

Part I

The ABCs of Copywriting

What do you think of when you first hear the word “marketing”?

A bunch of deceptive hyperbole with no substance? A sleazy game that shady characters play when they are trying to get you to buy something that you don’t actually need or want? At some point, most of us have even said something like, “Oh, that’s just a marketing ploy.”

As a representative of a community-oriented effort, you definitely do not want your voice to be associated with empty promises. Fortunately, marketing does not have to be that way.

Your organization is not just about building a better mousetrap that serves the community. You also want people with rodent-control problems to be aware of you, easily access you, consider supporting you, and spread the word about your work.

People working in the public interest increasingly acknowledge that *we too* have to get out there and hustle to attract attention to ourselves. Terms such as “social marketing,” “cause-related marketing,” “green marketing,” and even the old standby “outreach” come to mind. After all, if no one knows about your good work, you simply are not going to get very far.

So when I say “marketing” in the public-interest context, I am talking about:

Sharing information and enthusiasm about your work with interested people who may want to exchange their involvement or support for the value you add to them and their community.

That exchange is important. It is essentially an agreement, sometimes even a contract, between you and your reader. Remember: We are talking about dialogue that helps everyone win. That is what *writing to make a difference* is all about.

When you write on behalf of a community-benefit organization, you have to convey its work clearly, concisely, and persuasively. Your readers may include investors, clients, the press, activists, volunteers, colleagues, allies, and other stakeholders. You want to educate, inspire, and activate them. And to do that you have to write strategically to reach each specific type of reader.

This kind of writing is commonly known as “copywriting,” and that is the term I use throughout this book.

When copywriting, you also want to cultivate relationships with your readers over the short and long term. You want to encourage them to see your work as credible, successful, and vital—a solid investment of their time and/or money. You are looking to strike a responsive chord, so that your relationship can grow from there.

To communicate to the right people, in a way that builds solid relationships, you have to treat *everything* you write as a potential marketing tool. The specific language you use will vary, of course, according to the type of document and the intended reader. (For example, you would not write a project or funding proposal in the style you use to write a brochure, flyer, or press release.) The tips I share in this book offer a wide range of concepts to consider, no matter what your writing task.

In Part I, we will take a sneak peek at three of the fundamental strategies found in all good copywriters’ toolkits:

A ~ Create and advance your brand.~

Concentrate on what your organization stands for and keep promoting it.

B ~ Engage your specific readers.~

Get to know them and their worlds, and then join them there with your writing.

C ~ Emphasize benefits more than features.~

It is not just what you do that counts, but also what it *means* to your clients and community.


You can use these three introductory chapters to help keep you on track, by coming back to them from time to time. The 25 tactical techniques in Parts II-IV will show you how to put these “ABCs” into practice in the context of your socially responsible organization. Turn the page and let’s get started!

— Create and advance your brand. —



Every piece you write—whatever its own individual purpose—should have one overarching goal: to help promote your organization’s brand.

What do I mean by “brand”? Your “brand” is your essence: your identity, your personality, your promise, your reputation. It is what your organization stands for.

 **Ask yourself:** *When someone hears about your organization, what set of images, attributes, feelings, and ideas do you want them to associate with it?*

The answer is your brand.

Even if unintentionally, you are always building and reinforcing your brand. With time, if you are consistent enough, you can and should earn the familiarity and loyalty of your stakeholders. They will begin to relate to you, identify with you, and—yes—support you. As your brand becomes more known and liked, you will attract the people and organizations that can help your organization—and your community—succeed even more.

EXAMPLES

What do you imagine, think, or feel when you hear these organizations’ names?

- | | |
|--|----------------------|
| ☉ National Parent Teacher Association | ☉ Newman’s Own |
| ☉ Working Assets | ☉ Ben & Jerry’s |
| ☉ Amnesty International | ☉ American Red Cross |
| ☉ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency | ☉ NAACP |
| ☉ National Geographic Society | ☉ moveon.org |
| ☉ Whole Foods Market | ☉ Lions Club |

Bonus Tip



If your organization has recently undergone a strategic planning process, you may have already articulated your brand. If so, this book will help you maximize that branding (or re-branding) in your written materials, with a focus on reaching your intended readers.


All have built their brands over time, and unless one of them has somehow escaped your notice, you probably have opinions or gut reactions to all their names. You may envision a logo or tagline, or remember being exposed to and relating to their messages.

Whatever your organization's brand, your documents have to uphold it. That is, as a marketing writer (copywriter) at your organization, your job is to advance your brand. Here is an overview of how to do that.

EMPHASIZE YOUR ORGANIZATION'S UNIQUENESS

You probably know more than most people do about the many outstanding public-benefit organizations improving your community. In this way, you are truly blessed and inspired. However, all of those organizations inevitably encounter competition for all kinds of resources. Everyone needs financial backing, people-power, public attention, market share, etc.

To make your organization stand out, you need to highlight what distinguishes it from similar groups. You must show how your organization is uniquely positioned to address a specific need that your community has expressed.

