chapter 13

Persuading Niche Markets, Individuals, and the Press

Web Marketing Copy

Sure, your boss says your marketing is centered on the customer. The CEO claims dramatically, in slide show after slide show, to live or die by the customer.

But no organization is really centered around the consumer. Customer-centricity is a myth. Your organization may act as a kind of matchmaker between the needs of customers and the products and services that might address those needs, drawing together customers, in-house departments, suppliers, and partners. But the organization itself plays the central role.

> It matches its own resources and those of its suppliers and partners to the preferences and priorities of its customers. Smart companies consider not only what the customer needs, but also what they can profitably deliver. If you want enduring and profitable growth in this era, you must manage customer, supplier and partner relationships in parallel. (Knowledge Capital Group, *Customer Relationship Management)*

With that awareness of your role as spokesperson for your Internet-enabled company, with its train of suppliers and partners, and its conflicting internal groups, you have to tap dance even more adroitly when you write marketing copy on the Web than copywriters used to when they put the same kind of pitch on paper.

And customers online are often focused on a particular task, decision, or problem they want resolved. If they encounter burbling prose online, they get much more impatient than they used to when your firm sent them glossy brochures.

So, despite being urged to include several different marketing slogans in the same piece, your language must sound more Spartan, practical, and useful than ever.

And you must also demonstrate to the consumers that your product is relevant. "Relevance" is a praise word, earned through a lot of encounters with the people you are trying to reach. So...

- **Listen to real consumers**. Study the tapes of focus groups; go out to trade shows and talk with them; devour the e-mails sent into customer service; sit in on customer service phone calls. Sop up their attitudes, concerns, and expressions.
- **Write about your consumers first**. Only mention your product after you have shown you understand their situation with its many challenges. Put the customer at the center of your story and bring the product in by the back door.
- **Look for what moves people**, what lies at the emotional heart of the issue, and infuse your opening with those feelings.
- **Cut the marketing babble**. People hate this stuff online. They hate it more online than they did when they came across it on paper. People consider obvious B.S. "not relevant."

But when you are writing for the Web, your prose gets another round of reviews because you have to pull together conflicting marketing messages, pleasing various in-house constituencies, and you also have to fit into the corporate site, which has its own styleguide, demanding an end to fluff. On the Web copywriting is even more collaborative and iterative than it was when people drafted text for the back of the box, or the take-one data sheets.

As a Web marketing writer, you are in the middle of a whirling gossip mill, taking part in a lot of intense conversations, rarely able to go off in a corner and craft a coherent message. Your prose risks being pulled apart, or, worse, stuffed with snippets from everyone else's messages. How do you stay sane in a crazed Net whirl?

Straight talk

On the Web, marketing doesn't sound quite as sentimental as it does on paper. The twin curses of marketing—hype and fluff—don't work very well on the Web. But straightforward information sells. How ironic—the truth shall make your sales!

And they all gave essentially the same reason: "We have no money in the budget for web content." In most cases the hidden subtext included: "Plus, the higher ups only want our website to say one thing—buy our shit."

—Eric Norlin, on why some clients were canceling plans for creating content, in *The Titanic Deck Chair Rearrangement Corporation Newsletter*

The Internet is most useful for communicating with people who are already interested in learning more about a product.

—Saul Hansell, "Marketers find new avenues on the Internet,"
New York *Times*

A lot of sites where you would expect hype and fluff actually take a very straightforward, information-focused approach to content. (Amy Gahran, quoted in *Little Grasshopper Meets Content Guru* 2001)

The Web consumer has seen that some companies expose all their data on the Web and they expect you will let them see full information about your products, your finances, and your history. They expect neutral advice, not self-serving or snide appeals.

Earnest, honest—can this be marketing?

Having been burned before, consumers fear that any prose you post on your site will be corporate speech, some kind of committee report that hides more than it reveals. In this sense, any prose that sounds like an "official" presentation is suspect.

And interacting with a personal agent, natural language search engine, or diagnostic wizard often seems mechanical because the responses don't adapt to your questions the way a human would in conversation. You can sense that you are dealing with a computer.

Surprise the humans by being one yourself. One day marketing writer Nick Usborne was getting help at iQVC, using their live chat service, and after he'd gotten his question answered, the person signed off saying "Thank you for using iQVC and have a wonderful day." Usborne immediately suspected boilerplate message, and challenged the chat person, who replied, "I'm a real person. Honest." What a great line, thought Usborne. He admits that it's hard to write customer support as if you were a real person, but he suggests giving it a try.

To prove you are human, risk a little stream of consciousness. Ramble. Get confused. Straighten yourself out. Insist on your point, to clean up any confusion.

In other words, don't be too polished. Sure, in official presentations, you'll have to use complete sentences, and you'll probably want to look pretty well organized. But even there you can choose to reveal your own personality.

Avoid using regulation-issue phrasing. Make the headline, opening, and quotes new each time. (Some standard chunks are OK,

such as the corporate history and the contact info).

Admit a few problems. (Does the VP of Marketing really think customers were too stupid to wonder about these issues?)

You don't have to break down and cry, or blurt out the latest gossip about the slowdown in production, or the decline in sales. You just have to find a tone that meets your customer's reasonable expectations and makes a promise that your fellow employees can get behind.

Ask yourself how honest you can make your persona—that invented character who appears to be speaking through you—and how sincerely you can articulate the relationship between you, your company, and the consumer. Despite the pressure, and the tradition of marketing, you can speak for your company in a direct, reassuring, but no-shit tone. Take the Web as an excuse for developing your own voice.

Go gonzo

If you can't put your heart into your text as you write, the words may march along quite nicely, filling up the screen, looking as if they are hard at work, but turning inwardly feeble, bland, lacking in oomph. Hell, you've always known that. But the Web demands more energy, more personal investment, than paper ever did, because the screen's chilliness must be melted, and because the real spirit of the Web is direct conversation with other people— one-to-one. The closer you get to your idiosyncratic self, the more the other person can hear you coming through. Ironically, the best spokesperson on the Web is a unique human being, not a professional corporate clone.

