

Perfecting Your Catalogue Copy

How do you write irresistible catalogue copy? What does your customer need to hear in order to buy and buy again? Professional catalogue writers use the same tricks over and over again to get results. And you can too...

The Star of the Show

What's the single most valuable thing any catalogue writer can do? Focus fully on the audience. Write for your customers – whether old or young, gadget freaks or gardeners, they should inform your writing.

Not for your boss, who knows every technical detail about every product.

Not from your own viewpoint – your interests are your own, not your reader's.

This might seem like common sense, but it's amazing how many catalogues are filled with irrelevant details.

Get into the Reader's Head

It's useful, before you start writing, to imagine a typical reader. Why are they interested in your product? What do they want from it? What age group are they in? Do they prefer Corrie to Hollyoaks? And – crucially – what questions are they asking as they turn each page?

It's a common advertising technique to tap into your target audience's dreams and desires. What do they aspire to and where do their emotions lie? Fifty-somethings are no longer 'over-the-hill' – they're famously enjoying a new lease of life. We reach this generation by acknowledging that and inspiring it...

Once you start writing (and editing), it's a good idea to count the number of 'you's you've used versus the number of 'we's or company references. The reader doesn't care about the writer or the company. 'We're the only suppliers to offer Thai lime trees' doesn't have the same appeal as 'Everybody will want to know where you found this Thai lime tree!'

Think about each Product's Unique Selling Point

Once you know what sets your product apart, writing sales copy is a cinch.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that a USP has to be dramatic. You might not have a brand-new, patented and unique product. Your USP could simply be that the product is superior in terms of quality, delivery, value, or variety, or it's just better selling than your competitors' versions.

Essentially, the USP tells the reader why they should buy from you and nobody else. Setting it out clearly makes for positively inspiring copy.

Know your Features and Benefits

Not the same thing. A car that recently caught my eye is advertised as '190 BHP', which could be 190 big huge parts for all I know. What I want to know, as a customer, is what the features mean to me. Indeed, if the advert said 'You'll definitely beat a convertible off the lights in this car', I'd buy one on the spot.

If you're writing a substantial piece of sales blurb for one product, maybe a featured highlight in the catalogue, it's worth drawing up a list of features and translating them into benefits before you start. Here are some examples:

- Comes in a range of colours (feature)
- Colour-coordinate with your outfit, interior decor, or personality! (benefit)
- Made with organic ingredients (feature)
- No added preservatives – like you made it from scratch! (benefit)

Tricks of the Trade

Stuck in a rut? Here are some easy ways to make your catalogue sparkle...

1 Add a flash

The front cover is your only chance to get the reader to open up and start reading. Add an attention-grabbing flash like 'new products!' or '40% summer sale!'

2. Re-think the shape

Sizes just under A4 or A5 usually don't cost any extra to print. A different size or shape makes your catalogue stand out from others. It's a chance for you to be creative and excite your readers. (By the way, it also looks as though you've spent more on it!)

3. Add value with features

How about using a page or two to insert a feature, reference table or other information? If you get it right, it could make the difference between a reader filing and binning the catalogue. Do you have any expert contacts who can write an interesting article, or can you add some recipes, gardening tips, customer's letters (see www.iwoot.com for a successful example)?

4. Testimonials

A long-standing sales favourite. As a reader, you probably set more store by testimonials than you realise. Some businesses rely more heavily on these than others, but a quote from a happy customer personalises your service and reassures any buyers who may be weakening....

5. CEO's letter of introduction

Letter-writing is a dying art, but it still represents a friendly and direct form of communication. The CEO or director can show real, human passion for the products: sales copy that is more natural, convincing and warming than sales blurb, any day of the week.

6. List FAQs and answers

It's important to identify any buying barriers – whatever questions may be stopping your reader from ordering. Don't shy away from questions because you are worried about revealing flaws. An honest approach builds credibility.

The Don't-Dos

A final checklist to avoid the worst catalogue blunders...

1 Count the 'you''s

Tired advice but something that has been chemically proven to work. We're all only looking out for ourselves, so turn any 'we' into 'you' and watch their eyes light up.

2 Remove tech talk

If you don't, you're narrowing your audience. I won't be interested in your BHPs, FAQs or 400MWs. Make it nice and simple.

3 Add headings, contents and signposts

Make obvious links between relevant products and pages; colour code for easy reference and give clear headings.

4 Keep it short!

The optimum line length is only nine words; sentences just don't need to go on and on and on and on and on and on (bored yet?). Replace long words with short ones. Go through what you've written and delete as much as you can! You want the reader to reach the end of the catalogue before they die of old age.

About the Author

Anna Hollisey is an award-winning catalogue and web copywriter. Her work for the mail order brochure for Bees jewellery won her the title of 'Editorial Freelancer of the Year 2008'. Find out more at www.copyqueen.co.uk.