

Words Make the Web Work

[Web Smart Newsletter](#) originally published October 2004 - Updated July 2006. By Eric Holter.

Words Make the Web Work

When speaking of website content, the word "content" is an utter abstraction. Reliance on abstract words like "content" to stand in for specific, concrete realities is necessary in order to communicate broadly about concepts and ideas. Newfangled in particular relies on the term "content" quite frequently as we discuss the web development process. We talk about how we prototype the structure, content, and functionality of a site using grayscale prototypes. We highlight the many benefits of content management using the [NewfangledCMS](#). Yet when it comes down to it, the definite, concrete written words contained in a website are critically important to how a website works. This month we examine how the effective use of words can make or break website marketing.

People don't read bad writing...

During the web development process, people often jest that nobody actually reads copy on the web; they say the words don't really matter. Unfortunately, they are usually only half-joking. It's true that many people skip quickly over written words when perusing a website. However, this does not mean that they do not read. It probably means that people have pretty highly tuned mechanisms that help them identify "junk" copy. This allows them to cut through all the noise that clutters our information inundated world. I give people more credit. I think they do read, but I think they have become experts at scanning and finding what is compelling in the midst of lots of chaff. So consequently, it's my opinion that the reason many people say that nobody reads on the web is because it's true. They don't read much on the web, but that's because most websites aren't saying very much!

Throughout my years of web development, I have learned at least one hard and fast rule: when companies plan on building a website, they always underestimate the job of writing and editing its words (notice I did not use the term "content"). Whenever someone asks me how long it takes to build a website, I have a hard time responding. We've built huge sites in a matter of a few weeks and we've built fairly simple sites that have taken over a year to complete. Guess what the x-factor is. Yup, it's the words. In the abstract, planning a website is relatively easy. Our grayscale prototyping process is highly effective at detailing the structure, content (there's that abstract term again) and the functionality of a site. Our whitescreen process allows our clients to easily enter all of their "content" into the site during development. At this stage, projects frequently grind to a halt. Suddenly, all of the horribly abstract "Lorem ipsum dolar" placeholder content sprinkled throughout the site needs to be replaced with actual--gasp--words!

How to Write Copy for the Web

Words are easy to make, but very difficult to use well. It's easy to shrink back from the "content entry" phase of web development when faced with a significant number of words to write or edit. Simply entering content can be a chore--nevermind writing it in the first place, or refining and editing it in the context of a non-linear website structure. As a result, the words found on most websites are not the most conscientiously and carefully crafted; in fact, they usually are quite the opposite.

To make matters worse, companies like mine have made entering and editing website content so easy that it can lead to carelessness. I use the term "content" deliberately here because content management systems allow people to manage pictures, documents and data along with words. Remember what desktop publishing did for the design world? Once the capability of "making graphics" was in the hands of non-designers, lots of horrible design and typography resulted. Content management systems do the same thing for the web. Yet, I REGRET NOTHING! Yes, I've made it easy for people to pour hastily considered words into their sites, but I've also made it possible for them to enter excellent, well crafted words. Not only so, but as William Zinsser declares in his classic book *On Writing Well*, "the essence of writing is rewriting." One of the major culprits of bad website copy is the barrier between the copywriter and his website copy. In static

website development, the words need to be provided to the developer for coding. If changes are needed, the words must be re-coded. If the essence of writing well is re-writing, as Zinsser says, this critical capability is removed unless a content management system enables the writer to re-write as needed. In my experience, the need to re-write is even more important on the web because of its non-linear nature. You might not realize how certain words are read in the context of the site until you approach the site from many angles. The need for re-writing to achieve good website copy is essential.

So far I've been focusing on the importance of writing well on the web, but what about the pictures? Isn't a picture worth a thousand words? In short, on the web, no. As a former illustrator (check out my wood engravings at www.holter.com if you're interested), I feel I can be fair in limiting the importance of pictures on the web in comparison to words. Let me qualify this by saying that pictures are certainly not unimportant, but in comparison to copy on the web, pictures are not as important as words.

