INFORMATION HIGHWAYMAN

ACE COPYWRITER & ATTENTION-THIEF FOR HIRE

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How to increase your website's conversion rate—without rewriting your web content

…using secrets from the direct response industry
for presenting copy to maximize responses.
A special report from D Bnonn Tennant.

L ET ME GET ONE THING STRAIGHT UP FRONT: COPY IS WHAT SELLS. That's true in print, and it's equally true on the web. A completely unstyled site with strong copy will sell infinitely more than a beautifully styled site with none. And since the average website is between 90 and 95% text, one leading expert wisely observes that "web design is ninety-five percent typography."♠

So it may surprise you that this report is *not* about typography. The truth is, though, that although an expert in typography can certainly ensure your copy is presented *well*…he can't necessarily ensure it's presented *effectively*. And when I say "effectively", I mean "in the way most likely to get readers to open their wallets for you."

That's because *selling* doesn't come down to typography. There are many principles of presenting copy which have been learned through repeated testing in the direct response mail industry, but go against conventional wisdom for typography. Some

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♠ See http://informationarchitects.jp/the-web-is-all-about-typography-period/.

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of them have nothing to do with typography at all; yet most of them can be easily applied to the web—because it is also a direct response medium.

So the topic of this special report is *how to sell.* I'm assuming you already have good copy that's selling strongly, and that you're looking for ways to sell *more* with it. You can—by presenting it better.

In this report, I'll teach you some of the most important principles and best practices for presenting copy to be not merely *beautiful,* but *effective.* Effective at drawing your reader in; effective at keeping him engaged; effective at building a relationship with him; effective at evoking the right responses from him; and finally effective at converting him.

That does *begin* with typography—so our first rule is:

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1. Make your body copy as legible as possible

You can be quite flexible with how you set other parts of your text, but your body copy should *always* be as readable as possible. Making your selling content difficult to read is like mumbling to your customers. You might as well turn them away at the door. The following guidelines are critical here:–

A. Use an appropriate font

Whether you use a serif or a sans serif font is of negligible importance. That may come as a shock if you're old school—there are some pretty strong opinions on this question. But interaction researcher Alex Poole reviews the evidence and notes "study after study with findings of 'no difference'."[♠]

What *is* important is to choose a font which is designed for use on screen. A good rule of thumb is to look for a reasonable x-height: letters like *x* and *e* should not be overly "short" in comparison to tall letters like *l* and *b* if a font is to work well on the web. There are lots of excellent fonts available with licenses which allow you to

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[♠] See http://www.alexpoole.info/academic/literaturereview.html.

embed them into your website with the CSS `@font-face` rule. Font Squirrel♣ has become the go-to resource for these (TypeKit♥ provides a popular alternative to `@font-face`, however). That said, if you want to play it safe you can't go wrong with my old flame, Georgia.

Whatever you choose, be sure to test your font on all the platforms your readers may be using. Rendering *will* differ between them. For example, Justus Oldstyle, the font I use on www.informationhighwayman.com, looks better on Linux-based platforms than on Windows-based ones. After careful testing, I determined that it is still clear enough on Windows to warrant using it, because of the branding advantage it offers over Georgia. Be sure to know your audience and their preferences, and weigh your decisions carefully—you aren't presenting your copy for you.

B. Avoid font sizes smaller than 13 pixels

Ideally, body copy should be set at around 16 pixels in size—yes, the *default* size. There's a good reason this is the universal default: on typical screens, 16 px text is displayed at a similar size to printed 12 point text—the default for word processors. Why are these the defaults? Because they're the most legible sizes for the majority of people.

Do *not* make body copy smaller to accommodate it to an existing layout, or to imitate what others are doing for stylistic (as opposed to usability or accessibility) reasons.

Neither reduce your font size because of best practices for *print*. *S*tudies confirm repeatedly that, for print, type as small as 8 pt is the ideal compromise between legibility and cost—because larger type doesn't increase conversions enough to warrant the cost of the stock it's printed on. Not so on the web. You *will* pay if your readers find your copy too hard to read and click away before they convert; but you *won't* pay a thing for using more space on a page. On high-resolution screens, body copy set below 16 px is *extremely* difficult to read—even for people with 20/20 vision. This is especially so on increasingly popular HD laptop screens, which are small and have an unbelievably large number of pixels per inch. Full-HD laptops cram over

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♣ Find Font Squirrel online at www.fontsquirrel.com.

