

ATRENET TECHNOTE: WRITING FOR B2B WEBSITES

Writing for B2B websites is a unique challenge. Every website we work with presents its own issues, but one common factor is that website visitors are demanding and in a hurry. The key to writing successful web copy comes from understanding that people don't read websites like they do company collateral, books, newspapers and other traditional print media. B2B website usability testing ^[1] has found that the average success rate across B2B websites was only 58%. Why?

Part of the challenge is that corporate websites need to serve so many different audiences; prospects at different stages of the sales cycle; customers looking for support; other constituencies such as re sellers, press contacts, and investors. B2B websites often offer only superficial information or make finding critical information too difficult. Web copy must be intuitive, engaging and well organized to allow visitors to quickly identify the content that is tailored for them.

AVOID COMMON PITFALLS

Anyone writing for the web should strive to avoid creating skepticism, confusion or impatience. Incomplete product information or disordered comparison charts build skepticism in customers.

B2B customers detest marketing fluff or overly hyped language. Empty terms such as "cutting-edge", "rigorous", and "pushing the envelope" will create distrust. Providing too much content in long strings of paragraphs creates impatience in visitors who are searching for very specific words or phrases. Eye tracking studies show that when viewing a webpage our eyes skip over prose almost entirely searching for keywords within the webpage.

Visitors aren't looking for long blocks of copy; they want it in bite-size chunks. Usability studies have shown that very few users (16 percent) actually read the text on a web page word-for-word. Rather, the vast majority of users scanned

the content looking for keywords or phrases that either contained the information they wanted or possessed some relevance to their interest.

Poorly organized copy creates impatience and confusion in visitors and defeats the purpose of the website. Knowing how to organize content and write effective bullets is helpful to developing successful web copy.

WRITING FOR SCANABILITY

Jakob Nielsen, renowned usability expert, has outlined the following tips for effective web writing.

- ✓ **Be succinct:** Write less than half of the text you would have used for a print publication.
- ✓ **Write for scanability:** In tests ^[1] websites containing material that was scannable scored 47 percent higher than their competitors in usability ratings.
- ✓ **Organize data into chunks:** Use Hypertext to split-up long information into multiple pages.

Remember that web users typically do not read web pages—they scan them. The web is not a linear experience. The content should not represent a section of the site as being a brochure that should be read front to back. Rather, web messaging should be succinct and relevant, and then allow the user to build upon that content using the tools provided.

WRITING EFFECTIVE BULLETS AND TITLES

Because the eye scans a page looking for relevant keywords, it is critically important to write effective titles and bullet lists. Titles and bullet points are the most-read copy on the page. They do the heavy lifting as our eyes avoid paragraphs and prose when possible. The key to writing successful titles is using keywords that describe the content the visitor is looking for in their language. Having titles that match the reader’s vocabulary has two main advantages; readers will understand it and the content is more likely to appear in search engine results.

The key to writing effective bullet points is putting the most important information where the visitor’s eyes are most likely to see it.

How to organize your list ^[2]

It is common to organize a bullet list by order of importance; i.e. first being most important and the last item being the least important, but that isn’t how the eye scans the list. Eye tracking studies show that the eye typically sees the first two bullets and the last, before leaving to view something else on the page. Middle bullets are typically ignored. So you should organize your list like this:

- » Most important item
- » Second most important item
- » Less important item
- » Less important item
- » Third most important item

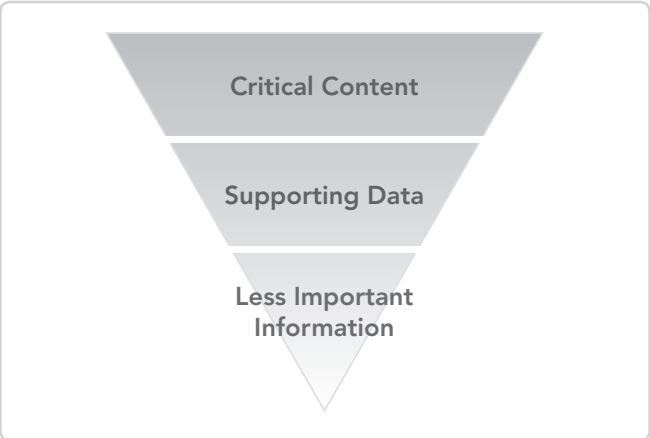
Highlight Keywords ^[2]

Remember website visitors are reading for keywords or fragments of phrases to help them quickly identify if this page contains useful content. Don’t write a bullet point as if they read full sentences. Also, don’t use the same word or phrases to start a bullet item. Don’t even use words that start with the same letter unless you want the content to be ignored. Below is a list showing which words are typically read on a bullet list (“Word” identifies read content; “Blah” identifies ignored content)

- » Word word word word blah
- » Word word word blah blah
- » Word blah blah blah blah
- » Blah blah blah blah blah
- » Word Word blah blah blah

Practically speaking, it may make sense to write a bullet list as you would normally, and then re-organize it until it features the most important keywords where they make the most sense.

THE INVERTED PYRAMID



The “Inverted Pyramid” is a technique commonly employed by journalists. Newspaper articles are designed to present as much information as possible in the headline and first couple of paragraphs because many readers will simply scan the article and then move on to the next.

