



NICK FIELDEN COPYWRITER

PLAIN LANGUAGE IS THE KEY

My Working Brief —

How I Prepare and Write A Business-to-Business Copywriting Assignment

It comes as a surprise to many business owners to learn that the act of composing a written assignment takes up no more than a third of a copywriter's time, and sometimes less. By the time I sit down at my keyboard to compile the text of an email, a case study, brochure, newsletter or white paper, the bulk of my work has already been completed. I have accumulated a wealth of background information about the client company, the project in hand, the product or service to be promoted, the target buyers, the expected result of the project, and more.

In other words, what takes up most the copywriter's time is the research, the interviews and other information-gathering — even to understanding the style and tone of the written material that the client company prefers.

Getting To Know The Client Company and The Project Subject-Matter

If I have not undertaken an assignment for the respective company before, my first task will be to learn about it. This includes becoming familiar with the industry within which it operates, its structure, its ethos and how the company management pictures the enterprise itself.

My initial step will be to meet an executive or senior manager who possesses long experience of working in the company and who associates closely with it. He or she will be able to give me an overview of the company and its activities. I will also need to learn the tone of the company's 'voice' in its written documentation. If a style-guide exists, this should give me a good idea of what syntax and English usage the company prefers.

Then there is the all-important interview with those members of staff who are most intimately involved in the project — the experts who can describe with most clarity and depth what features the product possesses and what benefits flow from those features. Does the product have a unique attribute that distinguishes it from the competition? Such as:

- How has the product performed during its trials, and have any problems arisen? If so, what steps has the company taken to overcome those problems?
- What customer support does the company offer post-purchase, and what warranties are attached to the product?

There will be a host of additional enquiries I will need to make, of which the major ones are:

- What is the nature of the project?
- What copywriting assignments will the project include — say, a combined press release, product brochure and white paper?
- Will the company engage a graphic designer? (The design and layout aspects of the promotional document are best assigned to a specialist).
- Who is the targeted readership?
- Has there been a similar project in the past? What were the results? (I shall need access to the documentation relating to the earlier project).
- What is the subject-matter of the project — the product or service?
- Has its development been fully completed?

- Do I need to consult with any other team of experts to fully understand the nature of the project and its subject-matter?
- What are the anticipated results of the project?

What is the deadline for the project campaign, and how soon before that deadline will the finalised copy be required?

Research

The copywriter needs to acquire as much knowledge about the product as possible in the time available before the deadline for the copy's submission. The project team can suggest sources of information from within the company where internal memos, technical documents, product specifications, engineering drawings, business and marketing plans, reports and proposals reside.

Where the product is a further development of an existing model, there will be plentiful sources of data, reviews, customer feedback and trade articles outside the company.

An acquired familiarity with the product enables the copywriter to describe with greater technical detail and competence its features, new or improved, and the corresponding benefits to the user. When writing the promotional text, I will need to substantiate with hard evidence whatever claims I make about the product or service. When independent reviewers have tested it and have objectively assessed its utility, those views will carry weight in the eyes of prospective buyers and will add credence to my white paper, email or brochure.

The Product Document

As a general rule, and regardless of the nature of the promotional material to be written, my copy will contain references the following aspects of the product or service:

- **Purpose.** Its name, and a description of its function.
- **Features.** Components and their uses, especially innovations that give an advantage in efficiency, running costs, performance, safety and the like.
- **Benefits.** The advantages to the user, especially those that are unique. These give added value to the product's features compared with the competition.
- **Compatibility.** The ease with which the product operates within existing systems and regimes, and the extent to which the product avoids any associated operating changes.
- **Stand-Alone Operation.** The extent and degree to which the product functions without the need for 'optional extras'. If add-ons are required for improved performance, is the product available in configurations that include them?
- **Trial Usage.** If the company offers to demonstrate the product's uses, mode of operation, safety features and requirements, the necessary arrangements should be stated.
- **Cost.** The price to be paid for the standard model, and the differences in price dependent on early or postponed settlement, or by instalments. Similarly, for variant models.

- **Method of Purchase.** If the purchase is online, state the website address which should provide as detailed an enquiry form as is necessary to facilitate the purchase. If through the sales department, give the name and contact details of the person responsible. The product name and number should be stated, together with any discount code. The aim is to make the purchase procedure as trouble-free as possible.

I Am An Equal-Opportunity Copywriter

I apply the same degree of application, thoroughness and attention to detail, no matter whether I am writing text for a fold-over brochure or a white paper on a new product of 10,000 words. Size does not matter — and that applies to my company client as well. I wish to do the very best that I can whether I have been hired by a publicly-listed company or a small family business.

The greater the effort I apply in garnering information and understanding of the product or service, the stronger and more credible will be my copy. That will be good for my client, and frankly it will be good for me too. I obtain a great deal of personal satisfaction from knowing I have done my very best in compiling an informative and persuasive piece of promotional material, written in clear and concise English, and which is accurate and thorough. In my book, that is what providing a professional service is all about.