

Why Clients Rewrite Your Copy (and How to Handle It)

By Bob Bly

Recently, the head of a large public relations agency said to me, "Boy, I don't envy you being a freelance copywriter. That's got to be a tough job, writing copy and then having clients make all those changes and revisions."

To a degree, he's right. H.G. Wells once observed that there is no greater human urge than the desire to rewrite someone else's copy. And certainly, if you've been in this business for any length of time, you know that for many writing projects, the most tedious part is routing the drafts, making changes, generating revisions, and getting approvals.

Why is there so much revising and rewriting of copy by clients and editors? Aside from the possibility that the copy being submitted is simply bad copy, I think there are two major reasons.

The first is that writing is one of the few activities in the business world where there is no RFP (request for proposal) – no predefined and agreed-upon specification to which the work must conform. If we cannot define a specification or requirement for the work before it is ordered, how can the professional writer be absolutely sure he or she is precisely meeting the client's preferences and expectations? We can't, of course – hence, the tendency to edit and rewrite any piece of submitted copy.

We can fix this problem by submitting a copy platform. Copy platforms allow the writer to communicate his or her ideas and plans to the client upfront. This gives the client the opportunity to correct anything right away. In other words, using a copy platform allows the writer and the client to agree on an approach before going to the first draft – similar to the way other business proposals are done.

The second reason why copy is rewritten is best summed up by an ad agency executive from the television show "Thirty-Something," who, when asked to defend a campaign, replied, "Nobody knows anything."

To some degree, he is right. There is no formula that guarantees a successful ad or best-selling novel. All creative efforts are educated guesses; all published materials are tests that determine the validity of our approach to the market.

Because writing is an art or a craft and not an exact science, the professional writer's opinion is always subject to question and debate – in part because he cannot with certainty say he is right.

Once again, the copy platform helps us fix this problem. While it won't eliminate comments altogether, a copy platform will help minimize them, since the direction of the copy was agreed to in advance.

Writers should also pay closer attention to the tone, style, and length of the client's existing published materials. If your style and theirs mesh ... fine. If not, ask if they're looking to create more of the same or if they want new materials done with your special flair and touch.

For instance, if I observe that all the sample pieces a new copywriting client has sent me are done in a certain style, I may ask, "Are you open to a different approach – or do you basically want another ad along these lines?" If they are inflexible, and if I don't like their approach or cannot duplicate it, I walk away from the job.

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