

Why so many websites fail

And the three elements you must have to make yours succeed

by **Michael Fortin**

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That Michel Fortin is one of the world's best copy writers— on and off the Internet— is a proven fact. But first and foremost, he's a skilled and insightful master marketer. The points he makes in this article apply to any presentation, in print, pixels or live and in-person. It's not the medium that's the message... the message is the message. And getting that message across the right way— telling the story— is what this piece is all about.

A significant reason behind websites that fail is the lack of an effective direct response sales message. A message that gets people to do something, even if it's to keep reading.

A direct response message is not just about response. It's comprised of three elements: it must be...

1. Captivating

(it captures the reader's attention)

2. Riveting

(it pulls her into reading further) and...

3. Engaging

(it calls her to act).

How can you incorporate those three vital elements?

If I were to answer that question adequately it would likely take me an entire book the size of an encyclopedia! But for now, let me give you a succinct explanation...

First, write to be scanned.

On the Internet, people are fast-paced, click-happy (with an attention span the size of a DNA molecule) and easily bored. The burden of getting visitors to stop what they're doing and start reading rests entirely upon the headline, the headers and any grabbers-- things that help grab people's attention (e.g., boxes, borders, graphics, etc).

But once you captured your readers' attention, the next step is to keep them (and to keep them reading).

If you know the AIDA formula, you know this is where you need to generate interest. But I go a step further by saying that your job is even more important here, since you must not only generate interest but also maintain it. And that is a much harder task, especially online.

[NOTE: AIDA is short for Attention, Interest, Desire, Action—the old advertising formula that names a few key elements that the copy writer must include in his sales text, and in which order these must be included: First you must grab the readers Attention, then develop his Interest in the product, make him Desire the product and finally compel him or her to Act.—JMF]

It's also the crux behind a long copy sales letter's success.

The debate about long versus short copy can be wearisome for most copywriters, since they must constantly explain to their clients the benefits of using long copy. Even though long copy is statistically proven to outperform short copy, many clients still tell me that longer copy will never be read, and that on the Internet things are short and fast. And then they ask me to trim my drafts down.

(I often fervently protest when this happens, and you'll soon find out why.)

Sure, I completely agree that things are short and fast online.

But there is a difference between grabbing people's attention AND holding on to it. Keeping readers riveted, hanging on to each and every word with an intense desire to know what's next, is the goal of any direct response copy.

Remember this: **There's a difference between long copy and long-winded copy.**

(It sounds the same as reading a story, right? Well, it is. Like a book that's called a "page turner," copy that keeps people glued to each and every paragraph is one that is intensely interesting, curiously inviting and uncomfortably compelling.)

As an aside, why do you think we now include "stickiness" as a measuring stick in web analytics? Granted, some of it is entertainment value, like videos and graphics. But nine times out of 10, it's copy. Period.

Here's a known fact:

Prospects who are qualified and genuinely interested in the product or service being offered always want more information about it, not less.

If they are not qualified or interested from the outset, no matter how long or short the copy is, they will simply never buy. If they're not interested or qualified, they won't read 15 words, much less 1,500 words.

Shorter copy can lead to three potential outcomes:

1. A lower response due to the lack of information;
2. An incessant need for more data, leading to a barrage of information requests or questions;
3. Or, a higher number of cancellations, refunds and returns since the product or service turned out to be different than what was initially expected.

***If long copy leads to poor results,
it has nothing to do with the
length. It has everything to do
with the copy.
It's simply too boring.***

It didn't elevate the reader's level of interest, and it failed to keep her reading. Admittedly, it's a challenge— and the reason why most online business owners usually opt for short copy, since writing long copy that engages, entices and entertains is very difficult. (Yes, I did say 'entertain.' It really is all about storytelling.)

Good copy, on the other hand, is where the reader hangs onto every word, and becomes more and more excited the further she reads it. You see, long copy is like telling a good story— and copywriters are indeed storytellers. If your copy tells a compelling story, people will read it ... **All of it.** When it is written well, long copy can lead to a much greater level of response.

Look at it this way:

You visit a bookstore and notice a book that seems to entice you. For instance, the cover, the title and the cover copy, such as editorial raves or the author's biography, pull you into the book. Even the opening chapter is delectable. So, you decide to buy the book.

The book seems to be inviting, exciting and entertaining, and the story compels you to read every single page, no matter how big the book is.

Take Stephen King, for example. If you're a Stephen King fanatic, which means: 1) you're in his target market, and 2) you're interested in everything King writes. Now, let's say King publishes a massive, 800-page tome. Are you **not** going to read it simply because "it's too long?" Of course not.

In fact, the book is so good that you either wish it was longer or, once done, are prepared to read it over once more. You just can't put the book down, even if time is limited, and you're busy or preoccupied with other things.

Here's a flipside.

