

## Heart of Marketing: What Do They Want?

This article originally appeared in two parts in “Active Voice,” the award-winning newsletter of the San Francisco chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.

“Who is the audience for this message?” I use this simple question as the starting point for any tech transfer or marketing piece I write.

Good writing equals words that produce the desired response within the target audience. (Superior writing does it with the fewest possible words and transparent style.) Knowing who I need to reach helps me make a dozen different writing and editing decisions about length, style, organization, word choice, and emphasis.

### **Questions About the Audience**

What do they know about the subject? Are they uninformed, requiring that I start with the basics and define everything? Are they knowledgeable and sophisticated, requiring that I start with the latest information or perhaps a fresh way of expressing what they already know?

How do they feel about any related controversial issues? If they support my client's position, I can quickly get to the conclusions and provide the background and supporting evidence later, and only briefly.

But if the audience does not care or opposes the ideas and requires persuading, I may begin with a statement of the problem(s) to be solved in order to establish some basis for agreement.

Or I might say something general that most people support. From there the text may cover specific reasons and illustrative examples, winding up with a grand, “Therefore,...” and one or more major messages.

What are their “hot buttons”? These words and phrases key into their unmet needs, unsolved problems or unsatisfied desires. Answering this question goes to the heart of marketing.

According to one expert, “Marketing means find out what people want and give it to them.” People want better, cheaper and faster.

To persuade, I sequence and phrase ideas to fit the mental and emotional state of the audience. In brief, I start where they are. Then I take them with me where I want them to go.

### **Decide What You Want Them to Know**

What key information do I want them to have? What are the messages? I cannot say everything about anything, so I choose what to emphasize. As a writer, I know how to emphasize a message in clear, direct prose. I use the client's knowledge of the product and audience to work out what to stress.

### **What Do You Want Them to Do?**

Response is the ultimate purpose. The message has to be aimed at that. If you want people to pick up the phone and call you, make it easy to find the number and make the call. If they need to go to a local dealer, feature that. If you simply want people to have a more favorable opinion (called “image advertising,”) use a different look and feel than if you want sales action now.

But what if the audience is not one homogeneous group but two or more? A large, non-profit client that develops new energy-saving methods for its dues-paying member companies has at least two audiences. One audience consists of well-informed, technical plant engineers who want to know a lot about the product quickly in order to decide several things:

Does this relate to my situation? Does this offer enough of a solution to my problem(s) that I should act to investigate it further? (The desired response from this group is, “Call or write to order or find out more.”) Is the proposed solution credible, that is, derived by sound methods, adequately tested and proven, and recommended by trustworthy people?

The other audience is primarily busy, technically ignorant executives (CEO, CFO, or COO) of the member companies, who will read little, if any, of the text. My client has a second, less obvious but important, goal of reminding the top people in the membership that they are receiving a steady stream of benefits in return for their large yearly dues. For these powerful but lazy readers, the messages have to be quick, clear, and simple.

How do you make a brochure rich enough for the engineers and scientists but simple enough for the executives?

Start Simple. I go first for the executive-level messages. I make the following carry the important content:

**Title and Subtitle.** Often the product name (over which I have no control) does not immediately reveal what it’s about. Software product names like Windows, SAFER, Excel, and BMW do not say what they do. Nor how they can benefit the user, which should be the overriding message. Since the title often is obscure or misleading, the subtitle must take up the slack.

**Graphics.** It’s tempting to talk next about the headlines, since they are so prominent. But people are emotional first and intellectual later. The stronger appeal is visual not verbal. Therefore, the next important question is: What visual images (concrete or abstract) will transmit the messages? Ideally, people should get your message non-verbally just by looking at the printed piece. (This is about promotion, not manuals and documentation. On the other hand, don’t assume people will be happy with, and loyal to, a product that has an ugly, dysfunctional user’s guide.)

Done right, a good promotion piece, in its look and feel, will have people positively inclined before they even start reading, so that the words support a “buying decision” they have already made.

### **Design: Pretty Isn't Good Enough**

I write copy, but an important part of my service is helping the client understand and express to the graphic designer what the non-verbal must convey. A beautiful, creative piece that looks great in the designer's portfolio belongs just there. Design has to do the work of carrying messages about the product and the company to the viewer/reader. If photos or other art that express the key messages don't exist, they must be created.

