

Writing for the Web

INTRODUCTION » HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY ONLINE

Why are we here?

When we designed our website, we set up place holders for content we knew we wanted to offer on the site. We, quite correctly I would like to point out, stubbed out the part of the page that said, "Get Whitepaper now! Ask us how!"

Something like that anyway.

Pretty innocuous, and frankly, it wasn't meant to see the light of monitor. It was just a placeholder. Like that friend you talked into standing in line for 23 hours to get you Star Wars tickets; just a patsy that got you through to opening night.

So we hit the publish button and everything went live. Within a few hours we had about 50 people signed up for our whitepaper, within a few days we had about 150, and at last count we had over 400. While it wouldn't have been our initial choice to write about writing, it has been a good opportunity to document how we approach one of the things we do.

Specifically, of course, writing for blogs.

In this paper, we'll talk about some style tips, ways to keep readers coming back, ways to get readers in the first place, and hopefully how to create an honest, worthy, and interesting place on the web for you, your company, and your readers to enjoy.

Because this has to be an enjoyable pursuit. Otherwise you will be doing yourself, your company, and your readers a disservice.

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There are a couple reasons for offering this whitepaper.

We want to make the world (and blogs) a better place. We think we know what it takes to write well. And **we made a mistake.**

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WRITING STYLES » ADAPTING YOUR ONLINE VOICE FOR DIFFERENT MEDIUMS

Writing Styles

There's a scene in *The Dirty Dozen* where Donald Sutherland's character pretends to be a General inspecting the troops. He is, of course, only a lowly grunt and convict to boot. After a quick pass up and down the lines he turns to the troops' commanding officer and says, "They're very pretty major, but can they fight?"

Sutherland is reviewing a group of men who know how to shine their shoes well, but when the chips are down shoe-shining won't save you. We always think of this scene when we juxtapose the presentation and content of a site. We've seen a lot of sites that look absolutely amazing, but lack amazing content.

The opposite is true too, but more often than not the site's owner will spend time (and money) getting everything looking great, but they are not able to keep interest up beyond the initial "wow" factor because they had no plan beyond the presentation layer.

As odd as this still sounds to some people, if you want to build a site with longevity you need to fill in all (or most) of the blanks before you set font to screen. Vision, Goals, Strategies, Tactics, Objectives, and a way to measure (qualitatively or quantitatively) if you are on track.

Content & Style

Business or personal?

There is a fine distinction between a business and personal site. This is a hard thing to describe, especially now that blogging is becoming more prevalent with each passing month. We'll get to some of the particulars in the next section, but the style we promote to our customers is to write openly, and with personality. That's something that could apply to both personal and business sites.

The difference for the business would be, depending on the business and its audience, a lack of epithets, the use of active tense and short paragraphs, and very few pictures of cats.

Another difference, and this is probably the most important, a business site, by starting a blog, is starting a relationship that it won't be easy to get out of.

Personal sites, while part of this ever burgeoning prevalence, fall by the wayside all too often with single posts announcing to the world, "Just testing to see if this thing works."

Read "[Pre-Launch Content](http://businesslogs.com)" at
businesslogs.com

When a business enters the blogosphere (which is a term we hate, by the way), they need to understand that they can't just walk away. It has to be successful.

Some guy who goes by the name Fajalar and his blog on kayaking can fall off the planet and 20 people will forget it within a month. With a business site, it's all about reputation and trust. Let the management of either of those fall off, and you may have more trouble than no comments on your blog.

But don't be afraid to dive in, the water's fine.

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ELEMENTS OF STYLE » EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENT FACETS OF WRITING ONLINE

Know Your Audience

This is where the kids in Marketing are extremely helpful. If you don't have a marketing department, not to worry; it's actually pretty easy to get to know your readership, especially with a blog.

You will have an audience to begin with made up of those customers with whom you already share web-based "touch points" and this audience will be a slow-growing one. Unless they are part of your initial audience: those that already track new blogs.

These can be key because if you don't convince them of the sincerity of your blog then it can be doomed to a very slow start, if it gets anywhere at all. This is important because many organizations do not take into account that these people are a part of your audience.

Depending on your industry, chances are there are already bloggers who write about the same or similar topic.

Many of them will blog your launch — and usually the more they say in their review, the worse it will be for you.

Even though you may be a leader in your industry, you are entering into the realm of the blog community so it's time to play by their rules. You may even be able to get them to help you in the initial word-of-blog campaign. All it takes is a quick email or IM with the following sentence...
"Would you be interested in previewing our blog to let us know what you think?"

Does this mean though that you should write for everyone? That would be nice, but it's nearly impossible. Not everyone will be interested in your subject matter, so in the long run, focus on those people who will have an interest in what you are talking about. You won't be able to keep everyone going to your site, but you should at least be trying to keep the ones that have an interest.

Voice

Content may indeed be king, but Voice is needed to bring the message to the people. Writing for a blog is all about writing with consistent voice.

Blog readers, over time, will get to know the author(s) of a blog, and come to love or hate the author even if they've never met in person, exchanged emails, or IM. A strong voice within a blog can keep readers coming back even when the content gets dry.

