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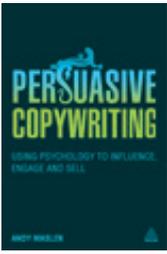


Writing to persuade

Persuasive Copywriting: Using Psychology to Influence, Engage and Sell

By Andy Maslen

Kogan Page (2015), paperback, 256 pages, ISBN 978-0749473990. Reviewed by [Andrew Peck MISTC](#).



“A good book for anyone wanting to get into copywriting or looking for a self-teach book.”

I enjoy reading books about different styles of writing, and Andy Maslen’s *Persuasive Copywriting* appealed to my inner manipulator. It’s a well-presented and well-written book (although I found the tables listing emotions quite dry) that at the 250 pages mark filled a handful of long distance train journeys quite comfortably.

One of the things that makes this book worth a read is the definition the author gives for ‘copywriting’. He says, “*Copywriting is the commercial activity of creating, maintaining and deepening profitable relationships using the written word*”; now that applies to me twice-over. Firstly, because we secure our own clients, I’m actively producing marketing copy about technical communication, trying to persuade potential customers that they need a technical communicator and that they need us. Secondly, the material I produce on behalf of our clients is customer-facing... in fact I like it when the documentation is not viewed as a separate entity or as ‘just’ part of the final product (they’ve already bought it... no need to sell), but as part of the whole commercial offering made down the chain. The book therefore is doubly relevant to me (and any other small-firm/self-employed technical communicator).

The book is well-designed with clearly structured chapters and icons to let us know what kind of thing we’re encountering. There’s even a lizard on the cover that’s a reference to one of the psychological principles he bases his book on, but also works quite well as a metaphor for getting through the chinks in the walls people build around themselves. If you’re knowledgeable about NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) or have done a similar ‘trainer’ training course to me¹, you may be familiar with some of the

subject matter, but there was sufficient new information to hold my interest.

The book is divided into two parts: the first focuses on the importance of stimulating emotion when writing, and the second on making copy ‘pleasurable’ to encounter. It’s further divided into sections and subsections (which makes it ideal for reading even on short hops on public transport). Much of the material could comfortably fit into either part (for example chapter 4, which deals with the use of flattery in copywriting) and the divide is largely so that the author can introduce the principles he’s relying on in bite sized chunks.

The first part has chapters that focus on developing empathy, emotional persuasion and social media engagement. The second part has chapters on creating engaging sales pitches, finding your voice as a writer (this was by far my favourite chapter as it focused on simulating conversation with written examples). Another chapter I particularly enjoyed, entitled ‘The definitive way to judge when grammar matters in copywriting’ (the author divides writers into ‘poets’ and ‘killers’) may leave some readers a bit hot and bothered.

Every chapter has a ‘From theory to profit’ section where successful examples of the principles of the chapter are outlined, followed by some fairly well written content reviews that wouldn’t be out of place in a GCSE textbook. Exercises are included that are designed to get copywriters reflecting as they work (with questions like ‘write two lines of copy for your product from each of the six primary emotions’). This makes the book a good bet for anyone wanting to ‘get into copywriting’ or looking for a self-teach book for the newly hired marketing apprentice in your office.

A few things in the text irritated me. At one point the author states, “*Emotion drives action. Information drives analysis. We want our reader to act.*” My instinctive reaction was to see unguided action as at best a waste and at worst dangerous (depending

on the context that I’m writing for), so I don’t agree with the bombastic nature of his statement. However, I also feel that there are too many times when ‘technical documentation’ drives users to the type of analysis that can only happen in an REM state, so I feel a compromise may work best, where an informed reaction is generated (gamification, anybody?). When reading statements like that, it’s worth reminding myself that I’m not really his primary audience because some of the underpinning evidence makes quite a compelling case for change.

For every bombastic nugget that requires dissection, there is a real gem. Andy gives four facts about a reader that would make an excellent poster in any office:

- They are not idiots
- They are not under any compulsion to read (or finish reading) our output
- They have other things to do besides read
- They have other things to think about that are more important (to them) than our content.

From a copywriting perspective, this advice needs no further modification, but from a technical authoring viewpoint, it again points to a softening of some of our prelude. We tend to assume that people are reading our material because they want to do something (a task) and need to know how. Sometimes, though, we do need to persuade a little more: they may have found a quick way to ‘get through’ the four screens of details they need to complete, but if that isn’t giving the business the information it needs, we have to persuade them that taking a few extra minutes is worth the effort. We must provide the answer to the ‘why should I bother?’ question. **C**

Rating: ★★★★★☆

About the Author:

Andy Maslen This is Andy’s fifth book on the art and craft of copywriting. He runs a copywriting agency called Sunfish and the Copywriting Academy, delivering both classroom-based and online training.

¹ ‘How To Be A Brain Friendly Trainer’



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