> In marketing, just as in government, professionalism tends to hew unimaginatively to its own timid orthodoxy. It does not provide leadership, enthusiasm, or the kind of impassioned personal engagement that has come to be called gonzo. (Christopher Locke, *Gonzo Marketing: Winning Through Worst Practices*)

When you face brand new micromarkets springing up every

Television made it possible for there to be 40 different brands of dishwashing liquid. The Internet lets a car maker print fewer brochures.

—Myer Berlow, President of Interactive Marketing, America Online

345

month, you can't start out with demographic data, professional predictions, and careful plans. You just wade in. You have to speak up on newsgroups, discussion groups, e-mail lists, weblogs—the fractured media of the Web—not just your own Web page. But even on your Web site, you are addressing niche audiences (or should be), and you personally may be attuned to one group more than you are to another—make that group your personal target, and leave the other groups to the rest of your team. Grow yourself into being part of those people, and they will no longer look like a market segment; they will be a community you participate in.

But this approach to marketing—more personal, more conversational—demands that you take a less buttoned-down tone on your site. Can you stand it?

Mission 'shmission, who's got the ax?

Most mission statements sound like a committee hoping to inspire deadhead employees while conning the customers. Unfortunately, you usually can't edit these stupid documents because they represent a carefully worked-out consensus (and that's part of why they bore the hell out of most readers).

But you can make the page with the mission statement a little livelier by adding links to pages that prove your organization really practices what it preaches—if it does. For instance, if you have testimonials, case studies, or success stories, create some menus around the key values, with links pointing to this kind of evidence.

Fight to demote the mission statement to a subordinate position somewhere within the About Us section. Scream and yell to keep the mission statement off the home page, where it can put visitors to sleep before they get to the third sentence. Putting all this corporate prose on the first page ignores the fact that the home page is a field of action, a set of menus, a place where people make choices, more like an airport than a billboard. Best move—kill the sucker off.

Product information

Provide more, not less. On the Web, crabbed little one-paragraph descriptions look like dried-up dog poop. You have a lot of

information about the product or service, so give it up. If you are customizing around tasks or market niches, then create a different product page for each group. Within that page, organize around the major questions that those people ask:

- What does it look like? **Product shot**
- What exactly does this thing do? **Overview**
- What good is it to me? **Benefits**
- How do you manage to do that for me? **Features** (subcomponent of benefits, not a lead-in, or peer)
- Can you show me how that works? **Animation**, **tutorial**
- What are some typical results? **Output** or **results**
- Can you give me technical information? **Data sheet**
- What do other people say about this? **Reviews, testimonials, success stories, case studies**
- How does this product stand out from the crowd? **Competitive analysis**
- What's this product category do, anyway? **White papers**

You can see that multiple product pages link deep into the same backup material. But customizing the product page means that the guest sees that additional material in the right frame of mind.

Overview: Here's where you write the haiku. You're saying why your product, service, or idea is valuable—to this particular niche audience. The biggest curse of paper marketing is the drive to appeal to all comers at once. To simplify your work, make sure you customize the marketing pitches, so you can concentrate on one particular group. That makes your job easier—one key value per niche.

Product shot: Big enough to see the buttons, small enough to download fast. The best e-commerce catalogs use an array of thumbnail shots as the menu—the product names are just tiny little captions, available if someone really wants to read, but not necessary. Reverse the text bias of the Web and make your images hot. (Of course, for accessibility, provide alternate text behind the scenes, so blind people can navigate to your full descriptions).

Benefits (with features): Use gritty prose for these. Sand out the bumpy little cheating adjectives. Pry loose the adverbs that exaggerate, like "immediately," and "automatically." Sure, for most

Copywriting on the Web is like writing song lyrics. ... Too many words, the wrong words, or even words with too many syllables— and you lose your audience. Switching Web sites is as easy as switching radio stations.
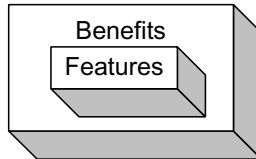
—Kathy Henning,
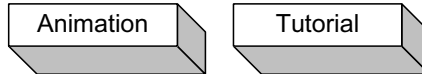*Writing well online:*
Talent isn't enough

Product Description
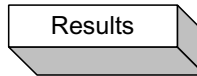
"What exactly does this thing do?
"What does it look like?"

Overview

Product shot

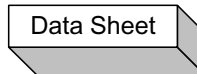"What good is it to me?"
"How do you manage to do that for me?"

Benefits

Features

"Can you show me how that works?"

Animation

Tutorial

"What are some typical results?"

Results

"Can you give me technical info?"

Data Sheet

"What do other people say about this?"

What Other People Say

Reviews

Testimonials

Successes

Case Studies
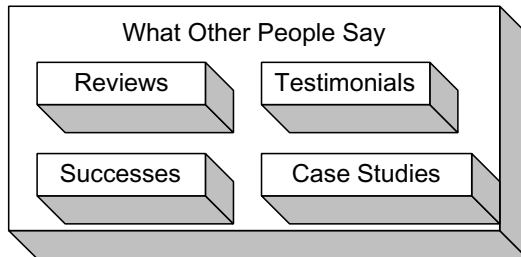
"How does this product stand out from the crowd?"
"What's this product category do, anyway?"
"How does this product compare with other products in your line?"

Comparisons

Competitive Analysis

White Papers

Comparison Charts

The "shut up" part was built into broadcast, as there was never any back channel—never a way to ask questions.