♥ Find TypeKit online at www.typekit.com.

two million pixels into screens measuring (on the diagonal) only 15.6″ or even 13″.

With mobile devices like netbooks and phones becoming ubiquitous for browsing the web, *any* text set below 13 px should be considered illegible—*period.* Even on a large, fairly low-resolution screen, the one person in ten with imperfect eyesight will probably be unable to read it; and for many others it will be all but illegible by default. Not all users know how to zoom, and *no* users *want* to zoom—so why deliberately throw away 10, 20, 30% or more of your prospective sales?

C. Maintain a vertical grid with a 130–150% leading (line height)

To be easy on the eye, text should be aligned to a consistent vertical grid—in much the same way that, to be easy on the ear, music should be aligned to a consistent beat. Your grid should set adjacent lines of text so that the distance between the bottom of one line and the bottom of the next is between 1.3 to 1.5 times the font size. This distance is usually called leading, but in css it's set with the `line-height` property.

You may pause to note with some irony that, having just recommended keeping the default font size, I am now recommending overriding the default line height. Why one default is sane and the other isn't I have no idea; but the fact is that the default single-spaced line height is too narrow. The eye has to work extra hard to differentiate the lines of text—and that's bad for legibility in body copy.

Generally speaking, I recommend setting both the line height and font size in pixel values rather than ems. Once upon a time, using px would break zooming in Internet Explorer. No longer. And while ems are no doubt purer typographically speaking, they're hell to work with when you're trying to set different font sizes on the grid. You have to keep figuring out how many fractions of an em you need to fill up the remaining space and get everything even. It's a pain in the proverbial.

D. Avoid unnecessary formatting

It's easy to get carried away with typographical flourishes in copy—but these can ultimately end badly. Keep the following guidelines in mind:–

Italics

Italics should be used only where emphasis is genuinely required, or where sensible in a pull-out or similar. This isn't an issue of legibility so much as of both correctness and aesthetics: italics aren't actually any harder to read than normal text, but they *are* distracting—they're meant to be. Overusing them makes the reader weary, so they lose their force. Doing so is also stylistically wrong—and don't think your readers won't pick up on that, because they will, even if only subconsciously. It's like a rough edge on an otherwise finely polished piece of furniture.

Underlining

Underlining should be avoided entirely, except on hyperlinks—because these are what it exclusively indicates on the web. Underlining any other text will confuse your readers, and make you seem incompetent. That leads to lost confidence, which in turn leads to lost sales.

Layouts & font styles

Centered and right-justified body text should be avoided, along with any other kind of unusual layout which makes the text hard to read. Colored type should be used very cautiously, if it all, as it may be mistaken for hyperlinks. And don't change fonts or font sizes for no reason. Decide on one font and one size to use for the body copy. You can use another font, and maybe three or four other sizes, for headlines, subheads, pull-quotes and the like—but don't overdo it. Above all, keep it consistent.

E. Use dark text on a white or very light background

Unless absolutely dictated otherwise by branding requirements, a pale background with dark type will be less of a strain to read than vice versa. In fact, according to Drayton Bird, reversed out text has been known to *halve* response.

There are times when light on dark *is* the better choice. For example, I deliberately chose white text on a dark blue background for www.digitalrecovery.co.nz in order to set it apart from the competition, while maintaining the *de facto* color scheme of

the information technology industry.♠ Note, however, that the body copy is relatively short.

For maximum legibility, I find a text color of #333 set against a white or slightly off-white background yields excellent results. Whatever you do, *do not* set text on top of a texture or pattern, and *do* be careful to check that your chosen colors are accessible to the nine percent of your readers who are color-blind or partially sighted. A good back-of-the-napkin test is to take a screenshot of your site and convert it to grayscale; however, there are many excellent and free online tools like www.checkmycolors.com and www.graybit.com which can help you.

