Web Copywriting: 
Persuasive Writing Techniques in Internet Marketing

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Abstract
Internet marketing has been a booming industry in the information technology revolution especially within the last decade. Its success lies not only in the revenue it is able to generate but also the increasing varieties of form to employ. Search engine marketing, blogging and social networking, for example, are a few to name, proven to be crucial tools to conduct global-scale campaigns at a relatively small budget. Such alluring factors encourage businesses of all sizes to rely more on the World Wide Web for their promotional activities and cause a growing demand for providers of informative and persuasive content as seen on job posts in websites and online forums. For copywriters, it is a lucrative opportunity, and some have built an authoritative credential in the field by being able to cater quality writing. Through lingual perspectives, this paper examines some persuasive writing strategies of internet marketing campaigns in order to answer some fundamental questions related to writing competencies. The result of the study indicates some techniques employed in several forms of campaigns.

Keywords: internet marketing, copywriting strategies, revenue generation

1. Introduction
Internet marketing has been a phenomenon parallel to the revolution of Information Technology (IT) itself. The industry has seen a surge of spending for marketing purposes with an estimated $18.5 billion paid to companies and freelancers in the US alone. There is an indication that as IT becomes more innovative, accessible, and user-friendly, e-marketing budget will continually rise to maintain the presence of the companies and the communication they wish to establish with the mass.

At present, IT has given an advantage for a company to have the ability to easily cross borders and time zones in regards to establishing and sustaining communication with its consumers. The international population with internet access is also growing and it entails a widening span of audience and new opportunities for business expansion. Also, a more in-depth discussion between a company and the prospects(customers) can be conducted either synchronously or asynchronously, and at a relatively cheaper price for both communicators.

As a tool for a marketing strategy, advertising on the internet has also been affected by the presence of IT. Its forms are adapting to the increasing capability of IT. Dynamic and bilateral presentation is no longer an issue as its incorporation with textual information to some extent allows its readers to interact with the materials. Such interaction may, if done effectively, lighten the proximity of purchase or other business conducts at the case of clicking buttons and completing forms readily available on the site.

The increase of advertising on the internet causes a growing demand for content providers. More specifically, there is a flourishing demand for professional copywriters to help businesses of all scale sell their products or services by creating informative yet communicative materials. This kind of copywriting is popularly known as web copywriting. Sales letters, advortials, article marketing, and PR marketing are some of the present demands from the copywriting job market with a payment range of $1 to $1000 or more per assignment. Sources of contracts are various but mainly fall into two categories: offline markets and online offers. There are even sites like Wisegeek, Odesk, and Wordgig that focuses on being the online markets for writing contract providers and seekers.

Even though the web copywriting market seems unsaturated, the competition is inevitably fierce. It is not unusual for seasoned traditional print copywriters to shift to web copywriting, overshadowing their less-experienced or beginning writers as they seamlessly apply their knowledge and uniqueness and bring their network of clients into the new media. Emerging talented writers from different parts of the world are also tallying apt wordsmiths ready to cater for the needs of lucrative clients.

As the result, more beginner writers are settling
for less pay for the same or even bigger amount of work or even discontinue their endeavors.

The above situation leads to some questions addressing the issue of quality in web copywriting: do cheaper services entail poor standards or vice versa? To answer such a question, there should be a discussion on the standard of quality of web copies.

Many literatures take into consideration effectiveness and revenue generation studies to set a quality standard on web copywriting materials. This paper, however, focuses on the elements and styles of web copies that complies with (or contradicts) persuasive writing rules and the integration of IT items. It describes the current trend in web copywriting with the aim of arriving at a sound foundation of reviewing the quality of a web copy.

Discussions on some root concepts of persuasion and marketing are meant to lead to the distinction between generic and marketing-loaded writing, as well as methods of scrutinizing web copy elements.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Persuasion

Persuasion is an act of convincing others to conduct particular thoughts and actions. In such act, logical and or emotional appeals are deployed. Logical appeal refers to the act of provide arguments and assume that people with inherent knowledge of the rules of logic can associate the arguments with their power of reasoning to arrive at a conclusion or judgment. The arguments are considered sound if they are logically acceptable and may lead to the change of stance of a party.

