

Volume

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A Chuck McKay *Hands On Marketing* Report

The Long and Short of Persuasion

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How long should your copy be? Do people really refuse to read more than 300 words?

Researchers must be careful to neutrally phrase a question, so as not to influence the response.

Bestselling marketing consultant, Roy Williams, offers an excellent example. When a penitent asked if it was proper to smoke during prayer, he was told it was not. But when the question was rephrased as: *“Is it acceptable to pray while smoking?”* he was assured that prayer was always appropriate.

Sometimes it’s not the phrasing that controls the outcome. Sometimes people ask the wrong question. The wrong question, in this case, is “Which sells better? Long copy or short copy?”

I’m a long copy proponent. That is, I’m opposed to the “nobody will read more than 300 words” school of advertising.

Short copy has inherent risks.

Because it has limited amounts of compelling information, response rates are frequently low. There’s also the risk of high numbers of cancellations and refund requests because the product or service wasn’t what the customer imagined.

The *Long and Short of Persuasion* is one in a series of *Hands On Marketing* reports by marketing consultant Chuck McKay.

All of the *Hands On Marketing* reports are available at www.ChuckMcKayOnline.com.

The short copy crowd assumes that everyone is like them. *“I wouldn’t read this,”* they argue, *“therefore no one else would either.”* However, these people are not interested in what you have for sale. Without any interest, no matter how short the copy is, they will not read it. Will they read 300 words?

They won't read 100.

Fans of short copy are almost never successful copywriters.

When the copywriter ignores people who won't buy, and concentrates on those who may, copy invariably grows longer. Be careful, though. Long copy in the hands of an unskilled writer becomes an excuse for sloppy, non-focused, undisciplined writing.

Long copy proponents have research¹ on their side. Split-testing research shows that long copy consistently outperforms short copy. Additional research indicates that although readership does fall off dramatically at 300 words (when the non-interested browsers lose interest) it does not show further erosion until 3,000 words.

This argument over long copy vs. short copy has raged for years. Unfortunately, it's a tangential issue.

It asks the wrong question.

To get to the right question we need to assess the customer's perceived risk, and the emotional commitment necessary to persuade her to buy.

What does risk have to do with copy length?

The biggest risk any purchaser makes is the possibility of wasting her money in a bad purchase – one that doesn't suit her needs. The lower the price, the less risk. The less the risk, the lesser amount of emotional commitment. A lessened amount of persuasion becomes necessary.

We've all been in a check out line at a convenience store or a grocery. We've noticed the magazines, the candy bars, the breath mints. In retail, these are known as "impulse items." No emotional involvement required. No financial risk. Impulse items are low priced items.

Long copy may well bore the potential purchaser of low-risk items.

Note that you won't be able to pick up and admire the portable DVD players, or the jewelry, or anything with a stiff price tag as you wait in line. These things don't usually sell on impulse.

The higher the price, the less likely Miss Prospect is to purchase it on a whim. As price goes up, so does the risk that she's making the wrong purchase. As risk goes up, so does the requirement for emotional commitment on the part of the buyer.

When our prospect is considering a major purchase, short copy may leave her wanting to know what she gets for her money.

So, in order to decide how long to make your copy, you'll need to determine the amount of reassurance Miss Prospect requires. If you're selling candy bars, she won't worry about the rent check bouncing. If you're selling college enrollment, and asking for a commitment of \$25,000 over the next eighteen months, she will require more assurance.

This leads directly to the right question:

How much persuasion does the prospective customer require to be comfortable making the purchase?

Her comfort level will be directly proportional to the number of dollars in the "ask."

The length of your copy should also be proportional to the size of the ask. When asking for a small amount a simple easily remembered message is appropriate. When asking for a large amount your copy must anticipate every objection, every question, every doubt that your prospect has in you, or in the product or service you're selling.

Of course, it must also be well written, persuasive, and compelling.

The message must be *salient*.

Salience is the relevance of the message to your prospect. It's the most overlooked quality in advertising. It's the reason for the long copy / short copy debate. It's also the reason the debate is bogus.

Remember, your purpose is persuasion.

You're trying to get a total stranger to open her purse and give you money. Write something that speaks directly to her. Give your message salience.

Write what needs to be said to convince Miss Prospect that owning your product or service will affect her life. Get her emotionally involved. Tell a story. Share testimonials. Use statistics. Boost your credibility by whatever means is available to you to remove as much risk as possible. Guarantees are golden. Add as much information as necessary to make the sale, and not a bit more.

Then start cutting any excess from your copy. Remove any word that can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence.

Do you now have strong, persuasive, motivational copy? Long enough to make your points? Short enough to get right to them?

Assuming that you truly understand your prospect, and have written to her concerns, your writing will automatically be the appropriate length, whatever that length may be.

About Chuck McKay

Chuck is a teacher. He just can't help it. He's compelled to reduce complex marketing issues to elegantly simple and easily remembered explanations

Chuck's clients are quite vocal about his work. And since no two clients have the same needs, his services are designed to be easily customized.

1. He will teach you to effectively market your business.
2. He will teach you whether the marketing professionals you work with really understand what they're talking about.
3. And if you discover that you don't like handling your own marketing, he can quickly assemble a cost-efficient team of professionals who understand your goals to get it done for you.



Chuck is a frequent guest speaker at meetings of civic organizations, marketing groups, and business associations.

He has been a regular contributor to *Radio and Production* magazine as well as Southern California's *Business Journal*. His columns and marketing commentary are featured online at AllBusiness.com, and AmericanSmallBusiness.com.

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