

Seminars: Marketing Workshops

Heather Maitland, Arts Consultant ***Developing believable copy***

Heather Maitland is an arts consultant, author, lecturer and the Research Associate at the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies at the University of Warwick. Heather has worked as a marketer for a wide range of arts organisations from the smallest of touring theatre companies to running the London end of the Royal Shakespeare Company. As head of two audience development agencies she has worked with over 100 organisations on audience, business and art form development. She has written eight books, including *The Marketing Manual*, which has now been translated into Mandarin Chinese and is used across China, Taiwan, Malaysia and the UK. She was commissioning editor of *Navigating Difference: cultural diversity and audience development* and co-author of *Greater than the sum of its parts: a joined up guide to working in groups* and writes regularly for the *Journal of Arts Marketing* and *Arts Professional*. She is director of the TMA's marketing courses in Ireland and Scotland and a trustee of the European Blues Association. Current projects include profiling audiences for jazz in the East Midlands, researching visitors at the National Museums of Scotland and helping Rich Mix (London's Centre for Culturally Diverse Arts) to write a marketing strategy.

This session offered practical advice on how to engage with the public, peeling away our assumptions and heightening our awareness in order to develop copy which communicates with people on their terms. Through examples and practical exercises, it was an opportunity for delegates to reinvent their style to suit the people they are trying to reach.

Communicating Effectively

This seminar is about:

- Getting your message across
- Making connections
- Being understood
- Being persuasive
- Making copywriting less painful

What does 'believable' actually mean? If it's going to be believable our copy needs to be:

- Listened to
- Understood
- Believed

Heather (HM) asked for suggestions of what it was that made copy believable. One delegate suggested that it was most believable when *'it does what it says on the tin'*.

What are your thoughts about the copy used on Innocent's Smoothie packaging? Do you find it believable, if so why?

Delegates: it sounds 'factual' – it's 'simple' – it's 'chatty and friendly'.

Some thought that because Coca-Cola had invested in Innocent it might taint their brand and this knowledge might affect our capacity to believe the copy.

This [not being sure about Coca-Cola's impact] is similar to the way an arts organisation's brand might be compromised if it is not backed up with what happens in the real world. We might write lovely words, but if our customer has a bad experience it will make our communication less trusted or believed.

Audiences don't seem to believe us. A participant in a focus group said this:

"It's taken me years to learn to read through all the write-ups. All these words: 'stupefying', 'electric', 'dramatic', 'never to be forgotten' and I used to believe it. All this hype."

What's wrong with words like 'dramatic' or 'electric'?

They're overused

We don't know what the work is going to be like so we use them as all encompassing phrases.

The words tell us that we will react in a particular subjective way.

They're not very specific.

These are all good observations. Hype is about the fact that we use words all the time which are unsupported or unproven, so they become empty. 'Dramatic' – but in what way – what is the proof?

What are the words which you over-use in your organisation?

diverse - exciting - legendary - unmissable - seminal - high-octane

We don't need to write like this. We need to get out of the ruts we're stuck in

Delegates were asked to think about their favourite film, to think about someone they know who hasn't seen it and to write a postcard persuading them to come and see it

HM observed that everyone seemed to put down their thoughts straight away. Afterwards delegates were asked how they felt about the exercise:

I found it difficult at first to say what it was that I enjoyed but once I started I couldn't stop. I went with my instinct at first and it would probably need to be refined later

What were the first words you used?

Dear John, Dear Katy, Hi Just

What does this seem to show?

It personalises the communication.

Why is that important?

You're talking directly to that person

Yes, you're saying 'Pay attention, this is for you'.

What were the next sentences?

Remember when you were young and bunked off school?

After going to see Once Upon A Time in Mexico – what a film! - I know you like westerns.

I saw a film last week called The Curious Case of Benjamin Button.

Do you fancy coming to see Bridget Jones at the Flicks?

What do these sentences have in common?

They used 'you'

They used 'questions' to grab attention

They got to the point quickly

Conveyed emotion

They made direct connections, grabbed attention, made it important for the reader

What was next? How did you persuade them they'd want to see the film?

Giant ape, dinosaurs, fighter planes, what's not to like? [with a picture]

The best film I've seen about the Vietnam War

It was shot on location in a place we had both been to. You'd love all the things I loved.

These all seem to be giving good reasons why people should go which seems like a sensible approach, but the problem is that when we write copy we don't do this.

How have you finished off?

One of the coolest films of the 90s

Because I just smile when I watched it

First film I watched and immediately wanted to watch it again

You've given great clinchers at the end. And what's the very last thing?

Let's watch it together in the holidays.

Bring your hanky x

See you soon, Helen

Why is this important? *It shows I care about you.*

You've all written postcards which obey the rules of good copywriting without trying to do it.

- A personal greeting
- An opener that makes a connection between you
- Reasons not facts or hype
- A simple, straightforward style
- A 'clincher' at the end
- A personal sign off

The postcard can be a good discipline too, because you are restricted to a small space and it's friendly and tangible. Compare this to the laptop with the blank screen and the infinity of space that you can write in.

