Michel Fortin's 7 Step Copywriting Process

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Thinking of becoming a freelance copywriter? How about writing the copy for your own web site (for your book or business). These seven (really eight) steps will lead you to greater success in marketing a book.
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[Editor's note: Michel Fortin is one of my favorite copywriters and Internet Entrepreneurs. In fact, I recently joined his email coaching program (at $450/month!) because I find his information and insights so valuable. If you have any desire to become a freelance copywriter (which is how I earn my living, by the way), then Michel is a great person to follow. Whether it's copywriting expertise, Internet advice, or marketing secrets, Michel is a fabulous resource. I encourage you to check him out. Also check out the copywriting course mentioned in the sidebar on this page - it's what got me started and earning a very comfortable income.]

1. Gather Initial Research

For starters, with all projects I ask that my clients take time to answer an initial, 25-point questionnaire. Their answers will provide some background information. I ask several questions from four main categories:

- The customer
- The product
- The business
- The offer

The first one is the most important. It’s where I ask questions like demographics and psychographics, and try to build a perfect customer profile or persona. The others include things like features and benefits, stories behind the product, testimonials, actual results, the buying process, etc.

(The questionnaire can be an eye-opener for many clients because it forces them to dig for the answers, and to see where some of the flaws with their current copy are.)

Admittedly, this is just a start. But their answers, which give me some direction as to where to conduct further research, give me at least a basic understanding of their business, the purpose of the copy’s message, and its goals.

Yes, that’s “goals” in the plural.

Of course, there is the main goal, which may be to generate leads or sales. But other, secondary goals may include to dispel rumors, answer questions, build credibility, eliminate misconceptions, differentiate from the competition, etc.
2. Conduct Exploratory Research

Then, I read and study the answers carefully, and I conduct some exploratory research. That is, I try to gather as much information as I can — anything about the business, the product, the offer and, above all, the target audience.

I surf their websites. I research their competitors. I look at some of the trends in that particular product category, market, or industry. I do comparative analyses.

I hang out where their readers hang out. I check out some of the websites they visit. I spend some time in forums in which they're active. I try to get a grasp of their language, their challenges, their industry, their fears, their goals, etc.

When I come across an important piece of information, I copy it into a document, where I can easily append extra pieces of information, include any corresponding URLs, make additional notes, and more.

I create a new project in my project management software, where I give access to all the key players, and start populating it with the information I gather.

(Aside from being a repository, the software has many features that come in quite handy, such as to-do lists, message board, whiteboard, chat room, file uploads, milestone tracker, and more.)

The idea at first is to gather as much information as possible, including facts, features, data, results, etc. I undiscerningly add whatever information I find into the repository.
3. Pick, Prod And Probe Further

Of course, a lot of it is also irrelevant.

So I go through the information and pull out the important stuff. I compile, clarify, and expand. I cherrypick and highlight what's relevant, and file or discard the rest.

I might even repeat some of the earlier steps to make sure I've covered all the bases. After spending some time studying the information, I may ask for more clarification and dig deeper.

Sometimes, it's to get a better understanding of the information. Other times, it's to get additional tidbits where I might uncover hidden gems I can use with the copy.

But most of the time, it's to be able to later put what my clients tell me into words that specifically meet my client's audience at their level.

I tend to look at my job as "connecting the dots." If the product is good and the demand is there, then my job is not to sell the product but to connect the desires and fears of the reader with the solution my client offers.

(Most of my clients are too "married" to their own products or businesses that they tend to be removed from their clients. So what they may feel is great about their product may not be a shared opinion among their target market.)

But here’s my greatest tip…

Some of the best answers I get are in fact obtained while interviewing people. That’s right: actually talking to people, whether it’s the business owner or existing clients. In other words, picking up the phone and asking questions.

(Of course, I record everything and transcribe the interviews. I do this with the help of an online transcription service.)

This allows me to not only catch verbal cues and innuendos, but also to prod and probe further. I sometimes throw in a dangling preposition or conjunction followed by a pause, where the silence compels them to continue.

(For example, once my client answers a question, I’ll say, “And?” “Or?” “But?” “So that…” “That’s for…” “That means…” “Or else?” “In other words?” After that, I shut up. You’d be amazed by the kinds of answers they would give!)

