CATALOG COPYWRITING IS HARD, DIRTY WORK...

Selected reprints from
Otis Maxwell's "COPY" column in
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PAGINATION POINTERS

The pagination, or page sequence, is one of the most important creative decisions of your catalog. This may be why many or most catalogers require the copywriter, who's already taking copious notes (one hopes) at the initial planning and product presentation meetings, to translate those into a pagination.

Marketers may have a good idea what products should be featured, but finding ways to accommodate difficult merchandise or to make a story or spread about unrelated items is really a creative task. Creativity also comes into play when you have to translate specific space allocations into a cohesive formula which adds up to exactly the number of pages in your catalog. And when you have two great lead stories but only one opening spread, creative instinct can help you decide between them and find a home in your catalog for the also-ran.

For all these reasons, even if you as the marketer are ultimately responsible for the pagination, it's a good exercise to require your copywriter (possibly working as a team with the designer) to take a shot at it.

I recently did a DM day workshop on pagination with catalog designer Carol Worthington Levy. Here are a few principles we agreed are important:

- DON'T waste your prize opening spread on purely institutional copy. But DO use a visual table of contents or other product-oriented device to set a tone for the exciting merchandise presentation to come.
- Put lower-ticket impulse or add-on items on the pages near the order form.
- The pages just after the centerfold tend to be Death Valley, the least-read in your book. Use them for those "stock" items a good proportion of your audience will be required to seek out and others can safely ignore.
- Don't forget the inside back cover of your book is also a "hot spot". In fact, some studies have shown that over half of readers start at the back.

Tip for catalog directors: once that you've cajoled your writers to do your pagination, ask them to write "lead sheets". Lead sheets are one-page synopses of everything that goes on a page or spread: a list of merchandise, anticipated space if that was discussed in the meeting, photo directions, clues to models, amount of copy space that will be required, trademarks and other mandatories. These lead sheets then become a quick, portable and convenient reference for designers, photographers, stylists and others involved in production.

I learned to write leadsheets in the days when I worked on department store catalogs--a frantic, high-volume enterprise where organization was essential. I'm surprised they aren't mandatory for all catalogs. The reasons to make your writers responsible are first, they've already got the notes that should serve as background and second, they hopefully know how to communicate in writing.

Tip for copywriters: discipline yourself to write at least rough headlines while you're doing leadsheets. It is a challenging exercise that will give you the "big picture" of how spreads relate throughout the book and also will tell the designers and others how you see this vision coming together.

Remember that catalog headlines should set a theme for what's on the spread, in addition (or even instead of) communicating a benefit. In this regard catalog headlines

are quite different from the heads on space advertisements or the teasers on direct mail packages where you're a millisecond from the trashcan unless you titillate or arrest the reader.

The person reading an interior catalog spread has already made a commitment of time and attention, and now craves the in-depth details. Your headline should serve as a clue to what those details will be...and the rough heads you put on your leadsheets can thus be a cue to your creative partners about what you think is important to show and say.

HOW TO GIVE YOUR COPY THE RIGHT POINT OF VIEW.

All copy has a point of view. Unless you take conscious measures to make it otherwise, that point of view will be your own. This usually isn't desirable, because your needs and interests probably aren't the same as those of the audience you are writing to.

Here are some tactics I've found useful, as a catalog copywriter, for making my point of view correspond more closely to that of my target audience.

1. Find out who your reader is. Study the marketing research for age, sex, profession, educational level and extracurricular interests. If this background is unavailable or incomplete, the merchandise content of the catalog itself might give you clues: the mix of men's, women's and kids' clothing in a fashion catalog; the ratio of utilitarian and frivolous items in a cookware book.

2. Read what they read. Get your hands on a year's worth of the most popular magazine aimed at your audience. Study the winning mail order ads (the ones that repeat) for benefits and "hot buttons". Pore over the feature articles to find out what's new and exciting. Especially, read the columns in the front of the book. These are written by weary editors who must interest the same audience with the same material over and over again...the same task you now face.

3. Decide if your copy should have a distinct personality. This isn't the same as a point of view. A personality is something intrusive, an extra element layered on above all the product information. It's "I" vs. third person.

This personal touch might be totally inappropriate for a business to business catalog, but it's often the best possible way to write to a specialty market. It gives you an extra arrow in your quiver of copy weapons. If you simply can't think of anything to write about a product, you can always have your "character" deliver his/her personal commentary.

