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Writing web content that works   Copyright 2012©

1. Your readers: show them that you know them.

First things first: it's not about you and your business! It's about your clients and prospective clients – the people reading your site. It's about their opinions and feelings and the things they want and don't want.

I'm exaggerating. Of course, your website should outline what your business makes and does. Nevertheless, though most business people know that the success of their business depends upon satisfied current clients and a steady stream of prospective clients, the things they write often connect poorly with these two groups.

This is how The Story of Telling, winner of the 2012 Best Australian Business Blog puts it: 'Know who you are talking to: This is the most overlooked aspect of brand and business communication. Every message you craft should begin by understanding the audience.'

Before your start writing your content, jot down answers to the following. (Do this for one group of current clients and one group of prospective clients.)

> ### Knowing your readers
>
> 1. What industries do they work in?
> 2. What are their main occupations?
> 3. What is their main age range or stage of life (e.g. 30 to 40 y.o. or retirees)?
> 4. What is the proportion of males and females?
> 5. When it comes to your good or service, what types of things influence them:
>   – the technical features of your product or service ?   – the opinions of others?
>   – the standards your products or services comply with?   – your brand's prestige?

Answering questions such as the above might seem basic, but doing so is the first step to content that is clear and convincing.

2. Your readers: lead them by the hand.

One of the best books on creating user-friendly websites is called *Don't Make Me Think*. Its main point is that a good website takes a reader by the hand and tells them what they need to do, know and feel. And it does this in a way that is simple and easy-to-follow.

So, what do you want the person visiting your site to do, know and feel? Here are some possibilities:

Do – sign up for a newsletter; call to get a quote; download an article.

Know – that the quality of your product or service exceeds that of your competitors; that your company is an innovator or thought leader.

Feel – secure because of your track record; loyal to your business because of its values.

Whether it's these or other things that you want your readers to 'get' from your website, don't leave them guessing.

Write down two things that you want your readers to do, two things you want them to know, and two things you want them to feel. Return to these once you've written your site's content and assess how well it achieves each of them.

3. Write as if you are talking: to a thirteen year old!

An intelligent and polite thirteen year old. Yes, they exist!

Most of us want our writing to impress people. We want to sound important. To achieve this, we often write in a slightly artificial or unnatural way. We might write in overly formal or stuffy manner, or in a way that is too informal, too friendly. Or, we may use too many buzzwords or too much industry-speak.

Writing like this gets the cart before the horse; it puts style before substance.

The remedy is to keep your language as simple, plain and clear as possible. If you're talking about things that are 'native' to your industry yet foreign to the wider world, explain these things in layman's terms. If you want to stress something, say 'This is important' (or something similar). Then say why it is important.

Remember, the thirteen year old lives in their own world. So too do your readers, and they are only one click away from your competitors' sites. Write in a way that keeps them at *your* site.

4. Use external sources.

I'm sure you've found yourself in a conversation with someone who talks and talks – and keeps on talking – about what they do. After a few minutes, your eyes glaze over. It's similar with the written word. Sentence after sentence and paragraph after paragraph of "We do this …", "we do that …" and "we also do this" will make your readers' eyes glaze over. Use material from other sources and you will be more likely to keep their attention.

Why? Firstly, style. Sources other than you and your company provide viewpoints and angles that differ from yours. And they express these in a tone that differs from yours. Variety is the spice of life, and it will also spice up your website.

Secondly, credibility. In court, two or three witnesses' evidence, if consistent, carry more weight than that of one witness. The same is true on your website.

Think about information from the following sources that you could use: magazines and trade and industry journals in your field; TV and radio programs or newspaper articles; your clients; other websites or articles online; testimonials (which can be broken into chunks and placed throughout your website, rather than being grouped in the one place).

High quality material from sources such as these will position you as an expert, a well-informed person whose products and services are reliable. This is a strong position to be in.

For help writing your website or any other material:

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