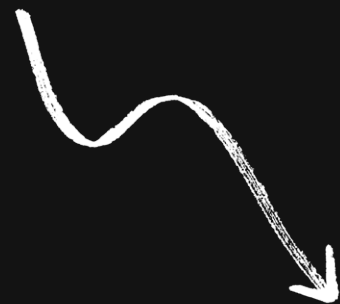


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The write stuff.

What it is and how to
make sure you get it.



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01

The Impact

Great content builds trust – which is the only foundation on which a relationship can be built.

Yet only 7% of marketers think their content is exceptional. So why is there so much mediocre content out there? And what can you do about it?



In B2B marketing, great content is the difference between success and failure. It turns strangers into prospects and can nurture prospects into customers and advocates.

Great content combines insight – ‘an accurate and deep understanding of a subject’ – and narrative: relevant, valuable insights that are communicated powerfully will reward you with the time, attention and ultimately the custom of the people with whom they’ve been shared.

Yet, according to 2020 data, securing the budget to ‘develop high quality, robust content at scale’ is the biggest problem that CMOs face (cited by 47%): in other words, too many of the people that hold the purse strings aren’t willing to pay for great content. The same research reported that almost half (43%) of those interviewed felt their content was just average; and, frankly, if it doesn’t inspire them, it’s not going to inspire their customers.

So, why is there so much mediocre content out there?

Well, writers themselves must take a huge share of the blame. If the majority of companies employ professional writers to produce what is mostly very average content, then that reflects very poorly on myself and my peers. Writing in 2013, Doug Kessler talked about the growth in the volume of B2B marketing content as far exceeding the capacity of good writers to deliver it – and that imbalance has only got greater in the intervening years. So, it may well be that less talented writers have filled the gap in the market – with predictably poor results. (Caveat emptor! Do your research. Get references!)

But I don’t think that’s the whole story. To employ a sports metaphor, most team managers have some experience of playing the game. Yet the same does not apply to marketing. The great paradox of our industry is that marketers are dependent upon quality content to do their jobs properly, yet very few have any experience of creating it.

“You never get a second chance to make your last impression.”

That’s not a deal-breaker. I’m not saying prospective marketers should serve a mandatory apprenticeship as a copywriter before they are allowed to take up a place in the profession. But, if the nature of content isn’t properly understood, it might explain why so much of it is so poor. In fact, in the survey cited above, the one problem CMOs would most like to resolve is ‘knowing if the content being created is actually influencing and engaging to our audience’. Put simply, the CMOs interviewed had little idea whether the content they’re commissioning is any good or not.

I guess that, if content is just words on a page, then one set of words looks much like any other. So, it doesn’t really matter what ‘asset’ you use if they’re all much of a muchness. But, of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

Poor content can cause a current prospect to permanently disengage from a sales funnel they’ve been carefully nurtured along. And, if it is being used for lead generation, that asset may be the first thing a prospect sees from your company, their first knowledge of your brand. And if it’s crap, then it’ll be the last thing they’ll look at from your company and all they remember about your brand – and you’ll never get a second chance to make that last impression.

Help them help you

Content creators don’t set out to create mediocre content. But, without in any way wishing to absolve bad writers for poor quality work, I think there are circumstances where even good writers will struggle to give their best. I am someone who experiences an almost visceral sense of unease when I am not given what I need to do good work, and I push back hard when those situations arise. But not every writer is in a position to do this – or is temperamentally inclined to do so.

So, if you are a marketer who is not a content creator – and assuming you are working with copywriters that have a proven track record in their field – then what can you do to ensure that the content that represents your brand is consistently great? I have put together an e-Book – The Write Stuff – that sets out how you can maximise the likelihood of great content being created for your campaigns.

Based on 25 years’ experience of producing a range of content – from social posts to white papers - in environments as varied as PR, advertising and internal communications, I set out six things that will improve your understanding of what great content looks like – and uplift your ability to contribute positively to its creation.



02

The Mentality

Great content isn't something that just ticks a set of boxes. It should **articulate** and address the real needs of your target audience. If it doesn't, then your asset is a liability.

For me (and I'm sure I speak on behalf of all writers), content creation is both a skill and a craft. I was born with a modicum of talent but that's been honed over the years.

