



Good Copy vs. Great Copy

Essential Copy Writing Tools for the Direct Marketer

As I write this article there are more than 70 books on Amazon.com™ related to copywriting and a Google™ search returns more than 3.9 million results. This is proof there is an overwhelming source of information on the subject of copywriting. What concepts and rules apply to your Direct Marketing copy, and what essential elements of these rules must be followed?

Direct Marketing Elements

We know that DM is any direct communication designed to generate a response, an order, a lead, or traffic for your business. Direct Marketing has three essential elements:

1. Offer
2. Information
3. Response

Weaving copy into your *offer* – if well written and laid out properly – is most effective. The second element, *information*, contains the bulk of your copy and shows what your product or service will do for your prospect – “What’s in it for me?” Goods and services have no intrinsic value; they only deliver benefits to people.

Direct Marketing Principles

According to the Direct Marketing Association – DMA Basics of Direct Marketing – there are seven cardinal principles for DM success. Copywriting is often the third principle. First comes establishing a solid foundation for your objective. Secondly, target the right audience or market segments. These two steps must come before you put the pen to the paper (pardon the cliché).

Even before I began writing this article, I had to determine what my objective was as it related to you, the reader. Secondly, I analyzed who my reading audience would be, keeping in mind rule number one below – to share information. Since I am writing a series of articles, I had to create a lengthy outline to map out a course that would be coherent, relevant and stay on target. You may not prefer to use outlines, but you must “map” out your copy using a process in a way that works for you and ultimately the reader.

Please note: I used the words “I” or “my” seven times in the previous paragraph and the words “you” and “your” only five times. This violates the Selfish Test in which the majority of the focus must be transferred to the reader, client or prospect.

Rule – There are only three reasons to write copy:

1. To share information
2. To persuade



3. To build a relationship

Rule – You cannot do all three with one set of copy. It is most important to understand this rule. If you attempt to do all three or even two within one set of copy, you will confuse, lose and most assuredly irritate your reader.

Benefits and Features

Rule – Reposition features as benefits.

When consumers purchase a product or service, their personal desires and emotions outweigh any logic they may use in considering the purchase. “What’s in it for me?” Thirty-eight percent of Americans will not buy a product or service unless a peer – no matter what other ways they see or hear about it – recommends it. This proves the emotional benefit of peer approval. When writing copy, emotion-based benefits are far more important than the features.

Companies and copywriters often mistake features for benefits. They live inside the daily realm of these features and their company every day. Reposition your features as benefits for the consumer. Initially, lead in with benefits, and then lightly weave in features once you have captured the reader’s attention. Below is a table of benefits and features.

Benefits

- Be happier
- Achieve more
- Live longer
- Retire early
- Earn respect
- Gain free time
- Protect loved ones
- Lose weight
- Get smarter
- Work less
- Decrease turnover
- Sell more
- Get profitable – quickly
- Save money

Features

- 29 years of experience
- Biggest and best
- Largest accounts
- Most experienced
- Fastest equipment
- Pay us today
- Own 90% of the market
- Largest [whatever] in the area
- We were voted #1 in [whatever]
- Largest showroom, offices, sales lot, warehouse
- Received the [whatever] award [x] number of times
- Fastest production line

Watch for part two in the summer issue of Mailing Directions. I will cover reader friendly layouts, typography and comprehension, and proper typefaces.

Creating a Reader Friendly Layout

When writing, make reading the copy fast, easy and comfortable. Most people are slow readers and can only read at a 4th or 5th grade level. There are several things you can do to counteract the effects of this.

Rule – Break long copy into smaller chunks. Use shorter paragraphs, paragraphs of varying lengths, bullets, and indentations.

Rule – Each line should not have more than 60 characters or less than 20 characters. The human eye cannot efficiently read more or less than this.

Rule – Divide your copy into single thought units. People will read three or four word groups at a time.

Rule – Never end a page with a period if you are continuing onto a second page. Make the last sentence on the first page a half thought. The reader will want to turn the page to finish the thought.

Rule – Write at a 4th to 5th grade level.

Typography & Comprehension

Colin Wheildon, a renowned Australian typography expert, has done extensive research on reading and comprehension. His research shows there are significant differences in comprehension for “body copy” – large blocks of text as paragraphs. Conversely, small amounts of copy such as subheadings and headlines yield little differences in comprehension.

- ALL CAPS ARE HARD TO READ according to 93% surveyed. As children, we were taught to read upper and lower case in Serif type fonts.
- **Red type** is acceptable for headings and very small amounts of copy, but not for body copy.
- Black ink on white paper gives the best comprehension. Below is a table of comprehension level for colors

	Comprehension Level		
	<u>Good</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>
Black Ink	70%	19%	11%
Deep Purple – PMS 259	51%	13%	36%
French Blue – PMS 286	29%	22%	49%
Olive Green – PMS 399	10%	13%	77%
Warm Red	10%	9%	81%

- Regular type yields a 70% good comprehension level versus **all bold type**, which yields only a 30% level.

