



Want Your Written Content to Attract More Business? A Copywriter Shares His Process

This transcript was lightly edited for clarity.

Chris: My guest today is Bob Woodard. He is the Principal at RNW, Inc. and he is a copywriter who specializes in health care and technology sectors. Of course, that includes a lot of experience in the life sciences as well. Bob, welcome to the podcast.

Bob: Great to be here.

Chris: So just as a beginning, can you tell us a little bit about your background so people understand who I'm talking to?

Bob: Yeah. I've been working in this area for quite some time in the Bay Area. I started out as a technical writer and got interested in more of the promotional aspects. I have a scientific background so this was a really good match for me. I love science so I just began working directly with companies and also ad agencies in the area. One thing led to another, and now here I am. So I work with a lot of different types of health care, pharmaceutical, technology companies in the Bay Area and I really enjoy it.

Chris: Nice. So let's start our conversation about writing and just think about why people should care. It's often difficult to find the time to produce well-written original content. Can you tell us what difference it makes for the customer and the business and a little bit about how companies can do that well?

Bob: There is certainly the . . . I wouldn't say it's really a joke, but an observation people make is that nobody ever reads the copy. I turned that around and say nobody really looks at the visuals, which I think they probably definitely do. But I think the copy creates an environment. So if there is a theme that people can follow, it's like it's telling a story where

if you have a compelling headline and subheads and copy that pay that headline off, I think people do get interested in it because of an inherent attraction toward a good story.

A lot of the products that I work with, they have tremendous stories behind them. So it's an opportunity to educate that prospective customer and draw them in. That's really the most important part about it, even if you don't read every single word. That said, there are some things like a data sheet or a manual or some kind of technical backgrounder where they will read very carefully to make sure that what you're doing is valid and relevant to their work or their research. Then they will carefully look at words especially the ones that have to do with results or specifications or claims. So there, the copywriter becomes more of a factual base thing that supports story. And that's all very, very important.

Chris: Storytelling is a very popular topic right now in the marketing world. You mentioned companies that have tremendous stories. How do you put that into marketing materials? I understand the principles of storytelling, but sometimes I'm looking for a story about a product and I'm not quite sure where it starts and how to frame it. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Bob: Well, it comes down to focusing on customer benefits and really having a good idea of who the customer is. When I hear about stories, I think of stories like all the way from stories that kids are attracted to like Find Waldo all the way to stories adults are interested in that become movies or blockbuster novels. Really, the whole thing starts with the connection with the person - where they know it has something to do with their life. So like a little kid, they're trying to find their way through the woods by dropping bread crumbs or whatever. On some level, the child knows that that's about them.

But I think that obviously, that's out of the realm of advertising to life science customers. But I think that it has to be so relevant to them that they are drawn into it. This could be on any of the continuum from blockbuster innovations all the way to something that's just going to save somebody a few minutes in a day. If they know it's for them, I think they will be drawn into the story.

Chris: Yes, and it's really about making someone feel like they are the character in the story. I guess what I'm asking is how do you do that besides talking about the benefits? How do you hook them into immediately looking at your copy and saying, "This is about me"?

Bob: Well, I think it has to do with understanding their environment and what their challenges are that they face every day. I think all too often, companies are kind of telling them what their problems are and nobody really wants to hear that. I think that they know what their problems are, their frustrations or their challenges or the things that are

keeping them from succeeding. I think that it's a matter of connecting with them at the level of . . .(pause)

we talked about features and benefits. It's like looking at the benefit and looking at it in the context of the work environment that person has, whether they're the CEO of some company or somebody who is pipetting reagents in a sequencing lab, they have an environment that they work in. It's really a matter of connecting with them on that level. I think there is a certain age old journalism rule where you really need to talk to a person who is looking at what you've written or what your publication is trying to achieve.

Chris: What is the biggest challenge you faced when you're contacted to do a writing project for a company?

