

GAINING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE BY USING A FULL SERVICE FREELANCE WRITING SERVICE

A White Paper by Michael Barton Writing Services Limited

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Business Needs for Written Communication

Executive Summary

Every business faces the same problem in the production of both its promotional and internal written communications: quality is often lacking, and cost – either implicit, explicit, or both – negatively impacts the bottom line.

Clarity of message suffers when content is written by amateur writers, no matter their expertise within their own business niche. It is this lack of clarity that causes confusion at company level and decreases consumer compulsion to buy products and services.

Many companies, particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs), rely on exiting staff to write material that should purposefully target customers and present the company, its employees, products and services, in the best light possible. This results in current employees being removed from revenue generative work, often poorly presented company and sales materials, lower than potential sales, and a cost base that negatively impacts margins.

Other companies have the vision, or the budget, perhaps also the benefit of hindsight, to realise that well composed and professionally presented written materials are both revenue generative and cost reductive. To address this need, perhaps after years of underperformance caused at least in part by poorly prepared written materials, these companies employ a dedicated copywriter. The result is an increase in sales revenue as promotional material better 'speaks' to clients, and more targeted use of employees' time.

However, salary and associated costs are increased by the addition of the copywriter, who may then spend a portion of his or her time underemployed in their profession – requirements for written material are often responsive to the needs of the overall business meaning large chunks of underutilised time that still has to be paid for., in addition to holidays, sick pay, and other associated costs of employment.

This paper examines the communicative needs of small and medium enterprises, how and why businesses are employing outsourcing strategies to meet those needs, and concludes that such businesses would be wise to consider using a comprehensive freelance writing service as a way to increase exposure and sales whilst containing and capping costs.

Every department of an organisation produces written communication, from the initial job advertisement in recruitment campaigns through web content to final sales contracts.

Of course, employee contracts and contracts of service delivery and sales schedules require a unique and legal perspective: which is why most companies either use in-house experts/ lawyers or buy that expertise in on a case-by-case basis.

However, many companies fail to see the need to use expertise in the production of most other written materials, such as web content, sales and marketing materials, presentations and speeches, newsletters, and even blogs.

Surely the question every senior and middle manager should ask themselves is this: "Can I afford for my company's public material to be written by a member of staff who does not specialise in writing?"

The Common Choice of Writer

Even in larger companies, but most commonly in SMEs, required written work is carried out by the person whom the appropriate senior manager selects as 'best fit'. This, typically, will be a middle manager with responsibility for the area to which the written material will ascribe.

For example, it is common for a sales manager to be asked to produce copy for a sales brochure, an IT manager to write up a user manual for a new product launch, and perhaps a secretary will be tasked with writing a weekly blog, the B2B manager to produce a whitepaper on the company's stance within its industry, and so on.

A combination of all of these different managers may be tasked with writing content for the company's website, and perhaps supplying blog posts as needs dictate.

Such an approach will lead to a natural divergence of style and tone of communication, and in the worst case even two or more different opinions or statements about services and products. This leads to confusion among clients, though this may be possible to rectify (if done so quickly). What can't be rectified is the poor morale within a business that such a public display of divergence will create.

Apart from these issues, there are also issues of poor phraseology, grammar and punctuation errors, and a poorly presented argument or message.

In addition, cost and disruption to business is rarely considered: a mistake most commonly made by SMEs.

The Big Fallacy: Using In-House Staff Saves Money

Most companies use existing in-house staff to produce written material for two reasons. First, they believe those staff to be in the best position to produce the required copy, and, second, they have not budgeted for the costs of employing a writer.

However, this is a flawed strategy for all of the following reasons:

- Experts in their field know their business. They know what they want to say. But rarely do they know how to word their message for their audience. This means the message they wish to convey loses the impact they want it to have.
- A writer works more quickly than a non-writer. For example, a 500 word blog typically takes a professional blogger up to two hours to write, re-write, edit, and then post on a blog. A non-writer will take a lot longer, or produce less than top-quality work. That is time away from his or her normal work: in the case of a salesman, for example, that could mean thousands in lost revenue.
- The written material produced by the in-house member of staff will often require several rewrites to get anywhere near the finished article. That's more unbudgeted time. In the case of a white paper, which can take a month or longer for an experienced writer to complete, that is a lot of extra in-house expense. However, because it is not an explicit cost it will not show up as cost on the accounts: but it will harm sales figures and reduce bonuses that the 'writing' employee may earn – and that could increase staff turnover (yet more costs).
- Written material is usually required at the most inopportune time – midway through a sales campaign, toward the end of the financial year, or when the volume of other work is high.
- Desk-top publishing expertise is usually lacking. This commonly results in the need to send work to a publisher/ formatting expert before printing. That's further, generally unbudgeted, expense.
- Material is often badly presented, with grammar and spelling errors, and has pertinent facts missing (because the writer is so close to his subject and knows it too well).

