An Interview with Expert Web Copywriter Scott T Smith
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It is my pleasure to introduce to you Scott T Smith, head writer at **CopyWriting.Net** and copy writing guru. Before you read any further, however, I want to give you a heads up that this is not a normal article from StepForth. This is an unedited interview written in a very personal style. In other words, this is not the normal condensed knowledge that my staff and I try to put out every week. That said, I really wanted to introduce you to Scott because I feel his copywriting skills are top of the line and either his services or his tips may help you shore up your bottom line. If you want to get in touch with Scott T Smith he is best contacted by email, via his Web site **CopyWriting.Net** or phone in his Montana USA office at 406.586.4112.

What is web copywriting and why is Search Engine Guide publishing an article about it? The fact is web copywriting is a perfect mate with search engine optimization and this has been the case ever since SEO became a reality. After all, as an SEO it is abundantly clear to me that getting people to your website serves no purpose unless they can be converted into sales; which is where a great copywriter comes in. An expert web copywriter like Scott T Smith has the talent to change your website into a sales machine while search engine optimization services and other forms of online marketing drive the convertible viewers.

So, without further adieu, here is my unedited interview with Scott T Smith. Be sure to take notes because Scott let some great tips escape in response to my questions.

Ross: "So tell me Scott, what is web copy writing?"

Scott: Just this: words power the Web and Internet. The Web is the graphical interface of the 'Net, where we actually see what's going on in the inky blackness of cyberspace. But when you scrape away all the flashiness of presentation, it still boils down to what is being said. Which means… WORDS. That's what search engines read. But more importantly, that's what human beings read.

So what is web copy writing? Writing for humans 1ST. Writing for spidering

search engines always comes in as a close 2nd.

The actual process of web copy writing is much the same as print copy writing, BUT… with its own set of rules.

First thing to remember is that the reader is reading through a cold computer screen. Generally, it's not very inviting. The world outside the computer screen is much more compelling, and oftentimes a lot more interesting. Heck, it's most often the comfort of someone's own home. Which means the first words on the screen - yes, the Headline - had better grab the reader by the scruff of the neck and forcefully pull them in.

Know what? Very often this is against the reader's will… after all, as the writer you are asking - no, scratch that, you are demanding that they pay very close attention to what you have to say.

And according to studies by research sites like MarketingExperiments.com, you have less than 30 seconds to interest your reader enough for them to read on. Which means, your headline and opening salvo had better be compelling.

Most copywriters spend a great deal of time writing and rewriting their headlines. I do. Here's a copywriter's secret (which if you've been online for awhile, is not really a secret at all…): there are entire books for sale containing nothing but great headlines, as well as 'cheat' books of great headlines out there in circulation. We use them to jog our creativity. They are great resources when your 'butt's to the blade', as my dear old Dad used to say. FYI, at this point I've boiled my own copywriting resource shelf down to only two books: Brian Keith Voiles outstanding 'Ad Magic', and Jay Abraham's 'Mr. X' book. For me, these two books say it all for both print and web copy writing.

To wrap it up about web copy writing, you should know this: readers don't read in linear fashion. Maybe this is obvious to you. After all, they can enter your site at any entry point, via any page or any link.

So how do you deal with this? Simple. Treat every page of your site as a complete entity unto itself. In other words, each page of your site is its own 'pitch' if it's a sales site. If it's an informational site, each page of your site must offer a complete piece of the puzzle per page PLUS provide an overview of your company.

Be smart. Write each page to be unique. Take the time to do this, and you will be rewarded with more readers. Better search engine positioning. More sales.

One more thing to know about your reader: they won't read your page from top to bottom. Instead, they will skip around. First, they will read your headline and opening salvo. Then they will jump down the page. Studies show they will often head straight to your pricing, then back up to your bullet points, testimonials, your PS (post script), and then…

They may actually get around to reading your copy from top to bottom.

Don't be frustrated by this. As you can see, the real difference between print copy writing and web copy writing is the 'modular' concept. As the writer, you are forced to take a modular approach to the writing. Because of the reader. And, sometimes because of the designer. A designer will do the most interesting things to your copy. After all, this is their job. And a good SEO will often take your copy and go one step further to give you a boost with the search engines.

No problem. Go modular, be as brilliant as you can be in each facet of your copy, and you cannot help but succeed.

Ross: "What is the biggest mistake you see in other people's web copy?"

