

Why you Should Write for the Bloke who Stole the Chickens

Judge: *The charge before us is theft of a dozen chickens. Are you the defendant?*

Defendant: *No, sir, I'm the guy who stole the chickens.*

I like lawyers. Maybe I've been lucky, but I find them good company and without exception, professional in their attitude (as a guest of this fine publication, I could hardly write otherwise). What's more, from what they say, it's clear that law firms increasingly recognise the need to be commercial in their approach to business. In conversation, I hear lawyers stressing the importance of 'engaging' with their clients. They point out how they've embraced the modern world. They've invested in smart offices and reception areas. They've launched contemporary-looking websites and employed the best graphic designers to produce beautiful brochures. There's little doubt that the lawyers I meet have their fingers firmly placed on the clients' collective pulse.

Or do they?

Take a look at this -

"I acknowledge receipt of your letter dated the 2nd of April. The purpose of my suggestion that my client purchases an area of land from yourself is that this can be done right up to your clearly defined boundary in which case notwithstanding that the plan is primarily for identification purposes on the ground the position of the boundary would be clearly ascertainable this in our opinion would overcome the existing problem."

You get the idea? This quote highlights a continuing problem facing the legal profession; the public's perception of the job they do. The language used by lawyers is often so archaic, so convoluted, so ill-thought out that their clients become rapidly disenchanted.

It isn't lawyers' fault. How can it be? From early days at University, through Training Contracts, admission to the Roll and onwards, the only language solicitors speak and write during those horrendously long working days is the language of the law.

I've heard it said that there's one reason so many corporate types are resistant to the idea of writing like a human being - They're terrified of getting into trouble with the Legal department.

And have you noticed - the lower the status of a writer in a Practice, the more likely he is to mangle meaning and cling to clunkiness? All in the desperate belief that dressing their argument in waffle will protect them from a nasty phone call from on high.

In some sectors, writing incomprehensible verbiage can just as easily land you in the mire as keep you out of it. I don't just mean being picked on by pernicky pedantic copywriters or being quoted on the Plain English Society website.

For example, in the financial services industry, there are laws designed to stop firms misleading clients with excessively complicated writing. To comply with the Treating Customers Fairly regulation, financial institutions must provide clear information.

I've heard it said that clear English can't be legally precise. Well, have you ever heard of a contract being declared less legally binding because it's written in plain English?

But Why Do Lawyers write the way they do?

There are historical reasons -

Firstly, legal copywriters used to be paid by the word. Ah - happy days!

The second reason harks back to medieval times. Following the Norman invasion, England was bilingual. The high and mighty gentlemen of the court wrote in Latin and French, whereas the rest of us stuck to good old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon. In a noble attempt to avoid confusion, lawyers would use words in pairs – one of each language root. For example, *fit and proper, will and testament, breaking and entering* in each case Anglo Saxon followed by Latin/French.

Such choice of words was aimed at being inclusive and fair. Today, the opposite is the case. Legalistic verbiage is the obsolete dinosaur of the legal profession, stifling its admirable desire to engage with its clientele.

Today the message is simple. Keep your copy Clear and keep it Concise. Your clients will love you for it.

So – now that we’ve agreed the goal, you might be thinking – ‘Right – I’ll crack on and re-vamp all my web copy and all my glossy brochures.’ OK ... well you could, but are you sure you should?

Haven’t you more important things to do? I mean – what were all those years of training about? Did you sit up burning the midnight oil so that you could become a DIY marketing man? Time is gold dust. Shouldn’t you be concentrating on the things that you’re great at? Like appearing in court. Putting a brief together. Meeting a prospective new client. Leave effective copywriting to the experts.

Four Tips for Effective Copywriting

What’s that I hear? You’re going to ignore my pearls of carefully crafted wisdom and plough on regardless? OK – I admire your bravery and here are just a few tips to help you avoid the most obvious pitfalls -

1. *Forget Everything you Learned in Your Training*

Well - when it comes to writing, that is. Writing for the law and writing to keep clients engaged are distinct skills. For the latter, you need to capture their attention. Then you need to keep it. You need to forget long paragraphs, ditch long sentences and kick out sub-clauses. And you should definitely stop throwing around legal terminology that the man on the Clapham omnibus has scant hope of understanding.

2. *Leave your Ego at the Door*

Your website isn't about you. It's about your prospective clients. No-one's really interested that you were established in 1894 and have a proud history of blah blah blah. What people want to know is what you offer that will benefit them. The rest is fluff. What's terribly important to people in the legal community may have little or no value to those outside it. Focus on the fact that people are looking for your services for a reason. They need help, and they want to know whether you can give it. If your website or brochure offers them the basic information simply and clearly, they will reward you with phone calls and email enquiries.

3. *Put Yourself in your Clients' Shoes*

What does your prospective client want? What is she or he worried about? What's going through their mind when they come across your website? Write words that speak to your client's fears and future. Only then will you find that you've created copy that truly connects with those who matter most to your Practice.

4. *Liven things up with a bit of Personality*

Now, I don't mean you should clown around. No-one's asking you to don a fez and perform your Tommy Cooper impersonation. It's simply a case of being natural. It's the same whether you're writing an email or letter to a client or putting together the copy for your website or brochure. Imagine you're sitting across the kitchen table from your reader, chatting over a cup of coffee. Just be yourself. The more you can show your audience your personality and the personality of your Practice, the greater the chance that they will connect with you. If you really want to let your hair down a bit, do this on your blog pages or your social media. Run a competition. Tell your audience about your colleague's fund-raising efforts in an up-coming marathon.

For inspiration, here are a couple of great Law Websites –

ModusLaw.com

For a great example of law practice personality - the *Our Lawyers* page of *Edelson.com*.

Follow these tips and you'll give yourself a chance of outperforming your competition. But you'll only be part way there. To make a lasting impression on your clients, both current and prospective, talk to a Copywriter; someone who understands the subtleties of writing copy that connects. Someone who can structure copy to keep the meaning clear - and format content that truly engages with your reader. You'll be working with an expert who can capture **your** message with **your** voice - whilst preserving your precious time for the things that you do best!

Bio –

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