

DESIGN CRUX

SPECIAL REPORT

In order to get you up to speed on how I work, I have developed a series of special reports. These reports provide invaluable context for the conversations we will have on matters of design strategy, marketing and copywriting. It takes just minutes to read and avoids all sorts of misunderstandings and confusion when working together on projects.

USP 911: The Intensive Care Clinic for Unique Selling Propositions

By John Soellner

They aren't unique. They don't sell. They're barely propositions.

One thing which keeps cropping up in copywriting critiques I do is Unique Selling Propositions (USPs). To put it bluntly, what people insist on calling a USP should be put in a critical care unit.

You can call absolutely anything a USP. Calling a tagline or clever (common) catchphrase a USP doesn't make it one. Here are some general guidelines for breathing life into USPs....

It is very hard to be unique these days. However with a little business savvy imagination, you can resuscitate the sickliest of USP.

Let's say you want to sell gift baskets. One basket case business, faced with being another "me too," figured there had to be a better way. They surveyed the competitive landscape for a niche business. Instead of looking at gift baskets as aesthetics, they studied what people use gift baskets for.

Looking at gift baskets this way turned up a valuable insight: Gift Baskets are sending a message.

"Our Gift Baskets Send Coworkers 'Gentle Reminders' About HygieneAnonymously" They repositioned their product line to target

workplace issues, replacing fruitcakes, garlic sausage and cheese with mouthwash and other issue-specific gift baskets.

A florist, faced with wilted inventory, tried repackaging their drooping flowers with melted chocolates as Breakup Gifts. Targeting and customer insight replace the usual idea of figuring out "how to make people buy our stuff."

When star copywriter Gary Bencivenga wrote "A gifted product is mightier than a gifted pen ...has built more fortunes than any other marketing insight and is the surest road to riches in business." he was talking about the U killing most USPs.

Most USP fatalities result from knowing more about products and what you want to sell than customers and what they want to buy.

Salesmanship and the Demo Factor

People spit out "copy is salesmanship in print" like a stuck CD. All you have to do to rattle their cage is ask the would-be copywriter what salesmanship is.

If you ever get to take sales training, you'll discover the following answer is pretty standard: Salesmanship is the transfer of emotion. That's well and good but left me with more questions than it answered when I first heard it. I soon learned the devil is in the details of exactly how that happens.

What's of more practical use is figuring out and influencing the customer's internal dialog. Mediocre sale people allow the client to sit there while they give their pitch, and robotically run a stock demo. The better sales people don't just demonstrate their product, they engage you.

Infomercials do dramatic demos, with vacuum cleaner sales people doing side-by-side comparisons to show what their vac picks up versus what other guys leave behind. Until you see

the claims stacked up against the competition, you can't be sure something better won't be along in a couple of minutes.

Ailing USPs should treat unfounded claims like "we're better" and "we listen" as seriously as chest pains signal a cardiac event. Ignoring the symptoms of vague, unfounded claims is a USP fatality waiting to happen. Yet every day people develop USPs in a competitive vacuum.

A Business Proposition You Can't Refuse

I'm going to show you the formula for taking a USP off the critical list. Complete the following sentence, "Doesn't it make you mad when the companies in our industry..." And then follow up with "The reason we're different is we make good on the broken promises of competitors by..."

Put the both together and you can get amazing results:

Don't you hate the way most roofing contractors work where you can't watch? We're the only roofers in the city who have live video feeds online, so you can log in and watch what we're doing.

Don't you hate paying for your jeweler's overhead? We opened on the second floor because we found the bulk of our business is generated by referral. Since we don't need a street presence, we have less overhead, and better security, so we can price things 12.2% lower, on average.

Don't you hate the way potato chips have the flavor washed away just to prevent the potato slices from sticking together on high-efficiency monster production lines? We don't wash off the natural potato juices, so these are crisper, potatoier potato chips called "Dirty" Potato Chips. They're not really dirty, the baked in juices just mean the tasty potato chips are a bit browner.

How to find the “Selling Story” buried in Your Business

By John Soellner

Many of the gurus suggest you stock your swipecard with a different kind of copywriter. It may be Joe Sugarman or Drew Kaplan. New economy marketing guru Seth Godin is a fan of storytelling copy. I recall it was copywriting guru Dan Kennedy who turned me onto the catalog copywriting of J. Peterman. You quickly notice these examples are different from the normal formula: They're stories.

The difference is using storytelling as copywriting. If you still aren't familiar with the style, here's an example.

Philosophy.

“People want things that are hard to find. Things that have romance, but a factual romance, about them.

