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Watershed for Catalogs

Don Libey

Everywhere your look, some company is being bailed out of their financial mess, or is getting in line for assistance. The greatest shower of money ever seen in the United States is being washed over the commercial landscape. The outcome is unknown, but there can be little doubt that we are in the process of pushing the Reset Button in every aspect of our economy. So, what is the current and future value of and support for the American catalog industry?

Pogo Was Right

Few people remember Pogo, the cartoon opossum created by Walt Kelly in 1949. Pogo had a way of turning a phrase so that we saw ourselves and recognized our shortcomings. Pogo was that most wonderful of all beings, a sage in the midst of lesser lights; a jester in a kingdom run by fools; a wise man with a funny nose. His most famous observation, after looking at the dismal reality of the situation in the Okefenokee Swamp where the characters all lived (some thought the swamp and the cartoon characters were a parallel world to Washington, D.C. and Congress), was, "We have met the enemy and he is us." I believe Pogo discovered a universal truth when he first spoke those words to Porky, his porcupine confidant, in 1971. For all his homespun naïveté and innocence, at that moment Pogo took his place alongside the greatest philosophers throughout all of history.

“We have met the enemy and he is us.”

As a long-time practitioner of the art and science of the business-to-business and consumer catalogs, an observer of the industry, a direct marketing futurist with an eye firm on the decade ahead, and a reputation for speaking out at times of peril and pain, it once again falls to me to sound the claxon alarm—only this time I feel an impending sense of doom.

Here, in the swamp we have created through our own isolationist attitudes, our own neglect, our own failure to demand professional representation, our own failure to put the money where we know it is needed, our own failure to look beyond our own corporate walls, our own failure to aggressively battle those who wish to see us destroyed, our own failure to get off our dead behinds and fight for the future of our highly specialized form of business—we are now looking straight into the eyes of oblivion. We are, indeed Pogo, our own worst enemy.

The Coming Economics

There is going to be another massive postage increase, perhaps as much or more than the postage disaster of 2005. You know all the reasons why, and you know all the political reasons why the problem can't be solved, only periodically mitigated. Spending federal money on something like a postal service that might actually support business and spur economic growth is simply lost on the idiot *body politic* in Washington. They are simply consumed with pettiness and personal pork to the exclusion of any idea that might be even remotely good for the country.

The recession is likely going to deepen further. The ‘wise men’—those who are consistently correct in their view of the near-future—have all warned against the next two years. This is a major, cyclical event that must cause a major, cyclical correction; it is not new; it has happened before—many times. There could easily be an eight to sixteen year downturn before these unprecedented, global financial events have been sorted out. This is the end of a way of life based on consumption and the new model has not been constructed.

American Catalog Mailers Association

This is a small group of some sixty-five members led by the most intelligent and effective association executive director ever to work in the catalog and direct marketing industry. Hamilton Davison has gotten things done and has made a meaningful economic difference. The directors of ACMA are committed and active and have equally made a difference. Individuals and groups—particularly NEMOA (New England Mail Order Association)—have made major contributions and have made a difference. Over these past two years, this is the first time in the history of American direct marketing that we have had an organization representing the unique needs and positions of *catalogers*. It is *not* an organization that caters to banks and their Number 10 letters; it is *not* an

organization that caters to home shopping networks; it is *not* an organization catering to huge suppliers, or software or media firms; it is *not* an organization that sees its future tied to the Internet. It is an organization formed by catalogers, for catalogers and *only* about catalogs. Read the name: American *Catalog* Mailers Association. It is only concerned with American companies mailing catalogs. It doesn't have interest in European associations, and it doesn't sponsor clubs, or foundations, or awards; it doesn't hire Jay Leno to tell funny stories at its meetings; it doesn't schmooze, rather it lobbies directly with the Postmaster General and the PRC telling your story—the story that no one has ever told before.

But, sixty-five companies spending \$5,000 each or so cannot win the battle for the catalog industry future. It's a beginning—and a very positive beginning—but just how far do you think \$350,000 is going to go in the Washington swamp? The pharmaceutical industry would spend that much to partially buy a newly elected Representative from an unimportant state. They would spend ten times that amount to own a junior Senator. Wake up: Congress is a *business!* It has nothing to do with fairness or the “greater good for the greater number.” It runs on lobbying, and lobbying is fueled with cash. You want something done to benefit your industry . . . You have to do it yourself. And you have to play by the rules and know all the secret handshakes.

