Build real and perceived value
- Have personality...So you and the recipient connect.

A *newsletter* is most effective when it does one of two things:

- *Reflects the typical reader's personality.* Appeals to the reader at another level i.e. be a personality the reader can both recognise and accept within the context of the Newsletter.
- This personality also adds to the human element of the Newsletter and boosts the one-to-one characteristic of email marketing bearing in mind it's not an audience that's being addressed; it is an individual sitting alone in front of a screen.

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