F. Use a reasonable measure (line length)

This will look strange because virtually *all* documents (whether websites or not) break this rule—but your measure should be limited to 50–80 characters. The eye has trouble following a line of text that's more than about 75 characters long, and has even more difficulty tracking from the end of it to the beginning of the next. Conversely, lines with fewer than 50 characters don't give the eye time to settle.

A consistent measure is also better for reading comprehension, so full justification is (in theory) best. This is simply because the eye finds it harder to follow lines from one to the next if they have uneven lengths. However, justification on the web is a bit of a shot in the dark because reliable hyphenation systems are yet to be seen. You'll probably find justifying your copy leaves large "holes" in it. My recommendation is to test it and see what works for you.

G. Use a single column of text

As compared to popular two- or three-column layouts, single columns of text are far more legible because there's nothing to confuse or distract the eye. If your site layout and information architecture will accommodate it, set all text in a single column, with navigation elements above and/or below rather than floating at the sides of the page. If the site layout *won't* accommodate it, change the layout…at least for landing pages.

♠ For a more detailed explanation, see http://informationhighwayman.com/case-studies/digital-recovery/.

H. Use scannable features

For optimum legibility, there must be frequent (but not *too* frequent) places in the text for the eye to rest. This meshes well with scannability, since you also need frequent elements which will help your reader along. Headings and lists are ideal for this; images can also be very useful.

The most *overlooked* element, however, is probably the paragraph break. Keep your paragraphs short so your reader doesn't feel overwhelmed by large blocks of text. A two-thousand word chunk of copy will *seem* much shorter if broken into paragraphs of 40–120 words; even though it takes up less space without them.

Place headings or subheads at least often enough that there will always be one visible at common screen resolutions. This ensures, if you'll excuse my metaphor-mixing, that your reader is never left in a sea of text without a landmark. It's also a good idea to emphasize keywords with heavy font weights, and to further break up your body copy using lists to summarize features, benefits and salient items.

I. Avoid elements which will distract users

It should go without saying, yet so many websites break this rule in not only minor, but major and obnoxious ways. There should be absolutely nothing on the page which will break the reader's train of thought or divert him from getting through the copy and onto the call to action. Put another way, absolutely everything on the page should contribute to *moving the reader toward conversion*. Elements such as irrelevant graphics and outbound links are highly inadvisable. On the other hand, it's a great idea to include action shots, charts or other graphics which visually demonstrate exactly what is being described in the text (see section 4 below).

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2. Make your first fifty words count

Ogilvy & Mather have reported that readership drops sharply for the first 50 words of a piece—then levels off until at least 500 words. How sharply? Well, people decide whether or not to read your copy based on its headline. If the headline interests them, they'll scan the lede (the first few sentences of the copy) to see whether the

piece is what they're looking for. Usually, *no more than 20% of them* will read further.

So if you aren't making your headline and lede work *extremely* hard, you're throwing away up to 80% of your prospective sales.

Aside from the obvious step of having a great copywriter spend a lot of time developing a strong headline and lede, you can further increase the likelihood of getting a better than 20% readership by heeding the following guidelines:–

A. Don't position your headline too high

Headlines actually work best about one third the way down your page. They aren't as effective right at the top. This may not be an issue for you, as you may have mastheads and navigation to take up the top space on your page. However, on landing pages this can be an important consideration.

B. Be sure the headline is clearly visible as such

This almost goes without saying, but it's critical to make your headline stand out so that it's hard *not* to read. You can do this in many different ways, from the simple classic of double-sized, bolded text to different alignments, colors, fonts and so on.

My personal preference is to format headlines in small caps, or simple uppercase if small caps glyphs aren't available (don't fake them; it's ugly). This is because not only do I like the letterforms of capitals, and not only is it one of the few times that they're legible (long text set in caps is very hard to read)—but it's also one of the few times it's acceptable to shout at the reader to grab his attention.

I also generally prefer a strong color, like red or orange—or at least a *different* color which will make the headline stand out from the body text. This is one major advantage of the web: you aren't limited by black & white printing.