 Ask yourself: *What is amazing, special, inspiring, stimulating, and unique about your organization's work?*

For instance: Does your organization deal with a particular aspect of an issue that no one else focuses on? Do you have a breakthrough approach or method? Do you work with a severely underserved community? Do you offer a product or service that solves a compelling social problem but is not readily available anywhere else? Do you have a history that has positioned you as the “go-to” organization in your community for years?

Those distinguishing characteristics are key parts of your brand and bear repeating (over and over again).

EXAMPLES

These bits of text (“copy”) help define various organizations’ unique qualities on their websites, in brochures, or in other marketing or fundraising materials:

1. When “Get Well Soon” seems a bit out of place, Kimo Kards™ are cancer recovery greeting cards that have just the right words to help a friend or loved one through the difficult journey of chemotherapy and other cancer treatments. Our messages are positive: designed to encourage and inspire men, women and children in different ways, including humor, scripture, and empowering words. Every card is “Created by Survivors for Survivors.” *(www.kimokards.com)*

2. Our mission is to deliver now — and for future generations. With every step we take, we are committed to leaving a “green” footprint across the American landscape... The U.S. Postal Service is the only shipping company that has earned Cradle to CradleSM certification (administered by McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry, LLC) for the environmentally friendly design and manufacturing of its boxes and envelopes. In addition, the Postal Service has the largest civilian vehicle fleet in the nation, and over 43,000 of them are alternative fuel-capable. Since we primarily refuel at commercial retail fueling locations, our fleet generates demand for alternative fuels nationwide.

(www.usps.com/green)

3. *International Development Exchange (IDEX) answers the Frequently Asked Question, “How is IDEX different from other international organizations?”:*

Since its inception in 1985, IDEX has made it a priority to support economic development initiatives in a way that is quite different from traditional large-scale philanthropy and prevailing models of global aid that are often top-down, paternalistic, and money-centered. IDEX’s grantmaking model has evolved over the years, but remains focused on:

- ☉ The value of community-based solutions and the wisdom of local leaders who are grounded in their communities.
- ☉ Providing multi-year unrestricted grants so that local partner organizations can apply funds where most needed and can plan for the future.
- ☉ Providing additional resources as opportunities arise. This may include participation in conferences in the U.S. or elsewhere or facilitating connections to fair trade organizations.

(www.idex.org)



If your organization is “too unique” (special in unfamiliar ways) you may generate initial resistance. Try to relate your work to things your intended readers already know and trust, as I discuss later in this chapter.

Your uniqueness must be so clear—and so relevant to your readers’ individual or community lives—that it gets noticed and gets people talking about you. This defining quality of your organization makes you the best choice for your readers to support or work with.



Ask yourself: *What is the _____ difference?*

[insert your organization’s name here]

Some ways organizations have traditionally set themselves apart from the pack include:

- ☉ Outstanding credentials or experience
- ☉ Personal service and attention to detail
- ☉ High quality and value
- ☉ Superior effectiveness
- ☉ Speed or convenience
- ☉ Unusual ease of use
- ☉ Continuous innovation
- ☉ Widespread familiarity

And as a public-benefit organization, you can also talk about qualities such as:


- ☉ Community accountability
- ☉ Values-driven decisions
- ☉ Socially responsible sourcing and trading
- ☉ Environmental sensitivity and stewardship
- ☉ Community participation and collaboration
- ☉ A leading-edge point of view or approach

Your uniqueness is whatever your ideal readers want and are concerned about but cannot easily get elsewhere. Once you identify those unique selling points, you can begin to incorporate them into your copywriting.

You might even take this idea one step further by showing how your work in conjunction with others in your field sets your network of partners and allies apart from the rest. (For more on collaboration, see Chapter 2, “Maximize your collaborations.”)

SHOW THAT YOU SHARE GOALS AND VALUES WITH YOUR READERS

People are reading your material because they feel that your organization’s core beliefs and aims are aligned with theirs. Your job is to consistently show them that they are right. Connecting with your readers on this plane—appealing to both their hearts and their heads—gets the best results.

 Ask yourself: *What is the very soul of your message?*

Your organization’s mission embodies its passion, sincerity, and spirit. It energizes your brand and should shine through in every piece of writing you create. You are conveying not only literal subject matter, but also your organization’s attitude and stance. By the words and methods you choose, you are saying a lot about who you are and why you do what you do.

EXAMPLE

Say you are writing a brochure that explains the importance of a specific aspect of your work. Your organization promotes child health and safety, and your brochure argues why lead paint should be removed from homes with young children. You and your colleagues understand the urgency, you are clear on what needs to be done, and you want to motivate parents to protect their children from the toxin.

Your brochure will advance your brand in that it will reflect your:

1. knowledge about the issue and how to handle it;
2. caring attitude about the pressing nature of the issue;
3. interest in making homes safer for youngsters;
4. unique ability to help parents in your community take positive action.

You will learn more in Chapter 1, “Spotlight your mission repeatedly,” about focusing on your mission throughout your copy.