The current skeptical society, however, is not easily convinced. Tactfully, they are performing the basic argumentation model of Toulmin (1958) when testing a persuasive agent: a statement or claim must be supported by evidence which is proven directly related to the claim. The evidence is further tested to see how convincing it is. As the number of persuasive acts grows, so does the society’s tendency to scrutinize the legitimacy of claim.

Another appeal that serves the purpose of persuading is the emotional appeal. As a change takes place, emotions reflect the natural responses to the change (Stiff & Mongeau, 2003). The responses Stiff & Mongeau refers to involves cognitive and affective, and physiological, reactions. A person will have his own interpretation of a change and develops a positive or negative sentiment, and finally a physiological arousal decides whether the person takes an action or not.

2.2 Online Persuasion

According to Stiff and Mongeau, there are two types of online persuasion, namely the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and Human-Computer Communication (HCC). Chat rooms are an example of CMC, where people can converse using computers connected to the Internet. HCC, on the other hand, allows a user to communicate with pre-loaded materials available on the website.

There are some doubts raised by Stiff and Mongeau about the effectiveness of online persuasion due to its various forms and the effect of human-human communication versus human-computer communication. However, a point worth highlighting is the ability of online persuasion to voice the support appeals from the mass. This technique is adaptable in web copy, as this paper later demonstrates.

2.3 Internet Marketing

As mentioned earlier, internet marketing (e-marketing) is an extension of the conventional marketing. Persuasion is still the core communicative strategy of e-marketing where the principal objective is convincing the audience with a persuasive message about a certain company, product or service.

It does, however, perform specific additional objectives with the help of IT:

1. Have a clearer definition of customer value since they operate within a more focused segment, target, differentiation and positioning.
2. Prepare and carry out distribution, promotion, pricing, services, and ideas more efficiently.
3. Open communication to fulfill individual or corporate customer’s needs. (Strauss, El-Ansary, & Frost, 2003)

With the additional objectives in mind, internet marketers need different types of promotional means. It is to the marketer’s advantage that IT can provide several forms as summarized in Table 1.
Table 1. Types of Promotional Means

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promotion Type</th>
<th>Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banners</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorships</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classifieds</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slotting fees</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyword search</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interstitials</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich Media</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referrals</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a shift of the use of the promotion type as Strauss, El-Ansary and Frost points out. Banner is losing its domination due to its lack of effectiveness in luring the reader to closer purchase: readers are increasingly ad blind, deliberately ignoring colorful and animated banners knowing that it is a commercial. The direction of the shift is towards sponsorships and slotting fees.

The current trend of marketable items on the Internet can be summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Items promoted in the Internet (IAB, 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marketing type</th>
<th>Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consumer-related</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computing</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business services</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consumer-related items refer to items of daily needs and indulgences. Thus, it is not surprising that this type dominates the items promoted.

E-marketing also focuses more on familiar communication trends in order to sound more people-oriented rather than profit-oriented. The theme entails a more receptive communication method towards the audience: maintain a certain identifiable characteristic, and generate attention from the public.

With all the points aforesaid in mind, the internet marketer’s goals can be summarized thus:
1. convey the UMPS of the company to their audience
2. provide evidence to the information regarding the UMPS of the company
3. offer the audience practical information on how to benefit from the service or product
4. furnish additional and interesting news still connected to the UMPS
5. open means of communication between the company and the audience for consultation, feedback and purchase-related actions (Cox, 2004).

2.4 Advertising on the Internet

As the marketing strategies adapt to the trends and approaches suitable for the Internet audience, advertisements follow suit. Most advertisements follow the communication process scheme as they are adapted to the Internet environment. Figure 2 depicts the flow of information based on the process.

In relation to the process, advertising can be described as follows:
- the sponsor acts as the source of information,
- the advertisement embodies the concept of message,
- website pages serve as the channel, and
- a consumer is the receiver (Kamins, 2006).

Competing advertisements may disturb the flow at the channel point as they convey information highlighting their competitive benefits. Should the Unique Market Positioning System (UMPS) be not solid, there is a chance for the receiver to get distracted or even diverted to the other sources.