Every piece I produce is carefully planned, meticulously written and checked and re-checked with a relentlessness that only those with mild OCD can muster. Content is crafted with care, attention and (on a good day) love.

Now, not everyone can (or should) share my passion for writing. I get that. But we should all share a commitment to quality. Because a poorly written asset can cause a current prospect to permanently disengage from a sales funnel they've been carefully nurtured along. And, if it is being used for lead generation, that asset may be the first thing a prospect sees from your company, their first knowledge of your brand. And if it's crap, then it'll be the last thing they'll look at from your company and all they remember about your brand.

The face in the mirror

The sad fact is that there is too much mediocre content in our industry. According to 2020 data, almost half (43%) of those interviewed felt their content was just average – despite the fact that 49% of them outsource content creation to people who, one assumes, write for a living. Much of the blame for this lies with the writers themselves – the demand for content simply outstrips the supply of great writers to provide it.

But, if you are one of those 43%, then perhaps you need to examine your own role in this. Far too many marketers consider content to be simply an ‘asset’: something that ticks a box, meets the criteria for a particular piece of content at a particular stage of a nurture flow – and nothing more. I’ve been asked to write copy promoting content so awful that I can’t believe it had actually ever been read – but it was the right kind of content on the right topic and a campaign had been built around it. The point is that, if the content in question is sub-standard, then your ‘asset’ is a liability.

This is particularly true for gated content. Prospects are giving up their valuable contact details in exchange for access to a piece of content – and that asset must be of equivalent value. If I had given up my information only to be sent a piece of marketing flimflam, I would be furious. And I would immediately unsubscribe from any company that did that to me.

The Takeaway

The ability to distinguish good content from bad is a critical skill for a marketer. If this is a skill you lack, then take steps to acquire it. (Be curious. If one asset worked much better than another, ask yourself why. Read widely. Ask for recommendations.) And, in the meantime, rely on the judgement of those you can trust to make that decision for you.



03 The Persuasion

Persuading someone of the **value of your products or services** and explaining those offerings to them are two very different things. Understanding the difference between them – and using them appropriately – is a critical skill for any marketer.



I started my career in PR. The people we were trying to influence had (probably) never heard of the client company authoring the article or knew anything about how it might impact their working lives.

Indeed, persuading them of the relevance of my client's technology was the point of the whole exercise: you can't sell medicine to someone that doesn't believe that they're ill.

I am therefore comfortable with having persuasion as an objective for my content. But, my more recent experience of B2B marketing suggests that most of the copywriters in it cleave more naturally to explaining. I'm not arguing that one is better than the other, merely that there is a distinction between the two that makes them suited to different parts of the customer journey.

By way of illustration, I recently had a brief on behalf of a low-code vendor to write about the use cases of their technology for Customer Experience (CX) professionals. Now, most of these people neither know nor care what low-code is and spend precisely no time wondering how they might use it in their day-to-day lives – so explaining the technology to them is entirely pointless. However, CX professionals do need to respond to volatile business conditions by rapidly spinning up new online services and iterating these rapidly in order to remove friction from the process: this is something at which low-code excels, so the challenge was to persuade them of the veracity of this claim.

It's a funnel thing

Prospects in the awareness phase of the funnel need to be persuaded of the validity of your client's product or service, typically through educationally oriented thought leadership materials (remember, they don't yet know they are ill!) such as analyst reports, white papers and e-Books. Once they realise that their symptoms can be diagnosed as an illness for which you have a cure, you can then push them along the funnel until they are ready to have it explained to them: case studies, ROI tools and product demos are among a host of different materials that do this job well.

(Caveat. As this Just Global blog argues, you need to enable the customer journey, not dictate it. Some of your prospects may prefer to look at case studies at the start of their engagement with you and study analyst reports at the end – that's entirely their prerogative.)

The Takeaway

You need to put yourself in your customers' shoes and understand where they are in relation to their understanding of (and therefore need for) your (or your client's) offering. Are they yet to be persuaded of the relevance of that offering? Or has the penny dropped, and they are ready to have its features and benefits explained to them? You should know the difference and brief your writers accordingly.



04

The Emotion

We all instinctively know whether a piece of content is written from the heart or simply to order. There is an **authenticity to great writing** that cannot be faked. So, if you're working with freelance writers, make sure they have access to your Subject Matter Experts.