Scott: Every business has their own culture, but what I'm about to say applies to each and every one. We've had the privilege over the years to work with some of the largest companies and campaigns in the world, as well as with one-person shops and brand-new startups. We've experienced enormous success at every level, and we've also been in on failures. So we can speak from experience here.

This is what I see.

The biggest mistake on the web, in the web copy, is not being personal. It doesn't matter if you are a mega-corporation, or a billionaire. And it doesn't matter if you are a tiny little shop trying to come across as an established big business. You MUST be personal.

I'd even go so far as to say… go "belly to belly". The Internet is such a cold medium. You have to melt the frost. Taking this step with your copy is key.

Be personal. Go belly to belly. Don't be afraid to 'tip your hat and reveal yourself'. We all have warts, bumps and bruises.

Then roll up your sleeves and write the very best copy you can. Plan to rough draft it without being too critical. Sleep on it. Then, plan on being very critical

indeed with each module of your copy. Buff and polish every single one. Your copy is organic and alive. Write and rewrite. Write and write, and…

Web copy is never done, another wonderful difference it has from print copy writing. You can easily go back and rewrite. And you should. Testing various elements is easy. Simply test a single element at a time.

And remember to keep it personal.

Ross: "What is the best client result you have seen from your copy writing efforts? Do you have a great story you could share with my readers?"

Scott: We have a deal with our clients. Since '99 we haven't gone public with our client list. All work has been proprietary and private. Some of our clients are names you would know in the online marketing and copywriting world. We write behind-the-scenes for these famous online 'gurus', which I'm very proud to do. It's a privilege to have access to these special people. They're the ones who set the trends, and they're out there on the front lines. Yes, they charge the big bucks, then turn around and pay us on a much smaller scale to do the actual writing work. It's a win-win for us both.

So as far as names of the famous go… I'm kind of stuck. I can say that we have indeed made millions for multiple online campaigns since '97.

Here's one I will try to 'mask', as I can't get in touch on short notice to ask permission: a friend of mine (who with a partner started the world's most famous software company - there's your clue!) had an idea for a remarkable brain mapping facility. Although he himself had the money to fully bankroll the project, he wanted investment of a different sort by medical facilities and research organizations. So he asked me to craft a story piece, which would become a long sales letter involving the medical community and foundations in investing in this project.

I wrote the piece, which became a 'modular' Web site and print sales letter. The result? An initial investment of $80 million grew to an investment of $120 million.

I'm quite proud of this, because it's a terrifically worthy endeavor. And yes, he really is a friend of mine. When I was a teenager, we had the world's worst rock and roll band. We loved Hendrix, and were devastated when he died. There's another clue for you.

Now here's a real life story, with names: The Bozeman Angler at www.

BozemanAngler.com is a fly fishing shop based in Bozeman, Montana. About 7 years ago they had a terrible web site that they had thrown almost $12K into. And no one came… So they were stuck, with a busted web site, and they didn't know what to do.

I knew I could help, so I roped a friend of mine in to re-doing their design (Dairrell Ham of MacFriendly.com) for pennies, and I more or less volunteered to rewrite their site in exchange for some quality fishing time. Yes, I bartered.

The result? Their business grew from $400K to $785K in three seasons, and they now do 96% of their marketing on the web. Their offline advertising budget is practically nil, and the only paid advertising they do beyond a local Yellow Pages ad is a fairly aggressive PPC campaign which I helped them set up.

The success of their site is due in large part to smart web copy writing, which is personal. It was highly important that the writing be infused with their voices (the voices of fishing guides), that the behind-the-scenes optimization be focused for their industry, and that their link campaign be ongoing. This has almost doubled their business, and made them the most successful fly shop in the town of Bozeman, Montana, where the local joke is that 'this is where God gets off the plane to go fly fishing'. I live here, and believe this to be true…;)

Ross: "How can you write content for fields that you do not work in?"

Scott: The only way to write copy for a field I don't know is to do the necessary research to 'feel the pain'. In other words, research the field until I know it extremely well, and… dare I say it?… feel it deeply.

Yes, even if it's about widgets.

I must understand the pitfalls and drawbacks well, and all the benefits and pluses the products and services seek to address. When I say 'feel the pain', I mean it. The word PERSONAL crops up again. How can you write it if it's not personal to you?

Here's a gripe about the profusion of copywriting courses now online: they teach technique. Uh-huh. But what they don't teach is…

PASSION.

Too bad. Because without it, guess what? Most writing stinks. There are too

many cookie-cutter direct response sales letters out there now which take the 'bash you over the head' approach.