To be effective, the catalog industry must mount \$10 million annual campaigns, at a minimum, to make any headway. If there are 10,000 catalogs in the U.S. (and there are probably closer to 15,000, perhaps 20,000 if you count all the manufacturers), that is \$1,000 per company a year. Is it worth it? Would you prefer to a 40 percent postage increase? Or 50 percent?

To my knowledge, the ACMA is the only organization that returned a rate savings on postage this year that was more than the members' dues. And that is probably the first time ever in the star-crossed history of the catalog industry and the U.S. Postal Service.

Unless this industry takes charge of itself and supports pure catalog interests, it will be faced with oblivion. Don't believe all the 'nice talk' about 'shared interests' and the 'larger agendas'—this is all about self-preservation and we catalogers are on the bottom of the food chain.

When your right coronary artery blocks and you have a Myocardial Infarction in the anterior, lower portion of the heart, and you may die in the next hour, who do you want—a general practitioner who dabbles in a little cancer, a little dermatology, a little pulmonary obstruction, and a little high blood pressure treatment? No! You want an Interventional Cardiologist who can open the blockage with angioplasty as quickly as possible. You want a precise, focused specialist who knows what the hell he/she is doing. And that is exactly what the catalog industry had better wake up, realize, understand and support.

The Poor PR and Green Threats

As an industry, we have never told our story effectively. No one ever ‘story-boarded’ the catalog industry and told the world why we are valuable. There is no effective public relations—*whatsoever*—about the catalog industry. If there were, how could some rogue organization like Catalog Choice be so successful at brainwashing little children in schools to deliver catalog cancellation requests from Grandma like they do donations for Jerry’s Kids? Over 1,125,000 people have signed up. At 6-8 catalogs each at a mailing frequency of 6 a year that could be 50 million catalogs the U.S. Postal Service won’t earn any money on, and that means you will pay more.

Who is telling our story? Why doesn’t the world know that on all the UPS trucks, every day, there are enough catalog-created packages to keep 279,000 cars off the road for an average of 6 miles each? We catalogers are green! And we have been green for years! Why isn’t America (and the world) told that?

And, as for the “trees” that Catalog Choice is supposedly saving, why isn’t America being told the facts: there are more trees *right now* growing in the U.S. than there have ever been—even before the Europeans arrived. *Trees are a sustainable crop.* That little horticultural achievement occurred in the last 50 years; nobody seems to have noticed or told anyone.

And, if you care to compare the carbon footprint excesses of a mall of merchants versus a group of catalog companies, I think we all know where the advantage will be found.

Every hog farmer and soybean grower here in Iowa pays a penny or two per pound or bushel for association lobbying and representation at the state and federal levels. For each \$1 those farmers donate from their businesses, they receive anywhere from \$3 to \$6 back in agricultural program benefits. As an industry, the Pork Producers Association is a whole lot smarter and evolved than the direct marketing industry. And that ought to scare you to death.

The People You Choose to Get Into Bed With

Abacus and similar companies have been around a long time now and, like addictive drugs, catalogers have had to have more and more ‘Magic Names’ to get the same ‘high’. It’s not good for you.

Over time, you have abdicated your primary skill: investment prospecting. Somebody else does that for you. After a few years, you lose all corporate skill and memory of how you built your niche business. That information is now somewhere inside the ‘black box.’ You no longer have sharp marketing analysts who know your customer base and your prospect pool as well as they know themselves. You are blind in a spiraling vortex.

All of these external ‘outsourcers’ are taking a dime here, a dime there. And you don’t get any real information back like you do with a list broker/partner. Pretty soon, you don’t have any information, any awareness of the dynamics of the names, any understanding of what is happening; you only know that you need more of the white powder. A dime bag here, a nickel bag there, a quarter-bag next. You’re hooked, and you can’t remember how to do direct marketing and profitable investment prospecting. You’re giving your lunch money to the guys on the corners.

Stop it! Take back control of your own destiny. If you cannot create the profit you need, no one else is going to do it for you. There is no silver bullet, magic amulet, or secrets. Cataloging is a formulaic, metrics-based discipline and is a highly specialized combination of art and science. You cannot ‘rent the talent’ and you cannot abdicate the work.

With loss of tactile understanding of our prospect and house universes, we seek a solution anywhere we can find one, except where it will be found. Instead of getting our CRM systems in order and fully functional, we rush off to illusionary predictive web promises of systems like Mercado that prove to be an unending morass of system fixes, bugs, patches, and work-arounds. We become distracted by the inanity of ‘data’ and lose sight of the simple purity of basic customer service, transactional accuracy, database understanding, and fulfillment excellence. We do it to ourselves over and over. We have met the enemy . . . and keep meeting the enemy . . . and it is still us!