Other good rules to follow are: replace the word "and" with the most striking and beautiful ampersand glyph available (note how I do this in body copy as well, such as in the previous sentence); use plenty of negative ("white") space to help the headline stand out from other copy and elements; don't be afraid to push the font size

up; and *test everything* to see if it makes a difference for better or worse.

C. Use a drop-cap

A drop capital is where the initial letter of a paragraph extends down vertically over two or more lines. This is usually only applied to your lede, or possibly to each new section of text if you have a lot of it. It's been proven that using drop caps increases readership. Plus, it's pretty (the savvy reader may suspect a correlation there).

D. Make your lede stand out

Drawing readers in doesn't stop with a drop-cap. Setting your lede in a slightly larger font size, a different color; emphasizing its first line with small caps or bold; using some graphical effect...these can all help to get the reader into and through those first fifty words.

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3. Don't give your readers an opportunity to do nothing

Conventional wisdom is that webpages shouldn't be too long. Most websites are divided into several, if not dozens of individual pages. If you have a lot to say, it is tempting to break your copy up into several pages and link them with calls to action. Psychologically speaking, though, every time you do this you're forcing your reader to decide whether or not to take an action. And the more times he has a choice between taking an action and doing nothing, the more times he'll simply do nothing. Encouraging reader involvement doesn't extend to asking for clicks. Bob Bly has told me that when online marketing expert Yank Silver broke his long copy sales page into multiple linked pages, his conversion rate dropped by 40%.

It's also wise to call your reader to action more than once. Some readers will commit as soon as you've made your offer—so give them a big, eye-catching call to action to click on straight away, as well as one later for more reticent buyers. For very long copy, three calls to action on a page works best. For shorter copy, two is fine.

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<h2 align="center">4. Illustrate with graphics</h2>

Graphics are a powerful means of increasing reader response—provided they're used carefully. The following guidelines are especially important:–

A. Match your graphics to your copy

As a general rule, only use a graphic if it will be more effective at telling than the words it potentially replaces or displaces. Your words are what actually sell a reader; so a graphic should attract the reader's attention to your words and illustrate them. It shouldn't try to stand alone, and definitely shouldn't draw attention *away* from the copy (especially the headline).

Always use the same "tone" for graphics as you do your copy. Quirky or humorous graphics are tempting for their attention-getting qualities—but unless your copy is also quirky or humorous, they're entirely inappropriate and will only damage the copy's ability to sell. By all means evince a real personality, be interesting and persuasive—but don't try to joke with your readers about matters which involve them handing over their money.

B. People judge based on appearances

If you don't have high quality graphics, don't use anything. It's better to omit low quality images than to look cheap and inept. If you don't have custom-designed, high quality graphics, either get some made, or just skip using graphics altogether.

C. Use a hero shot

Especially when making a pitch or an offer, a page which includes a portrait at the top will always increase readership, establish greater trust, and produce more conversions than a page which omits one. This is simply because copy is about establishing a strong relationship between author and reader—and visual recognition is a key part of how people form relationships. In that vein, remember:–

- ➤ You can't go wrong with a picture of the author: the person making the offer (not the *writer*, of course, since you probably hired a professional copywriter to develop your content).
- ➤ For author shots, the photo should capture him at his best, and be clickable so the reader can see a larger version (no 50×50 pixel cheese-eating car-lot grins).
- ➤ Portraits must be captioned with the author's full name and credentials.
- ➤ Glamor shots of models in more dynamic situations can also work, depending on what you're selling, and the visual style you're using—*provided* their relationship to the copy is clear to the reader, and will help convince him to convert. However, models are normally better used for action shots (see below).
- ➤ In any event, models should ideally be looking toward the headline. This will draw your reader's eyes where you want them to go, because people naturally look where other people are looking. Avoid having models looking or facing *away* from your copy.

D. Visually demonstrate with charts & graphs

Features, benefits and value (especially in the form of figures) can often be powerfully represented by graphics—helping a reader to understand at a glance what you're saying in the copy. This is especially useful when explaining with words is complicated (when describing survey results, for example), or where graphics will simply be far more effective at making the point (eg, when describing changes over time).