GIVE YOUR READERS GOOD REASONS TO TRUST YOU

As a copywriter, your intention is to create ongoing relationships with your readers. And all solid relationships begin with trust. One way to build trust is to demonstrate your familiarity with the problems your readers face. Show that you are in the know by citing what other experts in your field are saying. And back up your official, academic, or professional claims with on-the-ground testimonials from people who have used your service or product and are known by, or are at least similar to, your readers.

You can also reassure your readers with ways to lower their risk of working with you. For example, offer a satisfaction guarantee. Or tell them about an evaluation or feedback process (e.g., an online rating system) that will let them exchange their views about your effectiveness with other customers or clients.

Another idea is to describe your product or service by comparing it favorably with an easily recognized brand that your readers trust and value. Or, use a colorful analogy or metaphor that they can quickly grasp. The goal here is to reduce their unfamiliarity with your brand and encourage their interest in you and your work.

EXAMPLES

1. You may have seen this technique used in phrases such as, “If you liked X you will love Y” and the “Alternative Nobel Prize” (the popular name for the somewhat obscurely named “Right Livelihood Award”). Saying something is the Mercedes of solar heating systems (vs. the Ford or Honda) is another great example.
2. You may have bought a less expensive store-brand drug or food product that is marketed as equivalent to a well-known brand because it features the same active ingredients. Emerging musicians are often marketed by comparing their styles with those of more established stars.
3. Some marketers (and others) use the phrase “Disneyland for grownups” to describe Las Vegas, New Orleans, or Amsterdam. Such a comparison leaves no question as to its meaning.

Bonus Tip



Remember that you can never be 100% objective, no matter how hard you try. While your readers know you have a perspective, they also expect you to be clear and honest with your facts and opinions, and to explain your frame-of-reference.

In addition, your readers want to know that others they respect (often called “opinion-leaders”) agree that your work is important and worthy of support. Highlight awards, great media coverage, and endorsements.

And, of course, when a few bad apples produce scandals, scrutiny of all public-interest organizations goes up. Of course, it behooves your organization to always be as transparent as possible—showing that your community can trust you to be open, honest, and accountable for what you do and say. Being a consistently visible and reliable presence is one important way to do this. And your documents can play a vital role in sending that message.

GO BEYOND PROMOTION FOR ITS OWN SAKE

When you are *writing to make a difference*, your two-fold goal is both to promote your organization as a part of a socially responsible solution *and* to educate your readers about key things they need to know in your issue area.

Constituent education is often the first step in marketing, especially if you are tackling a complex, often misunderstood problem that involves many variables, processes, or actors. Most of your readers are not specialists in your area, but their interests make them want to know more. You would be wise, then, to build an educational component into your organization’s branding.

EXAMPLE

Let's imagine that, as a socially responsible business, you offer environmentally friendly laundry services to people in your neighborhood. While your customers surely know about their need for clean clothes, many of them may not be aware of the hazards of chemicals often used in the dry cleaning process. Your marketing, then, would need to include information about *why* you offer green services (as well as how you do so). Your branding should embody both of these aspects.

In this world of information overload, we all could use a guide to the most critical aspects of the issues important to us. We also want to hear about how we can personally get involved in solutions, presented in a way that we can relate to.

And that information is precisely what you and your organization excel at providing! Give it to your readers—repeatedly and consistently. The more value you can deliver, the more they will see your organization as worthy of their support, investment, or patronage.

Promoting your brand and appropriately educating your community work hand in hand.

PROJECT PROFESSIONALISM

Errors of fact or clumsiness of style can stop your readers in their tracks. You don't want to undermine the work you have invested in developing and promoting your brand, so make sure that you don't give your readers reasons to question your credibility. It pays to be mindful of the details—and to apologize for that rare mistake. It is often much easier to fix a slip of the tongue than a slip of the pen.

Double-check your facts and figures by consulting outside sources (preferably, more than one). Clean up any lingering problems in grammatical usage (Chapters 21-25 will be helpful). And review your work for its visual impact (see Chapter 20, "Make sure it *looks* right," for a brief discussion of layout and graphic design.)



WRITING WORKOUT

Take a few moments right now to think about your organization's unique brand and how you can improve your presentation of it through your materials.

- STEP 1:** Brainstorm five to ten key words and concepts that you would like your readers to easily associate with your organization. The words should describe your organization's essential identity. If you are so inclined, sketch out pictures representing each of your chosen words:
- A. The unique value you add to your community
 - B. The attitudes or ideals you want to be known for
 - C. The tone, style, and personality you bring to your work
 - D. The reasons why your readers can trust you
- STEP 2:** Now consider the five to ten words that your organization currently uses to describe itself. Some places to look are your organization's name, tagline, and mission statement, as well as the organizational descriptions in your brochure, home page, newsletter, press releases, or funding proposals. Also think about your organization's logo, colors, and other visuals. Jot down some notes.
- STEP 3:** Next, compare the words and images you chose in Step 1 with the ones you found in your existing materials in Step 2. How are they similar? Or different?
- STEP 4:** If you found some discrepancies, choose three new "brand identity words" that you would like to begin incorporating in your copywriting. Discuss these changes with a supervisor or colleague. You may want to try experimenting with the changes to see how they resonate with your readers.