The Potential Implosion

The printers are reducing manufacturing costs significantly. There is over-capacity in the catalog industry—everywhere. If we fail to unify our industry and suffer further unsustainable price increases from postage, paper or other primary variable cost elements of the catalog channel, we will begin to see a downsizing of capacity in all areas. The print production world will shrink. The U.S. Post Office will shrink. The CRM world will shrink. The data world will shrink. The list world will shrink. The merge/purge and data processing world will shrink. The fulfillment and shipping/freight world will shrink. The catalog world will shrink and could disappear.

The Potential Explosion

If we organize, invest in our image, take back control of our destiny, buy favor in Washington, educate businesses and consumers of our value, stand up and fight those who would have our demise, and join together in a common effort aimed at sustaining and improving our *catalog* industry and not our *multichannel* industry, we have a chance of reversing the velocity of the spiral.

It is doubtful that we will ever see the halcyon days of the catalog in the 1980s and 1990s. But it is possible, that the catalog can remain a viable and profitable marketing alternative for many companies—particularly business-to-business—for several more decades. It is likely to become a contained niche channel, much like

infomercials and home shopping. On the great Bell Curve, the world has begun to move on past the catalog, but it still has a huge amount of market and volume under its arc. The catalog industry will survive and will deliver more profitable sales, but only if the catalogers themselves are willing to make it survive, and only if they are willing to support and fight for their unified future.

There are positives. Cataloging is still more profitable than most other go-to-market channels. Online sales are relatively small as a percentage of all sales, despite the enormous amount of attention the online world receives and the amount of time it consumes in our day. Cataloging is precise and relatively straight-forward; this isn't nano-technology, it's basic math. We still know more about our customers than any other channel (if we would only organize that information properly and accurately and use it to our greatest possible benefit). And, most significant, our customers *like* catalog buying. That is where we begin. That is where we start on the road ahead.

Sunrise or Sunset over the Okefenokee?

Pogo was drawn by Walt Kelley with his arm around Porky's shoulders, facing away from the reader, looking at either the sunrise or the sunset over the swamp when he said, "We have met the enemy and it is us." I think it was the sunrise.

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Thoughts Looking From My Window

*A few thoughts that you may want to consider yourself.
A regular feature of the newsletter.*

My window here in Iowa has forty panes of glass—eight wide and five high. When I sit in my chair and write, I look out and notice that all of the earthly world is seen through the eight lower panes stretching across the bottom of the window, the 'sill' panes, as it were, panes #1 to 8, left to right as I look out. The corn field takes up about half of the height of the bottom row of panes; the horizon is straight across about half way up. The trees in the foreground reach a bit higher, depending on how far away they are. Cars go across in the distance, never leaving the lowest row of panes. All the planting, growing, fertilizing and harvesting is done in those eight panes. It's where the action is. The world in that lower tier of window panes varies between dry and wet, now and then flooded; between lush green and gray; snow-covered or whipped by tornadic wind; the trees are either full leaf or full bare; and the evergreens keep getting a bit taller each season.

The next row up, eight across, on top of the bottom row, is where all the birds tend to fly, at least those that are within a hundred feet of the ground. Every morning at

6:30 a.m., in late March and early April, a robin perches on a branch of the tree planted just twenty feet from the window. He sits there, in pane #12, and calls up the morning. Then he turns and looks at me looking at him, sings a bit more and faces the breaking dawn sun that turns his orange breast almost golden. He plumps up, takes in the heat, does some exercises and flies off. He'll be back tomorrow.

When it is bud-break, usually April 8 to the 10th, the first leaf buds to open on the tree will be those framed in panes #14, #20 and #22. I don't know why; it just is. As the tree ages, I suppose they will appear in the higher panes, those in the mid-thirties to forty, but that will be a few years. Probably won't see that.

The Turkey Vultures and the Redtail Hawks are usually seen on hot summer afternoons, lazing their circles on the thermals up in panes #33 to #40, the topmost row. Now and again, a hawk will dive through the panes and snare something out of the field, usually in panes #6, #7, or #8.

The window is a metaphor for a direct marketing company. The lower row is where all the basics are found: products, merchandising, database, circulation, creative, customer service, fulfillment, IT; all the dying and living, and the pain and pleasure. The second tier is management and board-level territory. A lot of flying by and diving and swooping by the brightly colored birds, but not much productive rooting in the dirt. The third and fourth level is the high-flyers, the Social Media folks and the Twitter Tweets. And up on the fifth level—domain of the hawks and the vultures—that's where the EBITDA rules. And sometimes it plummets down and snares something in its claws.

