

Punch Your Customers

7 Ways to Drastically
Improve Your Online
Sales Copy

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PUNCH YOUR CUSTOMERS:

7 WAYS TO DRASTICALLY IMPROVE YOUR ONLINE SALES COPY

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INTRODUCTION

IMPROVING YOUR ONLINE SALES

Are your websites selling as well as they could be? If they are, and you've been wondering just what you're going to do with the piles of cash that are rolling in from your online ventures, then stop reading now and go enjoy your money. On the other hand, if you suspect you could be getting a bit more out of your web marketing – or worse yet, if you're getting nothing at all – then read on, because I'm going to show you a handful of easy ways to convert more of your visitors into leads and sales.

For the past ten years, I've been writing sales material for organizations across North America and the United Kingdom. Coming from a background in commis-

sion sales, I noticed something interesting right away: that most sales copy wasn't working. Worse yet, it was *never going to work*. That's because most copywriters and marketing managers have never sold anything. Sure, they've written letters and designed brochures, but they've never done the hard work of meeting with prospects and finding out why they buy.

As a result, they tend to make fundamental mistakes in the materials they produce. They write copy that's pretty, fun, and entertaining – but nothing that's *effective*. Even worse, because so many of these folks work in high-end firms, their errors are duplicated again and again by their peers and competitors.

I don't want you to make the same mistakes. Now more than ever, the Internet offers entrepreneurs, agencies, and marketing departments an unparalleled opportunity to reach, inform, and yes, even *sell*, to more people than ever before. But to do so, you're going to need to let go of some old ideas.

To produce Web pages that sell and convert, you're going to need to be sharper than the competition. In these few short pages, I'm going to get you started in the right direction.

1

USE HEADLINES THAT GROWL, BARK & BITE

In my work, it's not unusual for me to write dozens – or even hundreds – of headlines for a single project. That's because, pound for pound, your headline is the single most important piece of copy on the page. It even carries more weight than the layout and design. Why? Because if you don't give people a strong and compelling reason to stay on your site, they won't.

So what makes a good headline? The simple answer is *anything that keeps people reading*. A good headline can inspire curiosity, hope, fear, or even rage. Any of these can lead to a buying decision, provided you strike the right chords in the rest of your copy. The worst response you can elicit from your headline, on the other hand, is "so what?"

What this means to you is that, when you're brainstorming headlines, you *must* find an effective way to hit right at the problem your product or service solves. Most people don't buy something online, or even request more information, because they have nothing else to do with their time – they do it because they've got a problem or need that keeps them up at night, and you have shown them a way to solve it.

Questions make great headlines, because they allow you to speak directly to the voice in your reader's head. Asking "Are You Worried About Losing Your Biggest Customers to Overseas Competition?" or "What's Your Plan to Beat Rising Tuition Costs?" is always going to be more effective than simply announcing "Profit Increasing Strategies" or "Tax Free College Savings Accounts," because it connects with an existing need, fear, or hope that already exists in the customer's mind.

Of course, you can take this too far, and some web headlines are so over the top that they end up being ignored. But the rule of thumb is that a headline should be like a punch to the nose – if your reader can still think about anything else, then you haven't hit them hard enough.

2

SELL WITH EMOTION

It's a known fact that nearly every buying decision any of us makes – from that dream house down to our morning cup of coffee – is made on an emotional, not rational, basis. In other words, we buy because of the things we love, fear, and hope for, not because we're as concerned about the facts and figures as we'd like to think. That's not to say that those details don't come into the equation, because they definitely do, but only after we've decided what we want emotionally. When it comes to spending our time and money, the head almost always follows the heart.

This isn't exactly new information. Psychologists and salespeople have known it for decades. And yet, the vast majority of sales pages I see go on with statistics,

percentages, and pictures without ever appealing to the reader's emotions. They give dozens of reasons why the product in question is fantastic, but no reasons to actually buy it.

Certainly, finding the emotional tie is easier for some products than others. A clothing site, for instance, can quickly draw on a person's natural desire to be respected or attractive, while someone selling industrial cleaners will have a harder time drawing on those connections. But no product anywhere in the world, not even paper or raw steel, is sold without some level emotional appeal – whether it's to the product, the company, the salesperson, or just the desire for fewer hassles and headaches.