E. Include an action shot

If you're selling a product, a high-quality photo of it is basically imperative. People hesitate to buy what they can't see; and the better they can see it, the more comfortable they feel plonking down cash. *Action* shots are preferable to "still life" ones, because they help your reader imagine himself using your product, and clear up any doubts he may have had about how it works. But a still life shot will do in a pinch.

Research indicates that one large image increases readership more than multiple smaller ones. However, the web again proffers an advantage over print here: I'd suggest an image carousel which allows you to display one high resolution image at a time—without sacrificing all those other great shots that will help close the sale.

F. Always use a caption

Be sure to caption any image with a strong selling message. It should not only describe the image itself, but also a major selling point: for example, a benefit, a summary of your offer, a sweetener or a guarantee. Bob Bly reports that a caption will be read 200% more than body copy—so be sure you make the most of it.

G. Use a signature

It may seem corny, but for any kind of sales piece which is written as one man (or woman) to another—and that is how any sales piece *should* be written—a scanned signature is known to increase conversions. This is for the same reason that a hero shot increases readership: it's a genuine, human element which helps to establish that trust you want with your reader. As always, ensure the signature is of high quality; resized and pixelated scans look bad. I keep my signature in a vector image format so that I can resize it to any resolution without a loss of quality.

H. Make your guarantee look official

When presenting your guarantee, "certificate" graphics can make a surprising difference. Ornate borders, copperplate fonts, gold, red or wax-look stamps, emblems, and of course signatures can be very effective at increasing the perceived credibility of a guarantee. Although readers know these elements are just for effect, the subconscious connection to quality and authenticity nonetheless evokes trust. Don't go overboard with this (your readers can tell when you're trying too hard)—but test incorporating motifs which make your guarantee look more official.

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5. Use a CSS typography reset

To simplify implementing the typographical aspect of my recommendations, it's sensible to use a CSS typography reset. I've included the skeleton of one below which you're welcome to copy and expand on. It applies a very basic grid, a reasonable font size and fallback, copy color, drop caps and lede prettification. It doesn't cover more complex elements like heading levels, blockquotes and the like—so it's by no means complete. It also doesn't perform a *full* reset on all HTML elements;

margins, padding, and obscure elements will remain at their defaults. For a proper reset of that nature, look to Eric Meyer♠ or Yahoo!♣

```
body{
    background:#fff; color:#333;
    font:normal normal normal 16px/24px "Georgia",serif;
            /* baseline grid is 24px */
    margin:0 auto;
    max-width:75ex; min-width:60ex;
}
h1{
    font-size:36px;
    font-weight:normal;
    line-height:48px;
            /* when setting text at larger sizes, the line height must
            be a multiple of 24px for the text to fall on the grid */
    text-align:center;
}
h1+p{ font-size:18px; line-height:24px; }
h1+p:first-letter{ float:left; font-size:120px; line-height:24px; }
h1+p:first-line{ font-variant:small-caps; letter-spacing:1px; }
h1, p{ margin:0 auto 24px auto; }
```

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6. TEST EVERYTHING

The final rule is very simple: test everything. For example, if you're implementing the guidelines in this document, test them. Remember—they're only guidelines. How they work depends on many things, and your mileage may vary. Sometimes, despite all reasons to the contrary, something will work when it shouldn't, or not work when it should. So test. With Google Website Optimizer,♥ running A/B split tests is free, and easier than it should be—so you have no excuse. Don't come crying to me if you lose conversions with a change you didn't test first.

♠ See http://meyerweb.com/eric/tools/css/reset/.

♣ See http://developer.yahoo.com/yui/reset/.

♥ See http://www.google.com/analytics/siteopt/.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

You've been reading the free but expert advice of D Bnonn Tennant. I'm known in the boroughs as Information Highwayman—the dashing and debonair copywriting ace and attention-thief for hire. I live in the urban jungle of New Zealand, where I'm renowned for my acerbic wit and very fine hat.

If you found this special report useful; if you'd like to implement some of my recommendations but you aren't sure how; if you have implemented them and would like to tell me how great and/or downright rubbish the results were; if you happen to be in need of an ace copywriter or expert consultant; or if you're just a raving fan...drop me a line.

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