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Merchandising

This issue, I want to explore the basics of Search Engine Optimization copywriting. This is a merchandiser's job, and it is a very different way of writing copy than we are used to doing for catalogs. I believe a traditional offline copywriter can learn SEO copywriting; I have my doubts that an online search specialist can as effectively learn how to write good copy adapted to SEO. It seems to not be a chicken and egg thing.

Introduction

This discussion is designed as a 'bite size' beginning to writing copy for websites that will be better indexed by the search engine crawlers and protocols. It is in no way comprehensive, definitive, or authoritative; it is, however, practical and covers the basics of good copywriting that appropriately ties together the customers' interests and the search engines' technologies.

Definitions

The following dictionaries and glossaries will offer definitions of most terms relating to SEO and SEO copywriting:

This link will take you to a comprehensive search engine glossary:

<http://www.searchenginedictionary.com>

This link will take you to Google's AdWord Glossary:

<http://adwords.google.com/support>

This link will take you to the SEMPO Search Engine Optimization & Marketing Glossary:

http://www.sempo.org/learning_center/sem_glossary

SEO Copywriting Basics

1. Keywords are not Nirvana. It is essential to attempt to optimize online copy for relevant keywords to achieve a better search engine placement. However, keywords aren't necessarily the most important part of copywriting. They might be the search term that brings visitors to the website, but if the copy is over-plumped with keywords, the conversion rate will suffer. Your customers are the readers; never place the search engine's needs above theirs. As long as you keep this as a primary tenet, you won't go wrong.

2. Scanner-Friendly Copywriting. Website visitors scan content rather than fully read it. What does this mean for most websites? Copy needs to accommodate the visitors' scanning habits. Copywriters should use sufficient whitespace, keep paragraphs brief and numerous, and use bold and underscored words and headings carefully in the copy. I believe that we must use proper headlines and subheads on our product descriptions. This will help the scanners grasp the main, keyword-related points from our content quickly and easily. My personal belief is that the word count norm is between 250 and 400 words per page.

3. Compelling Headlines. Good copywriters know that a great headline is one of the most important elements of any online copy. Headlines must sell a benefit or connect with the customer in some other way. Simply inserting a keyword phrase won't achieve success. This is the one opportunity to get the website visitors' attention and it must be done skillfully and relevantly. Using the product name in the headline is a plus, but not a requirement.

4. Content Always Supports Headlines. Once a compelling headline and subhead have been written, the body content must directly reinforce those headlines. If the headline mentions a specific benefit, describe and talk about it in the body copy. In other words, don't let readers down by using a great headline and then writing about something completely off-theme or off-headline in the body copy.

5. Talk to Our Customers. Conversational copy is perfectly okay for the web. The internet is a social medium, so copy should feel personal to the customers. Remember, customers—especially older customers—are more wary when purchasing from companies online. Conversational copy that is free of gimmicks helps first-time buyers and return customers gain and renew trust by making it seem like they're interacting with a real person who understands their needs, not some robotic, data-driven web site designed to serve its own ends or those of Google.

6. Testimonials are Helpful. Another way to build trust with web visitors is to use real testimonials on the website. Place a few testimonials in a sidebar on the right hand side of the page. They gain attention and deliver the message of trust without distracting the reader away from the main website copy.

7. Quality over Quantity. Online readers have a short attention span; don't spend 500 words explaining something that can be summed up in 250 words. Many websites extend their copy so that it reaches the magic 400-500 word count for SEO purposes, but it can really hamper the flow of content. Keep it short; keep it simple. This will keep the customers on track, and the search engines will scan and retain the important information.

8. BS is BS and Superlatives are Useless. Don't say the product or the brand is best, or that they are 'delightful' or 'brilliant' or 'excellent.' Everyone says that type of thing and customers really don't believe superlatives. They add nothing to search engine scanning and are simply wasted opportunities (and space) for true value descriptions. Raising the copy—online or offline—from superlative use to value-laden language is a positive enhancement for the future.

9. It's All about the Benefits. Instead of using empty modifiers and cliché superlatives, talk about the benefits of the products. In other words, how will the products make that customer's life better? That's primarily what customers care about. Let them know what's in it for them, and the website copy will be much more successful.

