

WRITE TO BE READ

Top tips for making online content work

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Extolling the virtues of Swiss football referees in your online copy won't win you many fans at the moment. Neither will forcing your readers to trawl through a text-heavy website with no clear points of interest.

Online, your competition is only a click away. It's vital to make your content work.

We've all been faced with a website that's no more than a migrated version of a printed brochure. We've all clicked that little cross and closed the browser window down, shuddering at the prospect of getting lost in a text jungle without the necessary supplies to see us through the night.

Writing for the web is a discipline of its own. There are a few simple rules you can follow to avoid some of the most common mistakes:

Know your audience

If you don't know your target audience, you can't communicate with them. Use the language and tone they expect and understand. If you are writing in the latest youth-speak and your readers are all over 50, you'll alienate them and they won't bother reading it.

Open with the main point

Like newspaper journalists, online writers should get to the point quickly: who, what, where, when, why and how. The content of the page should be apparent from the opening paragraph – then your reader can choose whether or not to read on.

Use the one-point rule

Online, always stick to one point per sentence, one subject per paragraph.

Be concise

Know what you want to say and say it succinctly. Web copy needs to be significantly shorter than print – users don't want to scroll through endless text. If you try and make them, they'll go elsewhere.

Write in short sentences and paragraphs. It's more punchy and has greater impact. Cut your copy back, then cut it back again.

Be direct

Passive language is weak and wordy. It doesn't work online. Use active language – it is forceful, direct and dynamic.

'The increase in sales was rapid' is passive. 'Sales increased rapidly' is active.

Be consistent

Consistency in your use of language is incredibly important. For example, using '3' in one sentence and 'three' in the next shows you have no attention to detail. If you can't follow simple and consistent rules in your writing, what does it say about your business?

Create your own rules (a style guide) and stick to them. You'll be surprised the difference it makes.

Use subheadings

If you have more than 250 words on a page, use subheadings to break the text up. White space is even more important online than in print. Subheadings allow your readers to scan the page and to pick out the information relevant to them. Bold text and bullet points also help to break the page up.

Use links

Unlike print, websites are interactive. Use links to drive your readers to the information they want. Make sure your link text gives your reader a reasonable idea of the information they will find if they click through. Avoid using long sentences as links – they're ugly and uninviting.

Proof your work

Avoid spelling, grammatical and factual errors by stringently proofing your work. This will greatly increase your credibility.

Keep it fresh

To have a dynamic website, your content must be dynamic. No matter how well written your copy is, if it isn't updated regularly, it will soon become old news and people will stop visiting.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information about how your business can benefit from effective online writing and content please contact Nigel Cooper at The Other Room:

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