Bob: I would say a couple of things. One is sometimes as a person who works in the freelance world, time is always a big crunch. I think that when it comes right down to it they call someone like me to get something done fast. Sometimes I kind of feel more like a skilled craftsman. Like a plumber or electrician that is drawn in to fix something or get something done because somebody else didn't have the time or the skills to do it themselves. I think that, really, that's kind of frustrating because some of these things do take some time to do them really well. And again, I think that in an ideal world, the projects would be done in a much more orderly way where all the information is available right up front.

But I understand that sometimes time is really the critical factor. There is a trade show, there is an ad placement deadline, you name it. And part of what I provide as a service is to do the best we can in the time we have. That often is fine because these things are always changing all the time. We're not building monuments. We are capturing moments in time. I would like it to be perfect every time and sometimes it is and sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's just a matter of practicality and we have to get it done. If you have like two hours to do a job that should take two weeks, that can be very frustrating.

Chris: I'm sure. I know a lot of these projects come down to time. Do you have any suggestions for companies about how they could think about this further ahead so that, I don't want to say they wouldn't need your service at the end, but in many cases it might be that they just don't have the bandwidth at the end when their time is limited and people are working on other things for the same deadline. But what kind of things could a company do at the beginning of some campaign or project that would ensure that they'd have better content coming out at the back end regardless of whether they engage someone like you or not?

Bob: I guess that it's just like with anything. There is a lot of planning that can go on. A lot of companies do this, where they have like developing but I guess I would call it messaging

platform or messaging hierarchy where they go from the why was the product made in the first place or the service, the objective of it, the problems it's solving, the frustrations it's eliminating and what was the idea behind the product. I guess supporting that would be a series of messages that talk to people on a variety of levels.

Like a functional level, what you need is the technology part of it, the technical problem it's solving. There is the emotional level having to do with "I'm going to succeed in this. I'm going to become known for my expertise in this. It's going to help facilitate my career," basically and then there is going to be the more overarching message like "I'm doing something good for mankind."

But I think all of these things have to be gathered, separated, and supported by feature type messages like, "How can the product actually do this?" So it kind of comes down to "What's the news? What should I pay attention to here and then why should I care in the first place? How is it going to help me and then how do I know this is true?" You separate those messages out very, very carefully. They don't have to be finely refined because that's ideally what my job is, but to work with somebody like me or some people in marketing to develop this hierarchy to begin with.

Then from that, I think you have a set of tools that could help develop anything from a website all the way down to a simple direct mail or e-blast because everything is falling into place based on those messages. That's what I think could help, not just help somebody like me do their job better but basically market their product more effectively.

Chris: I like how you broke that down into those three simple steps: "What's the news? How does this help me, and how do I know it's true? I really like that and I want to say that it seems like when these projects happen inside of a company there are many, many materials as you point out: Web pages, brochures, data sheets, all kinds of things, emails, that end up incorporating those things, but they are often each written from scratch so there are two aspects to that that I would like to point out.

One is that it takes a lot of time to start and think about each of those things, but my perception is that sometimes that's what happens. Someone says, "We need an email". So they probe their memory for "what are we talking about here" and they create an email. They have to do that again when they create some other thing.

Then the other aspect of it is just the consistency. There is a time saving and a consistency of messaging if these could all be laid out ahead of time, so multiple benefits for getting your messaging platform lined up early.

Bob: Yeah . . .

Chris: Go ahead.

Bob: I was going to say that things can get out of hand even with the best intentions, especially in a large company where they have operations in different places and often people in this . . . I guess we'd call them maybe sort of a district or satellite or there are people that have their own responsibilities for producing marketing materials and things can go all over the place when people take that on. I guess that can cause problems with the consistency like you were saying of messaging to begin with. That to me is, -- a really good marketing communications manager needs to have some power in the company and that's not always the case. And I think that that causes problem, . . . well not problems, but maybe confusion and maybe missed opportunities.

Chris: Sure, I totally agree with that. One of the things you mentioned when we spoke before was stuffing nine pounds of – crap, if you will, in a one pound bag. Can you explain what you mean by that in the context of marketing and writing?