10. Clear Call to Action. The best copy on the web does nothing if there isn't a clear call to action. The only reason for writing copy is to convince the reader that they need to purchase our products, and the call to action tells them what to do to get the products. Never leave the customers hanging. Write a clear, authoritative call to action that tells them exactly what you want them to do. If you want them to call your telephone number, tell them to call; if you want them to order online, tell them to "Buy Now, Click Here." The clearer the call to action, the higher conversion rates will be.

SEO Copywriting Expectations

1. An Understanding of SEO. SEO copywriters must have a solid understanding of the essentials of Search Engine Optimization. They must know that ranking is essentially the result of a website's keyword relevance to the web crawlers, indexers and search engine protocols. There are other factors involved, but if the SEO copywriter doesn't understand keyword applications, the copy will be less than optimal.

2. Multichannel Copywriting Experience. It is difficult to find an SEO copywriter who has actually worked on both catalog and SEO copywriting. As a rule, it is far easier to adapt good catalog copywriting to the web. Good copywriting is good copywriting; good SEO copywriting is, by definition, an extension of basic good copywriting; however, it is far more 'formulaic' in its concerns and, indeed, in the scientific and technological demands of the search bots and algorithms.

3. An Understanding of How Many Keywords to Use. We do not want to fill every product page with every keyword we can think of. This simply dilutes our site relevance and reduces readability; in turn that reduces search rankings and customer comprehension and persuasion. A SEO copywriter will rarely use more than four to ten keywords per page. Keyword phrases are similarly best constrained to no more than two or three per page. Conservative keyword use will enhance SEO indexing and will avoid SEO rejection due to suspected 'cramming.'

4. An Understanding of Which Keywords to Use. Determining a lengthy list of keywords is not the objective. Determining the three or four *primary* keywords that most customers use to search for a product is the key objective. This requires referral to keyword generators, keyword software, Google AdWord Generator, and a great deal of intuitive knowledge about a product. To be successful, the SEO copywriter must 'crawl' inside the brain of the average customer of the company. If that is a mostly female, 65 year-old, upmarket, country values individual with an interest in a corkscrew, then the SEO copywriter has to discover what it is that lady calls a corkscrew. Is it a wine opener, a corkscrew, a cork puller, a bottle opener, or any of dozens of other words and phrases? Then, the SEO copywriter—in cooperation with merchandisers, buyers, and others—must chose the three or four *ideal* keywords that produce the greatest *relevance* in the search engine optimization protocols and, therefore, the highest search ranking potential over time.

4. Clear Agreement on Who Determines Keywords. Someone needs to perform an analysis in order to figure out what words your company should be trying to rank for each product across each brand. The SEO copywriter should do this, but it is often more effective—and collegial—if the buyers and merchandisers are involved from the beginning of the process; in fact, it is most productive when suppliers are brought in to the product description and keyword process. Regardless, the creative management team must make it crystal clear who will be responsible for determining and analyzing keyword, key phrases, and related content modifiers important to SEO. To the extent

possible, you must reduce SEO analyses and preparation to protocols, processes, and cooperative research and decision making.

5. Keywords or Keyword Phrases. You should expect the SEO copywriter to offer guidance regarding how specific you should be with your keywords. In most markets, the competition for keywords is so fierce that you will be forced to target very specific keywords in order to rank, at least at the outset. For instance, if we are writing about a Cafetière, we probably would not start out by targeting the keyword “Coffee.” The competition is immense (as of 11 March 2009, there were 225 million results for this search in Google.com) and the coffee and kitchenware giants already dominate the search engines for this keyword. Instead, try using a more specific keyword phrase like “thermal coffee press” (there were only 118,000 results for this search in Google.com; you may have a better chance of ranking). The other benefit to targeting more specific keyword phrases is that you will generate more relevant customer inquiries to your specific product.

6. Agree on Word Count per Page. SEO copywriters must provide an indication of the number of words they expect to write per web page. While it is necessary to have an adequate body of words on most web pages, you should not have too many or too few. What too many is all depends on the brand personality, the product, the objective of the page, and the needs of your customers. It is always a delicate balance, but it is certainly possible to rank highly with only 175 to 250 words per page. Again, the norm is between 250 and 400 words per page, but ‘norms’ are always dependent on personality, product, objective, and customer needs for clarity and understanding.