- Large type is easier to read. Never go below 12 point if you want the reader to be able to see your text. If the type face you choose is small relative to a standard-sized type such as Palatino, then up the point size by one or two.
 - Use moderate amounts of accenting such as, underlining, **bolding**, and *italics*. Never mix more than one with another ***such as this***.
 - **Reverse type is ok for short headings** and very short copy. Do not put an entire article, ad, letter, or even a web page in reverse type. A large amount of reverse type is very dangerous as you can see from the body copy comprehension study below.

Good Contrast → Poor Contrast		Comprehension Level		
		<u>Good</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Poor</u>
	Black Type on White	70%	19%	11%
	White Type on Black	0%	12%	88%
	White on Deep Purple	2%	16%	82%
	White on French Blue	0%	4%	96%

Rule – Follow the typography and comprehension rules of copywriting.

Williams Sonoma catalog did a reverse type test of white copy on a black background. When they did the conventional black type on white background it yielded a positive 33% lift in merchandise sales versus the test.

Rule – Use the Proper Typefaces

Serif (feet) type fonts such as Times New Roman, Century Schoolbook, and *Courier*, which have hooks or feet on the letters, lead the eye horizontally across the page. These hooks and feet connect the letters as you read across forcing the eye to keep the letters in the eye connected, increasing comprehension. These fonts yield a 65% good comprehension factor.

Sans Serif (no feet) type fonts such as Arial, Tahoma, Futura, Trebuchet, and Verdana lead the eye vertically down the page and have a comprehension factor of 12% good. Use these fonts in headings and subheadings. They work well for lists, copy you want read vertically, or bullets to break up the copy from a Serif font. Sans Serif fonts work best on web pages and email.

Mixing Serif and Sans Serif typefaces as mentioned above will increase your overall comprehension and break the copy into more manageable chunks. Notice how I use Sans

Serif for my titles, section headings, bullets and tables, while using a 12-point plus Times New Roman font for the main body copy.

Rule – Avoid Using Clichés

Clichés are worn-out phrases that were originally effective, even brilliant. These phrases are so common that writers use them habitually without applying serious thought. Their familiarity makes them convenient. Although they were once memorable, they were repeated so often they are now dull and should be avoided. Reasonable clichés are fine in certain context and can be valuable metaphors: The judge had to *sift through* a 1,000 pages of testimony.

There are thousands of websites and numerous books available if you are wondering whether the phrase you are using is a cliché:

- www.clichesite.com has a category listing and an onsite search engine.
- www.politicalcliche.com has every political cliché ever used or thought of.
- Cliché Finder at www.westegg.com/cliche/ lets you search for a key word and returns a cliché using that word.
- Sports clichés is a workplace favorite. www.sportscliche.com/basketball.html
- This site contains links to others you should avoid in writing. www.westegg.com/cliche/links.html

Some clichés to “avoid like the plague” (this one included) are listed below:

All things considered	In no uncertain terms
As a matter of fact	In this day and age
Along these lines	Ignorance is bliss
Benefit of the doubt	Just for openers
Beyond the shadow of a doubt	Keep options open
Busy as a bee	Moot point
By the same token	More than meets the eye
Beat a dead horse	Pros and cons
Diamond in the rough	Play it by ear
Do not hesitate to	Pay the piper
Easier said than done	Pie in the sky
Food for thought	Pipe dream
Foregone conclusion	Second to none
Few and far between	Trust implicitly
Goes without saying	Too numerous to mention
Heart of the matter	This day and age
Hook, line and sinker	Word to the wise
How does this grab you?	Avoid like the plague

Rule – Use Proper Active and Passive Sentence Construction

Along with editing copy for wordiness, jargon, and gobbledygook, it's important not to overlook the common passive writing style. Both sentence types convey action. They differ in how they convey the actions in their grammatical structures. Passive-voice sentences will seem weak willed, indecisive or evasive.

Active and passive sentences have three basic elements:

1. The actor – the person or thing performing the action
2. The action – the verb
3. The receiver – the person or thing receiving action

When the structure has the actor in front of the action the sentence is in the active voice.

Immedia prepares thousands of pieces of mail per day.

Immedia is the actor; *prepares* is the action; and *mail* receives the action. Because the actor comes before the action, the sentence is active. The subject performs the action.

When the structure has the receiver in front of the action, the sentence is passive voice.

Thousands of pieces of mail per day are prepared at immedia.

In the above passive sentence example, the subject *mail* is not doing the *preparation*. The mail is being prepared. It is being acted upon; it is receiving the action. Therefore, the subject – and the sentence – is passive.

In a passive sentence the reader encounters the action before learning who performed it. In some passive sentences, the reader discovers who performed the action and they seem stagnant. The passive verb always contains a form of the auxiliary verb **be** followed by a present or past participle usually ending in -ed, -en, or -ing.

Not all “to be” verbs or past tense verbs are passive. If you must ask the question “*by whom or by what?*” to clarify who is doing the action, you have a passive construction. However, *have* and *had* are generally not indicators of passive voice.

