



HOW TO CHOOSE, HIRE AND MANAGE THE COPYWRITER THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU, YOUR BUSINESS AND YOUR BOTTOM LINE

For many businesses, outsourcing — of non-core skills such as copywriting — makes sound commercial sense, enabling you to extend your talent pool without increasing your payroll. There is, however, a downside... The lack of any longer term contractual obligation can result in firms choosing a writer based on less than stringent short-term criteria — usually something along these lines of: they're available and they're cheap'. Such 'commoditised' thinking makes for promiscuous clients, opportunistic service providers and fleeting, low-value business relationships. Choose the right adviser, however — one who has the tactical skills you need now and a reserve of strategic expertise for the future — and you'll have at your disposal a real commercial asset: a source of advice and support who will help you to maximise the return on your marketing investment.

ARMCHAIR NETWORKING

Creating a shortlist of qualified writers has never been easier. In particular, business networking sites such as Linked-in and ecademy allow you to review the profiles of a raft of specialist writers and to browse detailed client reviews at your leisure. Which means you can establish your prospective scribes' bona fides — their experience of your industry, your market(s) and your preferred media — before you even meet.

Of course, notwithstanding the global reach of the web, you'll be fortunate to find a writer who specialises in, say, petrochemical trade press copy for North American o-ring manufacturers. But you'll have little difficulty sourcing any number of 'generalist' writers with an engineering and/or technical background. And this should be sufficient.

Whilst it helps to have a writer who already speaks your language — who understands the lexicon of your business — the broader influences and ideas a generalist writer picks up along the way can enable him or her to bring a fresh perspective to your project and translate the most complex product features into differentiated, benefit-laden marketing communications.

Similarly, although you may be looking for a writer for your email campaign or website, do not feel you have to seek out one of the many self-styled 'online copywriters' that you'll find plying their cyber-trade.

In reality, the principles of effective marketing communications — espoused by traditional advertising and direct mail specialists such as Drayton Bird, Rosser Reeves and Herschell Gordon Lewis — apply equally in the online world, whether

*In the final analysis,
the marketing
copywriter lives or
dies by results and
by the leads and
sales s/he delivers.*

you're concerned with search engine optimisation, banner and pay-perclick advertising, email marketing, landing page creation and so on.

ESTABLISHING THEIR BONA FIDES

A client list that reads like a Who's Who of your industry tells you the writer has been in business for a while. But here again you shouldn't be too easily impressed. In reality, it's not terribly difficult for a freelancer to secure a one-off project from, say, Dell Computer and thus legitimately add the company to their list of credits.

It's considerably tougher to secure an ongoing relationship with that company, spanning a number of projects.

So try to determine for how long — and in what capacity — the writer has worked for each client.

You should also ask to see the writer's 'book'. That is: a selection of their recent copy samples (which, nowadays, is more likely to take the form of an online gallery or clutch of PDF documents).

As you peruse their portfolio, keep in mind: you're not assessing their design skills; you're concerned with their copywriting prowess. So try not to be swayed by slick graphics and typography.

Bear in mind, too, that their portfolio is likely to contain only the very best examples of their work: the material they think will most impress you, their hoped-for client.

You, on the other hand, want to know how closely the finished product reflected the initial brief and how effective it proved as a marketing tool. So be sure to ask what results the copy achieved. And take the names of a couple of past clients who will be happy to verify the writer's claims.

Accordingly, they will vary their 'tone of voice' to suit their audience. So, though instinctively you may not like a particular copy style, you should look beyond any personal editorial prejudices to determine whether the campaign proved a commercial success.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

OK — you've done your due diligence. You've established that your writer can get to grips with your business. They have a proven track record. And they can tailor their approach to meet your needs.

Time, then, for a first face-to-face meeting.

The ease with which such a meeting can be arranged is telling in itself. If the writer drops everything to meet at a moment's notice, chances are s/he's not too busy. Does this suggest a lack of work? And if so, why?

If, by contrast, scheduling a meeting proves tricky, you have to question their capacity — their ability to turn your work around in the required timeframe.

During the meeting itself, you'll be looking for a candidate who asks searching, relevant, and insightful questions ensuring a detailed understanding of your needs. Ideally, they'll reference previous clients who faced and — with the writer's help — overcame similar problems.

They may also offer suggestions to complement your piece and even argue the case for an alternative approach. This is all to the good.

Provided their argument is based on empirical evidence, as opposed to ill-informed arrogance, it could pay you to listen (even if prima facie you disagree). You're not looking for a 'yes-man', after all; you're seeking an experienced professional who'll add value in the form of new ideas, concepts, messages, and copy treatments to your business.