![Figure 1. Human Communication Process](image)

Another point to make is the feedback towards the source. E-marketing allows the consumers to give input on how the company, product or service satisfy their needs and expectations, or consult on how they may benefit more from what is offered without having to establish direct communication. This means consumers can reach the company at their will to express their views and concerns. It
is also a means to fine tune the company’s UMPS in by adjusting their product or service to the consumer’s demands (Mohammed, Fisher, and Jaworsky, 2003).

2.5 Web Copywriting

Web copywriting is a form of writing that conveys implicit or explicit marketing strategy within an advertisement in a website. The content informs the mass about a certain company, product, or service, loaded with persuasive means to stimulate the reader to take favorable action. Examples of copywriting products are sales letters, e-mail advertising, captions, and advertorials.

As an essential part of an advertisement, an effective web copy follows the creative pyramid as seen in Figure 2 (Arens, 2006).

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   action
  /     \
 desire
 /     \
 credibility
 /     \
 interest
 /     \
 attention

Figure 2. The Creative Pyramid
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Arens explains that the foremost objective in a web copy is gaining the attention from the reader. It motivates the trigger of the ‘oomp’ factor of an advertisement. As it gains the attention of the reader, the web copy proceeds to providing information to develop interest in the company, product, or service it promotes. The common strategy in this step is providing answers to the questions raised in the opening section and expanding information with facts. At this stage, the skeptical and sophisticated audience will test the answers and facts with their logic reasoning, searching for warrants to validate their credibility. Should the audience decide that the reasonings are valid, the next stage of the pyramid appeals to their emotions, enticing the audience to visually indulge in the benefits. The last step reinforces the previous four stages to lead to the audience taking action.

The pyramid lays a foundation of constructing the body of a web copy despite of its style. Currently, the styles can be categorized into the following constructs:

1. direct selling: the body appeals to the logic of the reader (fact expansion)
2. institutional: credibility is enhanced through endorsing the values and deeds of the company
3. narrative: the article explains about a certain predicament in which the product or service provides convenient solution
4. Dialogue/monologue: characters tell the story
5. caption or slogan: a short explanation (usually a single phrase or sentence) about a graphic entity

2.6 Web Reading Behavior

The theories above focus mainly on the writer/marketer’s side of the interaction. However, it is also equally important to understand the way the reader proceeds in exploring the content.

Nielsen (in Gerard, 2001) argues that the current sophisticated audience are not easily distracted by pictures and other graphic elements of a web page. They prefer to focus directly on the text and refer back to visuals later to seek their relevance with the text. Furthermore, the audience tends to scan rather than read an article. At the initial stage, a reader quickly locates the needed information of which he or she places the decision to investigate the text further.

Another trait the web audience has developed through their reading experience is their ‘blindness’ towards advertising. They tend to disregard obvious advertising elements such as flashy banners and protuding textual parts and ensuing gathering information before advancing to another page or site.

Thus, the basic question Nielsen raises is how the presentation should be structured to retain the audience. Gerard (2001) suggests some multimedia features that not only encourages the audience to engage on the site longer but also enhance the readability of a site. His suggestions include the textual and hypertextual functions of the title, main, menu, links, slogans/headings, and the body texts.

In a nutshell, the title page provides an index of the web pages as it displays the sitemap for the reader and search engine spiderbots. The main menu gives a preview of what the site offers in an outline form; it also serves as
navigation to other pages. The links refer to more in-depth discussion on a particular topic and they function to persuade visitor's interaction. Slogans or headings express the sustaining ambience besides provide search engine optimization. The body text introduces the type of the content, the content itself, and reasons for further exploration of the site. It also serves as the search engine optimization placement and presents disclaimers and use policies.

In dealing with the reading behavior, Arens suggests a list to make a copy effective:
1. fast delivery of the main point
2. narrow focus emphasis
3. clear UMPS in leads
4. highlights on the benefits
5. concise active sentence construction with familiar words and themes in present tense
6. boasting and cliche avoidance
7. personal pronoun to address the reader
8. conversational and vibrant language
9. finesse.

3. Implementation

The focus of this initial study is the current trends in writing sales letters as a form of web copywriting. Sales letters most commonly appear after a banner or a link on a search engine page is clicked. The length of a typical letter is generally a page with 1000 to 2500 words which entails concise persuasion. Their main objective is to convince the reader to proceed to the call to action section and upon the instruction given, namely completing a short registration and then proceed to purchase.

