

Still under construction?

Get the fullstory on how to write copy for your website.

Nowadays it has become almost unthinkable for any company not to have a website. Large and medium sized organisations all seem to have them, and for many smaller enterprises, a website often represents their first step into marketing.

To cater for the massive need this has created, many web design companies have sprung up, and many design agencies now in turn include web design in their list of services. But we still hear very little about the specialised skill of writing for web.

So is it very different from writing for a brochure? Or writing advertising copy? We asked marketing consultant Caroline Harbord of Inflection for her views, as she has a wealth of experience of writing for web and has learnt first-hand of some of the pitfalls and some of the opportunities that so many companies miss.

For more ideas on writing for web, you can contact Caroline on 01480 459866 or through www.inflection.biz.



“Easy reading is damn hard writing”

(Nathaniel Hawthorne, novelist 1804-1864)

So, what's different about writing for web?

There are two main things to consider when writing the content for any website. Firstly, when any of us accesses a website, we read the information in a very different way from when we are reading printed material such as a brochure. Our eyes dart about the page, we have a short attention span and we expect to find the information we need very quickly. If we don't, our finger is hovering on the mouse, ready to click away in an instant.

Websites must be easy to use. Paragraphs need to be short and punchy (there's no room for wordy essays here!), and should be broken up by clear headings, which act as signposts to help navigation. The worst thing you can do is regurgitate entire brochure copy to fill space. I guarantee no-one will make it to the end of the page!

How can you write to help Search Engine Optimisation?

On a website, you are also writing for a secondary (but very important) audience – the search engine 'spiders'. Being highly ranked in search engine results is something of a holy grail – everyone wants to achieve it. But there's no magic formula and the search engines continually change the algorithms they use to rank sites, specifically to stop companies from exploiting the system.

So the only way to win a high ranking is by ensuring the quality of your copy – so that your key words and phrases are well represented and in the right places, but ensuring that your site still makes sense and is still attractive and usable.

Understand what your key words are and make sure you use them. The spiders give extra weight to words used in headings and links – especially if they are repeated in the body copy. And of course the most important sentence of all is the very first one on the Home Page – because this is the one sentence that will appear in the Search Engine results list. Make sure it tells the reader everything they need to know to make them click on it!

What are the common pitfalls?

Many companies decide that they need a website, get it built and then simply use their brochure copy to fill the empty pages. Or, if they don't have a brochure, they delay making the site live for months because they don't have the time or the skills to put together suitable content.

And yet, companies often have a wealth of material at hand, but don't realise that they could be using it to good effect. Archived press releases for example often contain many of the key words that will help get a site up in the search engine rankings. They work best when published as individual pages, and not simply appended as pdfs for download. A pdf makes the information one more click away for a customer, and the spiders can't get inside them!

Similarly, many companies produce regular newsletters for their customers. These are a goldmine of content and yet I have often seen them just sitting there as pdf files, unclicked and unread. How much better to make each article into a page of its own, with those all-important headings, links and key words – it will work so much harder this way. This approach also means liberation from the dreaded 'newsletter deadline' – articles can appear as and when they are topical, not just at the beginning of a quarter – much easier for everyone involved.

Keep it alive.

Unlike a brochure, a website is a living thing. Even if it is there to act as a shop window rather than a e-commerce site, it needs to change regularly or no-one will want to come back to it a second time. New content is like oxygen – it keeps the site alive. If you don't produce regular press releases, why not consider a news feed or a blog. After all, you are an expert at what you do, so why not share a few insights with your readers!

“Smile while you're writing”. Websites can use a much more informal tone of voice than you use in your corporate literature. It still needs to be professional but “We are...” works so much better than “The company is...”. So write as though you are having a conversation - in a smiling way of course!