



THINKTHINK!

Is it too long? Is it too short?

[Print this page to read later]



Once again, ThinkThink was asked again the eternal copy question: **How long should text be?** The long and the short of it is that copy should be as long as it needs to be to get your marketing messages across. That's, er, it.

OK. That's not it. It depends what you're trying to sell or promote, to whom and in what medium. Clearly, you don't want 300 words of prose on a roadside 48-sheeter but on the other hand, what about on a platform-facing poster on the Tube? We know at least two things from research (station exit questionnaires): platform-facing posters are read and understood by people and, secondly, most people who actually go ahead and purchase your products, read all the copy available to them before they make the decision to buy. That bit's so important, it's getting a repeat:

The vast majority of people who actually go ahead and purchase your products, read all the copy before they make the decision to buy.

That means you've got a fantastic chance to fill your prospects with the benefits, to encourage, to persuade, to illustrate, to point out, to show what makes your product different from the competition's or unique in its own right. The old adage still stands: the more you tell the more you sell. And the last A/B split test that ThinkThink heard about where copy was tested revealed that the long version out-performed the short one by more than 800 per cent.

Copywriting is selling on paper. And what copywriters do – good ones anyway – is take the benefits of your products and services and help you communicate them in the most appropriate way. The benefits are the reasons to buy and the more reasons you supply, the better the argument. You want your prospects to read about your product and, when they've finished, they should feel that it would be stupid not to buy. Good copy should talk. Often, you'll hear copywriters talk about what they've said on paper, not what they've written.

As far as ThinkThink knows, the subscription drive letter for the Wall Street Journal is still four A4 pages of single-spaced typescript long. Why? Because it works. How do we know it works? Because it's been running for donkey's years, virtually unchanged and, what's more, it's a brilliant piece of copy.

“People are too busy to read all that.”

Is that really an argument? People will read the copy if they're interested. And it's the copywriter's job to engage your prospects, create and sustain the interest and then get them to act. If the readers are not the slightest bit interested in what you're offering, then the fault probably lies with the media or lists that have been selected, rather than with the copy. The same people that are “too busy” to radically improve their life by buying your products are perfectly capable of reading the sports pages, feature-length articles – some of your prospects may well even read entire novels running to hundreds of thousands of words.

It takes a normal adult one-sixth of a second to notice, interpret and react to an image, then the headline should reinforce the visual proposition and directly or indirectly tell the prospect to read on. If the interest is there, the copy will be read.

Strange and true

Years ago, ThinkThink knew a copywriter who was charged with the task of writing about a new modem that had been introduced by a major consumer electronics manufacturer. The brief said they wanted the advertising to be “cool” and “funky”. The copywriter spent the requisite amount of time digging through datasheets, looking for the beautiful, golden nuggets of information to be converted into benefits that would help sell the modem.

The product marketing manager, when presented with the campaign visuals, said he didn't want any copy; just the headline. The copywriter fought his corner until he was beginning to think about not just losing the client or his job but also, potentially, some of his teeth, and then gave up. All the text apart from the headline was deleted from the page by the designer – his most celebrated keystroke of the week – and the ads eventually went into production.

Because it was a mainstream consumer IT product, the media was selected appropriately: mainstream consumer IT magazines, and they're rather expensive for full-page, full-colour display advertising even if it does look cool and funky. Two months into the campaign, the figures were all scrutinised by the bean-counters at the computer company. The cost of sale was huge, the number of modems still in the factory was likewise and the product marketing manager didn't manage to work for the company much longer.

Closing music

What's important is what you say and how you say it. Sure, there are cases for shorter copy but only if it can still do its job. One copywriter described his work as “making his clients richer than him by making lists not look like lists.” You can see some of his work in *The Copy Book: How 32 of the world's best copywriters write their copy*.

Because the internal people to whom you present expect everything in PowerPoint bullets (short ones at that), that doesn't necessarily mean your targets want the same. The thing is, when you're trying to sell something to somebody, it's probably not the best idea to start firing bullets at them. Let your copywriter use his box of magic tricks to cajole, entertain and persuade, to massage and inspire. It's what you pay him or her for and you will both be better off as a result.

That's coming up for a thousand words and, assuming you didn't get interrupted, it probably took under five minutes of your time. Thanks for listening.

With Clear Focus, your marketing is measurable, profitable and provocative. **Call us now on 0845 225 0325.**

Taken from www.clearfocusdesign.com