—Christopher Locke,
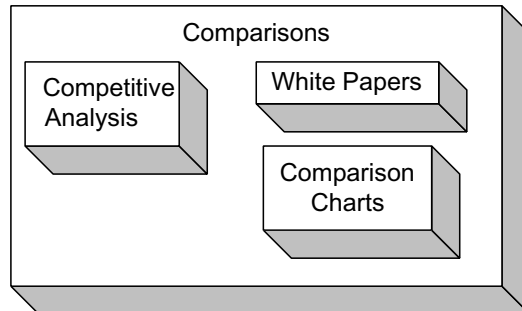*Gonzo Marketing*

niches, the benefits are primary, the features secondary (more like proof you can really bring the benefit), but for engineers you may want to organize this differently—with features trailing brief benefit statements. Either way, watch out for enthusiastic cover-ups—you know, the kind that come down from on high, where the VP of Marketing has agreed to cover up some defect or slide past a missing feature that most of the consumers want. The biggest lies involve glossing over problems, not mentioning difficulties, and pretending something really works the way people hope. Omission is a sin, here. Battle to get permission to admit you don't handle something, rather than adroitly leaving it out and letting the customers discover it later, ha ha, after they have made the purchase. Compare:

> Lets you save your pictures in popular Web formats.

> Lets you save your pictures in Web formats gif and jpg (but not png).

The first sounds more reassuring. The second sounds more honest. Which one will work best on the Web? Ironically, on the Web, the second one will sell better, because you are proving you are trustworthy.

Animation or tutorial: Sure, these are amusing, but they take a lot of time to download, and they break unexpectedly and disappoint. Give these low priority. If you decide to do the storyboards, walk through the action frames over and over, beating on them, to make sure you are really moving forward one meaningful step at a time. Often, writing an animated demo or a tutorial involves slapping your head and saying, "Oh my gosh, but before that, I have to put this in." Like a teacher, you'll find you keep having to go back and back and back, to insert material you took for granted or forgot to mention, but need to cover first, in order to get to the juicy parts. (If you have no background in training, teaching, or instructional design, get someone who does to check your material several times). Then test the heck out of your prototypes, even if you have to use paper mockups. The more you test, the smoother the

sequences will roll. In our experience, some very simple beginner tutorials have worked well as presales demos, even though we hadn't originally planned them that way. One odd recommendation from testing these "educational" demos—keep the progress extremely simple. You know the material inside out, but the guests don't, and out of impatience you may be tempted to rush through explanations, skip key moments, and roll the video at a furious pace. Don't. Let people take their own time with these things, and they will advance much more slowly than you would. You'll cringe as you watch them through the one-way mirror, but often, they come away beaming, because they grokked the whole concept. If you feel the pace is embarrassingly slow, you are probably moving at the right rhythm for your audience, because the material is much less familiar to them, and they need time to absorb it.

Results: Give me the payoff. What's the return on investment—a dramatic improvement in reading scores, successful launch rate, or whatever? Make an effort to pull these numbers, tables, and charts out of product managers, who guard them nervously. Customers long for any proof that your product works.

Data sheet: OK, these are all the facts and figures that the geeks and engineers want. Let them come here right away.

Organize these around major features, rather than benefit clusters, because this list reflects the structure of the product, as seen by insiders, professionals, and experienced users. Keep the prose tight, more like a database report than running text.

What other people say: Assume that nobody trusts you, and you have to bring in piles of evidence. Links to reviews posted on other sites give you independent support. Success stories and the more sober case studies are a little more suspect because you write them—narratives in the heroic mode, where a team faces a big problem, and, thanks to your product or service, triumphs. The more quotes and faces you use the better, because you want a rich air of verisimilitude. Even better—the e-mail address or phone number of the project lead, who offers to talk to future customers. You may never be able to get a partner to do this, but if one agrees, your story seems more trustworthy, even if no one actually makes the call. Testimonials—short quotes, like blurbs on a movie ad—help a little, but because they are taken out of context, they cannot do more than

The best brands are built at the intersection of what the consumer wants and what the brand offers. How you find that meeting point is research.

**—Amy Palmer,
Senior Planner, Leo Burnett**

suggest a groundswell of enthusiasm for your offerings.

Comparisons: If you have a lot of products, campaign to get the site to offer side-by-side comparisons, so a potential customer can see which features each has, at what price, gauging priorities, working out a compromise, and settling on the perfect product. Going back and forth from one page to another makes this kind of comparison difficult. Printing out each page and laying the sheets out on a desk is also frustrating. You've got a site, so make it do something useful. You may have to reassure product managers that these comparisons do not damage anyone's product because the customer is trying to work out a balance between cost, features, and glamour, and that thought process is personal, and requires a lot of back-and-forth comparisons. By making thought convenient, you take a big step toward a sale—any sale. So comparison tables benefit the firm as a whole, and, really, bring several products to notice at the same time.

Competitive analysis: This is best kept to yourself because attacking the competition always leads to counterattacks, and then you both look bad. But if you're in a tough competitive battle, and you really feel you have to ding your direct competitors, write carefully. You don't want to give the customer reason to think you are being petty, so focus only on important differentiators. You don't want to sound like a whiner, kvetcher, or gossip, so present a table, or a chart, showing the comparison of features—these look more scientific, methodical, and neutral than a few paragraphs that say the same thing. But include pop-ups or rollovers to explain what those features do—many of your consumers have no idea, and consider the terms just so much jargon. If possible, illustrate each row with a picture of the option, feature, or process, to give people a clue.

White papers: These offer a better way to position your firm vis à vis the competition. You state a broad problem, outlining in a way that you know will favor your particular solution, then walk through the components of a best practice, and lo and behold, at the end, your product emerges as the winner. The big-think tone gives an air of impartiality to these papers, particularly if you pay a consulting firm or an academic to sign one. But they are also useful; they give people an insider's view of the problems in the field, and a reasoned argument for your place in that world.

Why are markets always defined in terms of sellers and products? Why can't they be defined in terms of customers and activities?

—Mohan Sawhney and
Dave Parikh,
New Economy Boundaries:
Use 'Em or Lose 'Em

Architectural note:
organize around activities first

Web consumers resent traditional marketing with its attitude that customers are prey, to be shot at with a rifle or a shotgun, products are bait, sales are some kind of switcheroo, and relationships are a macho matter of conquering or taking possession of a consumer, measured in eyeballs, transactions, and clicks. The new consumers want to see evidence that you are aware of their situation, their goals, and their process of decision. Toward that end, marketing has to stop interrupting and grabbing people who might possibly be a customer for a product, and, instead, start helping the guests make their own informed decisions about which product would be best for them, if any.

