

Technically, It's Still Marketing:

The Rewards and Rigors of Writing Marketing Copy for Technology Companies

BY HARRY CALHOUN

When I came to write for a technology company several years ago, I had already been working as a marketing writer for close to fifteen years. I knew a lot of the pitfalls that all marketing writers encounter: from non-existent source material to clients who kept adding more product information while exhorting me to keep it short; from bad direction to people who had the nerve to dislike my conversational writing style. But I was soon to find out that writing for technology companies has its own unique set of challenges.

To help explore those challenges, I enlisted the aid of two expert marketing writers: Hillary Hebert, a veteran writer whose credits extend from fiction to technical marketing copy, and Phil Dunn, who runs the Synapse Services Company from his Web site, www.qualitywriter.com.

The Trials and Tribulations of Technology

Whether marketing writers are selling training programs or making mortgage insurance more palatable to homebuyers, their employers generally recognize them for performing the valuable function of selling the company's products. This function is less valued—or, at least, regarded with suspicion—in technical environments. Co-workers and clients alike often think of all marketing as “fluff” and want writers to stick to product descriptions with a minimum of sell. To make matters worse, the client often wants to load down the writing with technical specifications and other copy that is sleep-inducing to those less technically inclined. These factors make it difficult to produce the short, punchy copy that is at the heart of marketing writing.

Phil Dunn puts the dilemma this way: “There is often resistance from techni-

cal personnel to use ‘persuasive’ language or verbiage that is designed to compel buying decisions. People who design products—engineers, programmers, and others—often think that their products stand on their own legs just fine. They don’t necessarily appreciate the communication angle that marketing practices are supposed to address.”

According to Dunn, it’s the writer’s job to knock down the technological barrier that drives away customers and intimidates new users. “If customers perceive something to be techie, geeky, gear-head, or nerdy,” he says, “they resist the potential benefits because they’re afraid that there might be some real hardships ahead in learning the product—or learning a new lexicon, keystrokes, or process. This makes the writer’s job much more challenging. The writer needs to be a master transla-

tor, one who can turn technical benefits into real, tangible benefits that have impact on the user's life. Time saved, money saved, headache avoided—all couched in terms that relate to life rather than bits and bytes.”

Beyond simply translating bytes into benefits, marketing writers have an opportunity—a duty, even—to temper the technical focus. Hillary Hebert observes that “subject matter experts from development groups often want to explain how a product works, or how it was developed, instead of how it will benefit the customer. Marketing writers must steer the conversation back to a benefits discussion or insist on access to someone who will provide benefits information.”

The Marketing Writer as Hybrid

Hebert and Dunn's comments indicate that the marketing writer must become a hybrid who can convey the technical side of a product without losing the ability to market it. Additionally, this hybrid technical/marketing writer must have strong negotiating skills and know when to fight description-versus-benefit battles.

Conversely, the marketing writer sometimes needs to use negotiation to temper the client's enthusiasm. Some clients who insist on highly technical language are so passionate about the product they sell that they make exaggerated claims about it. Ironically, sometimes the very marketing writers accused of writing “fluff” or doing anything to sell a product must force clients or experts to either back off from claims or substantiate them.

Fortunately, writers don't always have to fight this battle themselves. A company's legal and editorial teams may have rules pertinent to the development of marketing materials—rules that may, for example, prohibit the use of language that cannot be properly defended. However, as Hebert notes, “Many writers work for companies or clients that do not have writing-style guidelines. In such cases, it's the writer's responsibility to offer options for accurate wording, free of exaggeration and unsubstantiated claims. Whenever possible, it helps to reference outside studies to support our

client's claims. But ultimately, we write to our client's specifications. By signing off on the writer's final draft, the client accepts responsibility for how the text is interpreted.”

Writers' objections to claims that a product is the very best in the entire world evaporate when the client produces a legitimate survey indicating that this is indeed so. Remember that legitimacy usually comes from outside the company; an internal study that finds your product to be “best of breed” is likely to carry less weight than the testimony of independent and respected outside observers.

Even so, Hebert notes, “You can't make everybody happy all the time. The trick is to really know your audience and know what your client needs to achieve. You have to please the person who's paying for your work. Find out what that person wants, offer your recommendations for a successful piece, and hope you don't have to compromise too much.”

What You Know and How You Say It

So it takes an unusual blend of technical and marketing writing skills to thrive in this environment. And it's important to use negotiating skills to ensure that your copy remains benefit-oriented and interesting. What role does product knowledge play, and how in-depth should that knowledge be for a marketing writer?

In most cases, a high-level knowledge of how the product works is all that's necessary if what you're writing is really marketing copy. If you need to understand the product more intimately and describe it in great detail, it's probably not effective marketing so much as technical writing.

What you *do* need to be intimately familiar with are the benefits of the product to the target audience. In other words, you might not need to know exactly how virtualization works or describe it in detail, but you do need to know why potential buyers should care about it, how it can help them or their business, and what the selling points are. If your source materials do not address customer benefits or the business needs that would make the target audi-

ence buy the product, you need to ask for this information or research more deeply.