I had this proven to me all over again when people actually stopped me in the street (in New York, in Tokyo, in London) to ask me where I got the coat I was wearing. So many people tried to buy my coat off my back that I've started a small company to make them available. It seems like everybody (well, not everybody) has always wanted a classic horseman's duster but never knew exactly where to get one. I ran a little ad in the New Yorker and the Wall Street Journal and in a few months sold this wonderful coat in cities all over the country and to celebrities and to a mysterious gentleman in Japan who ordered two thousand of them.

Well, the coat is magnificent. Simple, functional, handsome, extremely well made, affordable and, yes, romantic. I think that giant American Corporations should start asking themselves if the things they make are really, I mean really, better than the ordinary.

Clearly, people want things that make their lives the way they wish they were.”

People do want to make their life the way they wish it were. And those people often use your products and services to change the story they tell themselves about their lives. J. Peterman customers aren't just buying a shirt or a frock, they're buying something to make their own story less ordinary. People want to solve a problem or achieve a benefit *in a certain way*.

How To Tell Your Own Story

Many companies tell the details they hope will win the customer's business the way a prisoner gives up a “name, rank and serial number” routine. Others drone on about things their customers could care less about. Clearly, it's easy to go wrong with storytelling.

- Tell your story from the customer's perspective. Whether you're doing an About Us page or writing catalog copy, think about the problem the customer is trying to solve. Message to market match is crucial, your copy must demonstrate your knowledge of the customer's world view.
- Drama, action, romance, challenges overcome. All those elements which make for the storylines you enjoy work to hold the reader's interest long enough to tell your full story. An experiment also showed people remember details in story form much longer than other forms.
- People tell the stories they like. Story-based copywriting is especially effective on the web, where people link to things they like and shun blatantly self-serving hucksterism. People will link, refer, and repeat a good story.

After all, everybody knows the Kebler Elves, Marlboro “Man” and the Snapple Lady are fictional. Well, there *really is* a Sandy, the Snapple lady. What could have been a sterile bureaucratic communication was given the authenticity of personal communication. And whether fictional or not, authenticity is crucial for telling your story. The persona of a J. Peterman can

outlive the person with that name.

Excedrin Headache #214 isn't a medical condition, it's a story. But the scenario or situation is something which explains the customer's pain in a way they can identify with, find credible and *authentic*.

Do You Have An Interesting Story Buried In Your Business?

Almost every business has a great story. Often it gets buried in policy, procedure, features, and buzzwords. Or the company is so into the storyline they tell themselves, the customer gets a little lost.

The first place to start is with your Unique Selling Proposition. The USP isn't a story, but it can be the differentiator your stories should center on telling. And building a USP requires building some competitive advantage, the very thing you'll want to tell customers about in your story.

Imagine your company as a superhero, with your service or product as your "super power." The basic storyline starts with you swooping in to save the customer from the status quo of your industry. With a starter like that, what are the cliffhangers the tension, the happy ending?

How To Ignite Customer Desire With Benefit-Rich Copy

By John Soellner

Wireless Marriage Saver
Now you can watch late-night TV while your spouse sleeps. Now you can work in peace while your spouse watches/listens to Talk Shows. And now you can listen to your stereo system and your computer completely cord-free!

Drew Kaplan's copy isn't like everyone else'sno megahertzor decibelsand no bullet points of features. Wait one second ...the copy isn't really about the product at all. Kaplan, and really any copywriter worth their salt, writes about *benefits*.

The rule of thumb is really pretty simple. Any time you are talking about a product you're writing about features. When you are talking about the user or customer you're talking about benefits. Customers buy products to produce benefits, they use features to back up that decision.

Features aren't bad. But features would exist if there weren't any customers or users. That's an important point. The Edsel was supposed to have a push-button transmission; you could change gears with a toothpick. The only problem was nobody cared enough about that feature to make the Edsel a success in the marketplace.

Benefits speak to the customer about product effectiveness, not component parts. A product or service that isn't usable or desirable can still have one heck of a feature list. And consumers have caught on to the feature list trick.

Translating Features Into Benefits

Feature: Stores a million songs. Nobody wants to have to load or struggle with a million songs. What would be a great

benefit? The ability to effortlessly manage all your music. Benefits: Loads a million songs in 42 seconds, just pick the categories you want. And all it takes is three clicks to play any song you're looking for.

Capacity does not promise management effectiveness. You could have an unmanageable mess downloading, storing and retrieving one million songs. Those giant "super courses" in three-ring-binders present the same problem. A million fragmented clusters or database records or widgets in stock – same problem.

Feature: Hand-whipped shaving cream. (Don't laugh, this is a challenge I was given.) Benefit: A shaving mug is the professional tool for shaving customers expect when they're paying a barber to shave them. An upsell for barbers to earn more money without raising prices.