For a lot of writers, it is difficult to keep a high-level of quality in their writing, especially if they are updating their site multiple times per week. But if that content was written with openness and plenty of personality, readers will stick with a site even through the dry times.

An example of a blog marketing guffaw is the "HalloweenM3" blog put out by Mazda's marketing team. It was supposed to spark underground interest in the new Mazda3, but ended up making a fool out of the entire company with its fake content and marketingspeak.

The "M3" bloggers pretended as though they ran across some amazing car stunt videos on public access television, when actually they were simply Mazda car advertisements that tried to feature the Mazda3 in urban, hip surroundings. After they were outed, the site was pulled within hours. This is a great example of how not to use blogs as a marketing tool.
You listening, Mazda?

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ELEMENTS OF STYLE » EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENT FACETS OF WRITING ONLINE (CONTINUED)

Businesses may fear letting the world (at least the part with web access) see them as too personal and won't be willing to do more than spew PR-speak. Or worse, the business will cultivate a persona that a team of marketing specialists need to adhere to; developing content for "Natalie" to "write" about. Unless you come up with an amazingly detailed persona, and you only want to write one post per week, you need to let the people writing be themselves. Again, we take this back to building long-term relationships with the customer.

If you start a blog with multiple authors, let each one build their own online voice. We suggest cross-editing for spelling, grammar (the usual), but let your individuals be individuals. There are plenty of examples out there of authors who have built quite a following, and this will happen even on a site that is written by two or more people.

Length

This is an area that is highly debated in the blog community. Some blogs have seen success with short, quick posts while others generally do well with longer, well-written articles. We are involved in both types of sites and we've found what seems to drive consistent traffic figures is posting frequency. Thus short post sites tend to be more widely read. So then how do you decide what length your entries should be?

First focus on how often the blog will be updated. If you are looking at updating a couple times a day or once every day then your readers will not wish to read long articles.

For example, a blog that updates frequently usually only has paragraph-length entries and over time the readership grows accustomed to this. If Slashdot made every single post a full-length article, over half of them would not be read because it's too much information coming too quickly.

If Slashdot made all entries full-length articles, over half of them wouldn't be read because it's just too much information, too quickly.

Now this does not mean that because your website does frequent updates you cannot write a longer entry/article from time-to-time. In fact, this is encouraged because well-written articles build credibility much faster than short entries that link to other sites.

Not to tout ourselves too much (it is our whitepaper after all), but we launched The Car Blog (thecarblog.com) with a balance of both styles in mind. Longer, original posts on the left, quippier posts on the right.

So far this seems to be working.

The decision should be based on what your company can handle producing and how often, what you think your audience can handle keeping up with, and finding a middle ground.

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ELEMENTS OF STYLE » EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENT FACETS OF WRITING ONLINE (CONTINUED)

Scanability

Not everyone enjoys reading from a computer screen, and everyday more people are reading online. For many, it is quite painful and readers do not take the time to read online words as they would hardcopy because their patience grows thin. Your readers will scan your posts and pick out keywords, sentences, paragraphs, headings and other tidbits that are of interest to them.

To improve scanning here are some guidelines that you should follow:

- . Break articles up with headings
- . Use meaningful titles that tell the reader what the section is about
- . Use bold text to place emphasis on important words and phrases
- . Start the article with a short summary. While this may keep them from reading the entire post, they will appreciate you not wasting their time
- . Short paragraphs, especially in longer articles

Humor

We aren't talking, "Three strings walk into a bar..." kind of humor. Well, not necessarily. The kind of humor we mean brings in aspects of what we've already talked about: voice and knowing your audience. Part of the way you want to communicate with your readership is personal (voice), and strange, wonderful, funny things that happen in a company all the time.

Share it. Balance the posts about your product line with anecdotes that will serve to make your company more three-dimensional.

Humor makes you more accessible to people. You may not think you are funny, and you don't have to be. But talking about something strange that happened yesterday rather than hitting your audience, once again, over the head with how great your product is will help your audience come to see the inner workings of your company without giving away trade secrets.

More transparency is a good goal.

More transparency can lead to more involvement with your customers. More involvement can lead to more loyalty. More loyalty can lead to more sales; more repeat business.

More repeat business can lead to more money, which in turn leaves you more time to write about how you changed everyone's name plates at work so that they were all named "Bob" for a day.

And who doesn't need more time for office pranks?

In a lot of ways, blogging is like doing standup comedy: You have to just start doing it and keep at it if you ever want to be good at it. You'll always have hecklers who just like to heckle. And you will often find yourself carrying a notebook just for things to write about that come to you during the day.

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CONCLUSION

Wrapping It Up

Hopefully this whitepaper has given you and your company a good head-start in the direction towards better online communication. By no means is this a definitive piece on the subject for that we would need to write a book (which could happen). However, looking at the Writing Styles and Elements of Style sections should put you well on your way to producing quality content for your website.

To quickly summarize

- . Choose your voice and be consistent
- . Make sure you understand your target audience before you begin
- . Either write longer, high-quality posts less frequently, or shorter, low-quality posts more frequently
- . Make it scannable and easy to read
- . Humor gives your site an added mix of personality and makes your company seem more human
- . Honesty is the best policy. You can't trick the blog community so don't even try

Questions?
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