If you were asked for a company portrait, you might think carefully about the clothes you choose for the shoot, take a bit of time on hair and makeup or have a view about which was your best side. But you wouldn't substitute a photograph of a different person and insist on that being used instead. But copywriters are often asked to produce a piece of content with minimal input from the company in whose name it is being written. That's no less crazy.

Can I write something from scratch entirely on my own? Of course. I once did a series of blogs for a CRM vendor in which I was given a series of target audiences and simply asked to 'write something interesting'. It was a success – the CTR's were 'way above average'.

However, I never consider assignments such as these to be my best work. The views in those blogs were mine alone. They didn't reflect the particular views of the company concerned (although I was at pains to ensure that the two were aligned). They didn't refer to anecdotes about customer interactions I didn't have. They didn't include insights that weren't being written about elsewhere. How could they?

The ghost in the machine

In my PR days, I would often ghost-write articles for clients. Because these articles were accredited to a particular individual – and would enhance their industry standing, their personal brand and even their job prospects – we had SMEs queuing up to participate. However, these experts relied on their PR colleagues to give them the external exposure they craved; and the PR team needed their expertise in order to generate the column inches on which they were measured. So, there was a real mutuality of both respect and interest at play.

My experience suggests that this mutuality is somewhat missing from B2B marketing, although this is far from being universally true. Perhaps, because these experts' contributions are often anonymised in e-Books or position papers, they are viewed as an imposition rather than an opportunity. Or maybe it's the fact that marketers often defer to their sales leads and are reluctant to 'bother them' with requests for a briefing which may distract them from their sales mission.

Cold Feet

It is my firm belief that the reticence that many B2B clients have when it comes to putting a writer in front of their SMEs is based on a misassumption; and is a serious barrier to the success of any content-based marketing strategy.

Firstly, I haven't met an expert that doesn't love talking about what they do and expressing their views about the industry in which they have invested years of their professional lives; so, marketers should have no fears on that score (as long as their copywriters are knowledgeable and well briefed).

The second point goes to the issue of authenticity: whether it's a turn of phrase, an opinion, an anecdote or a customer example, the expert will bring something to the conversation that is unique to that individual and that organisation. That distinctiveness is at the heart of great content; and it cannot be manufactured.

The Takeaway

We all have a shared responsibility to put the distinctive character of our organisation or client at the heart of everything we produce. That means having the courage to enlist the help of those experts that can contribute to the process – and the patience to explain to them the value of doing so.



05

The Exercise

There are two parts to writing. The first is figuring out what you want to say – the second is saying it. You need to have nailed the first part before you start the second.

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Planning is the attempt to answer to a simple question: How is my company/client uniquely placed to address the real needs of its customers. Once you have that answer – for the sector and persona of the audience you are addressing – then the writing bit is pretty straightforward. So, if you are unclear on the value your (client's) offering delivers, create a planning brief. Then use that planning work as part of the creative brief to the copywriter and the wider Studio team. Pretty simple, huh?

The problem is that this rule is frequently ignored.

In-house teams, which may lack either the experience or the planning resources to do the first part, can present a copywriter with a brief that lacks the planning information necessary for it to be fulfilled effectively. Agency staff, which should have access to all the resources they need, have fewer excuses. They should be the ones to step in and tell their clients that the planning stage has been missed; but, under pressure from either their clients or their management to get a campaign quickly into market, they sometimes fail to do so.

The results are frequently disastrous: marketing activity that lacks the planning foundations to support the campaigns built upon it will quickly disintegrate. From the copywriter's perspective – and even with the best will in the world – (s)he will fail to deliver good content without understanding how a particular product or service delivers value to the groups you are targeting.

Rudyard Kipling's honest serving men

Kipling's famous poem ("I keep six honest serving men, they taught me all I knew. Their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who.") provides a good template for determining whether you are in a position to brief a copywriter or if you need to do a little more planning work.

- **Who are we targeting** – do we know enough about our target audience?
- **Why do they need our help** – do we understand the pain points that we address for them?
- **What do we want our prospects to do** – what behaviours are we trying to initiate or change?
- **When is the activity being carried out?**
- **Where is the activity being carried out** – what is the geographical scope of the campaign?
- **How are we going to achieve the goals outlined above?**

You must be clear on these details before you engage a copywriter. Fulfilling this checklist will ensure that your writers are clear on the language, the audience, the drivers, the timescales and the call to action they need in order to meet – and hopefully exceed – your expectations.