That said, you must be confident that your freelance has the right temperament for your organisation. Marketing is, after all, a creative process; if the team doesn't 'gel', the project may suffer.

WAYS OF WORKING

Some writers choose to work from their home or office, others at their clients'.

Either way, if the product is complex, some degree of face-to-face contact will be essential. However, once you've furnished your copywriter with the information they need, they'll probably be most comfortable (and most productive) working from their own premises surrounded by their reference library and other accoutrements and reserving site visits for essential briefing and review meetings.

Even those latter visits may not be completely essential; video conferencing provides a workable alternative to meetings for geographically dispersed teams and it saves on travel costs too.

Your budget, inevitably, has to be a factor in your choice of writer. With rates varying from £25 or even less an hour to well over £250, there's sure to be a freelancer to meet your needs (whilst keeping your accountant happy).

Unfortunately, the writer's hourly rate is just part of the story...

By way of example, at the outset of Steve Calder's career (some years ago, admittedly) he charged just £10 an hour and he was happy to negotiate. Needless to say, he was quickly snapped up by an agency, which immediately raised his charge-out rate to £140 per hour.

Same writer — 1,400% fee difference.

Writers have a range of motives for the level at which they set their fees. Some may wish to remain below the VAT threshold; others may price aggressively to ramp their new business acquisition before either hiking their rates dramatically, or buckling under the strain of too much work.

The case for a fixed price quotation is clear: it enables you to make a true 'apples-with-apples' comparison and ensures there will be no nasty surprises when the invoice arrives in your In-box.

As a general rule, the cheaper the writer, the more handholding will be required on your part.

Writers who charge towards the upper end of the scale will usually hit the ground running; they'll work on their own initiative helping you to develop new concepts and marketing messages and offering real added value, based usually on proven experience.

Conversely, those operating at 'the cheaper end' will require more direction. These are the writers you call upon to finesse your existing materials and ensure the commas appear in all the right places, which may be all you need.

In Steve's view, however, writers should be involved much earlier in the planning process and be respected as the experienced marketers they invariably are. He says, "Too often, a client will call up a writer and say 'do an ad' for their product, when in fact print advertising may be the least effective promotional vehicle for them. By that time, however, it's usually too late. The space is booked and paid for – the budget blown."

MORE HASTE, LESS SPEED

Speed of turnaround, too, has to be a factor in your deliberations. Who, after all, is less expensive: the writer who charges £30 an hour and spends a week creating the communication you need or the writer who charges £60 and turns the project around, satisfactorily, within two days?

With the latter in mind, you should also insist upon a supporting Copywriting Agreement setting out any and all applicable Terms and Conditions including undertakings (on both sides), access to background information and key personnel, revisions and alterations, proof reading, treatment of expenses, and deadlines. On which topic...

Most writers will ask for as long as possible to refine and polish your piece and rightly so. The longer they are allowed, the better the job will be.

Final word count is of no consequence here; it can take far longer to create a focused 30-word press ad than to write a six page direct mail piece. (Lest we forget Blaise Pascal's apocryphal postscript: "I would have written a shorter letter but didn't have time.")

It's not about inflating your invoice, either. In fact, it's the hours the writer doesn't bill for that can be the most productive: the period, for instance, between the preliminary briefing session and that all-important 'first cut'.

During this (usually all too short) hiatus, the writer's subconscious sets to work, assimilating the supplied information, and devising, sifting, and rejecting an infinite series of approaches and ideas.

Consequently, when the time comes to write, the communication is invariably halfformed, and the act of writing comes easy (well, easy-ish).

On a similar note, the luxury of a break between the first and subsequent drafts allows the writer to revisit the job with a fresh eye enabling him or her to quickly pick up on typos, verbosity, clumsy phrases, and ambiguity.

The message then is clear: wherever possible, give the writer the time s/he needs to do the job. Properly.

That said, once it's agreed, your deadline is sacrosanct. And although few writers would be keen to match Steve Calder's rip-up-your-invoice guarantee, some form of penalty for late delivery is not unreasonable.

If, like you, the writer is looking to develop a long term relationship, s/he'll be happy to oblige.

ABOUT STEVE CALDER

Steve Calder is a copywriter, consultant and interim manager specialising in digital and direct marketing communications. His clients originate primarily in the technology, transportation, travel and leisure, financial and professional services sectors.

UK and Netherlands-based advertising and new media agencies, companies, and not-for-profit organisations turn to Steve for engaging, response-oriented advertising and marketing campaigns that achieve measurable commercial goals: ramping awareness, generating new leads, driving web traffic, educating and informing stakeholders, building brand loyalty and converting new enquirers into profitable repeat buyers.

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