7. Density Targets and Measure. SEO of a web page is not guess-work. A good SEO copywriter will thoroughly understand ‘density measures.’ This is a measure of the number of times the keyword phrase appears on the page. It is expressed as a percentage of the total word count of the page. So if the page has 400 words, and the keywords and phrase appears twenty times, its density is five percent. As a rule of thumb, SEO copywriting should aim for a density of approximately three to five percent for the primary keyword phrase and the associated primary keywords. If the density measures are much higher than this, readability will be reduced, indexing will be skewed to ‘cramming’ and the risk of being interpreted as Spam by the search engines rises dramatically. SEO copywriters must understand the importance and nuances of keyword density and be prepared to calculate and apply the target density for each keyword phrase. One of the counter-intuitive oddities of SEO copywriting is that it is actually better to underwrite keywords and keyword phrase density than overwrite. And, while the five percent rule may dictate twenty uses of the keywords, it may actually be better to use only ten or fewer. Again, the needs of the customer takes precedent, but the needs of the search engines continue to lurk in the background. In the end, as with most things, it is an informed judgment call, and the answer lies somewhere in the middle. By default, however, the SEO copywriter’s performance is partially evaluated and measured by these somewhat fluid standards.

8. Where to Place Keywords. The question of keyword placement has been the subject of much debate amongst SEO copywriters. While it is still unclear how much impact placement has, there is a general consensus among experts that, indeed, it does have some impact. The accepted wisdom is that keywords are more effective if they appear in product titles, headings, bold, underlined or italic text, links, and generally toward the beginning of the page. In my experience, there is also some benefit when keywords appear at the end of the body copy, almost as a capsule summary. While there are significant unknown or unresolved issues regarding keyword placement, it is clear that the application of common sense principles of good copywriting must first apply, and then the SEO principles outlined above must be married to those aspects of good, traditional, basic copywriting. If one is to err, then err on the side of the customer's understanding and persuasion to making a purchase.

Determining Keywords

1. How to Create Keywords. Keyword creation is a mix of science and art. If we think of the product, Coffee Mug, a large number of words and phrases can be assembled that are synonyms, alternative words, relational words, or words related to the words 'coffee cup' and its root words 'coffee' and 'cup.' or 'mug.' These partially include:

Mug	Cup	Coffee Cup	Coffee Mug
Ceramic Mug	Ceramic Cup	Espresso Cup	Demitasse
Coffeecup	Coffeemug	Coffee Cups	Coffee
Cup of Coffee	Ceramic Coffee Mug		Mug of Coffee

First, consider the product and choose which keywords are relevant for the product itself and for the customer who wants to purchase the product. In this example, the product is a simple, plain coffee mug without thermal properties, personalization, decoration, unusual shape or size; just a simple, 12 ounce, white ceramic coffee cup. Therefore, the logical choices are mug, coffee mug, mug of coffee, and ceramic mug. Next, consider the choice of a product name. In this case, the product name is Ceramic Coffee Mug. The logical keyword phrase is the actual product name: Ceramic Coffee Mug. The logical keywords are: Mug, Coffee Mug, Ceramic Mug, Mug of Coffee, and the misspelling, Coffeemug. Intuitively, the best keywords would seem to be Coffee Mug, Ceramic Mug, and Mug of Coffee. The best keyword phrase is Ceramic Coffee Mug. If a keyword generator is used and Coffee Mug is entered, the ranked keywords generated are Mug, Coffee Mug, Mugs, and Travel Mug. There is no predicted keyword generated for the keyword phrase Ceramic Coffee Mug. With the intuitive and the generated keywords considered, it is logical to use Mug and Coffee Mug as these two appear on both lists. The final keyword phrase and keywords for writing SEO copy for the Ceramic Coffee Mug, then, are: Ceramic Coffee Mug, Mug and Coffee Mug.

2. The SEO Copy. With the keyword phrase (the product name, in this instance) and the keywords decided, the copy begins with the keyword phrase in the headline, subhead and the opening sentence and the keywords worked naturally into the body copy:

Own this ceramic coffee mug that will be your morning friend
Stop searching for the perfect coffee mug . . . It's right here!

Your perfect ceramic coffee mug has been created to warm your hands on cold, winter mornings and to warm your smile on sunny summer days.

There is nothing more personal than your own favourite coffee mug, and this mug may well be the last one you will ever buy. It's that good.

Coffee mugs always seem not quite right: too big, too small, too heavy, too tippy; too something or other to ever become your favourite morning friend.

Look: here is a mug that will feel specially molded for your hand, your thumb, your fingers. It just 'fits' and feels right. The handle is wide, comfortable and will fit three fingers with comfort to spare; you'll *want* to hold on to this mug.

