

BIG LESSONS

10 STEPS TO
**CHOOSING
AND USING**
A COPYWRITER

LAURENCE BLUME

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AND USING
A COPYWRITER**

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Laurence Blume worked with some of the most successful advertising agency groups in the world as a Copywriter and Creative Director.

Through his **freelancecopywriter.co.uk** consultancy, he now works with corporations and small businesses alike, who call him up in search of copywriting that can make a difference to their business.

He has been a member of the D&AD, the world's premier association of creative industry professionals, since 1981.

Foreword

Your business has a message.

You have to get it out there.

Putting it across is a skill proffered by many yet possessed by few, and having read English at University does not make someone a Copywriter, any more than it makes them a novelist.

How do you make sure, when you hire a Copywriter, that you're hiring someone who can tell your business's message the way you need it told? How do you make sure, once you've hired someone, that you get from them the best they have to give?

The purpose of this e-book is to help you choose and then work with a Copywriter who can set your business alight.

Throughout this e-book, I use ‘he’ and ‘him’ when I talk about Copywriters. Good Copywriters, however, are as likely to be women as they are to be men. But there again, so are bad Copywriters.

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What this e-book is

This book isn't about copywriting.

It's doesn't tell you how to do your own copywriting if you're not a Copywriter, nor how to write copy if you'd like to be a Copywriter.

This is a quick read book for anyone who wants to hire a Copywriter to improve the way their business talks, but doesn't have a clue how to make a judgement amongst all the Copywriters on offer, or how to get the best from their Copywriter once they've made their choice.

A good Copywriter can make a difference to your business you simply never dreamed of. Once he or she understands how your business works, why people do business with you and how you differ from your competitors, a good Copywriter will add impact, insight and cunning to the way you face the world, becoming an invaluable weapon in your marketing armoury.

Watch out, though. Copywriters come from many backgrounds. (And that's ignoring those who come from no background at all, have neither training nor experience, yet set out their stalls and

attempt to lure the hapless into hiring them.)

Just as there are accountants who understand taxation, and others who know all about audits, so Copywriters have varying skill sets and approaches.

Some come from advertising backgrounds, and tend to be strong on marketing and sales copy, but may have no corporate or technical writing skills.

Others come from publishing backgrounds, and may be excellent for proofreading 30,000 words of book manuscript, but may have no clue of how to write a sales letter.

Yet others will be former journalists, skilled in conducting interviews, perhaps, or writing press releases, but lacking the diplomacy with which to write corporate literature.

Some writers understand technology but not business. Others are proudly medical, or IT, or financial and may or may not have the same level of copywriting skill as they have specialist knowledge.

Out there, though, is the Copywriter for you.

The person who can work collaboratively and intelligently with you to deliver you marketing material that delivers your message, whatever that might be.

Once you've found this Copywriter, he or she should become a day-to-day part of your marketing thinking.

Through your writer comes added clarity of your messaging, greater impact in its delivery and, of course, greater sales, one way or another.

Let's help you find him. Or her.

Step 1

What can I learn from this writer's site?

My guess is that you won't consider a Copywriter whose website doesn't attract you in some way.

But you can learn a great deal from a Copywriter's site, and it's your first opportunity to judge whether or not you're looking at a professional.

So get on the site, and look for these things:

1) **Samples.** Everyone shows samples differently, but samples there should be. If not, ask yourself why not. Try to find one or two things that are in a tone of voice, or written for a client, similar to you. That's not to say that you should only hire someone who's already written exactly what you're looking for, but if you can find hard evidence that the writer can get the kind of thing you're looking for right, then you're reducing your risk. If there are no

samples on the site? Don't rule him out, if you like the feel of his site for some other reason, but do make certain you e-mail and ask to see some appropriate samples. Everyone keeps the copy from the jobs they do, even if they don't have examples of the finished job in print or online. And a writer with no samples to offer needs to be able to give an extraordinary reason why to keep himself in consideration.