For instance, I just finished a catalog of sports merchandise in which the mythical proprietor was a knowledgeable but somewhat curmudgeonly old fan. I couldn't imagine this irascible individual would take the time to write an entire catalog, so I had the copy come from an anonymous scribe who liked to poke fun at his boss. It got me out of a lot of jams.

4. Write a benefit sentence for each product. Even if there isn't room for extra verbiage, this exercise will help you understand why your client or product manager selected each item and how it relates to other items on the page and in the catalog.

If I've diligently prepared to this point, I'm often pleasantly surprised at the things that pop out on the page. Items will begin to group themselves as fashion stories, or I'll find myself putting an arm around the reader like an old friend to deliver a time-saving tip for using the product.

5. Write the catalog from the inside out. The "voice" of the copy takes time to develop and mature. If I can, I save important spreads and institutional information (letters, "what's inside" etc.) for last. I usually begin somewhere in the middle of the book with a boring spread that isn't too heavily merchandised. This gives me room to noodle around and try and fail without inflicting serious damage. Then, when I'm done, I go back and rewrite these awful spreads.

6. When all else fails, write benefits. The above suggestions assume you have a fair amount of control over how much copy is in the book and what it says. This often isn't true. Maybe you already have a copy style sheet which is already cast in granite. Maybe there isn't room for anything but the bare essentials.

Insist on including at least one benefit for each product or, if there isn't even room for that, for each larger merchandise story. (I'm assuming that you have fact sheets from the merchandising people that list benefits in priority order.) This gives your copy the point of view of a friendly, competent sales clerk who doesn't know what the customer wants but is eager to help. Not a bad fallback at all.

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...But somebody has to do it. A copywriter might charge $500 or more (let's say) for a basic sales letter selling a single item. But that same writer will be lucky to get $250 or less for a page of catalog copy, selling half a dozen items.

Clearly, something has to give, if you're a copywriter and you get a catalog assignment but you also like to eat. Hopefully, it won't be the quality or the effectiveness of your copy.

Here are a few labor-saving techniques I have found useful, for turning out crisp catalog copy without turning my hours at the keyboard into War and Remembrance.

1. Organize each copy story around a primary product benefit. It's near impossible to describe all a product's features and benefits in a paragraph or two, so don't even try. Select the single most important thing about the item, and then start your copy by trumpeting that attribute.

It's okay to talk about other, unrelated product details once you get that "big idea" out of the way. Keep in mind that you have two readerships. A certain number of serious shoppers will pore over every word, no matter what you write. But browsers decide whether to become shoppers, based on a series of fleeting impressions the first time they flip through the catalog. Write to catch the eye of that second group, and the first will follow along.

2. Don't be afraid to write complete sentences, especially when presenting the "big idea" discussed above. Catalog writers tend toward a staccato, ellipse-laden style that conserves space but constipates creativity. Remember you aren't getting paid by the word, or lack thereof.

It's amazing how the use of an occasional "write like you talk" sentence, complete with awkward phraseology and nonessential bridge words (e.g. "that", "which") can break up a copy logjam. Like the designer's "white space", it's an oasis that refreshes and allows you and the reader to return to the copy wars renewed.

3. Use the PR writer's "inverted pyramid" composition to solve copy-fitting problems. This simply means you begin with your most important message, and then

proceed to progressively less important statements and/or those which require extra words to communicate relative to their significance.

The copy editor who receives a press release organized as an "inverted pyramid" knows he can ruthlessly slash the end of the story without seriously affecting content. For you, the "inverted pyramid" can be a tool for prioritizing copy points, and then with a clear conscience striking out the ones that won't fit.

4. Shamelessly plunder the copy in manufacturers' product sheets. Vendor brochures are typically a combination of densely-packed specs and corporate posturing....but look closer. You'll often find a gem or two of real product information you can pluck out and use verbatim--to the delight of the vendor, not to mention your client's co-op manager.

Remember that someone has already invested the research time and creative budget to create the copy plums which are now yours for the picking. Plus, by incorporating the vendor's tag line, buzzwords etc. you can piggyback on any name/brand recognition built through other advertising.

5. Don't even try to get around "mandatories". Every product has them, whether they be sizes, colors, fabrications, place of manufacture, models the product will fit, ways a logo or trademark is used, etc. etc. Every copywriter considers it his/her duty to circumvent them, leaving out allegedly essential information in favor of more creative copy. Don't bother.