Remember that when you write sales copy. Every sentence doesn't have to be dripping with sentimental themes, but it should offer a compelling reason for your reader to move forward, and one that strikes them on the emotional level. A customer might tell you they bought because they want a percentage increase in profits, or a product that carries a solid warranty, and they probably even think so. But at one point or another, they decided to take action because your page said something that connected with them emotionally.

3

ROLL IN THE MUD

The biggest problem with most sales writing is that it's done by writers. Fresh from their journalism backgrounds and literary departments, they strive to produce sentences that are elegant, striking, and grammatically clean. But clinical writing isn't usually effective writing. It sure sounds nice, but it doesn't put money in anyone's pocket.

I'm not trying to slam anyone with an English degree or a creative background here, especially since many of them have a lot more writing talent than I do. I'm simply pointing out what a lot of those of us in the field know already – that it's much easier to teach a salesperson to write than it is a writer to sell. If you know the way to persuade buyers to take action, you can translate

that onto a page, but all the correct punctuation in the world can't save flat copy. That's because buyers care about benefits and clarity, not proper noun placement.

With that in mind, loosen up your copy. Bend the rules in your style guide and focus your energies on getting your point across. Your sales writing should speak to people, and their needs, not remind them of a textbook. Every sale is a personal decision, and stiff writing will only drive people farther back from taking action.

This shouldn't be taken, however, as an excuse for leaving typos and other obvious errors in your copy. While bending the rules and being conversational is a great way to increase your credibility, nothing will destroy it faster than coming off like a grade school dropout. A buyer's biggest fear is that they'll regret their purchase, or worse, that your site is designed to rip them off. It's hard for them to have faith in what you're offering if you can't manage to spell it correctly.

With that caveat aside, though, feel free to take off your tie when you sit down to write. Your copy should read like a letter from a friend, not the fine print on an insurance policy.

4

WRITE DIRECTLY TO A SINGLE READER

A poor copywriter, like any poor salesperson, wants to sell everything to everyone all the time. A better approach is to tailor your copy so that you can communicate effectively with a single person – even if there are thousands of them.

If this sounds confusing, it's really not. What I'm getting at is the idea that you should know your market inside and out. You should have a crystal clear idea of who would want to buy what you're selling, why they will buy it, and how they ended up on your site. In other words, you should get to know your average or ideal buyer as a person. Then, you write something that speaks and appeals specifically to them. Once you've done that, you'll have an effective sales page that really

does work for that one person... and anyone else who fits into your description of the ideal customer.

For instance, if you know that middle aged women are your buyers, then write for one and speak her language. If your reader is an executive in his sixties, then say what you need to say to get his attention. It doesn't matter if you need to sell to high school kids or senior citizens – write in a way that will cause them to respond, and don't worry whether it will work for anyone else. The goal isn't to have a page that sounds good to everybody; it's to have one that speaks to a single visitor in a way that makes them feel like you've taken the thoughts right out of their head.

It's a mistake to think of a mass of readers when you're writing sales copy, because almost all purchases are individual. The person on the other screen has his or her own hopes, problems, and constraints to deal with. Write something that makes them feel you understand their personal needs, and you'll have a much easier time persuading them to buy.

5

SLIM DOWN YOUR WRITING

There's an old adage that longer copy sells better than short copy, and it's often true – as long as you have something to say. But lots of online marketers have run wild with this idea, producing paragraph after paragraph of long-winded prose, begging the reader to buy something in an endless stream of pixels.

The great thing about the Internet is that space is cheap. It's just as easy to go with a three thousand word layout as it is something a third of the length. But for copywriters, that freedom can sometimes be a bit overwhelming. Without any physical reason to keep things shorter, many go ahead and write themselves right out of a sale.

In my years selling face-to-face and over the phone, I observed something interesting: that the best salespeople usually say a lot less than their peers. Some of this has to do with confidence and experience, but there's also a lot of value in being concise. Say enough of the right things, and you can convince a good prospect to buy. Keep talking after that, though, and you can easily create enough doubt for them to decide to move on.

