

OPEN TO PERSUASION

Frequently asked questions

Imagine you've got just 20 minutes to answer ten arts marketers' questions about copywriting. Then imagine doing that three or four times in a row. I enjoyed the round table sessions at both the AMA conference in July and last month's Scottish Arts Marketers Forum but they aren't easy.

Some questions came up again and again, clearly of concern to lots of us. Here's what we thought around those round tables:

I'm writing boring copy – how can I get out of the rut?

Pin up a picture of someone from your target group, torn from a magazine. Talk to them. Persuade them to get involved in your event. Good copy is conversational so write down exactly what you say. Many arts marketers talk good copy but the moment they pick up a pen turn phrases like 'Call us on 01223 578078 to get your tickets' into 'Tickets are available from the box office on 01223 578078'.

Be clear about who you are writing for. Bland writing comes from trying to persuade lots of different target groups with one piece of copy.

When you've finished writing, read your copy out loud. Does it sound convincing? You can add energy to your writing by using the rhythms of speech.

How can I avoid patronising our attenders and visitors?

Atenders aren't worried about being patronised. This is a frequent arts attender talking about copy from well-known dance and drama companies:

"Written for clever people by other clever people who are equally in the know. They're not written for us. It's shorthand. A lot of it's shorthand. "Exciting new production by ..." – I've never heard

of him. If you'd been really into ballet maybe, but it's not a hook to pick up Mr and Mrs Average.'

They want to know what the event is about and what it's like. This means giving them information. And unfortunately, they don't believe hype. Here's another attender:

'It's taken me years to learn to read through all the write-ups. All these words: "stupefying", "electric", "dramatic", "electric", "dramatic", "never to be forgotten" and I used to believe it. All this hype, it's much more effective to tell the reader what makes your event 'hilarious' or 'stunning' and why people said it was 'highly acclaimed'. Words that we take for granted can baffle audiences, as this attender explains:

"Vibrant new work". What does new mean? They say it several times.'

How can I write copy that will appeal to young people?

Not easy. As Jonathan Goodacre from Eastern Touring Agency says:

'its gr8 2b in with kidz but ur likely 2 look like an idjut :- (if u don't know wot ur doing!)

The best advice is to be yourself. Some organisations get young people to do it for them. Warwick Arts Centre sends ambassadors to see shows before they get to the venue and they write the copy for publicity material aimed at their fellow students.

My artistic director/curator writes incomprehensible copy and insists I use it. How can I explain how inappropriate it is?

Try collecting some information about the reading skills of the average attender. Your curator is much more likely to be convinced by facts than

opinions. Some marketers have got results from inviting their creative team to meet audience members for a discussion about publicity material. Of course, they had to be briefed thoroughly in advance so that they listened rather than talked! Or you could test two versions of the copy in a customer circle or two – but be tactful when you present the results.

How can I persuade touring companies to send me copy that's right for our audiences?

Company marketers often don't realise that their copy doesn't work. Tell them (nicely). And then ask them for a telephone call with someone involved in creating the event and ask lots of questions. This is not just a problem for arts organisations, though. Floyd Kernske, copywriting guru, says:

"Dual overhead cams" is a feature. "Goes really fast" is a benefit. Figuring out the benefit of a feature is not difficult. When it's not immediately apparent, just ask the client. "Why did you put dual overhead cams in this car?" The client will probably hem and haw about compression ratios and other stuff that has nothing to do with me, but just keep asking why until you get to something that addresses [your customer's] primary interest. Eventually the client will tell you: "it goes really fast."¹ Now you have to turn the benefit into copy that sparkles. Easy! ■

1. <http://www.thirdlion.com/benefits.html> consulted 17/11/02

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