The Takeaway

You must gather the information you need to support the activity you are sponsoring. If you are working with a marketing agency then it is their job to figure out the, 'How?' but you need good answers to the other five questions. If you don't have them, then take a deep breath and engage the planning resource you need to fill in the gaps. This may put a few noses out of joint in the short term but will save you time and money in the medium term and avert a potential s***storm down the line.



06

The Authority

To be taken seriously, writers must present themselves as **authorities on topics** they may have known nothing about only a week earlier. How can you tell if they have pulled this off?



To be taken seriously, writers must present themselves as authorities on topics they may have known nothing about only a week earlier. How can you tell if they have pulled this off?

I don't consider myself to be an authority on anything other than marketing and its adjacencies. I have worked in B2B tech for 25 years and am generally considered to be knowledgeable about the industry – and I'd certainly like to think that I have retained at least some of the information I've written about over that time. However, it is the agency writer's lot to know a little bit about a great deal – and, having worked with hundreds of SMEs over the years, I have far too much respect for their depth of knowledge to ever claim that title for myself. (I can console myself with the fact that few SMEs are great writers and that I do therefore bring something to the table!)

Yet I am asked to produce content for senior B2B audiences that are under enormous time pressure and are being bombarded by invitations to consume materials from dozens of different vendors. So, I need to make my material stand out by presenting myself as an authority on a topic I may have known nothing about only a week earlier. How can this sleight of hand be performed?

What does 'writing with authority' actually mean?

I was a history major which, contrary to popular belief, isn't about trotting out historical details, but about marshalling those details to support a particular viewpoint. (Although I didn't appreciate it at the time, it is excellent training ground for a B2B copywriter!) So, I was thrilled to find this advice given by the University of Cambridge to its history students.

“Writing with authority is about acquiring the ability to carry the reader with you as you present your argument and make them willing to accept what you say. However, it is important to note that 'authority' is not synonymous with 'dogmatism'. You are not bashing the reader into submission (which is counterproductive) but persuading them that in this matter your views can be trusted.”

Amen to that.

As a writer, I need to acquire authority from others – most obviously from the SMEs whom I have (hopefully) interviewed and whose real-world experience of delivering business outcomes to customers has an authority that cannot be denied. And research is critical: the start of my career roughly coincides with the widespread use of the web browser so I can attest to that fact that this job has got easier over time. I can borrow the authority of a Gartner, an EY or a Forbes (or even an esteemed university!) to ensure that the content is strong enough to carry the arguments I am putting forward on my client's behalf.

The Takeaway

Authority in writing is easier to recognise than explain, but you should examine the content created for you through that lens. Does it articulate and address the real concerns of your audience? Are recommendations offered tentatively or asserted confidently? Are opinions provided speculatively or firmly evidenced? In a nutshell, are you reassured that the writer knows what they are talking about? After all, if your content isn't conveyed with authority, then why would anyone take it seriously?

Conclusion

Great content cannot be created in a vacuum. First and foremost, it requires a good writer. But it also needs your help. You need to: think of content as more than just an asset, and know enough about it to set the quality bar for your organisation or client; understand whether your customers need to be persuaded of the value of what you do or if they are ready to have the delivery of that value explained to them; have the courage to engage with your experts in order to secure their participation in its creation; ensure that the content you are paying for has the authority necessary to engage the senior audiences you are targeting; secure the planning insights that underpin effective content creation; and invest your time and energy into giving your content creators what they need to deliver outstanding results.

Fundamentally, content demands that you take it seriously. That you acknowledge the critical role it has to play in delivering success to your organisation or agency. And that, even as someone that will not directly create the content you deploy on a daily basis, you will use your intelligence and influence to create an environment where great content can flourish.

Simple as that.



About the author

Iain Halpin, Head of Content at Just Global, is an award-winning digital marketer with 25 years' experience of the B2B technology industry. He is at his best when operating at the intersection of planning insight, content creation and creative strategy.

Iain has worked for some of the biggest Blue Chips – and the smallest start-ups – in content-led roles that have spanned demand generation, thought leadership, crisis management and internal communications.

To find out how Just Global can help you ensure that great writing is at the heart of your campaigns,

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