

Do you know what makes a good Copywriter?

A brief look at some of the Tools of the Trade of a professional wordsmith

If you want to take a look inside the toolbox of a creative writer, the first, and most obvious, is the word count available to him (or her, but for the purposes of brevity, we can assume "he" incorporates "she" for the rest of the article). In English, we are fortunate in having some 615,000 words from which to choose. Obviously we don't use anything like as many as that, but in general, we use about 200,000 words in common parlance. Every year, 5,000 more get added, and around the world, some 800 million people speak English.

It's a lot isn't it. If you need some form of comparison, the French only have about half as many words in common usage (100,000). So we have a rather large toolbox!

It is essential to have a considerable vocabulary at your disposal, but panic not. We can all write, and if you need to have a different word for something, a good thesaurus should not be too far from arm's reach. Having said this, a paragraph of long words might be pin-pointedly accurate, but may well have the effect of boring your audience rigid, more of that later. No, the differentiation between someone who can write, and someone who can write professional copy comes down to the individual, and his background and abilities. What I'd like to do is have a look at what sort of characteristics go to making up a writer who can create the powerful prose that all businesses seek for their communications.

First and foremost - a good sense of humour. Everyone likes to smile, and almost without exception, a smile coming off the page engages the reader. I mean, I wouldn't consider this applicable in all copy - a funeral service brochure is not really laugh a minute stuff, so humour would not really be applicable (you never know though...) Humour and sex are the two most powerful hooks for advertising, but sex can also offend / disengage half of your audience; and the written word lends itself far more to humour than to sex when it comes to selling.

Empathy. Just as in sales techniques, understanding who your client / prospect is, and how they are likely to feel about the issues you're putting before them is very advantageous. If you try and engage someone in their teens with language that might be found in an over 50's insurance brochure, you'll not hit the mark! Nor vice versa! Try to remember who you're writing the piece for, and on no account antagonise them with ill composed verbage!

Curiosity - in people, places, situations etc. You need to explore all the avenues, find new angles, take things apart to see what makes them work. You'll also need a vivid imagination.

Last but not least - an ability to stand back and impassively judge your creative piece. If you're writing for someone else, that someone else is going to judge your work, and if they don't think some part of it is good enough, you are going to have to defend it! But remember - the client is always right, and if he wants it re-written, re-written it must be.

So, if you are going to write the copy for a mailshot or brochure, try and follow these suggestions. Just as a experiment, write something yourself, then get a professional copywriter to write something on the same brief, and ask some readers in the target group what they think is the difference. Or split a database and check the results. If you come out favourably - have a think about a change of career. There are a lot of businesses looking out for good copywriters.