In the first place, buyers want to read much of this stuff. They may very well need it to make a purchasing decision, even if it's boring for you to type "S-M-L" over and over again. And in the second place, the more mandatories you have to include the less original copy you have to produce for your catalog writer's pittance...so what's the problem?

KEY LETTERS AND OTHER KEYS

Key letters, item numbers and similar minutae don't really fall within the copywriter's domain...except as they relate to clarity of communication, and the image you present to your catalog reader. And that's where I'd like to offer a few personal preferences, from a copywriter's (and mail order shopper's) point of view:

The right kind of key letter. The featured item on the third page of your book might be keyed as any of the following: 3A 3a 3A. 3a. A A. a. a

In my mind, only the first alternative is correct. Here's why: Lower case key letters lack precision and make the reader feel silly when writing them on the order blank. Periods after key letters are okay in body copy, but look like printing mistakes when they appear over artwork. Key letters without page numbers are fine for traffic-generating retail catalogs, but the page number adds an additional point of reference and control when you're asking the customer to fill out an order blank.

By the way, few experienced catalogers use I, L, or O as key letters and many skip J and Q as well. The reason is that these can be mistaken for other letters when they are handwritten on a customer's order.

The right kind of item number. The way you assign item numbers in your catalog says something about your company. Very long item numbers make you look bureaucratic and indifferent to your readers' needs, and also increase the likelihood of error when the customer is filling out the order form.

Very short order numbers make you appear small, folksy and homespun. These attributes which may be desirable at other points in the communication process, but not necessarily at the point where I, the customer, am putting together an order and want assurance I will be served professionally and efficiently.

As a shopper, I like item numbers which are 4-6 digits long and have an alpha suffix in a "code" which I can crack. More than six digits is hard to remember when I am transferring information to the order form and have to momentarily keep the numbers in my head.

Reader-identifiable codes, like "B" for Blue, make the item numbers user-friendly because I can see they really stand for something. This makes me more cooperative and increases my attention level as I am writing down the order.

The right way to show prices. When mail order shoppers look at a price, they want to know one thing: how much the item costs. Prices without dollar signs, prices with a decimal but no cents (e.g. $24. instead of $24.00), and light-face prices which try to disappear within body copy do not really facilitate this process.

If I'm selling a single item, I write the price in bold face, with a dollar sign, and no punctuation after the price. Like this: **$24.99** For multiple items in a column, I'll eliminate the dollar sign after the first item. Unless coerced by an art director, I very rarely depart from this format.

If you use fractional dollar amounts in your prices, you can use the fractions to convey additional positioning for your items. Perhaps prices which end in even dollars stand for "quality", prices ending in .50 mean "value", and of course prices ending in .99 mean "sale". A pet peeve: I don't understand why any catalog would have some prices that end in 99 cents and others in 95 cents. It makes the company look disorganized.

The right way to charge shipping. Ideally, not at all--but "delivery included" seems to be going the way of the white spotted owl. As a shopper, I'm willing to pay a fair price for shipping and handling...but I get resentful when it's obvious to me that a company is turning its delivery charge into a profit center.

Shipping prices in parentheses after the item price tell me the price I just read is never the price I pay. UPS weights seem to be the fairest situation, but they require far too much work from the reader. And every UPS catalog seems to have at least one example of apparent price-gouging, as when a one-pound container of coffee is listed as "UPS Weight 2 pounds".

That leaves us with a shipping chart related to the dollar volume of the order. I know this doesn't take into account the delivery distance, or the varying weights of different items. But for me as a shopper, the convenience of the shipping chart outweighs these disadvantages.

With a shipping chart I only have to figure shipping charge once, instead of doing a computation for each item. Since the shipping chart is usually on or near the order

form, I don't have to fret about how much the charge is until I'm ready to place my order. At that point I've already decided to purchase, so a request (hopefully reasonable) for reimbursement of the cataloger's delivery expenses shouldn't faze me.

EYEFLOW AND THE KING'S ENGLISH:
a copywriter copes with Herr Voegele.

More and more designers seem to be following the teachings of Siegfried Voegele, the man who strapped a camera to the heads of thousands of subjects in order to determine their catalog reading patterns.

Professor Voegele, as you may know, discovered that the average reader first looks at the upper right of a catalog spread, then the middle left, finally the lower right. (The top and bottom left corners are often ignored altogether.)
A designer who applies the principles of eyeflow dynamics can dramatically increase visual comprehension. But this presents a challenge for copywriters--whose work is traditionallly read from left to right and from top to bottom.