Make a connection

How can we make a connection?

- Asking a question
'Which comes first? The music or the words?'
- Using active language

"Discover Wolverhampton's collection of Victorian decorative objects and artworks ... Look out for the role Wolverhampton people played in defining Victorian taste."

Or this from Magna, The Science Adventure Centre, Rotherham

'Old – Living Steel: the fumes the heat the danger the hardships. Relive the astonishing experiences of the steel industry through the moving human stories told by the workers and their families who lived it for real.

Hot – The Big Melt: Watch sparks fly as our original arc furnace roars back into life. The industrial age is recreated with pulsating lights, smoke, pyrotechnics and an original soundtrack.'

[further sections continued with 'Wet, New, Cold, Dry']

It's all very active about what you can do. It's not just saying it's 'stupefying' but explaining what is stupefying about it.

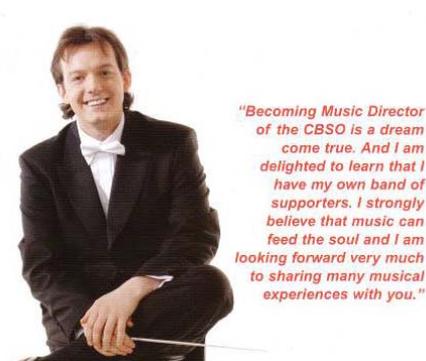
- Really talk to them – use "you"

'Enclosed in a freight container somewhere in Europe, five people huddle together with a common aim. Reach England. Start a new life. Can they rely on each other? And how far will each of them go to get what they want?

You can read a paper to know people smuggling happens. But watch The Container and it becomes a reality, putting faces and voices alongside stories of hope and sacrifice.'

See how powerful the 'you' is above.

- Be a real person



A piece of research called 'Nothing by Chance' discovered that attenders of contemporary film, dance and theatre, didn't really understand that someone actively decided what a theatre, arts centre etc programmed.

This is a real person persuading people to join the scheme and each part of the programme has someone different talking about their involvement.

Or this: 'What is it to be human? Ok, so that's a pretty big question. But what if you had ten days this July to think it over ... And since it's 150 years since Charles Darwin published his thoughts on the subject (in *The Origin of Species*) to put us firmly in our place ... and it is his birthday (well sort of, he was born 200 years ago) ... and the fact that he was born in Shrewsbury (we think that a very good thing) what better time and place to focus the grey matter (your brain) on the subject of *what it is to be us.*' (Time Shift Festival, Shrewsbury).

It's a real person. But, does anyone feel twitchy about this style?

It's a long sentence, with lots of ellipses in it. Yes, it goes on and on for ever.

I have a similar sort of style but I rein it in because I'm aware that the literacy level of some people would mean that they find it hard to understand all the sub-clauses and length of it.

You have to be careful about striking a balance. It's trying quite hard to be friendly.

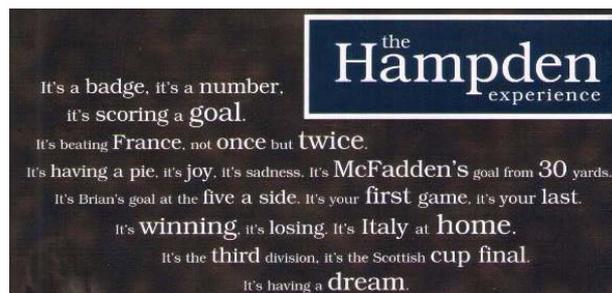
It works because it fits with the sort of organisation it is, it might not be appropriate for a hallowed organisation of the establishment, though it would still be beneficial for them to find ways of speaking like a real person.

- Grab their attention with something relevant

This (right) makes a connection because it brings in something unexpected.

- Use the words they would use

I hate football, but there's something very appealing about the way that the way the Scottish Football Museum uses the words of football fans in its copy:



These words were taken from the words fans used in focus groups.

Connecting with Strangers

When we were writing our postcards first time around we were writing them for people we know. This is easier because we know them, we know what they like and the best way of communicating with them. But most of the time we have to communicate with strangers, or potential strangers.

[A DVD of an interview with someone called 'Anna', 35 years old, who outlined her day, looking after children and doing a job. Her time is precious and recent outings have included seeing a scary film at the cinema which she didn't enjoy much and 'Mamma Mia' in the West End (which was a birthday treat with a meal and other activity). She's into 'Monarch of the Glen' on television. She likes lots of different types of music: Abba, Glen Campbell. Before that, the last time she went to the theatre was ten years ago; she can remember lots of things about the experience except for what it was she saw]

What is it that pushes 'Anna's buttons'?

It has to be an evening out with friends

Food and drink is important. It's a treat – someone else is cooking.

A good laugh – An escape

[Delegates were then asked to write a postcard to Anna persuading her to go and see the film that they had chosen before]

As a possible inspiration, delegates were asked to imagine they'd just met her and to imagine what the words were that they would say to her.