Online, this problem can be compounded by the fact that the reader's attention is a delicate thing. Another suggestion, piece of entertainment, or solution to their problem is only a mouse click away. They don't even have to set down a piece of paper or decide to put it in the trash can. Most people don't have the time or inclination to read through pages and pages of ramblings, so if they don't see what they're looking for on your page, they simply move on.

With that in mind, let your sales writing be as long as it needs to be, but become your own harshest editor. Look through your sales copy for any words or ideas that aren't necessary. Find the fat, and then trim it out. You only have a few precious seconds or minutes to impress your reader – so use them to provoke a buying decision.

6

USE STATISTICS, CASE STUDIES, & TESTIMONIALS

Earlier, I made the point that people buy emotionally and that the rest is details. That's entirely true, and it's something that every marketer should keep in mind. But that's not the whole story; the details *do* matter. Once someone has come to the idea that they'd like to buy from you, the next thing they do is look for clues that will tell them whether or not they're making a good decision. In this way, using statistics, testimonials, and other forms of verifiable data can give you a huge boost in your conversion ratios.

This is true in any sales situation, but especially on a website. The biggest problem on the Internet is credibility. Because of its anonymous nature, no one can know for sure that you are who you say you are, or that you'll

do what you say you'll do. For that reason, they may be especially hesitant to do business with you or your company.

The easiest way to overcome this is to show your visitors how pleased other people have been with you or your products. There's a reason so many big online retailers, like Amazon and Ebay, encourage buyer feedback. A single letter from a satisfied customer – especially if they are well-known, or with a universally recognized organization – can say more about the value of what you're offering than a thousand web pages ever could. The same is true of a strong statistic or case study. For most people, just seeing that you've done something great for other buyers can bring a sense of reassurance.

So, if you need to gather some extra customer quotes, or put together a few case studies before you write, then do it. It might take a bit of extra time, but the difference it can make in the effectiveness of your sales copy is enormous.

7

MAKE IT EASY FOR THE READER TO BUY

One of the big mysteries of copywriting (or life, if you want to be philosophical about it), is the sheer number of people who will never ask for what they really want. They'll put pages and pages of words together without ever working up the nerve to spit it out. At the end of the copy, if they even make it that far, the reader is left to wonder, "What now?"

Believe it or not, this tendency isn't that uncommon. In the commission sales world, the words "ask for the order" are drilled into new producers time and again. And yet, many of them will hesitate to ask their customers to buy. To understand why this is – and make sure it doesn't ruin your sales copy – we need to understand the buying offer for what it is: a turning point.

The second you ask the reader to ‘buy now,’ ‘sign up,’ or take to some other action, the cards are on the table. Like leaning in for that first kiss, it throws tension into a possibly awkward situation. The potential customer, who may have been dancing around with the idea of buying or getting to know the features of your product, is being asked to commit to the consequences of paying for it. Do this too soon, and you’re going to scare them away; wait too long, and you’ll miss your chance.

How should you handle it? By doing what the best do – making the purchase seem like the most natural thing in the world. If you’ve done your job and explained the benefits of what you’re selling in a clear and compelling way, why shouldn’t your readers try it out? In fact, they should be so anxious to buy that you can barely keep them from skipping ahead in the copy to find the ordering information.

Selling, whether it’s in person, in print, or in pixels, is best done in steps. Let your reader know you understand their problems and concerns, present a solution, and then show them how to get it.

And once you reach that point, make it easy for them to do what you want them to do. Don’t just ask them to buy – ask them two, three, or four times. The best sales writing isn’t a pitch; it’s an invitation to enjoy something better. Let that come through in your sales copy, and then take out all the obstacles to letting people take you up on your offer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Matthew Aaron is an independent copywriter living in Denver, Colorado, USA. For more than ten years, he's grown a solid reputation for delivering effective sales copy for his clients across North America and the United Kingdom.

A former commissioned salesperson, Matthew draws upon the lessons and experiences he learned firsthand to create materials that spur readers into action. His belief is that good copy shouldn't be judged on how clever or pretty it is, but how many new leads or customers it brings.

He is the author of *Selling in a Recession*, as well as hundreds of articles on sales and writing. His columns have been used by publications in more than a dozen countries, and he continues to work with organizations of all sizes.

For more information about him, his books, or his copywriting work, please visit www.matthewaaron.com.