

Exploring the nature and nuances of effective copywriting for direct marketing

Tips for a Seamless Relationship Between Copywriter and Agency



When I managed freelancers for an agency, I saw a lot of the good and the not-so-good habits of copywriters and account executives

alike. That information has helped me greatly as a freelancer myself, because I am able to identify ways that a good copywriter can make life easier for an account executive, and vice versa.

Here is a selection of tips to make the copywriter/agency relationship run as smoothly as possible.

As a writer:

- Always be on time. This should really be a no-brainer. Submitting copy late is really not acceptable. That could result in missed mail dates—plus, it's simply unprofessional.

- Do your best to meet the needs of the client and the agency. This requires a bit of balance. As a writer, I am happy to provide creative concepts for packages, and I am equally happy to write based on the creative parameters for the package already established by the account staff. Part of what sets me apart as a professional is that I can write a successful direct mail package either way. There is no ego in direct mail!

- Proofread your work. That sounds obvious, but when I managed freelancers, sometimes writers sent in copy that I had to extensively edit. Those were writers I frequently did not hire again.

As an agency:

- Ideally, allow one to two weeks of lead-time for your writers to create something brilliant. We can often work faster, but to really do quality work takes rounds of revision, and revisions take a bit of time.

- Communicate your needs clearly. If the client has a certain program that you should write about, be sure to say so up front. If there are any style notes, such as "never use contractions," be sure to share those with your writers as well.

- Communicate any quirks of payroll to your writers. If your accounting office routinely takes 45 days or longer to cut checks, let writers know. It would be a kindness.

- Take full advantage of what your writer has to offer. They work with multiple agencies and clients and have a good feel for what works and what doesn't. Don't overlook their expertise.

For both sides:

Perhaps my biggest tip for both sides of the house is regarding providing and

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obtaining background material. I have had plenty of clients ask me to write a package with little to no background material and tell me to work my "magic." And you know what? I can do that. But it's better for everyone when the agency supplies as much background material as possible, and the writer does as much research as possible. Everybody wins!

So that you aren't starting from scratch with every package, consider maintaining a file of material on each client. Ask your clients to forward links to articles, emails they receive from supporters, etc. You could even have the client send the information directly to the writer to keep on file. This way, with each new package for the same client, neither you nor the writer has to start from scratch.

I had one client in particular that would do this, and I ended up with a thick file of emails, news clippings and the like. Every time I wrote for this client, I would take out the folder and read through the material to see what spoke to me. Often, a new story would appear from this material, a new voice would resonate. And the next time I wrote for that client, the agency didn't have to start from scratch rounding up material for me to use. I already had it. Of course, it helps to have a client who is willing to share material so freely and without reminders. But clients like that are out there, if we simply ask.

Any writer worth his or her salt will do research on their end, as well. Background material can come from surprising places. Once, I had about exhausted any available news articles about a particular client, when, through pure happenstance, a public figure I follow on Instagram posted something about that client, including links to a new video and interviews. I will also set Google Alerts so I am alerted automatically whenever a particular client is mentioned in the news. In this way, I create my own packet of material for each long-term client.

Lest this sound like a writer may end up with too much background material, rest assured there is no such thing. An angle or an article that was not quite right for a previous package may be perfect to use for the new package in front of me. It is always better to have too much material and then let the writer parse it down. We're good at that.

Even with a lot of background material, it helps your writer help you if he or she has a clear understanding of what you and



the client need. The best way to do this in very little time is to create a template for each package. There is much to be said for allowing your creative talent the freedom to play with ideas and create something effective. But there are certain basic pieces of information that your writer needs—every time—and if you take the time to

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put that together, you will make everyone's life easier, including yours.

I have created a simple template with the following information that I will fill in if I am writing the concept, or that you can fill in on the agency side if you have made any of these decisions already:

- Concept/teaser.
- Theme, to include any particular program the client wishes to highlight.
- Summary of the package concept.

(Is this an urgent appeal? A membership package? A renewal mailing? Is this an update of last year's package or should this be an entirely new concept?)

- Additional information, such as: Is there a representative of the organization you wish to quote? Would you like copy for a lift note or acknowledgement? What style notes do you have for this client?

- Suggested premium(s).

- Suggested graphics. While I am not a designer, I can suggest elements such as a handwritten font for a personal touch, or a more formal/less formal style, etc.

Don't feel boxed in by this. Simply fill in the pieces of information that you have, or ask the writer to do so if you are asking him or her to create the concept as well. Then you will not only have a clear copy request for your writer, but you will have a clear proposal of the idea to share with the client, as well.

Hopefully, these tips will help streamline the agency/copywriter relationship in a way that saves time for everyone and helps the entire creative team work together seamlessly to create award-winning and money-making copy!

Marie Morganelli, Ph.D., is a former production coordinator and copy chief for a Maryland-based direct mail agency.

She makes connections between charity and donor through freelance work. Learn more at precisewords.org, or reach her at marie@precisewords.org.

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