How did that feel?

I thought it was okay – it made a difference having the picture of her – it wasn't as if she was a complete stranger.

I just picked up on a few things that seemed to appeal to her

Who had a scary movie? What did you write?

'The Exorcist': Don't be put off by the horror theme of the Exorcist ... There is a very human story under-pinning the narrative. A young girl's journey from darkness into light is incidental. It's more about the emotional challenges to her family and those that seek to help her ... It's a film that works on many levels. Give it a go, bring your scarf.'

How fabulous, you could see that working in a brochure.

The piece of film which was shown was the result of an informal interview in the local pub but what can you do if you're not able to do things so easily? How would you gain an insight into your audiences? What would

*You could set up an X-Factor video booth and grab peoples' words
See what people are saying in e-communities?*

One of the things that copywriters do is cut out pictures of people they are talking to, put them on their desk and imagine writing for them.

We need to be able to talk to audiences but we need to ask them the right questions. It's very difficult asking people to describe it to their next door neighbour, but ask them the three words that are in their mind after they've seen it or 'can you remember something in the show?' and ask them to talk about it will work better. They're non-pressured questions and easier to answer.

Reasons not Hype

A *feature* is a fact about your work, whereas a *benefit* is a reason why someone should be involved. The postcards had shown great reasons friends and Anna should see the films. A teabag obtained from outside the conference hall provided an interesting example of using a benefit rather than a feature to describe it: '*a moment of calm*' and then underneath it has '*Chamomile tea*' (in smaller letters).

So many people in the arts go into purple prose arty writing mode at the expense of giving simple reasons for attending. Compare this, which gives several reasons in a few words:

'Families, stretch your imagination. Fun, free and buggy friendly.'

(New Art Gallery, Walsall)

It's worth remembering what people say they like about the arts, in these cases the visual arts:

'It's relaxing ... it's a time to yourself ... you get away from all the hassles'

'You come out and you feel completely different. It's very liberating. Your mind is on a different plane ... yes I think 'spiritual elevation' is a good term'

'I'm very interested in how things are produced, the technical side, techniques ... it's the mystery of how they are constructed or how they are made which interests me most'

'I've no idea what I get out of it ... something warm inside ... I can't explain ... it's a sense of recognition, of accord ... for example, I find Francis Bacon disturbing, but that's what's great about him ... the reaction inside you It's something that affects my emotions'

The Research Practice, *Results of research into the contemporary visual arts*
(Arts Council of Great Britain)

What do we say?

'Giuseppe Penone is renowned rightly as one of the most important artists of his generation. Emerging through the late 1960s and 1970s as an exponent of Arte Povera, an avant garde Italian art movement that has had lasting effect, his career has gone from strength to strength ...'

Okay, let's give some history if we want to but let's make it accessible and provide context. As Diane [Ragsdale] said, so much of our writing is about proving how superior we are.

We also have an *'It's on, take it or leave it'* approach. Present the information: bare and boring.

What about the reasons we gave Anna to attend:

It's about life and the adventure it brings. Through the film you can escape and immerse yourself into the characters' life.

You might catch a glimpse of Patrick Swayze's bottom.

A Simple Straightforward Style

Readability is an important issue, as some people have already mentioned. So many times in focus groups I hear people saying they have no idea what we are going on about.

'I'd be put off by the leaflet straightaway - it's so pseud, so pretentious ... I'd just discard it ... and what does it mean? 'Intricate structured mechanisms' and 'metrical experiments' ... what does it mean? I want to be able to be told what it will be like, what I am buying.'

Also, we use simple words that don't mean anything. What does 'new' mean?

The average reading age in this country is 9.

The reading age of The Sun is 8.

The reading age of The Guardian is 14.

Only 1% of the population can gain meaning from a sentence of 24 words or more at first reading.

Some computer packages (like Word) have readability measures built in to them, but they're very rarely used. In Word: Tools - options - spelling and grammar - tick readability statistics and then go back and run a spelling and grammar check [check what year 1 is – usually 5 years old].

Many analysts have said that writing with a reading age of about 12 will provide readers with a good balance of readability and complexity.

End with a Clincher

'If Darwin was still living in Shrewsbury we'd like to think he'd come along.'

What were our clinchers for Anna?

'food provided' 'and cake' 'you deserve it'

We're good at clinchers if we write naturally.

Make Copywriting Less Painful

Different parts of our brains do different things. Broadly speaking, deciding what we want to say is left-brain and writing beautiful words is right-brain. Our right-brain is quite delicate and is easily bullied. In order to help our right-brain perform well, it helps to prepare ourselves before we write:

- Who are you talking to?
- What are they like and who are they influenced by?
- What are they interested in?
- What is your common ground?
- What is an appropriate tone of voice to use?
- What action you want your target group to take? What information do they need?

If you have all this sorted out you can get your right brain to flourish not wither.

As Diane Ragsdale said this morning, we need to concentrate on seeing better before selling better.