**Headlines.** Busy, skimming readers won't read every single word, in order, from the upper left-hand corner to the lower right. They'll jump around at angles, going forward and back to whatever seems striking or interesting, then maybe decide to sit down and read it through. The largest type on the page may be the only thing that gets an executive's attention, so the headlines have to carry major messages.

For example, I wrote brochure copy for a software product designed to manage the useful life of turbine blades. The headline on the first inside page summed up the entire product: "Controlling the High Cost of Blade Failure." Anyone who reads that knows immediately what the product is about and the main benefit.

**Captions.** With technical subjects the illustrations are often not self-explanatory. The captions, which are not just labels identifying what is in the pictures, should carry important supporting information pulled from the body copy. The goal is not to avoid repeating what's in the text but to use the captions to communicate what the executive may never read because he's only skimming. The captions also serve as reminders of key points for any reader who is giving it a second look.

Once you have made your messages clear at the "skimming level," via the title, design, illustrations, headlines, captions and boldfacing, how do you write a marketing message for the person who will bother to read the words? A complete answer would be a book-length tome. Here are a few guiding principles:

- Take the reader's point of view
- Stress the benefits
- Organize it logically
- Emphasize what's important

**Reader's Point of View-**The most difficult task for engineers and executives who are new to marketing is to shift their point of view from themselves to the reader. Most want to talk about their product or service from what they know about it. Logical, isn't it? What else can you say but what you know?

**Start Where They Are.** These four words are the key to communicating effectively with any audience. Think about your target reader and his/her needs. This doesn't mean talk down, oversimplify or remove necessary terminology or ideas.

The reader's point of view means anticipating the need for clear statements, background information, a logical progression of ideas, explanation of unfamiliar terms and avoiding

unnecessary or irrelevant details. Most readers want useful information, not exaggerated claims, impressive language, or the entire story from beginning to end.

How do these admonitions translate into specific words? For a brochure on a computer program to evaluate stress and fractures in steam turbine rotors, I began the text like this:

“Among the difficult tasks facing electric utilities is managing the life of a steam turbine rotor. The longer it runs the rotor, the greater the risk of destructive failure. But replacing the rotor too soon drains capital reserves faster than necessary. A third possibility, removing flaws in the rotor and returning it to service, carries its own complication: how to know which flaws are worth removing.”

Whether or not you could go into a generating plant and find the turbines, much less know which part is the rotor, there's nothing in that paragraph that a high school graduate (let's all hope!) could not understand, except perhaps “capital reserves.” After this brief bit of non-technical explanation, it was easy to take the reader into progressively more detailed but not technically difficult descriptions of the problems with rotors and how the software helps solve them.

Naturally, some well-informed readers, and some of the engineering clients themselves, may dismiss the above as babytalk. The guiding principle is the reader's understanding and interest and what will motivate him to take the desired action.

**Benefits Mean “So What?”**-The other common mistake experts make is stressing the product's features rather than the benefits. Facts do not speak for themselves, nor is the value of a product's features immediately obvious to most people. For example, the megaHertz clock speed of a micro-processor is a feature. The benefit is how fast (or how much faster) the new chip will let you do your work.

The three basic benefits of most products and services are “better,” “faster” or “cheaper.” All three at once make a real winner.

In Advertising 101, the most memorable thing I learned was, “Hardware store customers don't want 3/4-inch drill bits. They want 3/4-inch holes.” Stress the benefits to the reader in words he can easily understand.

**Organize it Logically** - What is “logical” probably isn't the same for everyone, so this isn't an easy rule to follow. Also, many patterns of organization are possible. (I have a list of 12 in front of me.)

Remember that people spend money to solve their problems. Thus, you won't go far wrong at least beginning with a structure of Problem, Effect, Cause and Solution. Your product or service is the solution. The order and relative size of these four pieces can vary a lot and still be effective and easy to understand.

When non-marketers or non-writers feel lost on how to structure a piece, they often fall back on a time-worn piece of advice: “Begin at the beginning.” Scholars and your counterparts at other companies may care about the whole story, blow-by-blow with every organizational twist and turn. Customers want to know what you have and what it can do for them. Put the results up front and bury the history in the middle.

**Emphasize What’s Important** - In a marketing document, even a long one, you usually cannot include all you know about the product or service. Strong, effective communications feature emphasis, which means a few major points receive greater prominence and more coverage, while other aspects are noted briefly or not at all. The marketing professional earns his fee by helping the client discover which arrows stand the best chance of hitting the bull’s eye and which are best left in the quiver.