Feature: Low Price. What?!?! Arguably one of the most destructive mistakes in copywriting is using low price to make up for – you guessed it – inability to create value. 75% off ...what exactly? A price nobody ever paid in real life?

Benefit: ...If gold is selling at \$375, pay us \$125 and buy three times as much without spending a penny more than you had planned.

Benefit: ...Thanks to the overcapacity of berths created by the launching of new cruise ships in 1992, the major cruise lines are wholesaling world-wide cruise reservations to premium destinations for as little as \$389 including air!

Benefit: ...We opened our jewelry business on the second floor because we found the bulk of our business to be generated by referral. Since we don't need a street presence, we have less overhead, and better security (resulting in lower insurance), so we can price things better.

Low price does not promise a bargain. You can buy a low-cost airline ticket. What you want is to also arrive at your destination on time, with your luggage, and otherwise relatively un-ticked-off. In other words, the airlines are in a lot of trouble.

Are Your Salesletters Missing The Most Persuasive Tool Sales People Use?

By John Soellner

If copy is “salesmanship in print,” what’s the most persuasive tool sales people use? As a sales person, you’ll find the first thing they train you to do is ask the right questions. Questions put you in control, but only if you ask them the right way.

What you want to do with questions is create what persuasion architects call “persuadable moments.” The task is to create an open mind for what you are about to reveal to your reader. But the power of the question headline is not what it persuades readers to do. The degree of success you’ll have is directly connected to how well you research the self-interest of your prospect.

Are you prepared for the Chinese invasion of your industry?

If you were given \$4,000,000 dollars to spend-- isn't this the kind of health club you'd build?

Are Your INVOICES Inviting BAD DEBTS?

You’ll notice how none of the headlines above place blame on the reader. One of the key reasons questions go wrong is putting the reader on the defensive. You want to open minds, not close them.

Quite some time ago I tried to beat a proven headline for a computer-based information product. Believe me, there wasn’t anything which went untried: get-rich, “you,” even “free.” When I decided to try a question headline it pulled 508% better. The question I asked was “Is Your Computer an Over Priced Under-Achiever?”

And when you understand the psychology behind that question, you’ll be ahead of most high-tech marketing people. Years later IBM built an entire long running ad campaign based on the same general theme. The technology industry has gained a reputation for touting solutions. What my question headline did was to demonstrate my understanding of the real problem. If you agree I

understand the problem, you are much more likely to be effectively persuaded my solution is the one you want.

Can you spot the five mistakes here that make you work more and enjoy your garden less?

“ARE BUREAUCRATS AND DRUG COMPANIES BLOCKING YOUR ACCESS TO PROVEN MEDICAL CURES?”

Is your grown-up appetite still being served those child-sized portions most restaurants offer?

Think of question marks as the “anti-exclamation.” I’m sure you’ve seen hucksters try to use exclamation marks to force their point of view down your throat. Question marks offer a feeling of control. You don’t get the idea you’re being harangued at, you’re being engaged to think, decide, respond. Since the reader connects the dots, they own the decision in a way they won’t if told.

Counterstrike copywriting is a natural for question headlines. For example, if you are plagued with cut-rate competition for your lawncare services, you can ask the question in your headline:

Does Your Lawncare Provider “Cut and Run?”

Of course, you have to immediately follow up to explain how you apply fertilizer and weed killer, where the competition doesn’t. It’s ideal to get prospects to think about what shortcuts lowball competitors take to get that low price.

Copywriters who use exclamation points are trying to tell you something. Copywriters use questions to ask you for something. No matter what the question is, you’re being asked for your participation and engagement. So, if question-based copy is powerful, why not use them in your body copy?

- What are the hiring manager's "15 elimination rules" for a resume? Violating

these rules will get your resume rejected faster than a freight train!

- The 10 deadly mistakes that can kill your sales (are you making any of these?)
- Strained a muscle? Here's how to stay active while you recover.

Question-based copywriting is not recommended for newbies. However, once you have some experience, you'll find questions force you to become a better copywriter and marketer.

Contact Design Crux

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That so few businesses apply design thinking is what makes design your best business advantage — a barrier to competition.

Design is your competitive advantage. People tend to think of design as aesthetic creativity; superficial decoration. Really design is the systems thinking making a product perform effectively, intelligently, and comfortably for the user. That's the real power of good design. The very confusion of design with decoration or construction confounds cheap imitators. Features get copied, not the system of relationships and connections which make a design successful.

Customers appreciate good design. Even when they can't pinpoint a specific element, users know good design when they find it. They find well designed websites and products look and feel meaningfully *different*. Design speaks louder than words, persuasive evidence of how well a company understands its customers. That's what makes design *work for you*.