Bob: I think we all probably seen it done when people say let's do a positioning statement and in an ideal world it will be one single thought. It's based on one single advantage or thought over competition or maybe it's just some kind of brand new idea. But I think that in an area where there is a lot of competition for products that are maybe very, very similar people will put everything they can think of into the positioning statement that can possibly differentiate it. Usually that's not one thing. They would say –it's the old thing -- it's faster, it's smarter, it's easier, it's everything goes in there like the entire thing. It sounds like the doomsday machine that's going to solve every problem a person has.

I think that, first of all, it's difficult to just basically like I said in sentence structure, it's more than one. It's like five thoughts in one sentence. And from the standpoint of the person who receives the message he just didn't know what to focus on and it's not being very captivating or believable. But people run off with these kinds of positioning statements and again, when it falls down to someone like myself trying to create an idea or write a cohesive piece of material based on that it becomes very, very difficult. So it's just a kind of mash up more than a positioning statement.

Chris: Right, I had this exact conversation last week with Hamid Ghanadan about positioning. First of all, five things can't be a differentiator or you would be . . . you would be phenomenally ahead of the market if you had five things about your product that were different than everyone else's. But it takes courage to find the one thing which may not be the most attractive thing, but would be the one thing that would capture all of a particular audience who cared about that one thing and then grow from there. I think a lot of companies . . . and I understand why, have a little bit of fear of missing out but again, like you said and Hamid said it as well, if you are not clear about exactly what you stand for or that one thing your customer won't be either so you're not helping yourself.

Bob: You're right Chris. I think that the thing is that it takes time to get down to that one thing and as we go back now to the understanding of the customer. I wonder sometimes. Every company is not creating a killer app, right? And the classical marketing 101 positioning, where you draw the axes and you have time versus cost or whatever the axes are and spend some time, people aren't going to be surprised if you are, for example, selling pipette tips or something, there's not going to be a gigantic difference. It might come down to price, it might come down to performance, but I think it's just a matter of being sure within the company itself or between the marketing department, in this case, what really can they say about it that will make it differentiated. It could be easier to order, it could be anything. I think that it's good to take the time to really figure it out.

Chris: You hit my favorite thing on the head right there with, "easier to order". And not necessarily that one specifically. But it's not always something about your product. There is a whole experience around the product, how you get it, how easy it is to understand how to use it when you get it, all the other materials around it, ordering, whatever it is. But a lot of companies tend not to think about that. I think partly because the people involved in the marketing content are typically more close to the product itself and are not responsible for all those other things but certainly a company that makes it easy for you to get their product - that is a differentiator.

Bob: Yes, I guess the situation where people from different parts of the company have input into the process or the person who is putting it together . . . Again you know the job of a marketing communications person in a company, is very, very important. And I think all too often it's more like, "We need a brochure. We need a flyer. We need a website. Can we put this together?" Well I think it's really there is some architecture involved, some research, and discovery and all that.

Chris: Yes. I'm going to shift back a little bit to this messaging platform and structure because the other thing that we talked about previously was that you mentioned that pharma does a really good job with messaging. Largely because of the regulatory environment, first of all they have to keep their claims on track and document everything so that it's essential that they have a clear messaging platform and they are sticking to it. There is no improvisation. Is there a way that life science companies can emulate that?

Bob: I think that even though they are not under . . . A lot of them are under obviously some restrictions and you want to make sure that what you're saying is verifiable no matter what. That's basically really the most important thing because you are selling the products to somebody whose job might depend on it or the quality of somebody else's work depends on it. So those are always, just like in pharma, those are really important things. It's not regulated necessarily, but those are important.

But I think what's good is to come up with something that . . . My perception is that in the pharma industry, you invest a lot of money into that messaging up front and once it's put into motion, it's just too hard or too difficult or too expensive to go changing things sort of on the fly. There has to be a really good reason to change something. So I think to implement a messaging platform across all the materials, you have a core concept that goes across the brochures, a website or anything that same concept or claims are held to in a very strict way all across the board. I think that's an ideal thing. A lot of times people get cold feet or something is not working out exactly right, so they start to change things and pretty soon it becomes unraveled. It might be good reasons for that except for the person receiving the messages kind of wonders, or they forget or the messages aren't being reinforced and that becomes ineffective. I would say that they the messaging platform locked down as much as possible. Enforce its usage across all the communication tactics.

