

The Baby-Carrot Principle: How to Supercharge Copy by Cutting Needless Words

Once, back in the 1980s, there was a nation that wouldn't eat its carrots.

One big reason, surveys said.... – Carrots didn't look good. They were grimy, lumpy, grotesque. Acres of carrots went unsold. Farms went broke....

Then along came farmer Mike Yurosek. He trimmed his ugly carrots into a smooth, pretty, "new" vegetable – Cut Baby Carrots. The nation fell in love.

In one year, U.S. carrot consumption soared 30 percent.

Lumpy Copy Leaving Your Customers Cold?

Copy can have the same problem as carrots – lumpy language that keeps customers from loving its crunchy nutritious goodness.

But there's good news. The veggie-trimming trick works with words, too.

You see, writing copy and growing carrots have a lot in common.

Like carrots harvested out of the dirt, first-pass copy never emerges shapely and shiny.

Pulled fresh from a brain that's working hard to formulate ideas, all early drafts have malformed thoughts and blurry words clinging to them.

And that's as it should be. Early drafts are for unearthing your whole idea and recording it before it vanishes. That's a separate job from improving copy to communicate and sell.

Love Your Wordy Draft...Then Cut It

Just like with "baby" carrots, improving copy requires cutting.

And it's easier than you think.

How can you tell where to focus your sentence-slashing energy?

Here's my favorite method for powering up copy by cutting unneeded words. I call it the "gadget-word" technique.

There are two kinds of words.

"Gadgets" are words like "is," ... "more," ... "in," ... "who," ...and "very." They connect, modify or stand in for other words and they work in any sentence.

Specific words, by contrast, carry most of a sentence's meaning.

They're words like "customer," ... "stress," ... "cost" ... "tequila" "sunrise."

To start trimming, mark all the gadget words.

Like this...

“This was the first time I could see some practical ideas that I was able to implement myself immediately. “

Then look in gadget-heavy areas for opportunities to cut or replace.

Unneeded Words Lurk in Predictable Places

Prime hiding spots include these --

- Gadget words that open a sentence... Like “This was the” or “It is true that.” They’re often just throat-clearing.
- Multi-word verbs....Like “I could see” or “that I was able to.” How about “I saw” or “I could”?
- Vague descriptors like “some” or “very.” Needed? Or not?
- Prepositional phrases. Could “a country house” replace “a house in the country”?
- Formal phrases or “business-ese.” Replace “for the purpose of” with “for” and “in order to” with “to.”

...So.... this 19-word gadget-heavy sentence --

“This was the first time I could see some practical ideas that I was able to implement myself immediately. “

...transforms to this 9-word specifics-heavy one --

“Finally I saw practical ideas I could implement immediately.”

A 53-percent drop in blurry language.

But Will Cutting Improve My Copy?

Clarity and specificity sell. Blurriness doesn’t.

Cutting needless words --

- Crams more meaning into less space (Great for email subject lines, for example.);
- Removes irrelevant words that distract readers and encourage skimming;
- Makes copy more memorable; and
- Means a higher proportion of your copy packs a punch.

Start small. Concentrate on highlighting and eliminating gadget words from headlines and subject lines.

Then add the first and last sentences of your copy to the agenda. Those sentences leave the strongest impression with readers.

Cutting words gets easier every time.

Soon you might find yourself saying, “Hey, this copy's selling like ... cut baby carrots.”