

Beat the Blank Page BLUES!

3 beginning outlines for every kind of copy you'll ever write

- Write better copy *faster* ...
- Ensure that every essential element is in place ...
- And get bigger winners, **MORE OFTEN!**

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Three beginning outlines for every kind of copy you'll ever write

1. Short Copy Outline

(TV and radio spots, post cards
and very small print ads):

- Grab 'em by the eyeballs with a powerful benefit-based, emotionally-driven headline.
- Expand upon on the headline with a brief paragraph that drives your lead benefit home in a powerful, emotionally charged way.
- Add a credibility element – a statistic, expert endorsement or customer testimonial that proves what you say is true.
- Repeat the headline benefit, justify your price and ask for the sale.
- Tell the prospect exactly what he/she must do to accept this amazing offer (usually in short copy, call a toll-free number).

For TV and radio viewers and listeners who may not have a pen and paper handy, it's essential to repeat the toll-free number as many times as possible.

Plus, I'm a firm believer in keeping the number on the screen for the entire duration of the ad.

Medium Copy Outline

(Mostly for sales letter up to 12 pages
and Web landing pages):

- Grab 'em by the eyeballs: Seize your prospect's attention with a powerful benefit-based, emotionally-driven headline.
- Support your headline: In a short deck, expand upon your headline with a deck structure that drives it home in a powerful way.
- Bribe him to read this: Tell him what you're going to tell him. Trumpet any value-added information that you're going to give him free, in the copy.
- Get his juices flowing: Open with a powerful, emotionally-driven, benefit-based paragraph or two.
- Make him believe it: Add credibility elements – a series of paragraphs presenting statistics, expert endorsements, track record info (if it's an investment product) or customer testimonials that prove you really can deliver the benefit.
- Get back on track: You've demonstrated what you've done for others and what others say. Now, it's time to get back to talking about your prospect's favorite person: HIM.

Repeat your lead benefit and transition into your secondary product benefits, each written in a way that connects with the prospect's most compelling resident emotions – his dominant emotions.

If you have room, make each benefit a subhead, followed by two or three paragraphs of copy (or more) that dimensionalize it.

If you're cramped for space, turn each benefit into a bullet.

If you're somewhere in-between, lead with your strongest benefits as subheads with explanatory copy and bulletize the rest.

- Make the offer: Repeat your headlined benefit, allude to the others, present your offer, and justify your price.
- Relieve risk: Add your guarantee and point out that, since the prospect's delight is a sure thing, he has nothing to lose.
- Sum up: Repeat your main headline benefit, the strongest secondary benefits, justify your price again, remind them of the guarantee and ask for the sale.
- Show your prospect how easy accepting this offer is: "Just complete and return the enclosed order form or dial TOLL FREE 1-800-000-0000."
- Close with a final reminder of your main headline benefit, what a steal it is, a mention of the guar-

antee. I also like to create word pictures of how the prospect will feel with the benefits my product offers – and without. There are consequences to declining this offer!

- Sweeten the pot: I like using my P.S. to catch my prospect off-guard. Just when he/she thinks "This is a pretty good deal," I like to add just one more thing to push this from a "good deal" into an absolute, deadlock-cinch no-brainer.

The best way to do this is by adding something to the offer: Usually an extra discount or a free gift for responding right away.

- Add an urgency element: In a P.P.S., I like to give a final reason why the prospect should respond right now. This "reason" could be an extra bonus, or merely a rationale – like "The Fed's going to raise interest rates on May 15 – whether you're ready to profit or not! Please – let me hear from you NOW!"

Long Copy Outline

(Follow the medium-copy outline, only do more – with ...):

- Biography Sidebars: Early in my packages, I like to introduce my client and trumpet his/her qualifications, personality, philosophy, experiences and so on.

I use these sidebars to position the creator of my product as being set apart from – and therefore better than – his peers and competitors.

I also make the point of writing these sidebars in a way that positions the "creator" as someone who is passionately on the reader's side. His advocate, defender and champion.

- Benefit Sidebars: These are like ads within my ad. Each of these draws out one of the most compelling benefits that the product offers.

More importantly, each is presented in a way that connects with how I believe my prospect feels about

1. Avoiding or ending a problem,

2. Easing a fear, or
3. Fulfilling a strong, long-held personal desire.

- Credibility sidebars: These can take many forms. In a way, my "Biography sidebars" establish credibility, and so do some below. But these sidebars are a bit more of a rifle shot.

