

Making Swipe Files Work for You

By Will Newman

Earlier this month, I caused a couple of problems when I described one of my favorite swipe file promotions, a Bottomline Books magalog featuring Hugh Downs as the spokesman.

The first problem came from several members not fully understanding what a swipe file is. Or, more importantly, how to build one.

The second problem – more controversy than problem, really – questioned the ethics and creativity of using swipe files.

I'm going to tackle the second problem first. It doesn't make sense for me to ramble about how to build a swipe file, if you won't even use one because of these concerns.

Every successful copywriter I know uses swipes. And many offer some of their own promotions as swipes, because of their usefulness. So, ethics and creativity don't present a problem, if you use swipe files the way master copywriters do. This is also the way I use them.

The key to using swipes properly is *not* to steal from them. Use them as a model for your own work. As stimulus for your own compelling ideas. As an example of proper structure for your own promo. If you come across a compelling turn of phrase, you could even use that to inspire your own words.

In researching today's article, I ran across a brief outline for how best to use swipe files from the CustomerIO blog. Here's what I culled from that blog:

Good Use	Poor Use
Study	Skim
Cull ideas from many swipes	Steal from only one swipe
Transform and remix	Rip off

If you use swipe files the good way, you haven't crossed an ethical boundary. And you're using them to stimulate your creativity ... not to replace it.

Ask and your mailbox shall overflow ...

When I started writing copy, the Internet as we know it today didn't exist. All direct marketing came in the mailbox sitting outside my house.

Has *that* ever changed over the past 20 years!

Today, most of the direct marketing you get comes through your email inbox. And, you're attracting most of the rest through Google, Bing, Amazon, and other online sources.

But a good portion can still come through that physical mailbox – which you do want, even if you're writing only for the Internet. Why? Because you can pull many worthwhile ideas from physical direct mail that'll transfer beautifully to online copywriting.

The basic strategy for getting swipes hasn't changed over the years since I started saving them. You simply "ask" for them.

Let's say you're interested in writing for alternative health. You get a couple of mailings every so often in your mailbox for supplements. Order one. It doesn't matter really if you're ordering from the best direct marketer in the niche or a mediocre one. Your name gets seeded on mailing lists for people interested in nutritional supplements.

Soon you'll be getting tons of promos for supplements. And health equipment. And alternative-health newsletters. And other products with almost no relationship to alternative health.

What if you're not in the market for anything at the moment, or you don't want to spend the money? Find a phone number on one of the promos. Call and ask to have a catalog mailed to you.

Almost instantaneous swipes from the Internet ...

Getting seeded on email lists is a snap. You don't even have to buy anything. Once again, start with the niche you're interested in. Do a web search for products in that niche.

Almost every company that does Internet marketing has a place on their home page that says something like, "If you want to receive information about special offers from XYZ, sign up for our email list."

Often they'll also ask if you want to receive information from a few of their "special partners." Fill in a few of these requests, and your email inbox will fill up quickly.

You'll frequently see the same request for contact info on sites where you buy things. Even if the items you've purchased aren't in your chosen niche, give your contact information ... *if* you trust these vendors. And, what are you doing buying from them, if

you don't trust them?

One last swipe-search hint: Don't stop at getting on email lists just in your niche. Farm other areas of your interest. Even though you do want to focus on one niche to work in, you'll find many useful ideas in other niches.

Keeping your email manageable ... and you sane ...

I'm sure by now you're wondering if you'll be opening a Pandora's Box of unwanted email marketing by doing this.

You might be.

But, there's an easy way to handle this influx of email marketing, so important email from your child's school isn't lost among the sales offers. Go to gmail.com, yahoo.com, mail.com, or similar free email services and open an email account specifically for your swipe files.

Use this email address only for sowing your name on marketing sites.

What about sites where you already have sales accounts that use your regular email address? Switching your contact info on those sites is probably more trouble than it's worth. So, when you receive swipe-worthy emails from these sources in your regular inbox, forward them to your swipe email address. This way, you have everything in one place.

The care and management of your swipe files ...

Once you follow these strategies, you'll have more than enough samples to build an enviable swipe file. But, should you save everything or just a few samples? How do you use them? How do you keep them manageable?

These questions, my friend, will be our focus for next week.

Until then, remember that the single, most important strategy for becoming a successful writer is to write!

P.S. Are you currently using swipe files? What strategies have you developed for getting the most out of them? Let us all know below. Thank you.

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9 Responses to "Making Swipe Files Work for You"

Hi Will, I read the article you reference and I must say that, if I had read it before I became knowledgeable of the use of swipe files, I would have had the same response. I would have wondered how you have made it this far with such "plagiarism". I still question how the field of advertising and marketing can be so different than other creative fields. What makes it even better is that it seems that fellow copywriters are willing to work with one another.

Nora King – over a year ago

Hi Nora,

Copywriting, marketing, and advertising is creative by taking older structures and making them new. And by overcoming the prospect's skepticism in new and effective ways.

Thanks for your comments.

Good luck, best wishes, and much success,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

Hi Will,

I am a 23-year-old student starting my diploma titled 'Effective copywriting advertising on social media'.

My system consists of carefully organized folders with screenshots (1500+) of ads, fb posts, mails, design etc.

And evernote notes (400+) with tags and collections of emotional words, gimmicks, headlines etc.

My question is:

I want to work as a personal research assistant for an advertiser. I would niche scan the internet, physical publications and collect valuable nuggets (ads, most common customer words...) similar to my swipe collection but more specific.

Do you think any advertiser would benefit from such a service how can I approach them and where can I find them?

Peter Premuzic – over a year ago

Hi Peter,

You're entering an area I know very little about – social media. However, your approach seems very worthwhile to your client. You'd have to present it in a very benefit-oriented way with the tech aspects supporting your pitch but not overwhelming it.

Make sense?

thanks for asking.

Good luck, best wishes, and much success,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

Thanks for the info. I have been using swipe files for years, but never put a label on them. Why not take advantage of the creative works of others? We have all done so in many other ways in our various careers and probably not recognized it. If it's not a copyright item, it is fair game.

Guest (Tom) – over a year ago

Will, thank you for doing it again!

Before this series of articles, I knew I was 'supposed' to keep a swipe file, but I couldn't see the point.

What stopped me was that I didn't know how to use my swipe files when it came to writing a promotion, and I didn't know how to organise my swipe file so it would be useful.

This series has given me all those articles. Brilliant and practical!

Daniel G Taylor – over a year ago

It seems what you're calling a "swipe file" is what "real" journalists call a "tickler".

"600 words on belugas. Ten minutes."

The tickler has anything that's caught my eye for 10 years. A search for "beluga" will find several pieces. I'll find several story angles, institutions or people who are working on belugas, and background info. When I'm done I'll ask good questions and get good comments.

Nobody questions a tickler file.

You can't be a writer without being a reader. Ticklers WORK.

rcmckee – over a year ago

I still don't fully grasp the concept of swipe files nor why they are called swipe files. I am hoping that you may broaden my understanding a bit more. I feel like the non-tech person trying to understand the tech person when they speak as I understand that concept being a techie.

pherbear2 – over a year ago

Hello pherbear2,

I prefer the name "inspiration files" rather than swipe files. The idea is to have files where you can find ideas that inspire your own creativity. This is explained more fully in my next article in the series.

Good luck, best wishes, and much success,

Wil

Will Newman – over a year ago

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