These effects are a direct cause of using in-house staff rather than a qualified and experienced writer. In short:

- Increased Costs
- Lost business opportunity

- Dented morale
- Less than top quality material
- Actual sales revenue below full potential

Employing a Full-Time Writer

Many successful companies have traditionally employed full-time writers, realising that by doing so their businesses benefit from professional sales and promotional copy, as well as content that informs about company progress and product updates. These companies have, over time, created the critical mass to support the costs of salary, expenses, and office space of an in-house writer. Very few SMEs believe they have the budget for a dedicated copywriter, partly because they fail to realise the benefits and potential cost savings as discussed in the previous section.

However, despite the benefits of a direct writer hire, there are drawbacks of hiring a full-time copywriter:

- According to the employment website, totaljobs.com, the average salary of a copywriter in the UK is £32,500. (In the United States, indeed.com has this figure at \$56,000). However, this is only part of the story. The actual cost to a UK company - once national insurance payments, employer's taxes, office space, training, health and insurance benefits, pensions, sickness and holidays are included – can be almost double base salary.
- While it is desirable to employ a writer who knows the business inside-out, and understanding that this is likely to take time, anyway, internal relationships as well as comprehensive company knowledge can cloud a writer's perspective. Fear of upsetting the applecart can lead to under-par content.
- Business needs fluctuate, with all areas of business suffering quiet periods. Many companies find that in-house copywriting services are under-utilised for long periods of time. Whilst regular requirements are easily coped with, ad-hoc assignments regularly clash with holidays or all come at once.

Given all of these disadvantages of direct hire employees, it is little wonder that start-ups and SMEs feel the need to utilise existing in-house expertise, albeit non-writers, to produce written materials. However, such companies would be wise to consider other sources of writing expertise given the undoubted benefits such expertise offers a business.

Traditional Outsourcing

With consideration to all of the benefits of employing a dedicated copywriter set against the costs of doing so and other disadvantages previously mentioned, the idea of outsourcing is not new. Many companies have used an

outsourcing strategy in many areas of their business, including writing, very successfully for many years.

When considering writing in particular, though, outsourcing is most commonly used on an ad-hoc, project-by-project basis, when in-house writers or other staff members are unable to cope. This often results in requests for urgent work, thus bumping up the cost of outsourcing (a strategy that should have at its heart an aim of reducing costs).

Furthermore, writers have traditionally been sourced from the local community, meaning a limited pool of talent from which to select, and potentially a less than perfect product.

Companies and organisations, when employing an outsourcing strategy, certainly save on costs and gain on flexibility, but typically lose the writer's in-depth knowledge of the organisation. On top of this, a company may, through design or necessity, employ a number of outsourced writers. This could be because of timing issues, where copy is required immediately, for example, or, more commonly, because of the traditional concept of employing a separate specialist writer for each different type of copy required – sales copy, ad copy, promotional material, newsletters, etc.

In brief, the disadvantages of employing a traditional outsourcing strategy for an organisation's needs can be summarised as follows:

- Cost – whilst cheaper than direct hiring, the ad-hoc nature of outsourcing means that such outsourced materials are charged at a higher rate than regular outsourced work.
- Distance – even though traditional outsourced writers are found local to the hiring organisation, because of the lack of regular company contact they are 'company distant', and lacking in depth of organisational knowledge.
- Non availability – outsourced writers may be unavailable at precisely the time they are most needed, due to their own fluctuating workloads.
- Continuity – with often more than one writer outsourced, a common problem is confusion of message, tone, style, or voice. Different styles are used and different language, too, leading to non-conformity of material.
- Time and Communication – where an organisation uses a number of external writers, there is a need to spend time communicating (perhaps the same message) with each one. This is a hidden cost of using a number of writers each with a separate specialisation.

Given an organisation's requirement for professionally produced and presented copy, which promotes an

extended reach with revenue enhancing copy, whilst remaining cost reductive, the need for a partnership between the organisation and the writer is being increasingly recognised.

