



Guest author

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Why use a professional writer?

If you routinely work with professional copywriters, you may be surprised to find you're in a minority. And if you rarely, or never, have anything to do with a writer, I hope what follows surprises you in a different way.

In more than 30 years as a corporate copywriter, I've spent much of my time not simply trying to persuade clients to commission me, but to think about using a writer at all. It seems to come down to the way people treat those two major constituents of our education - numeracy and literacy - so differently. For example, you'll encounter socially many who admit, with a laugh, how terrible they are at maths, some almost treating their poor numeracy as a badge of honour. Yet you wouldn't get very far in life suggesting anyone's literacy skills were a little under par.

Which is probably why, in the corporate world, people often think they can do the writing themselves. A major business will spend a small fortune on an overly large accounts department without batting an eyelid, and then pay handsomely on top of that for one of the large global accounting firms to deal with the important numbers. Yet ask them about paying to have something written and they'll say "£500 for a few pages, huh, I'll get one of our interns to do it. I could do it myself, but I'm in meetings all day."

Yet writing is a very specialist skill, and better done by someone who not only possesses that skill, but has the experience of practising their craft, all day, every day. By using a professional writer, you can give your messages the best chance of being read, understood and acted upon by your intended audience.

Here are five good reasons to hire a professional writer:

1. To get your message across.

There are many people in business who can write well. They wrote essays at school and university. And they still write them. They will turn out 900 words or so of beautifully crafted, reasoned and correct prose, leading to a compelling conclusion. Unfortunately, no one will read as far as that conclusion, because most people are drowning in stuff to read. Mostly, they're reading only because they want a problem solved - they're asking, "What's in this for me?" The opening lines in any piece of writing must answer this question, otherwise the reader won't venture beyond them - and your message is lost.

2. To create a clear and logical draft.

Clarity of writing usually follows clarity of thought, as memorably noted in The Economist's writing guidelines. A writer's major skill is structuring content in a logical way that takes the reader quickly through the story and the key messages, and keeps their attention from start to finish. And the writer doesn't need to be an expert in the subject matter. The client is the expert - the writer's skill is helping them identify, develop and communicate their message. In fact, it can actually help if the writer's understanding of the subject is roughly similar to that of the audience.

3. To give your communications the best chance of being read and understood.

Experienced writers bring a vital external perspective, and write in the reader's language. What's being written is one of many hundreds of pieces of communication a reader might see in a day. So the copy needs to do more than lay out the facts clearly and simply, it needs to be original and engaging. The investment sage Warren Buffet, talking about company reports, says: "Too often, I've been unable to decipher just what is being said or, worse yet, had to conclude that nothing was being said." How many times does someone have to read vacuous, vague and meaningless phrases like 'drive change' or 'deliver on our promise' before they realise, like Warren Buffet, that the company has nothing to say? A stream of the usual abstract corporate buzz words that could mean anything or nothing - driving, delivering, transformational, innovation, passion, partner, delight, core, empower, engage - all tacked together randomly, cannot express facts. It's just wallpaper. And the reader has seen it all before.

4. To save you time.

Writing can be a long, hard slog if you're not used to it, and deadlines loom surprisingly quickly. Clients set aside a spare hour to deal with something that is probably going to take them several days. An experienced writer will almost certainly save you hours, but more likely days or even weeks - time you can spend clearing other tasks from your to-do list. There's also the management time wasted in creating and amending poor drafts that bounce around for weeks. Many's the time I've received copy from a client that's been on a two-month path to something like draft v22, yet find that it has to be rewritten entirely anyway.

5. To get the most from your budget.

While the cost of a writer is relatively small, their contribution will make a huge difference to the end result. Unfortunately, the number-crunchers I mentioned earlier can't calculate the cost of getting the words wrong. If you add together production and design costs, and management time spent, to create something no one is going to read or understand, you could be looking at not just a large loss, but more importantly, a lost opportunity.

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