Therefore, articles will typically start with the conclusion, followed by supporting information, and end with the details. This technique is called an “Inverted Pyramid” because it essentially flips the standard written narrative on its ear. It allows the reader to stop at any time and still understand the most important parts of the article.

For websites, the Inverted Pyramid archetype means that high-level messages and summaries are positioned and formatted for prominent visibility, with more complex content available deeper on the page or within supplementary pages and resources. This strategy, if implemented consistently, can significantly enhance the usability of your company’s website, while making your company’s key messages more effective and compelling.

relatable summaries that directly address their concerns and needs. Web copy should position value and benefit statements at a high-level on relevant pages, supported by validation such as analyst commentary and success stories.

CONTENT FOR OFF-LINE READING

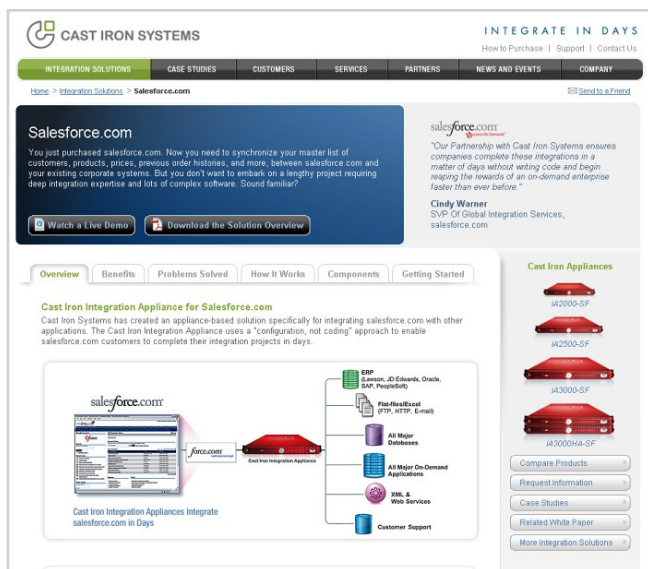
As advanced as display technology has become, reading text on a computer screen is a discomfoting experience when compared to the printed page. When reading an on-screen document, the user is forced to maintain a relatively fixed position. Though laptop computers and wireless devices have alleviated this problem to some degree, the fact remains that nothing has replaced simple hardcopy documents for sheer ease-of-use and readability.

An effective content strategy should incorporate provisions for printable documents. There are basically two options for providing the user with the capability to view documents offline:

PDF files

PDF documents can be viewed and printed on any platform that has the Acrobat reader plug-in. It is a portable format; the user can save the document or share it with others. The free Acrobat Reader has a very large installed user base (with more than 300 million copies of the software distributed worldwide, according to Adobe) and it is a format that is becoming ubiquitous on the web. To improve usability, PDF files should always be recognizable as such (through labeling and/or an associated PDF icon). This will allow users to choose whether to save or open the PDF, rather than forcing them into an abrupt transition from an HTML page into a PDF file. Your company may want to consider a streamlined template created for various document types:

- ✓ Product Literature
- ✓ Case Studies
- ✓ White Papers
- ✓ Comparison Charts
- ✓ Press Releases



This solution page represents an effective presentation and structuring of web content. Note the flow from introduction and calls-to-action to details (presented via tabs). Note also the use of a partner quote to reinforce the credibility of this solution. See this page at: <http://www.castiron.com/integration-solutions/sfdc/index.html>.

This technique is especially applicable when targeting a higher-level (manager or executive) audience. These users will typically spend much less time conducting research on a website, and will be interested in quick, succinct and instantly

Customers will appreciate the consistency and efficiency of these documents, and are more apt to download, print, and share with others. An additional advantage is that visitors may be willing to provide their contact information and Opt-in in exchange for this information.

Printable Pages

A print-friendly web page is generally an alternative version of the page with only minimal elements of the site “wrapper”, and a column width for the text that will fit horizontally on a single page when printed (setting the content to 100% of the user’s browser will effectively wrap the text to the appropriate width for printing). This function can typically be fulfilled through CSS markups which define the format of a printed page. A “Print this Page” button is not needed, but might serve to reinforce the visibility of this option.

CONCLUSION

A key to writing successful content that defeats the visitor’s pension for impatience, confusion and skepticism, is writing concise clear and well organized content that allows potential customers to quickly identify the benefits they seek and align them with your company’s product, services and price information. All too often visitors are bathed in marketing hype and bloated corporate speak. Remember that visitors don’t read websites the same way they read a book, newspaper or print collateral. They are at work and in a hurry to complete the current task before the next distraction impedes their progress. In-depth content that benefits from a long format presentation should be considered for inclusion in a PDF download or printable page to facilitate readability.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Hoa Loranger, Chris Nodder, and Jacob Nielsen, B2B Website Usability: Design for Converting Business users into Leads and Customers, www.nngroup.com
2. Anne Holland, Marketing Sherpa, How to Improve Bullet Point Copywriting, www.marketingsherpa.com

Find out how AtrE.NET can apply our design experience and insight to your Web project.
Contact: Tushar AtrE, office: 831.464.0120 | mobile: 831.419.9050 | tushar@atre.net