Samples investigated in this study represented companies/marketers that offered financial solutions in the make-money niche. The niche is among the top ranks which currently conduct voluminous transaction, meaning that the competition is high. Most of the products offered were related to information packages, either ebooks or online workshops.

To analyze the strategies used to retain the readers until they arrive to the call for action section, the study first investigated the structure of the web copies. That is, the procedure began with the observation of the functionality of the page using Gerard’s web page elements. The next step is examining the structure based on Aren’s construct before determining to which copywriting category they belonged.

The final part of the study focused on the persuasive function. Toulmin’s fundamental argument structure was used to identify the claims (UMPS), the evidence, and the warrant (appeals).

4. Discussion on Results

The functionality of the single-page letters was high as most of Gerard’s elements were present in the majority of the samples. The titles were typed in bright red or black with yellow highlights on the keywords. Various typographical type and size indicated text segmentation based on its role (as heading, important phrases, product name, amount of money to be made, and testimonials). Some keywords appeared as frequent as 12% of the total number of words which were spread across the whole page, including the main title and titles/captions in pictures.

Benefits and bonuses sections were presented in a list of bulleted items and appeared in the middle of the body or at the end within the proximity of the call for action section. Some lists used bright-colored checked boxes rather than round bullets.

There were minimal links both outbound and within the page. The reader was expected to scroll down the page to get to the end of the content. Some Sound provided a link to navigate to video presentation but others incorporated the audio-visual presentation in the page, usually after the main title or opening paragraph. Most of the pages bearing the video presentation, however, took longer to load.

Some pages called upon pop-up windows upon the clicking of the close button. The windows offered further bonuses not mentioned in the main text and provided a back button to go back to the page.

The majority of the content was textual but they were scannable, meaning that a reader was not obliged to read the whole text as clues regarding the location of important information were obvious with the varied typograph, color and size. Some pictures of the product and results of the program (luxurious items) were mostly static to reduce loading time.

Almost all the samples still complied to Aren’s checklist. Sentences were short, some even to the point of fragmented. Paragraphs typically consisted of an average of 3 sentences. The number of paragraphs varied, depending on the length of the letter.

Vibrant and conversational language was also apparent. The presence of “you” that referred to the reader and different moods
(mostly declarative, interrogative and exclamative), replicated engaging dialogue.

There was a case where the tone of the language might be considered as boastful and author-centered. This was demonstrated by the use of words loaded depicting self-indulgence and less concern for others. This would be considered as a device, focusing on black humor as its gimmick to attract attention.

All of the sales letters, thus, could be categorized as the direct-selling type. Even though some of the testimonials conveyed personal experience in regards to the product being the solution to the problem, they were too short to be considered as narrative.

The most common claim of the letters was that the products were beneficial in yielding a large sum of money within a short duration of practicing the methods and with less effort. To support the claim, evidence of payment (pictures receipts, checks, and account statements) usually showed the date and the amount. Some letters included testimonials functioning as additional proof of the product’s effectiveness by mentioning the time spent and money earned.

In spite of their direct-selling nature, emotional appeals were also prominent. Words like “secrets”, “reveal”, or “exposed” indicated a strategy to lure the reader to assume that the presentation was new information.

5. Conclusion

This preliminary study has shown that by considering many facets of web copywriting, a fundamental guideline can be established to assist in composing a web copy. By establishing clear claims, evidence and warrant, a campaign can maneuver within those elements to employ both rational and emotional appeal to the extent that they are acceptable to the audience. The persuasive elements have the potential to fine tune the internet marketer’s objectives to optimally utilize the UMPS. Lastly, the checklist mentioned could not be considered as the ultimate list to satisfy. On the contrary, creative aspects have the potential to overrule the expectations and yet still be effective.

As yet to be discussed, the next step of the study is to test the effectiveness of a web copy. Even though Stiff and Mongeau still cast doubt on on-line persuasion, their models of persuasive study may serve as adaptable designs to measure the effectiveness of the marketing strategy communication.

Another topic worthy of discussion is the other forms of online advertisements. Other growing markets like article marketing and public relations marketing provide ample samples to examine persuasive writing strategies on the Internet.

References