I also try to speak with actual success stories. I interview satisfied clients, not just for the sake of gathering testimonials, and not just to ask a lot of open-ended questions to probe deeper as well, but also, and if I can, to actually get them to sell me on the product themselves.

These interviews are worth a mint! If I managed to get my interviewee excited and passionate about the product, in many cases they practically write the copy for me.

4. Create The Structure

Next, I try to find a storyline, a unique benefit, a certain angle, or a key piece of information. Some call it a “platform.” Others call it a “hook” or “the big idea.” It’s essentially the one element on which the entire copy hinges.

It may be a certain fear, a news story, a “hot button,” a success story, a fascinating factoid, a sensational claim, a major benefit (even an unsought one), a sense of urgency, a “lie dispelled,” a secret, a myth, a hot trend, a controversial topic, an unexpected result, etc.

Once I’ve found it, I then create an outline. Often, I apply my QUEST formula, which is to “qualify” the reader, “understand” their problem, “educate” them on the solution, “stimulate” them on the value, and “transition” them into a buyer.

I don’t write the copy just yet. I simply use the formula to create an outline that will guide me as to where specific pieces of information will be added.

The copy doesn’t necessarily have to follow the exact formula, either. But it does give me some guidance as to what exactly I must cover, and where I must cover it.

Sometimes, I’ll use it to create headers throughout the copy as the outline. These headers are not written in stone. They only give me some initial direction as to what, specifically, I need to cover at certain points in the copy.

Look at these headers as “guideposts,” if you will.

I also try to look at the copy from the perspective of a reader. For example, I’ll ask myself, “What do I want and need to know at this point in the copy?” “What can potentially confuse me?” “What questions or objections might likely come up at that moment?” “What’s going through my mind when I read this?” And so on.

(At this time in the process, I write some notes on the copy, to myself, on what needs to be covered, what key pieces of information I must include, what ideas I want to expand on, etc. And often, I write these notes in point form.)
5. Write The Copy

Next comes the creative part.

From the platform and the guideposts I’ve set out above, I start writing the copy. I often begin with the headline or the bullet points, whichever is easiest. (It really depends on what comes to mind the fastest.)

Sometimes, a headline idea jumps out at me, particularly after doing the research and coming up with the “hook.” If so, I will start with the headline first.

The headline is not final, either. I sometimes come back and rewrite the headline once I finish the copy, because new and better ideas emerge later on as I write the body copy.

Both the headline and the storyline will give me a good indication of what I can write about, how to say it, as well as what options I have when I write it.

Sometimes, I just start writing and let it flow, and my writing takes a life of its own. When this happens, sometimes I end up ignoring the guideposts I’ve created. If so, that’s perfectly fine. Remember, they are guides. Not goals.

In terms of actual copy, I start writing and expanding.

- I structure a skeletal offer (with premiums);

- I create the opening or introductory paragraph;

- I tell the story (based on the chosen storyline);

- I list the features, advantages and benefits;
- I expand on key items for the main body;
- I incorporate or expand on story blocks;
- I add Johnson boxes, remarks or sidenotes;
- I reinforce key benefits and “reasons why;”
- I build up the value and expand on the offer;
- I form a logical and believable sense of urgency;
- I inject credibility by adding proof elements;
- I infuse testimonials in appropriate locations;
- I write the guarantee (or guarantees);
- I close with a call-to-action statement;
- And I plug some “PS’s” at the end.

(In the P.S., I add an afterthought to restate the benefits of the offer, repeat the topic covered in the headline, emphasize the sense of urgency, or add an extra bonus not yet offered.)
6. Rearrange The Flow

Then, I rearrange the content for flow.

I don’t edit the copy. I simply scan the copy to make sure it all flows nicely, and that the organization of ideas makes the reading pleasant, compelling and easily understandable.

I make sure to integrate headers at every two or three paragraphs. If needed, I also copy, paste and move blocks of text in locations I feel they are more appropriate.

(For example, sometimes it’s better to credentialize the copy early on. Or some testimonials are best located where specific objections may come up. In fact, I use them where the reader might have a specific question that the testimonial answers.)