They could include

1. A "Curriculum Vitae:" A simulated oversized Rolodex card or other device displaying the high points of my client's education, experience, awards & honors ...
2. Customer testimonials: I generally edit these for length and grammar – being careful not to change their meaning in any way – then create a headline for each testimonial, summing up its message.
3. Expert testimonials: Praise from peers and other experts whose names are known – or

whose titles are impressive and/or connect them with respected institutions.

4. Media mentions: At the very least, these demonstrate that your client is important enough to have been noticed by a major media outlet. At best, they'll say something about your client that reads like an endorsement.

IMPORTANT: Industry and trade magazines, medical journals, etc. with obscure titles are fine for this. But using mentions in local newspapers and local TV and radio stations just give the impression that the client isn't important enough to be noticed by big-name outlets.

5. Third-party endorsements: Whether tacit or explicit, an endorsement of the client by an independent third party of any kind – say an industry or consumer watchdog group – can be pure gold.

- Process sidebars: A sidebar that illustrates the process by which a particular problem arises and how the product solves it can work like a charm.

A few years ago, for example, I wrote a promotion for a nutritional product that is designed to dissolve plaque in arteries and flush it away. It's a fairly complex, highly technical process that I felt might leave my readers cold.

So, recalling that the famous Daniel Starch/McGraw Hill readership study determined story board ads are #1 in seizing readers' attention ...

... I had my designer create a simple, 4-step story board using illustrations that looked like they'd been torn them out of the pages of Gray's Anatomy – showing:

1. A baby's artery, clean as a whistle ...
2. The average 20-year-old's artery, already 20% blocked with ugly yellow plaque ...
3. The average senior's artery, now as much as 80% blocked, and ...
4. That same senior's artery as the product went through, breaking up the clog, flushing it away, and leaving it as clean as the baby's!

Suddenly this complex, highly technical process

– which was described in detail in the running text
– was simple, visual and as clear as day.

In fact, I'm taking the product myself now, and every single time I do, the pictures in that sidebar spring into my mind!

- Proof element sidebars: These kinds of sidebars are generally used in one of four ways ...

1. To document the enormity of the problem: In the package above, for example, I used a proof element sidebar for a table showing the carnage that arterial plaque causes each year in the U.S. – the number of strokes and heart attacks and deaths.

Then, I made it personal by showing the reader his/her risk at age 40 ... 50 ... 60 ... and beyond.

2. To demonstrate the wisdom of the client's approach: Most of the time when you're selling a product or service, you are, in fact, asking people to commit to doing something differently. That involves change. And most people resist change.

So oftentimes, a sidebar that directly addresses this resistance can help you overcome it – by presenting this new approach as the only safe, prudent, intelligent one, and the way people should have been doing it all along.

3. To prove that the approach does, indeed work: Other sidebars are doing this for you – particularly your testimonial sidebars. But why not take one of your best testimonials, call the customer and have him/her tell his story in greater detail?

Introduce the reader to John and Mary ... show them all the ways they're just like the reader ... talk about how they were skeptical, too ... show them how they thought, "What the heck ..." and gave the product a fair try ... show how all the ways it enhanced their lives ... how they feel about that ... and how they'd like to kick themselves for not trying it sooner. Then, I put their actual testimonial up in lights in a sidebar within the sidebar.

Powerful stuff!

4. To demonstrate the kinds of information they're going to get – either in a product or premium. I don't know who the first genius was who simply reprinted a book's table of contents on a full page of his sales copy.

But I do remember seeing this device for the first time and thinking, “Brilliant! Not only did it save him from having to write one full page of copy, it demonstrated the breadth of information in the book – and that the other things he was promising were really in it!”

There are other ways to do this, of course. As you probably know, Boardroom is a major publisher of self-help books and newsletters. When I'm writing for Boardroom, I try to make sure each spread has these three devices:

- i. LOTS of fascinations, of course ...
- ii. At least one testimonial, and ...
- iii. Proof elements – sometimes a section of text, taken verbatim from the book to demonstrate how valuable its advice is, as well as how much fun it is to read.

This is often called “value-added” material, as it gives the prospects value even before he makes a purchase. They also keep prospects reading. And, they also are great ways to grab his attention and compel him to begin reading in the first place!

- Value sidebars: You're making the argument that this is a screaming bargain in the text, so why not make sure the flippers and scanners get the message too?

Value sidebars can be as simple as showing everything the prospect gets when ordering (usually placed on or near the order form).