They're like action films with characters you just don't care about. And if you don't care whether they live or die, then guess what? You're sure not going to recommend the film.

And odds are good you're not going to make the sale.

So getting back to writing about a field that's new, foreign, outside your realm of experience… what do you do? Roll up your sleeves, go to your favorite search engine or directory, and… start researching.

The Internet is the greatest research tool ever invented, and it's easy to do the necessary research. Look up forums. Newsgroups. Pay attention to how language is used. Buzzwords. Sites. What people are most interested in.

Allow yourself to get excited about it. As Brian Keith Voiles would say, "be childlike". He's right!

Ross: "Scott can you offer some seasoned advice to my readers who may want to do their own copy writing? Perhaps some guidelines that might help them out?"

Scott: Yes, here's your easy/hard assignment. Easy because it really is easy. Hard because it's easy to veer off track, and because you really do need to be childlike to make this work!

Here goes: get a sheet of paper, and draw a line from top to bottom down the middle. On the left-hand side at the top, write 'Benefits'. On the right-hand side at the top, write 'Features'.

About Benefits: a 'benefit' is something your product or service does for the good of your customer.

About Features: a 'feature' is a fact about something. It describes what something does, or how it works. That's all.

Okay, get yourself a pen or pencil. You are about to spew out EVERYTHING IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER! This 'no particular order' direction is very important. You DO NOT want to edit while you are doing this exercise. All you want to do is… spew.

Don't leave anything out, and please don't worry about being messy here. Go

ahead and ramble. Just get it ALL down.

When you feel that you have gotten it all down, then you're done. Congratulations! Only when you've gotten everything down in both the Benefits and Features categories should you go back and put them in order of priority.

This is your first step for writing your sales letter. Here's why:

- Your headline will come from your most important benefit
- Your list of benefits - from most important to least important - will be utilized and fleshed out in your salesletter
- Your list of features - from most important to least important - will be utilized and fleshed out in your salesletter

Regarding writing the rest of your salesletter, here's a question for you:

Do you like long copy sales letters, or shorter copy sales letters? My own feeling is that you should let your own taste inform your answer here, but with this understanding:

The higher ticket your asking price, the more convincing you may have to do. In other words, longer copy for higher pricing.

Here's some more food for thought: there are endless formulae for writing the optimal sales letter. Let your own taste dictate. If you love Marlon Sanders, his formula is available. If you prefer another approach, no doubt it's out there. But on the other hand…

You could always dare to be different!

Take the modular approach. This is essential for web copy writing success, on all your web pages.

Be personal. This is THE way, and can separate you out from the rest of the pack. In today's cutthroat web business environment, this is a very good thing.

Ross: "How does writing copy for the web relate to search engine optimization? Are you optimizing the web site when you write copy?"

Scott: Over the past eleven years Copywriting.Net has often worked with SEO firms in partnership for their clients. This has been a great relationship for us to have, and one we have sought out. It's proven to be the optimal

service combination for client sites, giving them the foundation they must have to weather the ups and downs of the dynamic, ever changing web business environment.

Now Copywriting.Net is proud to be partnering with one of the very best: StepForth. Together we can anticipate changes, strategize and maneuver to help our clients deal with the cutthroat online business world. Our combined services are exactly what clients need today and in the future.

I have a basic understanding of SEO, having studied with Robin Nobles and earned certification through the Academy of Web Specialists. But I'm a writer, that's my department. StepForth are the expert SEOs. I need to have enough up-to-date understanding of basic SEO practices to ensure that our copywriting work always has an eye on the SEO needs of our clients, and supports our mutual goals.

Because our clients are working with StepForth, then it's highly important for us to guarantee our writing fits StepForth's SEO needs. Always. This is key. We do this in the writing itself, and by listening carefully to any needs as they arise and as we progress toward finished copy.

As I mentioned, we always write for human beings first. But the copy can and should be adjusted for spidering search engines. So in answer to your question, yes absolutely. We do indeed work toward optimization when we write the site copy.

It's all about serving the client, and improving the bottom line.

Thank You Scott
Big thanks to Scott for this incredibly thorough and engaging response to my questions. I hope you found some nuggets of wisdom within this article that you can apply to your website. If you would like to reach Scott T Smith to discuss his copywriting services , please contact him via email, via his Web site **CopyWriting.Net** or by phone in his Montana USA office at 406.586.4112.

Copywriting.Net is actively seeking to partner with excellent SEO firms.
Please contact Scott directly.