And when you look down, into the steam, you'll appreciate the rich, dark contrast of your coffee against the high-quality, velvety white ceramic. It won't tip or wobble. It will start every one of your mornings with stability, reliability and a familiar and welcome 'feel' to your day. Just like an old friend.

- Generous, 12 ounce capacity
- Better ceramic for preserving heat
- UltraComfort design and hand fit
- Great for coffee; great for tea; great for hot soup
- In-style, neutral white colour
- Dishwasher and microwave proof

Limited quantities. Order NOW online or by telephone

Ceramic Coffee Mug **Product Number SS0943**

Quantities: 1-2 \$5.95 each 3-6 \$4.95 each 7-12 \$4.00 each 12+\$3.50 each

3. The SEO Copy Analysed. The copy above is reproduced for a second time below and observations are made in red regarding the SEO elements and the format of the writing.

Own this (1) ceramic coffee mug that will be your morning friend
Stop searching for the perfect (2) coffee mug . . . It's right here!

Your perfect (3) ceramic coffee mug has been created to warm your hands on cold, winter mornings and to warm your smile on sunny summer days.

There is nothing more personal than your own favourite (4) coffee mug, and this (5) mug may well be the last one you will ever buy. It's that good.

(6) Coffee mugs always seem not quite right: too big, too small, too heavy, too tippy; too something or other to ever become your favourite morning friend.

Look: here is a (7) mug that will feel specially molded for your hand, your thumb, your fingers. It just 'fits' and feels right. The handle is wide, comfortable and will fit three fingers with comfort to spare; you'll *want* to hold this (8) mug.

And when you look down, into the steam, you'll appreciate the rich, dark contrast of your coffee against the high-quality, velvety white ceramic. It won't tip or wobble. It will start every one of your mornings with stability, reliability and a familiar and welcome 'feel' to your day. Just like an old friend.

- Generous, 12 ounce capacity (9) mug
- Better ceramic for preserving heat or cold
- UltraComfort design and hand fit
- Great for coffee; great for tea; great for hot soup
- In-style, neutral white colour
- dishwasher and microwave proof

Limited quantities. Order NOW online or by telephone.

(10) Ceramic Coffee Mug

Product Number SS0943

Quantities: 1-2 \$5.95 each 3-6 \$4.95 each 7-12 \$4.00 each 12+\$3.50 each

There are three uses of the keyword phrase, Ceramic Coffee Mug (#s 1, 3, and 10). There are seven uses of the other primary keywords (#s 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9).

The keyword phrase is used at the beginning in the headline (#1), in the first sentence of the body copy (#3), and at the end in the product name/price block (#10).

There are 252 words and word equivalents used in the copy. There are ten keyword phrase and keywords used in the copy. The Keyword Density is four percent.

This copy has a strong (or stronger) percentage chance of being crawled, indexed and accepted by the search engine spider bots. The product has a stronger potential of being ranked higher in organic search, especially for the specific product, Ceramic Coffee Mug.

3. Keyword hierarchy. In the example, ten uses of the keyword phrase and the primary keywords identified are present. The hierarchy of keywords is:

Hierarchy Number 1: Keyword Phrase: Ceramic coffee mug

Hierarchy Number 2: Keyword #1: Coffee mug

Hierarchy Number 3: Keyword Phrase: Ceramic coffee mug (repeat #1)

Hierarchy Number 4: Keyword #1: Coffee mug (repeat #1)

Hierarchy Number 5: Keyword #2: Mug

Hierarchy Number 6: Keyword #3: Coffee mugs

Hierarchy Number 7: Keyword #2: Mug (repeat #1)

Hierarchy Number 8: Keyword #2: Mug (repeat #2)

Hierarchy Number 9: Keyword #2: Mug (repeat #3)

Hierarchy Number 10: Keyword Phrase: Ceramic coffee mug (repeat #3)

There could be improvement in the hierarchy by moving a different keyword into the position occupied by Hierarchy Number 8. This would break the three-time repeat of the keyword 'mug.' That may improve the overall indexing by the search engine bots. That copy changing decision, however, must be made with the customer in mind first.

In this instance, it was decided to err on the side of selling persuasion and emotion and to sacrifice this small keyword inconsistency to the benefit of a customer's human response.

However, an acceptable change would be to simply replace Hierarchy Number 8 (keyword #2 'mug') with keyword #1 'coffee mug.' This would produce the second

repeat of keyword #1 and be a reasonable solution. This was intentionally *not* written this way in order to better illustrate the principles of keyword and hierarchy number repeats.