Using the developing freelance market, it is now possible to source writing expertise from increasingly innovative freelancers. Doing so retains the different benefits of direct hire full-time writers and outsourced expertise, whilst eliminating the disadvantages of both strategies. Before discussing this in more detail, a review of the development of the freelance market and the participants in it is needed.

A History of Outsourcing

Outsourcing is a direct result of the changing business model as the industrial climate has evolved. For the majority of the 20th century, business wisdom held that super-sized companies, owning and controlling all of their assets, would be the big winners. The diversified business model became the norm, with a broader base of businesses giving competitive advantage through economy of scale, through the 1950's and 1960's. (*A Brief History of Outsourcing, 2006, Robert Handfield, Ph.D*)

Outsourcing of non-core functions was not really a focus of business until the 1970's, growing in popularity in the 1980's as bloated companies looked for ways to increase market agility and cut costs by using external sources to satisfy non-core functions of the business. In fact, outsourcing was not formally recognised as a business strategy until as late as 1989 (*Mullen, 1996*).

In order to outsource these non-core functions, organisations would use two types of businesses: a servicing company or individual subject experts. Often, where using an outsourcing company, a business would transfer a part of its business to the servicing company, subsequently sub-contracting the service company to provide the non-core functionality requirements. This level of outsourcing is most commonly seen today in manufacturing, where components of a finished product are made off-site and by an otherwise unrelated company.

Outsourcing of service requirements – accountancy, human resources, secretarial, etc – to individuals or small firms has grown exponentially in the last twenty years. Companies have always used contractors for certain specialist work, sometimes forming long term relationships with servicing firms. Before the advent of the internet such relationships were generally formed between local companies.

Now, however, companies, in their quest for competitive advantage, are increasingly looking to capabilities of providers on a global basis. This widening of scope has increased the possible cost savings as well as the available experience and expertise of service providers.

As more companies have begun to outsource business activities that were traditionally carried out by employees, a whole new global freelance industry has been born.

Experts in all fields, including writing, can now be located and sourced from around the world, with a number of global websites set up as enablers of this new industry.

One of the largest of these, Elance (www.elance.com), in its 2012 Global Business Survey had 85% of the 1500 respondents stating that hiring freelancers online gave them competitive advantage with cost savings an average of 53%. Other major considerations of companies seeking to use freelancers for non-core business activities included the global availability of talent, and the time-to-hire as major advantages.

73% of these respondents also plan to increase their online hiring of freelancers, with 5 year estimates of total workforce being online centring on 54%.

The Innovative Freelancer

The majority of freelancers are specialist by nature, and this includes within the writing niche. This necessitates companies and organisations to use a number of such specialists to complete different writing projects, with the amount of communicative links increasing workload on a company's in-house organiser of the outsourced freelancers.

Using a specialist freelancer will leave an organisation with the need to source specific content from other freelance writers, as well as then acquiring desk-top publishing services, uploading and inputting content to websites, management of contact databases, and compilation of newsletters.

However, in developments that mirror the development of traditional businesses through the 20th century, some freelancers are spending time, effort, and money on acquiring a more diversified base of knowledge, expertise, and capability.

These freelancers are more willing to learn and understand their clients' businesses, partnering toward the same aim, and constantly increasing skillsets, keeping up-to-date with the latest market developments to best serve their clients.

These innovative freelancers are able to offer SMEs, start-ups and large multi-nationals a comprehensive service catering for all written needs.

Outsourcing to such an individual or company offers an organisation a range of benefits:

- Lowers business costs
- Increase in revenue generative potential

- The morale of existing staff increases
- The quality of written materials increases
- The freelancer will offer help and opinion to grow the business
- Company message is kept on track and consistent

Working with a Full Service Freelance Writer

When working with a full service freelance writer, the first thing a client notices is the freelancer's willingness to become immersed in the business of his client. The attitude to the task in hand is completely different to the average attitude when hiring a specialist freelancer on an ad hoc basis (though commonly a client will find the attitude of the full service freelance writer is taken into single projects, too).

To the full service freelance writer, his success relies on the success of his clients' businesses. He'll want to know about a business, its clients, aims, and products and services: after all, it is the writer's job to put all this on paper, extolling the virtues of his client, products, staff, services, and customer care.

The full service writer will see his clients' successes intrinsically linked to his own. As such, he will be willing to learn new skills and develop different written materials and products with, and for, his client. In short, he'll put in the maximum effort because he sees himself as a stakeholder in the entire business.