2. **Look at the clients.** Not all writers list the clients they've worked with in the past, but many do, and my feeling is that those who don't, avoid doing so for a reason. If a writer's client list consists of a local restaurant, a local travel agent and a painter and decorator sharing his family name, he may be an excellent writer, but you'd be right to question his experience, or whether he was likely to be a trouble free choice to write for your law firm. Good, working professional writers tend to have one or more known brandname client companies. This assures you of their professionalism, on the basis that big companies, with professional staff doing their commissioning, simply don't need to work with amateurs. And don't assume that a Copywriter who works for bluechip clients must be more expensive than one who doesn't. Most writers have a fee scale that they will price against, depending on the kind of company you are, and the budget you

indicate you have available. And, in the end, most writers like to work, and will negotiate their quoted price with you once they feel you're serious about giving them your project.

3. **Awards.** Ignore them. Don't be impressed by awards. There are so many schemes for these, and most of them are worthless. Their judges are simply not looking for the same things you are.

4. **Testimonials.** Some people love these, and take great comfort from them. I'm not so sure. Yes they're compelling, but everyone in any business can summon up a friendly client prepared to let his name go on the bottom of a couple of lines saying what a great job he does.

5. **Typos.** Some very good writers are not great proof readers, but I like a tidy mind and believe that god is in the details. Be careful if you find literals, spelling mistakes or poor punctuation. If he's done it on his own job, he'll do it on yours, and one or other might just make it through.*

**Yes. I know. There is almost certainly a typo lurking somewhere in this book, and if you find it you are more than welcome to mail and tell me where it is.*

Step 2

Does this writer's quote ring true?

You might think that all you need do with a quote is look at the bottom to see how much the writer wants for the work, but the truth is that you can learn a whole lot more from it than that.

All projects involve a number of stages through which the writer will need to work, and the quote tells you whether or not the writer understands what work your project entails.

There will be meetings and research. There may be interviews to arrange as well as conduct. Some sections may contain twists and turns which complicate them.

Understanding your feedback, and being able and willing to incorporate it into each draft, is a core part of the job.

These things all take time and a writer needs to show that he recognises this when quoting.

If he doesn't, if common sense tells you that he's underquoted the job to a significant degree, don't see this as a bargain opportunity to get your project on the cheap. What the writer is actually

demonstrating is that he doesn't really understand how to do the job.

An experienced writer will anticipate the components of the task accurately, and his quote will reflect time for them. It may surprise you when you see the project broken down in this way, but it should make complete sense.

Aside from anything else, because an inexperienced writer will often not allow in his quote for much of the work that will be required, he will quickly find that he's using up time for which he has not secured payment.

This leads to frustration and corner cutting and rarely, if ever, to trouble-free delivery of a high quality job.

Step 3

**Can this writer tell
me *when* he's going
to do the job?**

As in other freelance professional services, Copywriters experience busy times, and quieter times.

This makes them reluctant, during busy times, to turn away work, especially from new clients who may turn out to be long-term customers.

There are only so many hours in each day, however, and a backlog can soon build up.

If you're offering your project to a writer, make certain he or she has worked out the number of days that will be required, and that he's able to tell you precisely when these days will be scheduled into his workload.

I usually find that I can squeeze a half day, or even a full day that has real urgency, into my schedule within 72 hours, but any project of greater duration will almost always have to take its place in the queue, and for me that will usually mean it's around 7 days before I can start it.

More often than not, that's fine, and people are often not ready to brief when they first call up anyway.

If it's not acceptable to a client to wait until I can schedule the job, and I am unable to reorganise jobs on my schedule without inconveniencing or letting someone down, then I'll always tell the prospective client this and decline the project.

Remember that good writers, like good anything elses, tend to be busy.

You should question carefully anyone who claims to be free to start a lengthy project immediately.

Step 4

Can this writer understand what I'm talking about?