You may use a passive sentence when you don't know or don't want to mention the actor. Use a passive sentence when the receiver is more important than the actor. Also use passive sentences when you need to form a smooth transition from one sentence to the next, but do not use them to avoid using first person pronouns such as *I*, *we*, *me* or *us*.

Here are three ways to make passive sentences active.

1. Change the verb
Passive – The trees *would always turn* their leaves right before the rains came.

- Active – The trees *reverse* their leaves right before the rain.
Passive – English *was being* spoken.
Active – They *were speaking* English.
2. Rethink the sentence
Passive – This research paper showed how “Malware” or malicious software can be used for causing harm to a computer system or network.
Active – The research paper shows how “Malware” or malicious software causes harm to a computer system or network.
3. Turn the clause or sentence around (easiest method)
Passive – The methods of proper type facing are covered above under rule nine.
Active – Rule number nine covers the methods of proper type facing.

Writing for Buying Styles

Not everyone is like us in what they think and especially *why* they choose to buy a product or service. Personalities certainly affect reading comprehension, buying styles and life choices. If you know the core style of your reading audience, writing this style will increase readership, comprehension and lift response rate. If you don't know the core type, then you can use a combination of two or more styles to appeal to a broader audience group.

Rule – Do not write for yourself or your style; write to the style of your audience.

Here are four buying styles. There are certainly other types of personalities and styles, but these four can be used for a large majority of copywriting.

S – Social, Impulsive and Creative. Use frequent bullets and graphics since they scan when they read. Open the copy with a strong beginning and a strong closing. They also hate routine and indecisiveness. Tone down your writing and presentation style. Don't be critical of yourself or others.

Motivators – attention and recognition
Fears – losing social image

E – Enterprising, Executive, Owner and Decision Maker. This style makes decisions quickly and prefers a quick summary at the beginning and or end of the copy. Show value in your writing. Use humble copy, and engage the right brain. This style is very kinesthetic and hates laziness and irreverence.

Motivators – action, decisions, getting it done
Fears – losing control

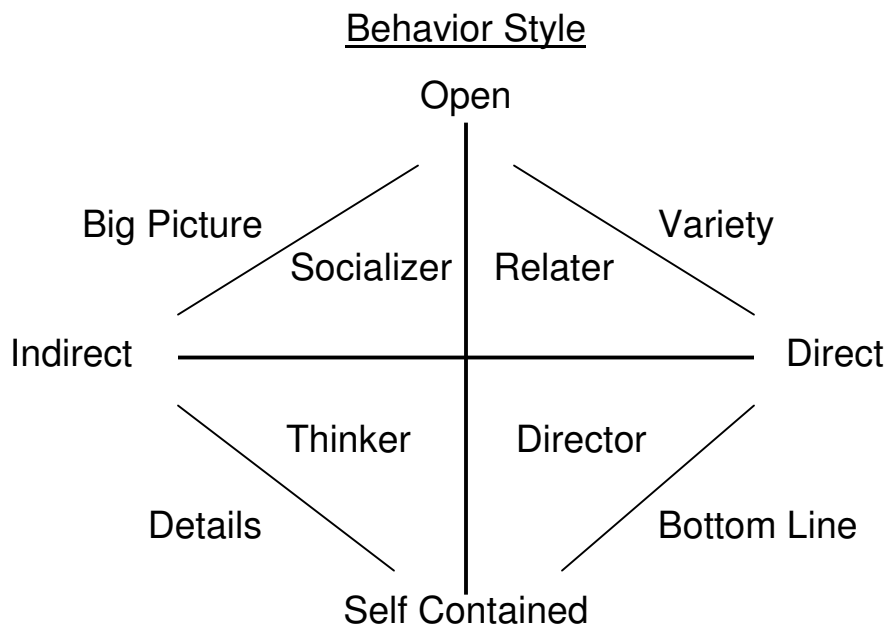
L – Relater and Inclusive. This style has a high need for people and hates hard sells. Use a hands-on casual communication/copy tone. They wear their emotions very openly and need to have deadlines set. They are often self-indulging and need to learn to say no.

Motivators – being included
Fears – losing acceptance by peers

F – Formal, Thinker and Methodical. This style has a high degree of “leave me alone.” They don’t like pushy people or phonies. This type is quality-focused, slow-paced, and task-oriented. They focus on the details and are primarily concerned about doing things the “right” or “correct” way. These individuals are analytical and frequently set higher standards for themselves than others. Your copy must be assertive, thorough, spontaneous and strive for “very good” not “perfect.” Focus on the outcome versus the process.

Fears – being wrong or looking foolish

Although people are dynamic and have various personality styles and traits, they tend to fall within or cross over between two styles. There is no right or wrong style.



Structure of Copy

Using the principles outlined in all the previous sections and articles, you can begin to lay out your copy structure. Keep the rules and concepts in mind as you write. Your headline is a very important part and is the device for drawing them into your copy. When developing headlines keep in mind PMH – primary motivational hook. Within each copy section follow IDA – interest, desire, call to action. An exceptional closing is critical to bringing it altogether and closing the deal.