This said, it is also important that the client gives his new writer as much direction as possible, certainly at the start of a working relationship (in time, though, it's likely that the writer will almost be on 'autopilot', producing diarised work that simply appears in his client's inbox).

Working with the writer to produce a timetable of work, and then allowing a couple of days on each piece for review and revision, is a generally accepted way to get an employee/ freelance writer long term relationship off to a fast start.

The first two or three weeks will be the formative period, when style, tone, and voice are honed to how the client wishes the writer to present him as a company.

By producing an itemised diary of work, the client and writer work together to commit the writer to business imperative deadlines, and then will calculate a charging and payment structure suitable to both parties. It's likely that such regular work will be met with a discount from standard single project rates, and ad hoc business will likely be charged at the same beneficial rates.

A client should be certain of the volume and type of projects he will require from the writer, because in return

for these improved rates the writer will expect a guarantee of business and a portion of payment in advance.

A good writer will also suggest places in which improvements can be made, such as the editing of website landing pages, repurposing of archived blog posts, etc.

He'll also not stop at content – the full service writer will be happy to work on presentation, formatting, imagery, and other graphics that support his written work.

He'll also be able to upload content to blogs, and become involved in social media marketing. It's not unusual for a full service writer to begin with a start-up company, supplying web content, sales and marketing material, press releases, blog post content, monthly newsletters and run email marketing campaigns for his client.

In return, the client gets an invaluable member of his team, able to produce a range of material with a common voice and purpose, and happy to discuss how such material can be best positioned and planned for maximum market impact: all value added benefits at the fraction of the cost of an employed member of staff.

Working with a Full Service Freelance Writer: The Competitive Advantage

As the working world is changing, with the world-wide-web and services such as email, instant messaging, and Skype, made possible, the world of outsourcing has evolved also. This change is happening at an ever increasing pace, and what was once the norm is now rapidly becoming part of the history of outsourcing.

A huge global freelancing industry is being born before our very eyes, and is likely to become a major phenomenon in the modern world, with the opportunities for organisations to progress their business far more cheaply than ever before growing exponentially as the freelancing market develops.

This said, as with the birth of every major industry since the industrial revolution, there will be leaders and laggards. There will be freelancers who survive and thrive, and those that crash and burn. Whilst there will always be space for the exceptional niche player, companies are likely to gravitate toward those freelancers – whether individuals or companies themselves – who provide the most efficient all round service that caters to a business's needs.

With information more freely available now than ever before (again, thanks to the world-wide-web), companies will seek to differentiate themselves from competitors and provide unique insight into their products and industries through the quality of their written materials. It is also a given that this information, along with marketing opportunities, will be more usually disseminated via the

internet. Two major reasons for this are cost and speed of delivery.

Companies will need to develop fast and interactive services that focus on the customer, delivering on message content with clarity and continuity. As companies become leaner with their workforces migrating to online freelancers across the spectrum of non-core functions, the need for writing services is likely to increase.

SEO (search engine optimised) content is likely to become less valuable as the power of social media marketing takes to the fore. New 'word-of-mouth' advertising will be made by dissemination to friends, family, and subscribers via media outlets such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. To win out in this new world, companies will need to address consumer need for quality content, being persuaded to buy through recommendation and clarity of message rather than by keyword stuffed articles.

With the need for quality content, clarity and continuity of message, as well as speed and flexibility of service provision, real competitive advantage will be achieved by those companies utilising the expertise of a full service freelance writing service, whether that is provided by an individual or a company.

The need for speed, and the constraints placed on businesses by 'slimming down' will naturally gravitate outsourcing to those freelancers that can provide all services under one roof. Negating the need to employ multiple freelancers for outsourced activities will force companies to actively seek full service providers, who can provide content required, across a range of writing disciplines, and then manipulate that content for dissemination to customers and the wider market.

Using a single full service writing company (or individual) will provide the benefits of cost, expertise, agility, and partnership to the buyer of those services. With the aid of the internet and full service freelance writers, SMEs will eventually be able to wrestle global competitive advantage away from their industry's biggest players, able to compete on cost, quality, and reach for the first time since the birth of the industrial revolution.

About Michael Barton Writing Services Ltd

Michael Barton founded his full service writing company in 2011, and is now ranked in the top 0.1% of all individual writers on the global Elance freelance platform.

He provides services from web content, through blogging, social media marketing, and newsletters, to white papers, articles, and ghost writing for businesses and individuals around the world.

For more information visit www.mbwsltd.com