Dunn's comments again stress the hybrid nature of the marketing writer's job: “Know the product intimately, and think of it in terms of pains, challenges, everyday stumbling blocks, common gripes, successful scenarios, and dream scenarios. Getting into the mind of the user—in terms of both frustrations and triumphs—is crucial.” While technical knowledge is important, so is your *mind-set*: approach the product or service from a benefit-oriented standpoint.

Hebert points out that the right amount of technical information depends on the audience and format—a brochure, direct mail, or e-mail. “Even in a short e-mail, it might be smart to include, say, recent benchmark results if you're targeting a specific audience, such as data center procurement managers. But for a CEO or CIO audience, it's better to stick with very high-level benefits statements and really limit, or avoid, technical detail.”

You're the Expert, but They're the Clients

One vital reason why marketing writers need good negotiation skills is the age-old tension between the “customer is always right” mentality and the writer's status as an expert in his or her field. Sometimes the writer's knowledge of the presentation options available—and how those options work—is a step or two ahead of the client's. For example, most clients are familiar with Microsoft *PowerPoint* but not with *Flash*; these clients often produce wordy, bulleted scripts instead of the faster paced, image-oriented copy appropriate for *Flash*. So how do you manage the client's expectations of the piece you're producing?

Hebert has found a way to leverage the writer's expertise while also making the client happy. “The best way to handle this is to offer examples for the client to view,” she says. “Then talk over why one works better than the other. Most clients won't argue once they experience a really well-done, well-paced *Flash* as opposed to one that drags on and on. It's fair to inform clients that marketing

Roadblocks to Effective Marketing

Most experienced marketing writers have encountered these problems when working in a technical environment:

- The client wants to throw technical specifications into the mix, which makes it very difficult to write effective, short, punchy copy.
- The client thinks of all marketing as “fluff” and wants you to stick with product descriptions with a minimum of sell.
- The client keeps adding product information that increases the length of a brochure, mailer, or other piece—making it longer and more boring to read. The benefit to the reader is lost or obscured by product descriptions. (Frequently, this problem is compounded by client exhortations to “keep it short and punchy.”)
- “Garbage in, garbage out”—the client provides a bad or inaccurate source and you are forced to use it or dig up your own information.
- Your clients do not understand that they are the experts and must provide the source—you as the writer don’t have it.
- If you’re writing for an internal client but directing your copy toward an external audience, you might encounter an environment filled with lots of internal “nick-names”—acronyms and pet names that are not suitable for external consumption. But sometimes your internal clients get attached to those names and want to use them. It’s your job to make sure they don’t.

surveys have shown that more people prefer multimedia over *PowerPoint*.”

Dunn says that while his job is to deliver what’s wanted, this focus sometimes conflicts with what’s needed. In these cases, he says, providing subtle clues and directing the conversation are key: “Ideally, you want the clients to think the idea was theirs. It’s tough to sell, ‘I’m the expert and this is the way it should be done.’ If you can steer the clients toward some ideas like value, benefits, call-to-action, closing copy, and so on, you can get them thinking beyond product and focusing on usage and real-world situations.”

Another issue concerns the amount of detail to include in marketing copy. Descriptions of products should always have an element of mystery. One of the tenets of marketing is to tease and entice; if we’re telling readers everything there is to know, what reason do they have to call or reply?

“There’s a fine line between giving away the store and telling a complete story that could lead to a sale,” says Dunn. “I think it depends on the product.” It stands to reason that people purchasing a high-ticket item will want to know more about it than those buying less expensive products, so marketing materials for these may take more time and effort

to read and go into more detail.

Finally, writers might find themselves butting heads with clients because, as Dunn points out, “Noncreative types don’t factor in creative cycles and the value of putting things aside to ‘marinate’ and then revisit for editing. Many writing assignments turn out to be fire drills with tight timelines. Strict deadlines are necessary, of course, but a large chunk of time for research, writing, editing, and proofing is a key to good results.”

Final Words

As we have seen, there’s more to writing marketing copy in technical environments than what’s on the surface. Beyond talent and expertise, it takes negotiation skills and a mind-set balanced between your client’s needs and your own abilities. “Writing for days and years on end for technical clients takes a lot of patience and stillness,” says Dunn. “I find it helpful to play with the material when I’m having trouble cranking out good sentences with consistency. That means reading it over and over, Googling the topics out of curiosity, reading other approaches and angles, and moving the words and paragraphs around.

“Just make sure you are either playing with or writing great copy for each of your projects every day. Writing alone or in a

small, e-mail-connected group is a tough business that takes lots of discipline.”

But as Hebert points out, “Marketing writing in a technical environment is still just writing, with the goal of making something happen. Can you put characters on paper, or on a screen, that will cause somebody to get up from a chair, make a phone call, change her strategy, or cancel a golf game to attend a meeting? There is nothing more challenging than creating change and disrupting stasis. The reader must be convinced that the pain of action, or change, will be less than the pain of the status quo. Given human inertia and resistance to change, if our words can accomplish that, it is extraordinary. And it’s fun.” ❶

SUGGESTED READINGS

Elms, Janelle, Phil Dunn, and Amy Balsbaugh. *The 7 Essential Steps to Successful eBay Marketing*. New York: McGraw-Hill Osborne Media, 2005.

Harner, Sandra, and Tom Zimmerman. *Technical Marketing Communication*. New York: Longman Press, 2001.

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