

How to choose a copywriter

Some jobs you'd commission on the basis of fees, and some jobs you'd commission on faith. You probably wouldn't book a plasterer you'd never heard of. You'd check out friends' houses, and ask neighbours for references.

The same is true for your writer. And before you even commit to using a copywriter, investigate the benefits.

The relationship between a copywriter and client is an important part of the process of any project. You may know exactly what you want, or you may need someone who can say "how about..." and "what if...". You might work best with people who say "Yes" to your every suggestion, or you might relish a debate. You may need someone who is used to working with style guides, or you might want a totally original voice. This is your business, after all.

So here are some things to consider when you're looking for a copywriter.

1. Work out your budget.

You shouldn't choose on the basis of fees alone; this is because talented copywriters don't charge more or less than lesser talented copywriters. When we work out our fees, tallying up phone bills and office costs, drive and hours, we don't factor in talent. And so it is that a lesser-talented writer could (and does) charge more than a talented copywriter. But, as a starting point, think about your project budget.

This is, of course, difficult to do when you don't have any 'typical' costs in front of you. Here are some pointers (also see below: copywriting fees). An average copywriter might charge £100-£800 for a website (the former being a simple 3-page business window, and the latter being a large ecommerce site). Or £50-£150+ for a sales letter. Catalogues may begin at £400 and business brochures at around £200.

If these costs sound frightening, consider requesting quotes for editing services - copywriters will often happily spend a few hours tightening up your pre-written copy, and although you'll get more from handing over the entire project, this is a way to keep costs down.

2. Gather some quotes.

Quotes are free of obligation and most writers won't bother you for months if you ask for a quote and then fail to take up the offer. We're not like carpet salesmen, you know.

3. Ask for samples.

Here's where you find out more about the writers' styles. Copywriters are all extremely different, as you will discover. Request samples relevant to your area of business, but don't forget that each one was written for a different client (with a very different brief).

When you read the samples, think about what you need for your project. Perhaps it demands the traditional "direct sell" style of copywriting ("Learn How To Become a Golf Pro In Only 90 Days With This Revolutionary DVD. Secrets! Pro Tips! And Your Five-Day Training Programme!") -- or perhaps you are looking for something a little more subtle. Do you want copy with humour, copy with authority, or copy that sells by the bucket-load?

Read the samples carefully. If you're offered a bespoke sample, try to provide a detailed brief. Read the sample and look for the writer's interpretation of your company voice and offer. Don't forget they are the copywriter's first stab at creating a style for you - and there is room for improvement; but if you don't like a single word, choose another writer - even if they cost more.

4. Ask questions

Get to know the copywriters a little. Ask for advice or ask what they think of your current site/brochure. Ask what they've done in the same field and whether they would enjoy the work. You will be working closely with this person, so make sure that you get on.

Copywriting fees - what does a copywriter charge per hour?

What does a copywriter charge per hour? It's shrouded in mystery, like "what's it cost to rebuild a 3' wall?" (anything from £100 to £500) or "how does the water board calculate our rates?" (using house prices from the 1980s).

Copywriting fees in the UK average out at (July 2007) £35 per hour.

That figure was made available to me last year, and it probably veers wildly up and down. If we get an influx of US imports then perhaps the copywriting fee goes up a little more (US copywriters being legendarily overpaid. You thought £84 was a lot to pay for a letter? Call on some of the US copywriters and you'll be handed a bill for £10k).

Context: some recommended editorial fees

What would you pay to get your report proofed? Or for a few features on China for your website? There are industry guidelines for editorial and proofing work (though not yet, as far as I can see, for copywriting).

The Society for Editors and Proofreaders recommends some minimums: Proofreading starts at £18.50, on-screen copy editing at £21.50, and project management (books or reports) at £27.00. The National Union for Journalists (NUJ) recommends a daily rate of £160 (£23 per hour) for feature-writing.

Copywriting fees... how are they calculated?

My fee is calculated to cover my overheads and allow me to stay in business; because I typically work 2 hours for every 1 hour of paid writing (think of all those phone calls, emails, quotations, samples, invoices and accounts, blog entries...), this keeps me in happy balance. For these reasons, I usually won't negotiate on an estimate. I'm happy to work out ways to keep the cost down, but they don't include working for half my hourly rate.

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.