Think about whether your Copywriter has the understanding and breadth which the subject matter and context of your project will require.

The best way to do this is pretty much as you might do when interviewing a prospective employee: talk around those matters that impact on your business or your industry, and listen out for a response that's informed and sensitive to the key issues affecting you.

As in all things, the experience of the suppliers in the copywriting market varies greatly. There are some excellent Copywriters available who lack experience, but have a great deal of talent, and for some projects such a writer may well be an acceptable choice.

For other projects, however, such a writer's inability to properly grasp the subject about which he's writing, or to really understand how the matter in hand fits within the broader context of, for example, your industry sector, may prove frustrating for you and, in the end, impair the writer's ability to complete the job to your satisfaction.

In the end, if you're in doubt, move on. You expect to have to explain certain aspects of your business to the writer you're working with, but do you really have time to teach him to walk?

Step 5

Does this writer have real commercial experience?

A lot of Copywriters have no commercial experience.

I know at least a dozen writers whose skill in turning a phrase is not enforced with any real experience of businesses, how they work, what drives them or their markets, or how their sales efforts work.

If the project you're placing has a commercial imperative, ie. if it's driven by sales or marketing goals in any way (let alone if it forms the actual backbone of your sales strategy), or even if it's driven by corporate communications objectives, ask questions that will help you establish whether the writer has the commercial experience necessary to appreciate your business imperatives.

Though aspects of many projects call on a Copywriter to have a good general understanding and perspective on business and commerce these are not, unfortunately, easy qualifications to acquire.

A writer who lacks them may have difficulty in helping you gain maximum commercial benefit from whatever item it is he's writing for you.

Step 6

Does this writer seem like a pro?

Look for signs of real, professional know-how.

Experienced Copywriters listen hard while you talk, but will be ready to offer information, ideas or, perhaps, caution based on practical lessons learned at other clients' expense over the course of the time they've been practising.

Good Copywriters ask you probing questions and, later, are able to fill in the gaps in what you say.

They ask you questions about your project, its objectives, its timings, audience and myriad other matters they know will raise their heads once they begin to write.

The less detailed you are in your prepared briefing, the more a good writer will ask.

You'll find a good writer enquiring about things that you've omitted to mention, or sometimes even to think about, but which his or her experience suggests require consideration.

You should be aware that if a writer does not ask questions in this way it doesn't mean there are none: it means only that he lacks the experience to foresee them.

Step 7

Where's my timeline?

You need to know what you're going to get.

An experienced, professional Copywriter doesn't say, "Yes. I'll write that for you", and then expect you to take the rest on trust.

You should expect a timeline or project schedule which tells you, as a bare minimum, when you can expect to see the first draft, and how long after you submit your response to this draft you can expect to see a revise. Depending on the nature of the job, you may want to see this repeated to the stage of a third draft.

If you start out with a project timeline of your own to fulfil, then ensure before awarding the job to any writer that he has seen and agreed to your timings.

Experience and common sense tell you that things cannot always work to schedule, but copy is almost always required to play its part in a chain involving web developers, or designers, or internal approval committees, and it's the writer's responsibility to ensure that others who come after him aren't sitting around waiting.

Step 8

What's the best way to tell my Copywriter what I want?

The best way to brief is 'clearly', but it's surprising just how few people manage to do this.

It's worth taking an afternoon, at the least, to get together all the material you wish to pass over to your Copywriter, as well as to write a clear, succinct 'Brief' which sets out exactly what you're expecting.

The less experienced your Copywriter is, the more important the brief is, but it should be an obligatory part of any job, whoever is writing.

Your brief should include the following:

- 1 **The name of the company actually commissioning the work.**
- 2 **The brandname of the product or service for which the work is being commissioned.** This may be the same as the commissioning company, but very often is not.
- 3 **The name of the person responsible for commissioning the work.** Along with names of any other key contacts which the writer might need.
- 4 **What the work being commissioned actually is.** Is it the copy for a single page sales letter, or the database descriptions for each of 700 lines on an e-com website?