Consider this scenario. A designer, true to the teachings of Voegele, positions the product to be featured in the "hot spot" at the lower right of the spread, then indicates the copy for the spread in its own logical spot beginning at the upper left. The copywriter, with equal logic, will lead with the feature product. Result: the copy and the product are as far apart as they possibly could be. Plus, Voegele tells us, nobody looks at the upper left corner anyway.

"Voegelization" has provided valuable objective research and design direction, neither of which needs to come at the expense of copy coherence. Copywriters, here are some tips for survival in an era of eyeflow dynamics.

1. Convert "body copy" to "cut and copy" whenever possible. "Cut and copy" means that each item has its own copy block, immediately adjacent to the picture. The conventional wisdom is that "cut and copy" is fine for occasional spreads with an assortment of odds and ends, but you wouldn't want to use it consistently because the catalog would lack focus and direction.

Today, copywriters who can't get the words close to the pictures face the opposite problem--the design is too strong, not too namby-pamby. And "cut and copy" may be the key to peaceful coexistence.

2. Turn other copy into "fixation points". These, according to Voegele, are locations where the eyes tend to pause briefly on the page before moving on. Placing fixation points strategically is one of the tricks a designer uses for forcing the reader to spend more time on the spread.

Your designer has a drawing board full of fixation-point tools including outline photos, spot color, "bursts", arrows and other dingbats. You can put your copy in the picture by specifying it, whever possible, as a graphic element. Examples: sidebars, captions, callouts to photos, and freestanding subheads that are not tied to specific body copy.

3. If you must have long copy, use the copywriter's secret weapon: facts. Let's concede that copy can be, visually, the least-interesting element on the spread. However,

long copy is sometimes mandatory. Perhaps you're providing institutional information that applies to all the images on the page, and shouldn't be linked to any one of them.

In this situation, you can guarantee readership if you include details the interested reader has to read--like dimensions, colors or, best of all, price. A well-designed catalog spread is a feast for the eyes but, sooner or later, that information has to be processed by the brain.

4. Tell your designer that Voegele's rules are supposed to be BROKEN, not followed. That's right. Since readers are going to look at the "hot spots" anyway, it amounts to overkill to put the strongest graphics in those positions. By relegating major graphics to the cooler corners, a savvy designer can insure that more of the spread will be scanned...and more of your copy will be read. (I'm indebted to designer Carol Worthington Levy for revealing this invaluable tip.)

Examples: putting the feature picture on the left of the spread, and beginning the copy in the upper right, means the eye will see the copy and then the art that goes with the copy--and, hopefully, comprehend both. On a copy-heavy spread where type has to start in the upper left, a small illustration in the top left corner (perhaps a detail or non-selling photo) insures that the eye will be drawn to that spot, instead of ignoring it.

THE RIGHT WAY TO USE TESTIMONIALS IN COPY

Testimonials can be a key element in your catalog copy. They help attract new customers by showing that others have had a satisfactory ordering experience. They help bond existing customers (something that will become more important as postal rates and acquisition costs continue to climb) by demonstrating that you're a "real" organization with real consumer relationships.

In order to work well for you, the testimonials you use should have these characteristics:

They should be specific. I'm looking at a Land's End testimonial in which the customer says she's been shopping "since way back when you sold sailing equipment". Jackson & Perkins uses a detailed anecdote about the customer who put his roses through a torture test in a Texas Panhandle winter. Specifics sell. These testimonials are believable, and make interesting reading in their own right...as opposed to generic one-liners or one-worders ("outstanding", "excellent") which seem contrived.

They should be realistic. Never correct your customers' grammar or edit phrases to fit the King's English. Write like they talk. (I do, however, correct spelling errors. Matter of personal preference.)

Resist the temptation to crop and consolidate. Leave in the rambling, off-the-subject asides; these provide the veracity you are seeking. Use ellipses sparingly and only when absolutely necessary (for example, because the quote isn't understandable without this editing).

They should be relevant. A business-to-business client gave me a series of "testimonials" from dealers who said they were happy to be selling the product. This is not what the customer is looking for. Testimonials should be about the ordering process (how easy it is, or how a problem was solved) or about the specific product sold on that page.

They should be signed. Testimonials followed by initials and no address appear to be faked...even where they aren't. Whenever possible, I include a full name and city in a testimonial from a consumer; name, title and company for a professional. If you must use initials to protect the customer's privacy, include the city and state to retain believability.

