

Writing for Web 2.0

Massaging the Message for the Medium

By John Bidwell

The proliferation of cool new communications devices and formats can make it easy to forget the fact that for most businesses, “the medium is meaningless—the message is the thing.” (*NewMedia* magazine, May 1995.) The medium may be the message for Apple, but they are the exception, and you are not Apple. It’s important only insofar as you had better use the same one your audience does.

In the end, it is your message that will—or will not—resonate. Think about the Wizard of Oz. It’s remembered less for the wizard’s giant smoking, floating head, than for his words: “A heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others” has been repeated at more than one misty-eyed graduation.

Ten Overall Good Practices

Regardless of the medium—Web 2.0 or printed—certain practices are wise to follow. Let’s start with these.

1. **Know your audience and appeal to them.** Do whatever you can to get into their heads. What media do they follow? Do they have a preferred learning style? Find out what questions they have. Answer those questions. Sadly, most companies talk about themselves much more than they address customers’ needs. The bottom line: the better you understand what your audience wants to know, the more successful you will be.
2. **Provide readers with multiple points of entry.** The term “points of entry” is one I learned in the magazine industry, but it can be broadly applied. It means headlines, photos, captions, sidebars, pull quotes, or charts that draw readers into the piece. Different people access information in different ways, so you want to supply a variety of entry points.
3. **Keep it simple.** This is the crux of what communications specialists must do: make communications and marketing simpler. Avoid corporate and academic jargon. Use one strong photo instead of five lackluster ones. Use simple, bold headlines. Keep your copy as short as possible. Prioritize, and figure out the hierarchy of what you want to convey. This is especially important with introductions. Don’t overwhelm readers with information. Once they are interested in you—once they sit down at your table—you will have plenty of time to wow them with *all* you can do.
4. **Mix story telling and data.** Numbers and statistics can be powerful, but people are more likely to recall stories and metaphors. Our brains prefer them. I don’t believe that numbers “speak for themselves.” We speak for them, and how we do it makes all the difference. Don’t just cite increased sales numbers—talk about the impact they’ve had on somebody.
5. **Be unique.** It can take a lot of time and refining, but you will only benefit from defining what makes you different from the competition. However, be sure that difference is relevant to your company and your customers. People will not come back for uniqueness alone. For example, saying that you are simply “the best” at whatever is not good enough, even if it is true. “Best” is an unimaginative brag that makes

your breath stink of your own Kool-Aid. Instead, use testimonials that speak to specific points. As author Jeffrey Gitomer says in his *Little Red Book of Selling*, “When you say it it’s bragging. When someone else says it it’s proof.”

6. **Create a writing style.** This can also take time, since you don’t want it to be affected. Make sure it fits your brand. A cutting-edge snowboard company can get away with an attitude that a community hospital can’t.
7. **Be consistent**—with your style (although it’s okay to evolve over time), with how often you update your content, and with your messaging points.
8. **Be transparent.** Reveal everything, or somebody else will. Be open about your motives, clear about your affiliates and sponsors. Never try to pull a fast one on readers. Trust is everything. It takes time to earn it, and you can quickly blow it. For example, you don’t want somebody else calling you out on a behind-the-scenes endorsement. Reveal everything, or somebody else will. Readers are highly skeptical of marketing, and for good reason. Don’t feed that skepticism.
9. **Edit and proofread.**
10. **Edit and proofread again.** Just to be sure, proofread it one last time.

Web Sites

1. **SEO vs. readability:** Of necessity, more attention is being paid to search engine optimization (SEO). Search engines are increasingly sophisticated, and SEO can make an impressive difference in your online search ranking. So consider incorporating into your copy the words and phrases often used to find you—as long as they don’t make your copy unreadable. This happened with one of our clients. The Web consultants provided a richly detailed SEO report with word and phrase

recommendations that made for terrible reading. In the end, we decided to drop the SEO recommendations on the home page. We kept the copy short and sweet, and relied on other SEO tactics such as using more key words on secondary pages, and incorporating location information on all the page footers.

2. **Online storytelling is not linear.** Browsers may land on any given page of your site, so never count on your content being read in any sort of order, as if it were a book. Which gets us to...
3. **Write for the skimmer.** Readers might delve right into your content, but more likely they want to browse first. Make it easy for them. Use subheads. Give the gist of a paragraph in the opening sentence. Your readers are in the driver’s seat. Make it easy for them to drive. Most important, remember that less is more: fewer words, short sentences, less copy.
4. **Fresh is best.** If readers see dated information, they will not return.

E-newsletters

Refer to our white paper “E-Newsworthy: putting together great content for your e-newsletter.”

Forums and Blogs

Forums and blogs are community-building by nature. They are tools by which customers can interact with your organization, or each other. An online forum is a discussion site, sometimes compared to an electronic bulletin board. A blog (a contraction from weblog) is a site with a series of entries (commentary, news, diary) that allow for reader comments. An active forum or blog shows that you are vibrant in your field. Before launching one, post on similar ones to help find your voice and make valuable connections. There is nothing wrong with hiring someone, especially a forum moderator, but shop around to find the right voice. Note this difference between a blog and

forum: a blog can have a slant; a forum needs to be neutral and verifiable.

Wikis

Wikis (wiki is the Hawaiian word for “fast”) are collaborative Web sites, mostly used to build and share knowledge. Wikipedia is the best known. Despite most professors’ disdain for layperson-generated wikis, they are still a first-stop for your customers. If you can, get your company, product, or service listed. But beware of promotional copy. Wikipedia doesn’t allow it, and entries are best made from a third party. Avoid personal opinion and analysis. Just present the facts. Like a forum, the information must be neutral and verifiable.

YouTube

YouTube can be a great way to show off your expertise, your service, your campus, whatever. Professional videos are always best, but less refined, homemade videos are fine as long as you keep them short and interesting. I mean interesting to your audience, and not just to you. A clear, specific written description for your video will help people find it. And think in terms of series. We did a string of humorous clips for Surly Brewing that have piggybacked off the beer’s viral marketing.

White Papers and E-books

White papers and their beefed-up cousin, e-books, are great marketing tools, provided they are not sales pieces. They should be helpful. They can prove to the world that you know your stuff. We’ve created white papers for years, and prospects and clients constantly use them. They’re

never about Bidwell ID, but rather focus, like this one, on topics that clients propose. If you’re not expert on the topic, invite a guest writer.

An e-book is longer than a white paper, delving more deeply into a topic. Here are some tips specific to e-books. Consider a horizontal format. It is a more horizontal world thanks to wide screen movies and PowerPoint presentation. Your e-book may well be presented on-screen. Use links, especially to landing pages. Lastly, follow David Meerman Scott at weblinknow.com for more about e-books.

Promotion

You have to promote your content. You have to. Promise me you will. Otherwise, you are wasting a lot of time. Cross-link your Web site, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and e-books. Create relevant external links, providing some background and context. People are not cats. They are not going to check out links out of curiosity. They are too busy. They want to know they will find answers. Promote offline as well: in newsletters and ads.

Avoid anything that gets between your content and your reader, which means think carefully about sign-ups. If you choose to use them, make them extremely short and easy. Sign-ups make marketers salivate since they can provide information about readers, but I prefer making content free, or at least enough to interest and entice readers. I believe it is worth sacrificing some data to help spread your gospel.

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