

**A Compelling Voice:  
The case for professional copywriters**

**by**

**Robert Roth**

Let me make one thing clear: everyone can write. Some of us learn to write as early as preschool, often before we learn how to add and subtract. Eventually, we find ourselves in Ms. Fromm's 10th grade English class, where we learn that the rules of grammar are sacrosanct. Then, in college, we hone our writing skills even more, learning how to express our thoughts in 15 words, when five would suffice.

Design, on the other hand, is a different matter. Most of us recognize our limitations in that area early on and readily acknowledge that we can't draw, paint or design our way out of a brown paper bag. So when it's time to begin work on an annual report or corporate brochure, the ensuing thought process goes something like this: "Since we don't know how to design, we'll hire a design firm, but since everyone knows how to write, we'll write the text for the annual report ourselves (and save money)."

**Writing is writing — or is it?**

Remember the line from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others?" It's the same with writers. Professional copywriters often bring an added value to the project. For one thing, professional copywriters write all the time (at least the good ones do), so they have a rich depth of experience in a variety of industries. Second: professional copywriters are skilled at managing the elements that make copy easy and enjoyable to read — things like tone, clarity, rhythm, cadence and sentence length. Third and perhaps the most important: professional copywriters bring a creative point of view to the project. "Our designers work collaboratively with writers as a communications team," explains Terry Davis, founder and creative director of design firm see see eye. "Having a writer who can think and contribute conceptually from the beginning is a big asset for our clients and the creative process."

While Davis doesn't advocate that every company needs a professional copywriter, she does believe that outside writers provide a "fresh voice" for a corporation. "Because they

are not caught up in the details of the company,” says Davis, “outside writers can sometimes do a better job of communicating the big picture and strategic direction of a company in a clear and simple manner.”

Zia Khan, founder and president of design firm Lucid, concurs. He believes that outside writers are better equipped to reach “outside” audiences (stakeholders). According to Khan, outside writers build “a more compelling case than you would normally get from just stringing facts, statements and assertions together. A professional copywriter not only contributes to the concepting stage, but also keeps coherent thoughts aligned with the given concept.”

### **It’s what you don’t write.**

According to Rick Anwyl, founder of communications firm EAI (now Unboundary), an annual report should tell the story of what a company is doing: what it said it was going to do, what it actually did, and most importantly—what it intends to do next. “That’s a lot of ground to cover,” says Anwyl, “which tends to force in-house writers into writing too much.

“The dynamics of that are caught up in the company’s need to tell its owners (shareholders) everything that is going on. The folks over in marketing want to be sure that they tell the whole story. Ditto for the people in manufacturing, management, human resources, legal, finance and community affairs. They all want to be absolutely certain that their story is told the right way. So they pressure and brow beat their poor in-house writer until he or she is crushed under the weight of the company’s message.”

It’s different with an outside copywriter. “A professional copywriter can take all the stuff that everyone wants in the book, distill it to succinct and relevant points, organize and prioritize it, and write it as well,” explains Anwyl. “When that happens, the document takes on a clear and sharp focus; various constituents read it, understand it, and most importantly have confidence that the company knows what it’s doing. What the copywriter brings is perspective, experience and a highly specialized skill.”

Matt Rollins, Creative Director of the design firm Iconologic, sums it up more concisely: “One can't work inside a corporate communications department day in and day out and remain objective. Navel-gazing is one of the hazards of the job.”

### **Words are serious business.**

In addition to bringing in an objective point of view, professional copywriters also possess the skills to utilize words in compelling ways. There's even an organization that promotes the inherent power of words. It's named after the number of letters in the alphabet—26. 26 is a non-profit organization of professional writers and language specialists based in the U.K. The mission of 26 is to help individuals, businesses, brands and organizations transform the way they communicate.

The [26 Web site](http://www.26.org.uk) (<http://www.26.org.uk>) states “We believe the power of words is hugely underestimated, and that experienced and imaginative writers can offer the business community (and the writer community) wonderful opportunities and benefits.” It's hard to pass that up.

### **How to hire a professional copywriter**

Copywriters are like hairstylists; you have to choose one that's right for you. And one of the best ways of doing that is to enlist the help of your design firm. “When a client asks us to suggest a writer,” says Terry Davis of see see eye, “we don't just offer one name. Instead, we present two or three portfolios showing representative samples of each writer's work. Other factors that we consider before suggesting an outside writer include industry experience, annual report writing experience, writing style and compatibility with our designers.”

### **The litmus test**

Bottom line: Can a professional copywriter add value to your company's corporate communications? There's one easy way to find out—engage one. And judge the difference for yourself.

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