> To discover points of leverage, firms need to think of their customers in terms of their activities and workflow. This is a customer-centric view of markets. It involves finding products for customers. (Mohan Sawhney, *Contextual Marketing and the Rise of Consumer Metamediaries*)

Find out what activities people want to perform at your site or at a portal like the ones Sawhney calls "metamediaries" because they act as super intermediaries between you and potential consumers. An individual consumer's activities involve particular tasks such as getting house prices for a particular neighborhood, and these low-level tasks can be grouped within several higher-level tasks, such as finding a new home, buying or renting a home, or moving into a home. These tasks, and the overall activity, are what matter most to the guest. For instance, on a site run by a food manufacturer, people get more involved in information about cooking than about recipes, and care more about using the recipes than learning about the products within them. You need to promote information (neutral, helpful, informative material) that aids in the activities, while demoting information about your products to a support role.

Oddly, this kind of information lives, traditionally, in technical

writing, training, and customer support groups, but not marketing. Go get it, recruit those folks to write more, and reorganize your site to encourage activity.

Sure, you still need to write product descriptions and let people zip right to one if they want; but you will delight people more if you help them do what they want, making the purchase simply a step on the path to the final transaction, which is the way the consumer likes to think about it.

Eventually, through personalization and real-time tracking, you will present promotional offers at the moment the customer seems to be making a decision, rather than broadcasting them over every page or slinging them at everyone who comes to the site that day. At that instant, your offer becomes relevant and even welcome.

But until you get to that point, you need to shape the great bulk of the architecture of your site around consumer goals, tasks, and activities—not products.

See: Hansell (2001), Henning (2000a, 2000b, 2001a), Knowledge Capital Group (2001), Locke (2001), Price and Price (1999), Sawhney (2001), Sawhney and Parikh (2000), Sawhney and Zabin (2001), Usborne (2001a, 2001b, 2001c).

Case Study: Web Marketing Copy at mySimon

MySimon.com pitches itself as a tool for finding the best products at the best prices throughout the Web. Simon himself overlooks every page in many different poses, acting as the site's persona (an obviously virtual face, grinning with irrepressible good cheer). Simon is assisted by human editors, who pick out products to recommend, articles from *Consumer Reports*, decision guides (interactive wizards that lead you through the process of deciding which options you really want, ending in a list of products that fit those criteria). The marketing folks at mySimon.com have to walk a tightrope stretched between tooting their own service and rooting for the products they recommend. In between lies an enthusiastic neutrality.

One strategy the marketing folks use is restraint—they keep the adjectives and adverbs to a minimum, picking the one or two with the biggest impact.

> Need help deciding which to buy? Get highly personalized and completely unbiased product recommendations with our decision guide!

The excitement contained within that exclamation point spills over into the "highly" and "completely," the adverbs modifying the two key benefits—personalization and objectivity.

The tone throughout is similar to that—sober, hinting of a conversation, but "written" in the sense that most of the text would not work if read aloud. When the writers pitch a new product category, they often start with the rhetorical question routine, but instead of segueing into a folksy chat, they take a condensed, detail-packed approach, suggesting that they have done a lot of work behind the scenes, and that they are bringing you the results in as tight a paragraph as they can make.

> Extreme/Multisport Men's Watches
>
> Planning to climb the High Sierra or check out a coral reef? Luckily, for any hard-core athlete, this season's sport watches boast an impressive array of exercise-friendly functionality: timing laps, monitoring heart rate and even checking the height or direction of the ride can be done while breaking a sweat.

Nice touches:

- Defining the audience—The writers make clear who these products are aimed at, narrowing the focus, but intensifying their grab.
- Hinting at the now—It's this season, not last season.
- Subtle spin—These watches don't just have features. They boast of features. The set of functions is not just an array, it's an impressive array.
- Cliché reversal—Usually, marketing folks talk of doing something "without breaking a sweat." But here, the whole point is to consult your watch while exercising. The switcheroo draws a little attention to the writers' own good taste, as if they were saying, "We don't indulge in clichés."

The lame conclusion suggests a less inspiring aspect of the marketing style—an over-eager English major at work. When we read that the watches boast a lot of functionality, and see a colon, followed by a list, we tend to think of all the items in that list as examples of the functionality. But no! The writer adds a verb phrase ("can be done"), turning all of these items into subjects, requiring a little mental flip-flop. Perhaps the writer felt anxious that the list of items might look like an incomplete sentence. But the grammatical whiplash makes the finale painful.

The humor's a little strained, too. In writing about tricycles, for instance, the writer says that one recommended product is tough enough to "endure the inevitable backyard demolition derby." OK, so it's a joke. The site gets points for trying humor. But the tone is arch, almost professorial, hey, even a little condescending.

Mostly, though, the writers succeed at compressing a lot of features and benefits into a small space. Product descriptions fit into two or three lines. For instance, here's a dog dish:

> Lightweight bowl med.
> Plastic dish. Outside diameter 7 inches by 3 inches deep.
> Color may vary.

MySimon and his buddies work hard to summarize a lot of information briefly, while pushing their own service and their recommended products, without seeming too pushy. The marketing copy here seems adroit, light, even, do we dare say it—fun?

News Releases

Public relations is no longer just about "ink."

—Don Middleberg,
Winning PR in the Wired World

The emerging Web has changed public relations by giving the audience greater control over what writers must produce, and when. Reporters still act as the advance scouts for other audiences, but they are followed (within a day or so) by chattering discussion groups, viral sneezers (they cough, and hundreds of people are infected with the idea), and customers e-mailing each other. And, increasingly, reporters say they get story ideas from Internet rumors, which they seek to confirm by using your Web site. As a PR person in this environment, you're driven to respond to breaking news on a cycle of hours, not days or weeks, as in the past. You can't waste time going through levels of approval and news-release boards; you have to get out there now. You keep discovering new audiences, new forums, new ways to combine print, radio, TV, and Internet campaigns, so you can no longer develop steady routines, specializations, and focus. You don't have time for in-depth research because you have to work with quick snapshots, adapting your strategy on the run. Your advance planning extends a few months, not years.