Chris: Right. That's what I was getting at. That sort of discipline around what the message is and just sticking to it ruthlessly to keep it consistent.

Bob: Things do change and that's like you are always hearing. Again going back to marketing 101, that a business or marketing communications plan is a living document and it changes all the time. But I think in a way, that where it's changing, like going back to the original positioning and messaging, if changes are made, they change for reason.

That reason is fit into the current, let's say campaign. So if we call it a campaign that's based on a consistent messaging platform which is the whole idea of the campaign. If that campaign changes for some reason, then it has to be clear to everyone that the campaign is changing, including the people receiving the messaging. I think that's where things get to be kind of difficult because companies don't have endless resources to go back through and redo a big messaging initiative or whatever every time something changes but it's just good to be aware of it and to keep things contained. And again, not to put too much pressure on marketing communication managers, but really that's a responsibility somebody has to take on.

Chris: Right. Yeah and again I completely agree with that limited resource problem which really sort of reinforces the idea that getting clear about what you're going to do from the beginning and getting that right is worthwhile.

You talked about the value of a creative brief and a culture where creative brief was standard and I don't know to what extent people outside of agencies still use a creative brief internally for their company, so I can't speak to that. But I guess if you could talk about it the value of that creative brief a little bit and then I think that, I'm pretty sure we are going to link to one in the show notes so that people will have something they can use.

Bob: I think that a creative brief is a distillation primarily of what should be of any number of source materials. I think again, in an ideal world, there would be some marketing reports, profiles of customers, and any information that's available at all. Could be interviews with key customers. All this information distilled down to one document. And it really starts off with - a lot the stuff is pretty straight forward. If we think of it as a sort of pyramid in a way, the top is certainly the objective of the brief, what this piece of communication is supposed to do and definition of the project again: advertising, website, brochure, technical brief, technical manual whatever it is.

Then positioning, whether it's been established or not, would be the next part of that, which is probably, in a way, the most important thing. This is really all that information that I just mentioned distilled into one differentiating statement. And then from that, you know, we can build the argument for the product from its supporting key facts. These could be . . . typically there are very... in our industries, they are very feature oriented but this is an opportunity to bring in some customer benefits and limit it to two, or most five important things or whatever can fit into that communication . . . the document or the website. But they have to be clear. Again going back to the mash up thing, we don't want to have a whole bunch of things in one sentence. We want it have to be very, very clear.

Then talk about what the goals are for the outcomes. If there is anything having to do with attracting customers from different fields, or anything like that, and also any kind of mandatory information that has to be included which might be disclaimers and things like that. So that when a person gets it, a person like myself gets this document, there is a pretty clear idea of where we're going. It's like it's sailing on a dead reckoned course. You know where you're going, you know where the hazards are, you know where the route is and you're going to be able to do an effective job of getting where you want to go.

Chris: Nice. So now let's shift gears a little bit and get down to . . . I'm going to use a nitty-gritty example of software. One of the things I see a lot of is copy for software that's fairly generic about "easy to use", "powerful", and "intuitive" and so on. I had a conversation with one of my guests a couple of weeks ago who said. "You might think it's intuitive but until I sit down with it and I use it, that doesn't mean anything to me. Because it might be and might not be." I've been thinking most of us in our jobs, if we are marketing people, are using software for a large part of the day, whether it's Word or project management software or anything. These things must help us in some way and I'm wondering is there a way that we could think about what we would say about the software we use a lot to get ideas about communicating the value of more specific software. Is that a crazy idea?

Bob: No, I think what you brought up to begin with, I think some of this stuff sounds generic because we all have the tendencies to fall back on kind of tried and true, I guess, sort of sound bites. I think that if somebody could . . . I keep going back to this idea of

understanding the customers. If somebody can really put themselves into the customers' position and try to assiduously avoid going to kind of the tried and true statements, then you can bet on it, on not just software, but any industry.