Related SEO Requirements for Better Search Rankings

1. Writing Title Tags. The title tag carries more weight than any other HTML tags as far as on-page SEO is concerned. In HTML source, look for title tag near the top of the file. It appears at the top of the browser window:

```
<title> Title of web page consisting of keywords</title>
```

All the major search engines such as Google, Yahoo and MSN Search place emphasis on the words that appear in the title tag. The spiders use these words to determine what the rest of your page is about. The title bar should consist of words that describe your page and should include the most important keywords or phrases. Careful thought must go into title tags if SEO is to be accomplished. Abandoning title tagging to a third-party (generally a hosted solution supplier) or to inexperienced people almost assures poor search engine ranking results.

All title tags of all web pages must be optimized. Each title bar should be unique and descriptive of that specific page. Generally, between four and ten words are used in the title tag to indicate what the page is about. Title tags are almost like addresses for homes. Each home has a unique address and, similarly, each web page has a unique address.

Avoid repeating keywords more than once in the title bars, and make sure that identical words are not next to each other. As the text within the title tag will be used in the listing of your website in the search engine results, it is important that your title bar sounds interesting enough for a potential customer to select it for viewing. All too often, online designers fail to remember that the *entire* search process fails if no one clicks on the description presented, whether that search choice is number one or number 300 in the search ranking. My criterion is simple: Be the one *selected*, not just the one ranked highest. And, that requires exceptional skill in writing title tags.

For the coffee mug example above, one could write the title tag as:

```
<title> Your Company Name Ceramic Coffee Mug </title>
```

The management of title tags in order to drive improved search engine optimization requires consistency and discipline in the following element of SEO and title tagging.

2. Responsibility for Title Tag Management. Someone in the company has to be given the responsibility for writing and managing title tags. As with all disciplines, it generally cannot be done on a random basis. It must be controlled and described by consistent and tight rules; otherwise it will never be optimal and will never enhance search rankings.

There are precedents for who should have this responsibility. The SEO copywriter may be the proper person for title tag creation. The merchandiser responsible for the product or the product line may be proper person for title tagging and, equally, product names, whether for the websites or the catalogs. Regardless, there is nothing more apparent as when there is no one responsible for these functions and—equally—when there is someone responsible. The first condition results in title tag and search chaos; the second produces an elegance of search engine effectiveness and nomenclature uniformity.

3. Creating Meta-Tags. In the early days of the internet, the Keyword Meta-Tag was the most important information used by some early search engines to determine relevance hence ranking. However, that was the past. Now, the keyword meta-tag is ignored by most search engines due to abuse. It does not matter if the keyword meta-tag is used or not. If it is included, do not repeat any word and only include the most important keywords (those actually used in the content).

The meta-tag that *must* be properly created is the Meta-Description Tag. Here is how the meta-description tag looks:

```
<meta name="description" content="One or two sentences to describe the page consisting of keywords">
```

For example, using the Ceramic Coffee Mug:

```
<meta name= "Ceramic Coffee Mug" content="XYZ Company offers ceramic coffee mugs that become an old friend">
```

The words in the description will be used by the search indexer algorithm to create an index snapshot of that web page. The major search engines such as Google, Yahoo and MSN Search results are displaying this description when you enter the keyword phrase or keywords as a search query. This is important because a well-written meta-description will increase the chances of attracting the searchers and causing them to click and visit the web site.

In this instance, the addition of “. . . that become an old friend” adds the creative nuance that may just make the difference between selecting this description or not selecting this description. This is where the Master SEO Copywriter begins to emerge.

4. Research and Preparation. SEO copywriting requires a very different time, research, preparation and planning approach than traditional catalog copywriting. It is a crucial step to research keyword phrases and potential keywords extensively. As stated earlier, this is an intuitive art and an empirical science. The keyword phrases and keywords the SEO copywriter believes customers may be searching for may very well be incorrect. To find the optimal phrases to optimize for, talk to customers and then use proven research tools such as [KeywordDiscovery](#), [Wordtracker](#), or [Google's Keyword Tool](#).

Above all, we must begin to create SEO copy *intentionally*. By that, I mean as a defined, informed, experiential discipline and not simply as “We have to write 400 pages of copy for the web by Friday.”

This very brief discussion and template example should serve as only an introduction to proper SEO copywriting. It is, by no means, exhaustive, but an exhaustive discussion at this point in the evolution of SEO copywriting for most companies may serve only to create unneeded confusion. By using these foundation elements and examples as “a place to begin,” you will *evolve* search engine optimized copy over time, will grow your own skills and knowledge for the future, and will improve your search rankings and your online sales.



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