

# How to Write Catalog Copy So a Client Wants to "Buy" You

## *By Will Newman*

Not too long ago, most catalogs relied on features ... and not much else.

That's changing. More catalog retailers are catching on to the power of benefits. But many of today's crop of catalog copywriters still haven't gotten it right. And this presents you with tremendous opportunity.

Most "benefit-oriented" catalog copy just skims the surface of benefits. It does not dig deep enough.

As an AWAI-trained copywriter, *you* know far more about writing powerful benefit copy than most copywriters today. The trick is turning it into short-form copy needed in print and online catalogs.

### Quick Review:

## From Features to Core Benefits

A product's feature is what it has or does. In any type of copy – including catalog copy – customers need to know features. Features let them know what's included for the price.

Let's use an automated cat litter box as an example. Here are four steps for distilling the core benefits from a list of features:

### STEP 1: Home in on the features ...

The features for this automated litter box include touch-sensitive, automatic disposal of cat waste 30 seconds after the cat leaves the box. The waste is neatly disposed into a sanitary plastic bag the owner can remove, tie, and dump.

### STEP 2: Determine the simple benefits ...

The next step is translating features into simple benefits. When you do this, your customer sees "what's in it for him" ... how it affects his life on the most elementary level. This is where most catalog copywriters stop (because they don't know they need to dig deeper). Simple benefit for the automated litter box: You save time and effort.

## STEP 3: Dig deeper for the next level of benefits ...

The next step is to ask yourself, "What about this simple benefit makes me happier? What would make me feel good if I owned the product?" This is a deeper benefit.

There are several deeper benefits here: The quick disposal of waste means I don't have to live with persistent cat smell. I wouldn't have to spend 10 minutes every day cleaning the box when I could be using it to read the newspaper. And so on.

## STEP 4: Find the deeper – often intangible – benefits ...

Your final step is to look even deeper and find core benefits. This is the larger-than-life stuff. Often, the core benefits are intangible.

The core benefits for our magical cat litter box include: I'm keeping my family safe from potential diseases carried by cat waste. My neighbors will no longer sniff the moment they walk into my house. And – most important for a cat lover – my cat will love me more for keeping his litter box pristine.

## Applying Core Benefits to Catalog Copy

Unless you're writing for the Neiman Marcus catalog, you'll probably write short copy blocks, somewhere between 50 and 150 words. In this case, the best approach is to give a brief description of a feature and a simple benefit and tie those quickly to a core benefit.

One of the keys for you in writing core-benefit copy is to trace *all* the features to the ultimate core benefits. Then decide which one or two are most important and highlight those.

But in catalog copy, as in long-form DM copy, it's often best not to refer directly to the core benefit. Be direct about the simple and deeper benefits. But let the prospects feel the core benefits for themselves.

Let's look at two examples taken from real catalogs to see how to improve their feature/simple-benefit copy. For simplicity, I'll look at just a few features in this exercise.

## Example #1: From a national sporting-goods catalog retailer ...

### ***Fishing Pants:***

*Anglers can now enjoy the legendary performance of pants made especially for fishermen that can be converted to shorts in seconds. With six pockets, these pants have enough room to hold everything you'll need. The semi-articulated knees and enhanced stretch panels in the gusset and rear make for a loose fit and freedom of movement. Made with 100% nylon rip-stop microfibers, a tear-resistant, lightweight fabric, they dry quickly and transport moisture away from your skin. A UPF of 30 helps protect you from the sun. When the weather heats up, zip off the lower legs and you'll have a pair of shorts with a 10" inseam. Imported.*

[107 words]

FEATURES	SIMPLE BENEFITS	DEEPER BENEFITS	CORE BENEFITS
Can be easily made into shorts	I stay cool when it heats up.	I can stay on the river longer, catch more fish.	I gain respect as a top angler.
6 pockets	I have all the gizmos I need readily available.	I save time and energy having to go back to the car.	I can enjoy what I came out here for.
UPF of 30	It protects me from the sun.	I can pursue my passion without worrying about skin cancer.	My wife will stop nagging me about the dangers of sun exposure when I'm fishing.

**Core-Benefit Copy:**

*Stay out on the river longer – doing what you love to do ... landing trophy trout, salmon, or bass. The weather heats up? Simply zip off the lower pant legs and cast in comfort. With six pockets, these pants have enough room to hold everything you'll need. Made with 100% nylon, rip-stop fabric, they dry quickly and transport moisture away from your skin. A UPF of 30 helps protect you from the damaging rays of the sun. Imported. [77 words]*

In this copy, I chose to focus on the core benefit of "I can gain respect as a top angler." Notice that I never said that in the copy. But the idea is carried by the phrase "landing trophy trout."

A dyed-in-the-wool fisherman knows that anybody can fish. It takes a great angler to "land" the fish. And not just any old fish. A trophy.

Our next example is a little bit different. When most copywriters think of catalogs, they think only of companies that sell *products*. But there's a whole sub-niche in catalog copywriting selling *hope* ... writing catalogs for fundraising and nonprofit organizations.

While the entire feature-to-core-benefit route might not be so obvious, it's there. You just have to adjust your perspective a bit to follow it. Let's take a look.

**Example #2: From an international charity ...**

*Children in Africa, Asia, and Latin America love to play soccer. In Africa, children often use handmade "balls" of banana leaves or rolled-up trash. Thanks to a matching donation from Baden Sports, you'll provide 6 balls for the price of 3 – or 12 for the price of 6. [48 words]*

In this copy, the only "feature" that can be turned into a benefit is the matching donation. But they have implied some positive and negative features.

FEATURES	SIMPLE BENEFIT/NEGATIVE	DEEPER BENEFIT/NEGATIVE	CORE BENEFIT
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Many children play soccer.	Keeps them happy and occupied.	Less likely to get into trouble.	Helping improve their lives, encourage them to go to school.
They make soccer balls out of banana leaves and rolled-up trash.	"Balls" are not sanitary and don't last long.	Children digging through trash can get sick easily.	Protecting their health.
Matching donation.	6 for price of 3.	More kids benefit.	The more kids who benefit, the more who stay in school and stay healthy.

### **Core-Benefit Copy:**

*The children we serve in Asia, Africa, and Latin America live for soccer. And most of them use soccer balls made of rolled-up trash they've pulled from garbage dumps. A real soccer ball is a special gift to these children ... a gift that makes school a wonderful place where they can live out their fantasies while learning and getting exercise. Thanks to a matching donation from Baden Sports, you'll provide 6 balls for the price of 3 – or 12 for the price of 6 ... doubling your impact on their lives. [90 words]*

Try this yourself. Find several catalogs you'd like to write for. Map out the features to core benefits like I've done here. But do it for *all* the features. Then focus on one or two of the core benefits.

Using those core benefits as your guide, write catalog copy that runs about the same length as the average length of copy in the catalog. (It doesn't have to match the copy you're improving in word count, but try to come close.)

After a very little amount of practice, you'll see how easy it is to write dynamic, successful catalog copy. And you're on your way to becoming a successful catalog copywriter.

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## **2 Responses to "How to Write Catalog Copy So a Client Wants to "Buy" You"**

This is a really great article Will! Exactly what I needed to know. You have given me great tools to use and the insight made learning simple and effective. Thank you!

*Juanita Powers* – over a year ago

**Thank you for commenting, Nita. I'm glad you found this article useful, even though it's 8 years old!**

**Good luck, best wishes, and much success,**

**Will**

*Will Newman* – over a year ago

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