If you get somebody's marketing materials you'll see that there is sameness about them. It becomes evident very, very quickly and if you could put somebody else's name on piece of promotional materials that you produced and nobody would know the difference, then I think that's a problem. I think that being original I guess is really the answer to that, that there is always some way to explain something differently. It's a little bit of a risk, but if you understand the customers' problem, what they are trying to achieve, they will understand it and you don't have to use, what in the journalism world would be trite and hackneyed phrases to describe something that's supposed to be new.

Chris: Right, yeah. I was thinking, just for life science software in general, each one of those things does something that helps people understand their data better. Maybe it's easier to manipulate the data or there is something about it and it's not just easy to use. It does something for you that's going to speed up your understanding of the results, like slice the data in a different way, faster or whatever it is. I feel like the parts of brochures that I see describing the software that goes with an instrument are neglected and really, if they are not going to add value, they are just wasting space.

Bob: Yeah. One thing, from just a purely practical writing standpoint is to look at the adjectives you use and ask yourself if you really need all of them. Because you strip those away, you end up with what it is that the person really wants to know. This is sort of a good exercise to take a look at because people use adjectives to try to take those nine pounds in one-pound bag stuff and try to pack it all in there. If you strip it all down to what really it's about, it's a good way from a very practical writing standpoint to figure out what it is you are actually trying to say.

You're right I think product is designed and built to serve a purpose and trying to make it be more than it is or ...making it apologizing for what it is. I mean it's a really interesting problem and you just see that coming up all the time.

Chris: I love what you said there as a practical take away from this whole thing is: here is an exercise anyone can do. Take your copy, strip out the adjectives and see if it tells the right story.

Bob: Yeah, exactly because ideally you can put so many adjectives in front of something like you said faster, easier, cost effective, efficient, minimizes hands on time. I mean people can see that all over the place in our industry and it gets tedious. I think when people read it, it doesn't really mean anything at some point.

Chris: Well that's really helpful. Is there any other general advice you have for the audience about how they can make more effective use of their own writers or outside writers?

Bob: Well yeah, I would say to provide them with good input, that's the main thing. A lot of companies are really good at this, and it's something that the good product managers and marketing communication managers, a lot of them are really good at it. I think that it's just a matter of being organized and give people good materials that they can use, and not just sort of do a data dump on them. Data dump is fine at some point, but there need to be somebody who's gone through all that and digested it like I said so they could create a creative brief out of it.

I think it's useful to have the writer participate in writing the creative brief because that's the person . . . and even the art director, those are the people that are going to be tasked with using that information to create something. If they can be involved in doing it, in fact in many times, I've been responsible for creating a creative brief myself. I hate to use the word forces, but it forces a writer to go through the material and understand it and put it in a way that they can play that back to the clients and say, "Did I understand this the way that you would like it to be understood or maybe in a new way that you never even thought of?" I think that's a very valuable exercise. But to do that the writer needs good information and that often requires him or her to be involved in the planning process at least to some extent.

Chris: Nice. That's great. I want to thank you for all this information. Before we end though I like to ask all my guests one other question unrelated to the topic of the day and that is, I'm curious to find out what you do in the time when you are not working. What do you do for fun or to relax?

Bob: Every day I get up 5:00 in the morning and go swimming for an hour or so. Then I go to yoga two days a week. I really enjoy spending time with my family, taking long walks and then reading. I love reading. I just started to reading a book I've read many many years ago and I'm enjoying very, very much. It was David Copperfield. Charles Dickens, what an amazing writer he was and it's just fun to read his stuff.

Chris: Fantastic. It's interesting that I always find out many times I have things in common with the people I'm interviewing that I didn't even know about. I think I knew about your love of swimming. I don't swim everyday but I swim three days a week and still love it. I met my wife swimming, and it's a big part of our life.

Bob: Yeah. It's a great thing to do. So yeah, in open water or a in a pool it doesn't really matter to me but it's just good to take some weight off your body and off you mind for a while.

Chris: I guess it's a good thing to do for sure.

Bob: We'll have to go swimming some time Chris.

Chris: We can do some open water swimming in the Bay.

Bob: Yeah.

Chris: Well thank you very much for your time Bob Woodard and really appreciate all this helpful insight.

Bob: Thanks for the call and hope to talk to you again soon.

Chris: All right.

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