Internet news releases go out as e-mail, not paper sheets, and they must be written for the screen. Tons of public relations copywriters ignore this fact, preferring to follow the traditions established by—in fact, demanded by—editors, reporters, and production managers at old-line newspapers, industry journals, consumer magazines, radio stations, talk shows, and TV shows. The basic structure of the genre is OK, but the prose needs tweaking for the Web.

Your audience is still the press, but now that they do research on the Web, get releases by e-mail, and (often) post online, reporters are even more impatient, rude, self-pitying, quick to doubt, and careless than they used to be in the days of paper. Unlike marketing folks, who address real customers, you're trying to reach those customers indirectly, through someone else's writing—whether

that person is writing in a traditional media outlet or its site, for a pure webzine, or for a discussion group—and you are using e-mail to get through to most of these writers. That means you have to adapt your prose for electronic delivery to other writers, including some folks who would hate to be thought of as your peers.

You're repping the rep, electronically. To start, visit discussion lists, industry guru sites, and media outlets to find out what your organization's reputation really is. Monitor the fads, trends, and controversies inside your industry because this buzz gets reflected pretty quickly in the stories for the general public. Figure out where your organization shows up on the Net radar, understand your weak points, and calculate your boasting score, so you can spin your "news" into a favorable review, a little applause, a solid plug in a competitive overview. Where marketing tries to build a story that will attract customers, you have to adapt that story for an audience that is better informed than most customers, a lot more cynical, and, unless you sell only to early adopters, much more obsessed with what's hot, new, and different. Customers generally care about what works well, what saves them some time, what costs less, and what adds to an existing setup. But reporters want stories—service pieces, tales of heroism and innovation, attacks on established ideas (and products), and gossip. The best way to get your releases read is to create them so they can be easily cannibalized.

Remember—even though you must get along with all the people who might have a stake in the wording of your press release, you should fight to get them to recognize that the release will be rejected by reporters if it ends up being inflated with blather, jammed with jargon, or pointlessly complicated. Your job is to fight off the stakeholders, to get your pony through to the people who will write the actual stories—you know, those sponges who hang out in the press room eating all of your carrot sticks and bagels, gossiping with each other, and, ungrateful wretches, forgetting to mention your new product in their survey of the trade show. (As members of this crew, we have to admit that we are all a tough lot to pitch).

To make your case, explain that you're assembling the components of the press release to answer the journalists' questions, more or less in order.

The first rule is, simply, move fast.
—Don Middleberg,
Winning PR in the Wired World

- "What's new here?" **Headline**
- "When did this happen?" **Date issued and official release date**
- "Who's this from?" **Company name**
- "OK, what's the gist of the story?" **Opening paragraph**
- "What are the details?" **Follow-up paragraphs**
- "Have you got a quote for me?" **Quotes**
- "What's the background of the company?" **About section**
- "How can I reach you?" **PR contact info**, executive contact info, hot link to the PR section of the site

For agencies, the ultimate client is the journalist. If an agency loses its credibility with a journalist—it's over.

—Don Middleberg,
Winning PR in the Wired World

News Release

"What's new here?"	Headline
"When did this happen?"	Date
"Who's this from?"	Organization
"What's the gist of the story?"	Opening
"What are the details?"	Follow-up
"Have you got a quote?"	Quotes
"What's the background of the company?"	About
"How can I reach you?"	Contact
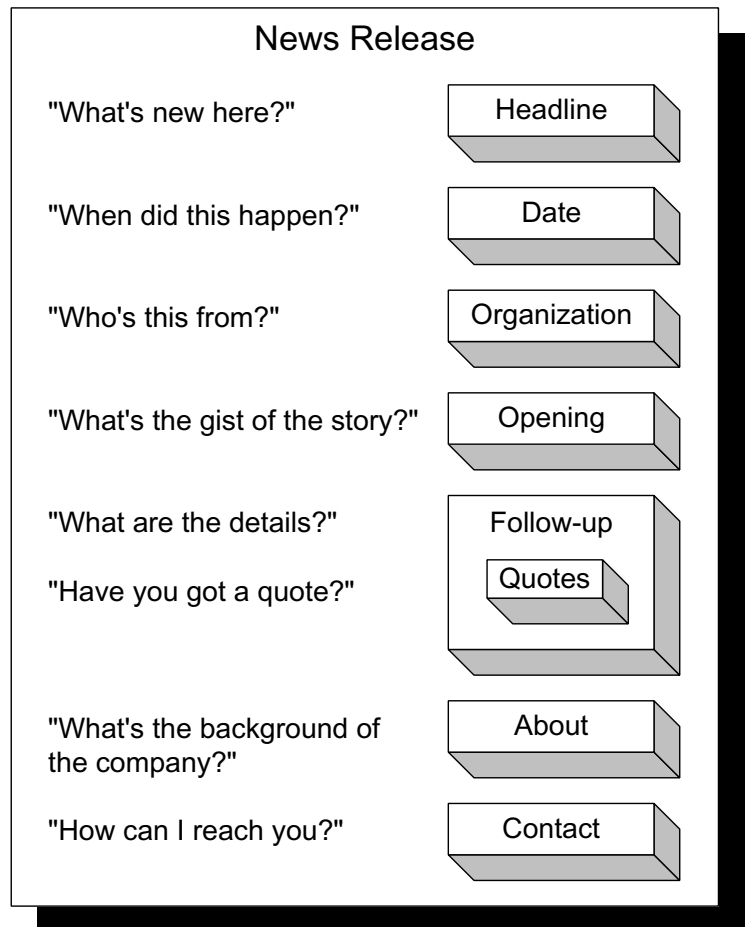
Material that doesn't answer a reporter's question doesn't belong in that particular section (and may not belong anywhere in the release). You have to defend your reporters against consensus releases, which cram everyone's favorite phrases into one or two ungainly sentences that no one, except the original committee, can understand. Take notes, listen thoughtfully, but go your own way. Even though you may be called a company spokesperson, you have to write on behalf of and as an advocate for readers who write.