THE RIGHT WAY TO GET TESTIMONIALS: Some products--especially gardening, cooking and other hobbies--seem to generate floods of unsolicited positive comments from customers who want you to know how well they're doing with your merchandise. If this situation applies to you, you're lucky. Much more likely, you'll have to ask for testimonials.

Start with a customer service survey (something you should be doing anyway). Follow up with phone calls to promising responses. When you talk to them, have a mental list of topics you'd like to touch on and gently lead the conversation into these areas. Try to elicit case histories or other specific comments and examples. Before you hang up, ask if it's okay to use the comments in your advertising. (Don't push it if the answer is no.)

My next step is to type up a transcript of my call notes, followed by a sanitized version in which I try to make the comments more coherent and cogent without editing out the customer's personality. At the bottom I type:

[Company name] has my permission to use the above quotation in its advertising and promotional material

[ ] as is [ ] with changes.

_____

Signature

I then send this self-contained authorization form to the interviewee, via fax or by mailing with a self-addressed stamped envelope. In almost every case, I've received it back right away and with no changes. Warning: the above approval language was written without the help of a lawyer. Your legal department might want to add some "hold harmless" verbiage. Resist. The more mumbo-jumbo your customer has to sign his or her name to, the less likely you are to get an OK.

In closing, here are two ways not to get testimonials. Don't invent them and then sign the name of a willing friend or co-worker. It's smarter, and not much harder, to get the real thing (assuming your company has at least one satisfied customer, that is). Second, sometimes a well-meaning customer will offer to compose a testimonial for you. Never, never accept. The customer will write what they think you want to hear--and the result will be about as hokey as you can get.

THE END OF THE LINE:
or, how direct marketers can capitalize on the mistakes of general advertisers.

There's a supermarket in Southern California which promises to open a new checkstand when 3 or more people are in line. Shoppers stand under hanging signs announcing "The End of the Line"...in endless queues which snake back into the food aisles.

Also in Southern California, a bank promotes a "goof guarantee": they'll pay depositors $5 if the bank makes a mistake of any kind. A threat to the bottom line? Not in this instance, because the bank's surly customer service employees make it almost impossible to collect the fiver.

What's happening here (and in countless other retail and product ads) is that some dim lightbulb in marketing or operations has equated saying with doing.

General advertisers have learned from direct (and from guerilla marketers like Trout and Ries) that specifics sell. And ads which state a benefit or cite a USP (Unique Selling Proposition) outpull chest-puffing vagueness.

But suppose your establishment is so me-too, or your margins so thin, you can't offer a single benefit? According to this school of thought, no problem--you just make something up. It's unlikely that anyone will call you on it, because ads are just image anyway. Right?

Wrong. As direct marketers know from personal and statistical experience, buyers aren't bovine idiots. Not only will shoppers remember their negative experiences, they'll tell their friends about them. And even write columns in newsletters about them.

It's no secret that service-oriented retail establishments are cutting back as they enter the slimmed-down 90s. We read about it, and we all observe it every day. Only a very foolish and unrealistic executive would think people don't notice. Yet it's a sign of the times, and the state of retail merchandising and general advertising, that banks, supermarkets and others not only try to get away with poor service but promote as good service what obviously isn't.

This represents a golden competitive opportunity for catalogers and other mail-order sellers. In a retail establishment, customer contact is constant from the moment the shopper walks in the door. But for a cataloger, your contact occurs at four key points. The catalog itself. The voice on the phone when the customer calls to order. The order itself, when it is delivered. And the way you field any inquiries or complaints.

Handle the customer properly in these four contacts and you'll be a customer service hero...especially in comparison to your retail competitors, as more and more misguided marketers load up and fire away at their own lower extremities.

How can a catalog copywriter help? (This column is supposed to be about copy.) Unlike our brethren in general agencies, we don't attempt to create the illusion of customer service where there isn't any. But we can make sure every reader knows how efficient and concerned we are.

Take a walk through your organization's fulfillment operation. You'll probably be impressed by the array of barcode scanners, package handling equipment and other devices which are there for only one reason--to get the orders out as quickly as possible. Tell your readers. They'll be impressed too.

Visit your customer service department. More than likely, you'll find at least one operator who's been there forever and prides herself or himself or herself on knowing everything there is to know about your product or service. Why not profile this person in your next issue?

And one final point. Remember that catalog copy, itself, is a form of customer service. Shoppers count on the information you provide to be complete and accurate. Make your copy helpful and friendly as well and you'll go a long way toward improving

your company's outlook for the 1990's....while your retail competitors continue to shoot themselves in the foot.