Expert advice and guidance from the
Communications Sector

ONLINE WRITING

MEET OUR EXPERT

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Kaye Coleman-Rooney is founder of Cambridge-based agency Doing Words Communications Ltd. A specialist in brand development and marketing communications, Kaye has recently overseen the rebrand of her own business.

One of the architects of Anglian Water's groundbreaking Love Every Drop campaigning brand platform, Kaye came into the business world after a successful career as a Senior Producer with the BBC. Now with 30 years' experience spanning the UK, the Middle East and South East Asia, she believes that, in business, as in life, finding better answers starts with better questions.

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Why does online writing need its own guide?

It's true that your aims are the same wherever you meet and communicate with your customers.

In a nutshell communicating effectively means:
- You've got to attract attention
- Keep attention long enough to get across your message
- Be relevant to your different customer segments
- Differentiate yourself from your competition
- Offer irresistible products and services
- Devise compelling calls to action that deliver hot leads

So far, so easy! But when you're writing for customers who're looking at your online shop window, there's more you must do to make sure you're offering the best possible experience in the noisy, over-crowded and frenetic online marketplace.

Customers prefer smartphones and tablets

2015 is the year when smartphones have overtaken laptops as the UK's number one device for going online, say communications' regulator Ofcom. In their latest report, 33 per cent of internet users say their smartphone is the most important device for going online.

By 2019, close to three-quarters of the UK's internet population - that's 40 million people - will also be browsing, researching and shopping on iPads and tablets.

So, as customers migrate en masse to devices offering restricted screen sizes but more choice and interactivity, the way businesses showcase and describe products and services online needs to change too.

In 2015 writing for online audiences means
- Presenting information in ways that will work across much smaller screens
- Finding more visual ways to communicate facts and figures
- Creating content people will share on social media
- Understanding that search engines rank by relevance and social shares.

[figures: Ofcom / emarketer.com]

10 top tips when writing for online audiences

1 **Be responsive**
Check that your website is responsive — formatted to work well across all devices and particularly on smartphones and tablets. If your site isn't, organising a responsive site is your first priority.

2 **Put your customer first**
Get the red pen out. Give your customers the information they're actually looking for: make it brief, upfront and easy to find.

3 **Make your content easy to skim read**
When online, we only read around 30 per cent of the words on the screen. We get most of our information by scanning headlines, photos and captions, lists and text boxes.

4 **Think bite-size**
Break copy down into chunks. Headlines and sub-headings catch the eye and communicate key points as readers skim your page. Use just one or two sentences in each paragraph.

5 **Break up the text**
- Give photos captions that help tell the story
- Make your main point short and very visible — perhaps in a text box
- Use bullet point lists.

6 **Signpost important points**
It takes just milliseconds for the brain to process simple symbols. Consider including relevant icons to guide readers to exactly the information they're looking for.

7 **Make reading effortless**
Sans serif fonts (like Arial and Calibri — without any tails or ticks) are generally easier to read online. Serif fonts (Times New Roman, Baskerville) are clearer in old-fashioned print. And is your font big enough for most people — not just those with perfect eyesight - to read at a glance without adjusting their screens?

8 **Write short, descriptive headlines**
Online, relevance trumps wordplay because search engines want you to deliver what it says on the tin. So, resist the word play and fun cultural references of Osborne beats Clooney as new silver screen hero. Go instead for the plain vanilla Chancellor offers UK film industry tax break boost.
Facts and tips headlines with numbers are called 'click bait' precisely because people do click on them. (27 best-buy toddler toys. 83 reasons to join the Chamber of Commerce.) They work well as titles and topics for blog articles.

9 **Pictures ARE worth a thousand words**
We process visuals 60,000 times faster than text. And people like looking at pictures, so include photos and graphics to inform as well as illustrate.

10 **Great content is best for search engine rankings**
Don't stuff your copy with keywords. Writing Cambridgeshire Bath Bomb Company sells the best bath bombs in Cambridgeshire will turn off customers, and search engines will actively penalise you. The best way to serve your customers and please search engines (without getting into paid rankings) is to focus on providing relevant content that your customers and staff will want to read and help you share.