Get over the notion that reporters depend on you for information and ideas. Sure, some do. In fact, some drudges just edit press releases all day long. But most reporters come up with 80% of their ideas on their own (or through chats with industry insiders, editors, other writers, and cab drivers). Once they have a story idea, though, journalists do count on your serving up the latest info from your company in a form they can reuse. (How come your latest press release isn't up on the site? Why is the last "news" item on the site three months old? Isn't anything happening?) That's why you need to build a helpful set of Press pages on your site, to support the e-mailed release.

But first you have to get a reporter's attention. You have to get past the Delete button in the e-mail application.

Put the gist of the story into the subject line and headline

That's all you've got, at first. If your subject line doesn't work, a reporter never sees the rest of the e-mailed release.

The headline must do its job, announcing the kernel of the story. The headline is usually the subject line, so it has to work twice as hard to capture a reporter's attention within 60 characters or less (the e-mail software may not display more than the first part of the subject line).

Don't put clichéd marketing claims into the headline. Reporters at major sites use filters to delete messages that come in with subject lines that include words such as "best," "first," "leading edge," "customer-centric," "mission-critical," and "solutions." As one *Wall Street Journal Interactive* editor told the Gable Group, "No thanks, I'm done covering solutions.... Please don't write to me about solutions anymore...They've become a problem."

Some companies put out one or more news releases a week, whether they have real news or not. ... They do it to populate the databases of the world, so their names show up when financial analysts go searching.

—Gable Group,
Stories Not Getting Through?

Instead, ask yourself, what makes your announcement news? What good is it for the end audience, that is, the people who read what the reporter writes? Why will they care? Generally, the more concretely you can describe the benefits for these folks, the more likely a reporter is to read on instead of clicking the Delete button.

Think marketing for a moment. What is your product differentiator, here? What is your unique selling proposition for this story? The headline is your pitch.

But the writing challenge is to describe the benefits without using in-house or industry shorthand. One way to get the headline is to ask yourself, what is the most important fact you would like to get a reporter to pick up and pass along?

Opening

Despite all the pleas from product managers, vice presidents, and other helpful editors of your prose, your opening must sound like a news lead, not a puff. If you smell any mission-statement crap, remove that with a stick. And excise branding terms such as:

- *A world-class technology vendor...*
- *The industry leader in...*
- *The world's only...*
- *Leveraging its expertise in...*
- *Enabling and empowering customers...*
- *Providing end-to-end solutions...*
- *Seamlessly integrating...*

In a survey of electronic news releases pouring through PR Newswire and Business Wire during one week, the Gable Group found a new "solution" every eight minutes, and more than half the companies claiming they were the "leading providers" without any supporting evidence. Blanking out the names in releases from 11 companies (of whom 9 claimed to be the "market leader"), the group asked a client to identify which company was which. He spotted only one out of eleven, overlooking the release from his own company. That's generic writing, all right. Ten of those copywriters had adopted the same clichés, and pretended to work for the same imaginary superpower, forgetting to be themselves.

Go through your first paragraph crossing out any phrases that you would be embarrassed to explain, much less prove, if a reporter were to challenge you. Immediately, your release will stand out from most of the others.

Start editing when you realize you've been handed half a dozen nouns strung together as a single giantism, like "Next-generation online comparison shopping technology integration services." Who can tell where the other hyphens ought to go? Who, but the president of the firm, can untangle that kind of noun train before it collides with the brain? Blowing up this kind of phrase often requires several sentences. Write them. Even though the Internet demands brevity, these noun strings are so compressed that an outsider cannot interpret them without reading the full release, plus touring the site.

Follow-up and quotes

Give some evidence for your claims. Reporters question your headline and opening, and whatever summary statements you make there, you should follow up with some facts, figures, quotes, or anecdotes to show why you make the claim.

Write in short paragraphs. Too often copywriters reared on paper cram about five ideas into every thick paragraph, making it tough to disassemble on-screen. On-screen, a succession of short paragraphs organizes the information so it is easier to absorb.

You can write a lot if you just break it up into separate chunks, each addressing a different potential question, such as:

- How much does it cost?
- What features distinguish this product from the competition?
- Have you won any praise for this?
- What limits, constraints, restrictions apply?

In advertising, long copy sells better than short, and on the Internet, a two-page press release often works better than an e-mail that runs two paragraphs and out. The reason is that if any reporters care, they must ransack your release for material that applies to their audiences, and the longer release gives them more items they can grab.

Journalists don't have time to wade through deep, complex navigation trees or sift factual wheat from marketing chaff.
—Kara Coyne and Jakob Nielsen, Nielsen Norman Group, *Designing Websites to Maximize Press Relations*

The about section

Include the one-paragraph description of the company so that reporters can lift whole sentences. Include the answers to common questions, such as:

- How big is the company in sales, number of employees, number of offices, number of products?
- What are its major products, services, lines, and brands?
- What were its latest financial numbers, and what is the trend?
- How does the company position itself?
- Who's the boss?

This paragraph is boilerplate. You should craft it so it can be placed at the end of every release. Because you are now using the Internet, and writers want to grab whole sentences electronically, leave out phrases they would not normally use, such as the effusions about the brand, the jargon juggernaut, and the mission malarkey. If a reporter could not use the phrase without getting caught plagiarizing your release, omit the phrase. Remember— you want your key facts lifted, and to get that to happen, you must throw a few pet phrases overboard.

Contact info

If a reporter is interested, you must be available, right away. The Internet speed has intensified deadline pressure, so reporters often have less than an hour before they must post. Let them call you or e-mail you. Include a backup person for those times when you leave the office or go to lunch.