- 5 **What is the precise media?** If it's a brochure, is it 96 A4 pages, or 4 x A5 pages? If it's a radio commercial, is it 10 seconds long, or 60 seconds long?
- 6 **When the work is required for?** Or any other fixed timeline dates, such as a launch date or publication date.
- 7 **What the job of the copy is.** Is it meant to persuade CEOs of potential client companies to buy from you, or to explain your care for the environment to school children?
- 8 **Who the audience for the copy is.** Who matters? Is the copy meant to be read by the kids who'll love your product, or by the parents who'll buy it for them? Is a no-time-to-waste CFO the target reader, or a diligent PA who will read every word in order to be certain they've understood?
- 9 **What is the underlying tone of voice of the brand?** Who is the brand/ How does it speak? Is it authoritative? Solid? Fun? Conservative?
- 10 **What is the tactical tone of voice of this communication?** A quiet man may sometimes have reason to shout. Within the terms of what you're trying to achieve with this brief, what tone is required. If you can't quite

- see how this differs from 8), think about the idea that a very upmarket store may want to announce its sale, or a circus company may wish to recruit a CFO!
- 11 **The full, supporting detail of the brief.** This is the full, specifics of what you're expecting. Don't assume that because you mentioned something in a phone call it will have been taken on board. Define the job as precisely as you can, here. On some kinds of jobs this will take not much more than a couple of sentences. On others it may take a number of pages. Either way...do it thoroughly.
- 12 **Where can the reference material required to write the job be found.** Locating the information on which to base the copy can take up 75% of the entire project time. Include, or include pointers to, all research and information resources that your writer needs to know about. If possible, relate specific resources to the sections of the copy for which they will be needed.
- 13 **After reading the copy, what should the reader think?** Answer this in one sentence. Even if there was a lot of information to put over in the copy, what's the one thing that the writer should make sure the reader is left thinking?

Step 9

What can I do to help get great copy?

If you've hired a good, professional Copywriter, he should know how to write whatever it is you want written.

He may well not, however, be expert in the intricacies of your business, or of the industry in which you operate.

Make it clear from the start that you see getting it right as a collaborative effort, and that so long as he's prepared to revise the draft for you, and isn't reluctant to ask questions of you if he's unsure about anything, you won't be at all concerned if it takes a couple of 'tries' to get there.

Remember, the Copywriter wants just 2 things: to have a satisfied client, and to get paid.

When you receive a first draft, however wide of the mark you feel it to be, do not despair, and do not start trying to rewrite it yourself.

Whatever you may think is wrong is the Copywriter's job to correct.

Your role is to make clear, detailed notes of your concerns, both general concerns relating to the whole piece, and specific concerns related to points of detail, and to pass these back to the writer.

Be prepared to do that through 2 stages and, even in the worst cases, you should get the copy you want.

Last thing. Be encouraging. It works.

Step 10

How do I get even better copy next time?

By the time you've completed your project with your Copywriter, you'll have learned things about how he works, and about his strengths and weaknesses.

More importantly, he will have learned things about you, about your business, and about your expectations.

Next time you need copy, don't start all over again with a different Copywriter.

Go back to the one you've worked with already and build on the relationship.

If there were things that weren't great for you first time, identify them and ask the Copywriter to be aware of them.

Stick with it, though.

From the Copywriter's point of view, by returning you are confirming that so long as he keeps at it, you'll keep showing up with more work.

And you will.

Because pretty soon you'll find that the copy you're getting is doing what you wanted it to do.

Setting your business alight.



Laurence Blume has been a Copywriter for 26 years, working with some of the most successful companies in the world, as well as for some of the most successful advertising agencies in the world.

Married with 2 sons, he lives in London, UK, where he writes for clients through the site www.freelancecopywriter.co.uk and runs the creative consultancy group Big Lessons Limited.