To help me, I work with multiple, tiled windows (i.e., side by side), all opened at once and each showing a different part of a same document. This is particularly helpful when I’m working with longer copy.

That way, I can easily scan and scroll through each window to rearrange the content from one window to another (i.e., from one section of the copy to another).

From this cursory look at the copy, I can immediately sense if I need to also add certain elements, whether cosmetic (such as adding a grabber, a picture or a graphic) or tactical (such as adding a sidenote, a proof element or a Johnson box).

I also make sure that the copy follows the AIDA formula (i.e., attention, interest, desire and action).
7. Edit And Expand

Once re-arranged, I then edit the copy. I read it to myself, slowly and sometimes out loud, to make sure it's easy to read and flows properly. If I stumble at any point or verbally struggle, I know that I need to rewrite that section.

(Whenever I can, I even record myself. It's amazing how many errors I've discovered from listening to myself reading the copy, than from simply reading it.)

I then expand, cut out, tighten up and add more. I add emphasis where needed, rewrite certain sections, and, above all, cut out as much of the extra fat as possible.

In fact, the latter is the most crucial step.

Why? Because when I write, I usually write with abandon. I let it all flow. I write like I speak. I try not to stop myself, or else it will impede my train of thought.

(When I stop writing, it forces me to start thinking critically. I begin to edit myself too early, which blocks the creative flow. When this happens, I lose focus because I spend too much energy on making sure I've said things right rather than saying the right things.)

That's why I wait until after I'm done, and only when I'm done, to go back and excise all the extraneous filler. I try to cut out as much of the unneeded copy as I can. Or, if what I say is indeed important, I try to find ways to say the same thing but in less words.

(Editing is probably one the most important strategies in writing copy, but it's also the most overlooked because it's the hardest thing to do for most copywriters. That's why it's best to wait until the end.)

Finally, I focus on the cosmetics, since certain visual "triggers" help to increase both readership and response. So I touch up the formatting, typestyles, tables, colors, graphics, pictures, layouts, fonts, and so on.

After that, I'm done.
Revise, Revise, Revise!

Before I deliver the copy to my client, I still get my staff to proofread it for me. But I don't limit them to the grammar or style. I also ask them to signal any part of the copy where they feel confused, lost, or disinterested in the story.

(I also ask them questions about the copy to see if they truly grasped some of its key elements. If their answers are not good enough, I know I need to edit it more.)

This is important, since I often make the same mistakes I made while writing it when reading it back to myself. Also, knowing what the copy is all about can cause me to take what I say (or fail to say) for granted, and accidentally skip over what may be confusing to others.

(Don’t discount having a fresh pair of eyes look at your copy for you. Before handing off the copy to the client, try to get someone else to read it for you.)

After it’s all done, I then upload it to my the project website for my client to read and offer feedback. I revise the copy until the client is satisfied. (In fact, I allow my clients two free revisions.)

There is no way to predict how well my copy will do. For some clients, my work multiplies their response rates like gangbusters. But for others, my copy turns out to be a downright dud.

Maybe it’s because the platform is wrong. Perhaps the headline is the bottleneck. I don’t know. The only way to know is to test.

But in my experience, when my copy failed it was largely because the audience wasn’t targeted, or the offer wasn’t appropriate. And in either case, the copy would have never sold well, no matter how good the copy was.

Failure does happen. It happens to the best of us. But failure is also an opportunity — an opportunity to learn, improve and grow. That’s why I appreciate it when my clients keep me posted on their results.

(I trust a copywriter who failed and succeeded more than I do one who never failed at all.)

In fact, some clients prefer to keep me on a retainer after the initial project, so they can have me rewrite parts of the copy, or offer any suggestions on how to improve it, without contaminating the initial control.

Nevertheless, these are the steps I follow. I don’t necessarily follow them to the letter all of the time. But hopefully, they have given you some fodder on your quest for better response.
About the Author

Michel Fortin is a direct response copywriter, author, speaker and consultant. Spy on Michel by watching videos of him in action, working with real copy from real clients, and get tested conversion strategies proven to boost response at http://TheCopyDoctor.com/. Watch a free 2-hour sample video!