Include the full corporate address, and, if you are sending HTML e-mail, make the Web site address hot (offering a complete path to the release on the site, if you have managed to get it posted before you e-mailed it out). To write an online story, the reporter must be able to provide links to the main site (or the release itself), and many editors insist that reporters insert lines like, "based in Albuquerque, New Mexico," to give readers a little orientation.

Journalists are not gullible, and they do not take a company's own word as truth.

—Kara Coyne and Jakob Nielsen,
Designing Websites to
Maximize Press Relations

Set up a Web press center
that gives reporters what they want

When we think a release will fit into a story we are working on, we go to the company's Web site to find out more. To make sure your press releases fall on fertile ground, build a full online press center. Unfortunately, many organizations are stingy about providing the materials a reporter might need. If we can't find what we need on your site, we figure you probably won't return our phone calls or e-mails quickly, and we move to a competitor's site. If that site gives us the additional info we need to flesh out the story, they get the mention, and you don't.

When the Nielsen Norman Group assigned 20 journalists a hypothetical story, and asked them to look for the information they would need on 10 major Web sites, the press corps failed to locate basic facts in more than a third of the sites, and reacted to those uninformative Media pages like this:

> "I would be reluctant to go back to the site. If I had a choice to write about something else, then I would write about something else."

> "Better not to write it than to get it wrong. I might avoid the subject altogether."

> "Makes me think someone is being evasive, or that they are incompetent." (Reporters, studied by Norman Nielsen Group 2001)

The press or media section of your site ought to answer these questions:

- How can I reach a human being who will talk on the record? **Contact info**
- What's the history, and focus of the company? **Company history**
- What happened when you did x, y, or z? **Archived press releases**
- Who's in charge? **Biographies**

The function of the press is very high. It is almost holy. It ought to serve as a forum for the people, through which the people may know freely what is going on. To misstate or suppress the news is a breach of trust.

**—Louis Brandeis,
in *Collier's Weekly***

The press is like the air, a
chartered libertine.

—William Pitt,
letter to Lord Grenville

- What's your position on x, y, or z?
  Position statements, white papers
- What have other people said about you?
  External resources

Contact info—At the very least, make it easy for reporters to get the e-mail address and phone number of each PR contact. When a reporter is covering a breaking story, the canned info on the site is not enough. To get your views, give the reporter a way to call you, page you, fax you, e-mail you, every which way.

> It's amazing why companies keep information such as
> addresses and phone numbers a secret. Unless you're
> located in Area 51, you ought to make this information
> very easy to access. (Ed Pyle, Executive Producer,
> KNX, quoted in Solomon, *What Does the Media Think*
> *of Your Site?*)

Put your own e-mail address with your full (human) name, not just a generic corporate.communications@bigcompany.com. The generic names make reporters think, "No one will get back to me on time. My e-mail will be lost or ignored."

Company facts—Explain the main twists and turns in the history of the company. If a lot of reporters ask about some episode in the past, include that. Drag out all the skeletons and force management to explain them; then post your story on the Web, as a precaution against surprise attacks and reporters who stumble on the tale late on Saturday night when you forget to check your messages. Don't make them read through the whole history wondering about that episode, only to find you have stonewalled. If you force them to call to get a quote, well, they may not bother to mention you at all.

Archived press releases—These are gold for reporters. Include the headings in the menu, not just dates. Who knows when that big event actually took place?

Biographies of major executives, with pictures—Do the one paragraph summary, followed by as much interesting personal detail as you can worm out of these folks. Go back through their other jobs. Try to show how their life makes sense. Include

There are two forces that can carry light to all corners of the globe— the sun in the heavens, and the Associated Press down here.

—Mark Twain

Articles from independent news- papers and magazines are often considered to be much more cred- ible than the company's own press releases.

—Kara Coyne and Jakob Nielsen,
Designing Websites to Maximize
Press Relations

downloadable pictures—those often make a mention more likely, because the editors want illustrations. (How about two shots—a formal suit and an informal, at-play shot? But from an editor's point of view, the less formal shot is what she pays a professional to go out and capture on a site visit, for a lead story. If you can pro- vide that right away, your people will get coverage.)

Annual report, and an archive of quarterly financial reports— Reporters need this information to flesh out their analysis, even though their analysis is rarely as detailed as a Wall Street analyst. You may just want to link from the press section over to the area for stockholders or analysts. But make the information very easy to spot. Writers generally hate numbers, but they become very suspi- cious when a company hides the profit-and-loss statement.

Position statements and white papers—Reporters want to know how your organization positions itself. How do you see yourself stacking up against the competition? Where do you fit in your indus- try? What exactly do you do for your customers and what do they say about it? Position statements give your standard pitch on breaking news for the reporter who gets to your site after hours. White papers detail lengthy arguments for your approach—including lots of statis- tics, specs, tables, and big-think posturing—give a reporter a few paragraphs of smart prose. Excellent extra: an explicit offer to put reporters directly in touch with real customers (very tempting, when a reporter needs to get some support for your claims).

External resources—Journalists tend to view news releases as your side of the story. So, to get an outside opinion, they want to read what reviewers, analysts, and even customers have said.

Give the full name of the article, and link to the article on its original site, going directly to that article, not the top of the site. Going outside your own site increases the credibility of the link; you have clearly not tampered with the article if it appears on the other company's site.

See: Gable Group (2001), Middleberg (2001), Nielsen Norman Group (2001), Solomon (2001).

