

Cut the bullshit: How to write marketing copy for your startup

Failure to communicate is the leading cause of startup death. For lack of a coherent message, many great ideas never take off. The concept is lost in a fog of clumsy sentences and vague descriptions. No-one gets it.

Copywriting is a skill every entrepreneur should master. You might have the Next Big Thing up your sleeve, but until you can explain it convincingly to a general audience, who cares?

You don't need a marketing agency or a degree in creative writing – just an appreciation of how language works. Follow these simple rules to write better copy for your website, press release, or email campaign.

Keep it short

Especially on the web. Brevity is the golden rule of online copywriting. The average netizen has a three-second attention span, so cut the B.S. and get straight to the point.

Never use five words when three will do. Look through your copy and delete every word that doesn't need to be there. Strip each sentence down to its bare essentials.

- Bad: *"It's our pleasure to announce the latest product in our range."*
- Good: *"We're pleased to announce our latest product."*

Both phrases mean the same, but the first is bloated with useless words.

- Bad: *"The new app we are building is for lovers of music."*
- Good: *"We're building a new app for music lovers."*

- Bad: *"In order to use our service, you will first need to agree to the terms and conditions."*
- Good: *"Agree to the terms and conditions before using our service."*

- Bad: *"We specialize in designing beautiful websites."*
- Good: *"We design beautiful websites."*

Where possible, avoid using "there are" and "you can." Most sentences work better without them.

- Bad: *"There are three advantages to using our product."*
- Good: *"Our product has three advantages."*

- Bad: *"You can follow us on Twitter."*
- Good: *"Follow us on Twitter."*

Shorter sentences are clear and punchy, and let you fit more information in each paragraph. By writing less you can actually say more.

Use the inverted pyramid

Everyone reads your headline. Most people read your subhead; maybe half read your first paragraph. But less than twenty percent will read your copy all the way to the end.

So don't waste your opening sentences – that's the prime real estate. Structure your copy like an inverted pyramid: big stuff at the top, small stuff at the bottom. Your first 20 - 30 words should answer the most important questions:

- What's the product/service?
- What does it do?
- Who is it for?
- What's the USP?

Use the later paragraphs to present secondary features and smaller details. But always state the important facts at the very beginning. Readers should get the gist of your product or service at first glance.

Keep it simple

Big fancy words are the telltale sign of an amateur writer. The best copywriting uses plain English and a conversational tone.

Replace big words with small words whenever you can. You might need two or three small words to replace a big one, but sometimes one small word can replace an entire clunky phrase.

- Bad: *"We are embarking on a large project."*
- Good: *"We're starting a big project."*

- Bad: *"We endeavour to provide an outstanding service."*
- Good: *"We work hard to provide a great service."*

- Bad: *"Our headquarters is located in the vicinity of several major tech firms."*
- Good: *"Our headquarters is near several big tech firms."*

Check the thesaurus before using a big word. And never (ever) use those lame corporate buzzwords like “leverage,” “synergy,” and “value-added.” They mean nothing at all and make you sound like a certified dumbass.

Some pointers on style

Anyone serious about writing copy should read *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk & E.B. White. The book is nearly a hundred years old, but the basic mechanics of good writing haven’t changed. For example:

Use the active voice

Sentences in which the subject performs the verb are tighter and more direct than sentences written in the passive voice.

- Passive: *“Our service is recommended by thousands of customers.”*
- Active: *“Thousands of customers recommend our service.”*

- Passive: *“New ideas are always being worked on by our team.”*
- Active: *“Our team is always working on new ideas.”*

Use the positive form

Don’t sour the mood with negative words. Get rid of *not*, *don’t*, *can’t* and make a positive statement instead.

- Negative: *“There are not many things this app can’t do.”*
- Positive: *“This app can do everything.”*

- Negative: “*We don’t accept bad-quality submissions.*”
- Positive: “*We only accept high-quality submissions.*”

Be certain

Make your statements clear and definitive. Cut out the weak quantifiers like *mostly*, *almost*, *nearly*, *just about*.

- Bad: “*Download the app that almost everyone is talking about.*”
- Good: “*Download the app everyone is talking about.*”

- Bad: “*We are mostly focused on social game development.*”
- Good: “*We focus on social game development.*”

Edit, then edit some more

No-one writes a masterpiece on the first draft. Relentless editing is the only way to produce lean, effective copy. Be hard on yourself; look critically at everything you write. Keep chopping and changing until you’re satisfied. The learning curve is steep, but soon enough you’ll find your voice. Now dust off that keyboard and get cracking.