Let's say, as you read it further, the story makes no more sense. You become confused, perhaps a little frustrated, and you slowly begin to lose interest. The plot no longer invites you to keep reading. You drift away and find it harder to continue. Ultimately, the storyline fails to keep you excited about the book. So, you stop, close the book and then shelve it. Now, it gathers dust in your library.

The excuse? It's TOO long!

Let me ask you, how many books in your library did you fail to finish reading (or to start reading, for that matter)? Perhaps some. Perhaps many. But the same thing holds true with direct response copy.

Long copy works better than short copy. But it only works if it's interesting, captivating and riveting. Call it "edutainment." Copy must be educational and entertaining.

However, in a handful of cases shorter copy is warranted. (There is such a thing as "overselling" in copy.) But the only real way to know for sure is to test, test and test. Claude Hopkins, author of "Scientific Advertising," wrote an important axiom:

"Almost any question can be answered cheaply, quickly and finally, by a test campaign. This is the only way to answer them, not by arguments around a table. Go to the court of last resort... The buyers of your product."

As my mentor, copywriting genius Dan Kennedy once said in a recent interview:

"Now, the person who says 'But I would never read all that copy' makes the mistake of thinking they are their customer ... And they are not. We are never our own customers.... There is a thing in copywriting I teach called 'message-to-market match'. It is this: when your message is matched to a target market that has a high level of interest in it, not only does the level of responsiveness go up but readership goes up, too...

The whole issue of interest goes up."

The next step is to engage the reader.

Again, you're like an author telling a good story, and your copy must read like one. But like all good stories, the reader must become intimately involved in the plot. They see themselves in the shoes of the characters living out the story.

And to do this, you need what I often call "UPWORDS." It's an acronym that means: "Universal picture words or relatable, descriptive sentences."

First, using "universal picture words" means to use words and mental imagery that help to paint vivid pictures in the mind.

Lace your copy with words that engage as many of the senses as possible, and cause your prospects to easily visualize already enjoying the benefits of your offer.

As for "universal," it means to use words that appeal to, and can be easily interpreted by, the vast majority of readers. In other words, use words to "encode" your message so that, when they are read, can be decoded in the same way by most of your readers. Your job is to get the reader not only to read your copy but also to understand it, internalize it and appreciate it.

Remember this simple yet extremely important rule:

"Different words mean different things to different people."

Some words can be interpreted in one way by one reader and in a different way by another. Your job, therefore, is to choose words that cater and universally appeal to the bulk of your readers in order for them to fully appreciate what you're conveying.

For example, a challenge among cosmetic surgeons is the fact that prospective patients will call for an estimate over the phone when obviously the doctor needs to see her beforehand. (An initial, in-person assessment is always required, even by law, to see if that patient is a surgical candidate. Giving out an estimate implies that the patient is indeed a good candidate for the surgery when it may not be the case.)

Here's the crux of the problem:

Most patients don't understand the significance of seeing the doctor in person. Some may feel intimidated by doctors or by surgery, while others may simply be in a rush and want to "shop around." While they may understand the reason, they may not necessarily appreciate the importance, because cosmetic surgery is an uncommon process. So, doctors will use analogies, referring to a more common approach, such as cosmetic dentistry.

Why? Unlike surgery, most people have had their teeth done at some point in their lives. They already know it. They already have a "reference point" in their minds they can relate to.

So, doctors will say: "Like a dentist, I can not give you an estimate over the phone without any x-rays of your teeth let alone the knowledge of how many cavities you actually have." People now understand not only the reason but also the importance of seeing the doctor in person in order to obtain an accurate estimate.

This applies to every business.

Business owners often become so intimately involved with their product or business that they tend to forget to look at them from their prospect's perspective.

For example, they tend to use a language that only people in their industry or "on the other side of the fence," so to speak, can fully appreciate. But that approach can backfire... **And often does.**

Therefore, your job is to use analogies, metaphors and comparisons, and most importantly stories, all in a language to which the prospect can relate.

That's what "relatable, descriptive sentences" mean. Words are not messages in themselves. They are merely symbols. Your choice of words can actually alter the understanding, and particularly the emotional impact, of your message.

Finally, use action words (i.e., active verbs and not passive ones) that not only compel your readers but also "propel" them into action. Tell them what they must do and take them "by the hand," in other words. Don't stick with mere verbs. Use action words that paint vivid pictures in the mind, too. And the more vivid the picture is the more compelling the request will be.

For example, you're a financial consultant. Rather than saying something like, "Poor fiscal management may lead to financial woes," say, "Stop mediocre money management from sucking cash straight out of your wallet!" (People can visualize the action of "sucking" better than they can

"leading.") Instead of, "Let me help you maintain your balance sheet," say, "Borrow my eyes to help you keep a steady finger on your financial pulse."



Michel Fortin is one of THE BEST direct response copywriters, authors, speakers and consultants working on the Internet today. His specialties are long copy sales letters and websites. You can watch him rewrite copy on video each month, and get tips and tested conversion strategies proven to boost response in his membership site: TheCopyDoctor.com

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