Case Study:
News Center and Releases at Reflect.com
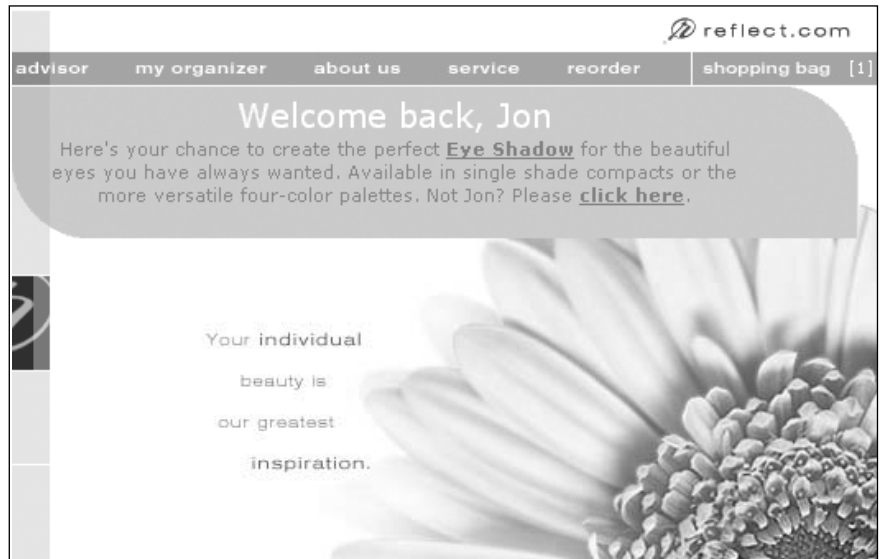
Here is a company that makes customized cosmetics by interviewing customers on its Web site, using their answers to build up personal recipes, and then manufacturing one-of-a-kind products. Funded by the giant Procter and Gamble, and backed by the collective knowledge of P&G scientists, the site runs artificial intelligence code to match customer choices with ingredients and packaging, so consumers participate in building their own moisturizers, fragrances, and other cosmetics. The company has pioneered using the Web to personalize the actual design and manufacture of individual products. Because so many of these ideas are unfamiliar to reporters and editors, explaining how the company works, and boasting about its progress has been a challenge for the PR team.

Edelman Public Relations has cranked out one or two Reflect.com releases a month, touting news such as second-round

financing, partnerships, new products, shifts in advertising, changes in operations, and milestones. ("Reflect.com reaches over one million customizations.") These releases generally give journalists what they need, while struggling to make the key marketing points. You can hear the heavy breathing in a lead like this:

> Reflect.com, the first interactive, truly customized beauty service created solely for the Internet, announced today...

Imagine the committee meeting that led up to that lead, with half a dozen folks brainstorming.

"Hey, we are the first! We are numero uno."

"First what?"

"Uh, first to customize... ."

"But other sites let you customize their content."

"But that's not real customization. We really do customization."

"Yeah, we customize products, right?"

"Interaction is the key. We interact with the customers on the site, and that's how they get to build their own products."

"So you could say that what we offer is a service then?"

"Yes, and don't forget that we only work on the Web. We don't have any retail outlets. You know, we're a pure play."

Then I imagine the boss saying, "OK, just wrap all that up into one sentence, and we're ready to go."

The final consensus solution, used for at least six months:

> Reflect.com, the first interactive beauty care service empowering women to reflect their authentic beauty by creating customized products, announced today...

So the marketing team got their way with the lead. But the PR folks crammed the releases with the kind of details that reporters really need:

Exact numbers. For instance, we learn that the IT department expanded from 5 to 25 people.

Clean headings. Most are sculpted to go right into a trade journal or business page without heavy editing. "Reflect.com

and Proflowers.com Extend Partnership to Give Women a Gift of Flowers."

Expansive subheads. The team lets itself go in the subhead, telling the whole story in a few lines for the inattentive reporter. The subheads include the key ingredients of the story, plus a nice helping of marketing marmalade. For instance, "Partnership Enables Reflect.com to Continue Delighting Women by Giving Them a Free Floral Gift after Their First Purchase." Sure, "free floral gift" is a bit much, giving away the flowers twice, and implying that they are actually part of a floral arrangement. But the qualifier is helpful. You have to buy something to get this gift, and the PR folks get that detail into the subhead, too.

The nitty-gritty details. We find that the "floral shipment" includes two Dendrobium orchid stems, "greenery" to "accent" the orchids, a gift card, care instructions, a protective tube, foil wrap, cotton, water tubes, and elastic ribbons. Plus, we get the reason why—"to ensure freshness while making a truly memorable impression on the recipient." Most writers will edit out the rationale, but, in an effort to sound as if they actually did some legwork, many reporters will include a few of the details in their stories.

Quotes from named people. Sure, some of these quotes come with the obligatory expressions of satisfaction ("'We are very pleased with Reflect.com's momentum over the past year,' said Tim Haley, a founding partner of Redpoint Ventures and member of Reflect.com's board of directors.") But some actually let us overhear the insiders talking. ("The repurchase rate also increases dramatically among these women.") With two or three quotes per release, the PR team makes the reporter's job easy. No need to make a phone call, if the deadline is tight. Just edit what you're given.

Plenty of About. The boilerplate sums up the company's position and background in a paragraph that mixes the clichés of the Web ("harnesses the power of the Internet") with awkward but convincing phrases ("products that don't exist until a woman helps create them"). Result—this material is easy to edit if reporters need another paragraph on a job where they are paid by the word.

Contact info. OK, but strange. You have to go through the PR team. No one from the company is listed. Just the Web site.

When you go to the site, you find the press releases listed on a menu next to a colorful photo. The full text is there, but nothing more.

The site provides only minimal information—a street address, and a general phone number, without the name and extension of anyone in particular at the company. The implication is if you want an interview, you will go through the PR agency. (By the way, "We've worked through the PR team, and found them very cooperative, setting up interviews, and responding to queries promptly, so this route is not a dead end").

On the other hand, the management bios are helpful, and give an eager reporter a person to target for an interview. The site offers pictures of the key managers, reasonable backgrounders, and quotes—enough to put together a story without having to call anyone, and a reasonable starting point for a real interview. In a section aimed at customers, the site also lists favorable articles in print media, with links to the original pieces, so reporters can (how do we put this?) crib from their peers.

So, despite encouraging women to answer dozens of questions in an effort to find their "authentic beauty" the site guards its own privacy carefully. As a reporter, you can break through to a real person (we have) but despite the emphasis on personalization, the site does not encourage direct personal contact with the managers. Hey, they have some real work to do.