Or, they can be comparisons, showing how little the product costs relative to the benefits it provides.

I'm fascinated by consumers who complain about gasoline costing \$2.50, \$3.00 or more a gallon – while they're on their way to pay nearly five bucks for a 12- ounce cup of Starbuck's coffee.

That's \$25 a gallon: TEN TIMES more than the “high” gas prices they're complaining about!

(Anyone who still thinks we make our purchase decisions based on intellect and reason, please raise your hand and explain that one to me?!))

And so, I have sometimes compared what my product costs per day to the cost of a cup of Starbucks. After all – if you buy just one cup of Starbucks' a day, that's \$1,825 a year – this product is only \$99, and it does a heck of a lot more for you!

But you can do it with just about anything familiar: A gallon of milk ... a carton of eggs ... a pack of smokes ... or even a gallon or a tankful of gas.

- Risk relief sidebars: I call them this because I've heard others do so and it sounds impressive. Basically, this is just your guarantee.

Think about why you're including a guarantee:

1. It removes a key objection in your prospect's mind.
2. It gives you an opportunity to repeat the product's USP and key benefits.
3. It demonstrates that you are absolutely, positively, 100% confident that your product will produce the promised results.
4. It allows you to create a bond with the new customer by making him a kind of “wedding vow” or “solemn promise.”

Guarantees are necessary. They can also be pretty technical sounding and boring. “Why not make them not boring?” is how I look at it.

So I write my guarantees as carefully as I write my sales copy.

Sometimes I begin by pointing out all the other folks who are making money off the prospect whether they help him or not. His broker. His banker. His doctor, etc. And I point out that I think that's wrong and that if I can't do what I promise, I just wouldn't feel right keeping his money.

I try to always tell the prospect all the things I promise to do for him, as specifically as possible: I'm going to make him \$5,000 richer this year, 20

pounds lighter this month, or six inches taller in a week or less.

Finally, I tell him that he will be thrilled with my product, otherwise, everything he gets from me will cost him nothing (or whatever direction the client's guarantee takes from there.

ALSO: Think about what a guarantee really is. Isn't it a contract between your client and the prospect? A solemn, sacred vow that your client is making to the prospect? Sure it is! So why not present it as a separate, personal letter from your client to the prospect? In a component packages, maybe a lift-note. In magalogs or tabloids, a mocked-up letter, laying on a desktop.

Getting a little bit creative with your guarantees can go a long, long way towards lifting response.

Pull-quote sidebars: The main reason for using pull-quotes is simply to pull the scanner down into the body text. I make them do double-duty – by including an animated picture of my client talking to them.

People like to see the folks who are talking to them. Ever encounter a shifty-eyed salesman? Someone who could never quite bring himself to look you straight in the eye?

Can you imagine how you'd feel if your doctor, investment advisor or any other expert you're talking to actually hid his face behind a newspaper during the entire conversation?

That's why I add a photo of my client with pull-quotes – and that there's at least one such pic on every spread.

- Page-turner sidebars: People will decline your offer for lots of reasons – most of which, you have no control over.

One thing is sure, though: 100% of the people who fail to order from you stopped turning pages at some point. They were in the middle of a spread, and just decided not to see what came next.

Page-turning devices address this sad fact of life. Somewhere – usually at the bottom right-hand corner – of every right-hand page, you can insert

a mini “Table of Contents” – a small box that trumpets all the glorious things still to come: A preview of coming attractions of sorts.

This works especially well in large tabloids for consumer books, where you're giving away and/or teasing the some of the best stuff in the product.

- Contact devices: The way I figure it, some percentage of my prospects will have heard all they need to make a purchase decision on every page of the copy. Some will be sold right on page 2. Some on page 7 ... some on page 15 ... some on page 19, and so on.

Demanding that they read every page or turn to page 23 to get their ordering information is just silly. So, I always include a footer at the bottom of every spread that gives them the toll-free number to call.

These are just some of the added devices that I find helpful in longer copy. There are others. I like to include an “ad” for each free gift the prospect is being offered and that makes that gift seem like it's worth many times what he's being asked to pay for the whole shebang.

I also like to get creative with my credibility devices. Once, I had my client's track record notarized. That is, his signature at the bottom was notarized. Credibility out the wazzoo!

The bottom line, though, is that sidebars should only be used to help you make one of the eight sales I listed earlier, and of course the final sale: To help the prospect actually place his order. Otherwise, they're just wasting space.

Yours for Bigger Winners, More Often,



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