Importance of Website Content

I say this for many reasons. First, the marketing paradigm for using visual impact is inverted on the web. I've written about this dynamic many times over the years, but it merits reiteration. Offline, image and visual impact is necessary in order to grab attention. You must win attention before you have the opportunity to say anything. In these situations, visuals often trump words. Some of the best ad campaigns have little or no words in them at all. Where brand reinforcement is the objective, an image of an athlete with a "swoosh" can do the job nicely. However, on the web there is literally no "stop and grab attention" work to be done at all. People don't walk past websites or have websites presented to them in between television shows. They choose to go to a website based on an interest of some kind. They type in a URL, choose a bookmark or click on a link. The design of the site has no role whatsoever in their choosing to click on a link. This is not to say that design and images are unimportant; once they do click, site's looks fills the same important role it does in a brochure, annual report or billboard. But the initial attention-grabbing part of the equation is removed.

Another reason for the elevated priority of words on the web is the expectation of why people go to a website. Except for a very small percentage of ubiquitous brand sites like Coke, McDonald's or Nike, or sites where the purpose is highly entertainment-oriented, most websites get traffic from people in search of information. Such information may very well include pictures, like maps on MapQuest, but usually the information is contained in the words of the site.

Case in point

Suppose you want to find out how many square feet are in an acre. How might you go about finding out on the web? Most people would Google it. If you're a real estate agent, it's a good idea to have an FAQ on your website that gives the square footage of an acre and perhaps some description of how large an acre is, say in comparison to a football field. When someone does a Google search they might find your page and get to your site, thereby finding the information they were looking for. Words make the web work. Another case is in how people look for specific information on a particular site using search functions. If you wanted to find out if a certain accessory is available for your MP3 player, you might go to BestBuy.com and search for iPod accessories using their site's search tools.

Theoretically, in both of these cases, the information could have been presented visually. The acre could have been presented as an image showing a square imposed over a graphic of a football field representing the relative size of an acre. Or the accessories page could visually display all the available iPod accessories. If this were the case however, you would not have found the acre page from Google or the desired accessory on BestBuy. That's because words make the web work.

In both these cases pictures would definitely add to the richness of the information, but without the words the information would be hidden.

Website Copywriting Tips

Words are hard work

In *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser also says, Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard.

A content management system can't make the craft of writing any easier. It can remove the barriers from the process so that good writing can occur. Without it bad writing is almost assured. Perhaps this is why so many websites have such bad writing, and consequently why so

many people "don't read website copy."

Writing well is hard, yet it must be done if a website is going to be compelling. Here are a few brief tips and encouragements for those non-professional writers like me who often find themselves responsible for replacing "Lorem ipsum dolar" with words from a more modern tongue...

Unless you can sequester yourself, don't fight against the tide by trying to write during normal business hours. For example, when I write these monthly newsletters I bite the bullet and set aside one evening after work or a Saturday morning. It's amazing how productive you can be when the phone isn't ringing and when there are no knocks on the door.

2. Read well written books. Not just for their content (oops there's that abstract work again), but with an eye toward their style and craft. If you've been reading these newsletters for a while, you know I always recommend Harry Beckwith's book, [Selling the Invisible](#). William Zinsser's book, mentioned twice already, is certainly very helpful. Another one of my recent favorites is Malcom Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*.

3. Say what you mean, mean what you say. Second phrase first--"mean what you say." In *Selling the Invisible*, Harry Beckwith talks about the first rule of service marketing as "getting better reality." If you work diligently at your business so that you have a truly valuable service to offer, you should be passionate about it. If you like what you do and you believe in your product or service, you should have adequate motivation for plugging away at crafting the words that will represent your business on the web. First phrase--"say what you mean." Strive for clarity. Use as few words as possible. Ask yourself this as you write: "If the reader of this paragraph knew nothing about my product or service, would these words be understandable and informative?"

4. Eliminate hyperbole and abstraction. Sometime abstract words like "content" are necessary, but use them sparingly. If a concrete word or illustration is available, use it. Ruthlessly eliminate throw-away words like "unlimited," "best," "incomparable" and the like.

5. Say one thing. Don't confuse a reader by saying too much. One particularly strange episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* had a holodeck character who proclaimed loudly, "The Higher, The Fewer." I have no idea why, but this phrase stuck in my head. It's actually a great metric for website copywriting. If you think of a home page as the highest page, it should say the fewest things--or at least it should only try to say one thing loudly. As you descend to sub pages, you can say more and provide as much detail as you want. Another character in that *Star Trek* episode warned: "If you ever have a world--plan ahead, don't eat it!" I have no idea how that relates to copywriting, except that perhaps it serves as an example of how easy it is to say too much.

And so, it would be best to stop right now.