

How to engage with your freelance technical copywriter



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One way of generating promotional copy or more detailed engineering content for your technology and products is to use a freelance technical copywriter. But how do you ensure that the relationship achieves your marketing objectives? This article offers a copywriter's perspective on the points you need to consider.

Since 2005, I have been providing a technical copywriting service to marketing specialists and business owners within electronics, software, electrical and other engineering and technology enterprises. But how do I optimise this service to deliver exactly what my clients want, and achieve the results that they're looking for?

The points below are designed to answer this question. They cover the issues that are likely to arise during any copywriting project, and explain how I would respond while working for my clients.

From my perspective – and experience – I can successfully fulfil my clients' expectations provided that I have sufficiently detailed information about the topic to be covered, the target audiences, and marketing objectives. This is derived from in-depth conversations at the project's start; these not only provide the source references that I need, but also help to build a mutually-shared vision of the project's outcome, giving each party reassurance that synchronisation has been achieved – or an opportunity to apply feedback if not.

Accordingly, the first point below discusses why you might like to choose me as your copywriter in the first place. The remaining points cover how I can contribute to your marketing campaign if chosen, and the support I would need from you in doing so.

1. Choosing the right copywriter

While it's hard for me to be objective on this, I can offer some suggestions. It's easy to see if the candidate writes in a style that you like, by asking for samples from their portfolio. However, your project's ultimate success also depends on other key factors:

What's their background? How well do they understand your technology and your marketplace?

What's their approach? What is their pricing structure? How reliably do they meet delivery commitments? How do they handle feedback and document revisions? Overall, how does their attitude align with your expectations of the relationship?

As with taking on full-time employees, only experience will answer these questions fully. However, it's worth devoting some time to a discussion with any copywriting candidate. Describe your project requirements and ask how they would fulfil these. Their response should give a good indication as to whether they're on your wavelength.

If you choose me as your copywriter, the following points describe how I can contribute to your project's success, and the support I need to do so.

2. How can I add value to your marketing campaign?

While my core activity is writing content, I can also offer input on the type of articles to be written, and, to some extent, the topics. My engineering training and background will allow me to understand the environment that you're operating in, and offer suggestions to help you develop your strategy.

3. Are you looking for a series of articles, or a content marketing plan – or just a single article?

Let's come back to the question of a content marketing plan later, and assume for now that the requirement's for just a single document.

4. What's the article's objective?

Is it to announce a new product, or to build brand awareness and acceptance of your company as a 'go to' supplier and solution provider?

5. Who is the target audience?

Does it comprise designers and engineers seeking technical information about your product, and how they could design it into their own? Or are we addressing decision-makers and buyers looking for reassurance that your innovative products are backed by an organisation that's stable, well-funded and able to offer timely and effective support throughout the product's lifecycle?

Sometimes an article can be repurposed to reach both audiences.

6. What type of article?

To some extent, this is driven by the two previous points. If it's about a new product, it will most likely be a press release and/or a promotional email. Brand building can be achieved by technical articles for engineers, or case studies for decision-makers. Different thought leadership articles and white papers can be designed for each audience type.

7. Which media channels?

These could be electronic or printed published media, social media channels, blog sites, emails, or your own website.

Placement in a magazine usually involves winning an editor's approval for a synopsis, and then abiding by the publication's guidelines for writing style and word count. You obviously have more control if the article is intended for placement on your own website.

A magazine article can also be used on your website, although I'm sometimes asked to make it more promotional before uploading. Other forms, from LinkedIn articles to tweets can also be extracted.

8. Exactly what information is needed?

For most articles, I need two categories of information. Firstly, there are the sales points. What are the product's USPs, and what key messages do we want to deliver? Secondly, there's the back-up detail; more in-depth information that I can use to substantiate the sales claims and generate credibility for the whole article.

Currently, the most popular and efficient method of transferring this information is to set up either an onsite meeting or, more usually, a telephone conference call. This typically includes at least a marketing specialist and an engineer or technical designer. There may also be someone who's driving the project; a senior member of the client company, and/or an agency representative if I'm working through an agency.

This allows the stakeholders to impart their vision and messages for the product. Ideally, this discussion will allow me to design the frame for the article. The same stakeholders can also send me or give me links for the in-depth information sources; data sheets, brochures, PowerPoint presentations, YouTube videos, articles or anything else.

Clearly, there are many aspects to a document design, and these vary according to the genre. If it's a case study, for example, I might gather information by visiting the product's installation site, witnessing it in operation, and interviewing the end user. Nevertheless, it's ultimately about generating a compelling message backed by convincing detail.

9. How do I generate the article?

Having obtained the necessary information, I write up the first draft. This is occasionally in the form of a wireframe, especially if the subject is particularly complex, sensitive, or of especially great strategic importance for the client. Otherwise, I present it as a full text version of the target document, ready for markup and comments from the client.

I usually find that a couple of iterations suffice. Exceptions can be in large organisations where many stakeholders, often including a legal department, are involved.

Once the content has been approved and signed off, the client is free to use it as they see fit – placing it into published media, websites and/or any other appropriate channels.

10. Content marketing campaigns

So far, we have discussed the steps and interactions involved in generating a single document. However, the requirement is often for an ongoing marketing campaign, designed to build up a ubiquitous and sustained market presence. This calls for a scheduled stream of articles that complement one another; technical content to attract and convince your prospects' engineers, plus brand awareness and commercial benefit material to instil confidence in the decision-makers who sign off their purchase requisitions. There's also the question of copy vs. content - see below.

I can participate in planning as well as implementing such campaigns. Who are the key competitors and what are they writing about? What are the hot topics? Which vertical sectors should we be covering? What are the relevant trade magazines and what editorial opportunities can we find within them?

I'm currently working on such a project for a long-standing electrical equipment manufacturing client, in preparation for their 2020 content marketing campaign. Right now, I'm looking at their main competitors and working to spot trends within their content output of the last six months or so.

I expect that the results will be added to the client's body of market intelligence to produce a schedule of articles to be generated and distributed throughout 2020.

11. Content vs Copy

I thought this was worth mentioning, as I describe myself as a copywriter that engages in content marketing - but what's the difference between content and copy?

One brief, but effective explanation is that 'Content tells, copy sells'.

In the days before the Internet, social media, and digital marketing, they were two very different disciplines. Marketing departments, or advertising agencies, would write copy into adverts and press releases to pitch products into their employer's/client's marketplace. Meanwhile, a development or production department would have a technical writer producing detailed content explaining how the product works, and how to use it.

However, with the rise of digital media and content marketing, publicity campaigns now tend to include informative content as well as promotional copy in the marketing mix. Providing material of genuine value to prospects helps to build credibility and establish you as the 'go to' supplier in your industry. It's a longer game, but far more effective than alienating your audience with an output comprising nothing but sales pitches.

Accordingly, a content marketing campaign can be said to include both content and copy. For example, I recently wrote content in the form of a technical guide for an international building automation standard. Now, I'm complementing it with some promotional copy - a press release announcing that the guide is available for download on my client's website.

I regard 'content marketing' as shorthand for 'content and copy marketing'. Equally, I consider 'copywriter' as shorthand for 'content writer and copywriter'.

Conclusion

If you're considering working with a copywriter to generate a document or develop a content marketing campaign, I hope you have found this article to be helpful. If you would like to explore how I could contribute to your project, please contact me on nigel@charig-associates.co.uk or +44(0)20 8933 0917.

