

15 Excuses IT Companies Use Not to Hire Copywriters

Tom "Bald Dog" Varjan

The year was 1904.

A former Canadian police officer, a big, strapping lumberjack of a man, John E. Kennedy just lumbered up to the reception desk of the famous Lord & Thomas advertising agency in Chicago and told the receptionist he wanted to talk to the agency's owner.

Since John had no appointment, the receptionist promptly declined his preposterous request.

She told him Mr. Thomas was a very busy and very important man, and absolutely no one could see him without an appointment.

Then John gave the receptionist a short note and walked away.

He walked downstairs to the saloon, knowing that his note will have consequences.

Later on the receptionist gave the note to Mr. Thomas, a true doubting Thomas by nature. The notes said...

"I am in the saloon downstairs, and I can tell you what advertising is. I know that you don't know. It will mean much to me to have you know what it is and it will mean much to you. If you wish to know what advertising is, send the word "Yes" down by messenger." Signed — John E. Kennedy.

Mr. Thomas almost got a heart attack from this unknown man's arrogance and condescension.

So, he unceremoniously dropped the note on the desk of a young copywriter, called Albert Lasker.

Albert was a naturally curious man, so he decided to meet John. The meeting went along these lines...

Kennedy: "Do you know what advertising is?"

Lasker: "I think I do... It is news."

Kennedy: "No, news is a technique of presentation, but advertising is a very simple thing. I can give it to you in three words."

Lasker: "I am hungry. What are those three words?"

Kennedy: "Salesmanship in print."

John further explained...

Kennedy: “Copy truly is a disembodied salesman. Advertising is just salesmanship-on-paper. It is a means of multiplying the work of the salesman, who writes it, several thousand-fold. With the salary paid a single salesman, it is possible, through advertising, to reach a thousand customers for every one he could have reached orally. True advertising is just salesmanship multiplied.”

Decades later, Lasker said that his whole philosophy of advertising had been shaken up, stirred and rearranged in that moment.

Lasker hired Kennedy on the spot, paying him 205 times more than he was paying other copywriters.

Then John and Albert went to work applying the “salesmanship in print” concept for the benefit of Lord & Thomas’ clients – and their ads were so effective, the agency began growing by leaps and bounds.

In 1908, Lasker hired a 42-year-old copywriter named Claude C. Hopkins for an annual salary of \$186,000 (about \$4.79 million in today’s money) and together, they built Lord & Thomas into the world’s largest advertising agency.

Just for comparison’s sake, in 1908 a Ford Model T cost \$625. A fully tenured Harvard professor was making about \$1,000 a year.

So, how did the story end?

By the time he retired in 1942, his approach to ad copy as “salesmanship in print had earned Lasker more than \$627 million in today’s dollars, making him the wealthiest person in the history of advertising. Just to demonstrate that amount, in 1942, the average house cost \$6,827. That’s a whopping 91,841 houses. That would have made a pretty reasonable real estate portfolio, wouldn’t it?

So, to say that both Lasker and Hopkins got stinking rich from this ‘salesmanship in print’ ‘shtick’ would be as much of an understatement as calling Mount Everest an oversized speed bump.

Well, Mr. “Doubting” Thomas slowly faded away and became a footnote in the history of advertising.

Kennedy and Lasker created their own pretty big and significant chapters.

What made the difference?

Mr. Thomas’ scepticism and Mr. Lasker’s curiosity.

Sadly, based on various excuses, many IT companies act like the doubting and always suspicious Mr. Thomas.

They say they their marketing and advertising are good enough and don’t really need that extra expense of a copywriter to improve their existing copy.

And the irony is that the more poorly their marketing collaterals perform, the more satisfied they

seem to be with their pathetic performance.

In a way this is like weight loss.

A well-toned woman stands in front of the mirror, pinches her waist, shakes her head and says, “We seem to have a little extra work to do here.”

And what happens when a 400 lb lard bag oozes to the mirror and looks at herself? She says, “I’m happy! I’m healthy! I’m beautiful!” Yeah, right!

The reality is that the deeper shit an IT company is in, the less likely its management realises that the secret to improvement is not doing more of the same but maybe doing less of something drastically different.

And while deeply troubled IT companies are busy hiring more salespeople, nicely performing companies with desire to do even better look at salesmanship in print.

So, here is a collection of excuses why many IT companies choose not to use copywriters. I want to share them with you, so you can learn from others’ mistakes and not to repeat them in your own operation.

Let’s remember the wisdom of former Prussian Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck...

“Fools you are... to say you learn from your experience... I prefer to profit by others’ mistakes and avoid the price of my own.”

So, let’s see...

Excuse #1: “I Should Write Copy Because I Know Our Products/Services/Business Best”

That’s absolutely right. And this is the reason why you may approach copy from the wrong perspective. You or one of your people may end up writing copy about your product/service itself. The risk you run is that your copy sounds too technical which techies will eagerly read but decision-makers ignore.

The reality is that the people who make the decision about hiring your company reside in the boardroom and they speak boardroom English (revenue, profit, ROI, etc.). If you write to them in server room English (bits, bytes, packets and gigahertz), as your internal people are likely to, even if your message gets read in the boardroom and even if you get invited, you get relegated to an IT manager and then to the purchasing department, and you’re off to the races to the next bidding war in RFP hell.

The other problem is that if you write the copy, who runs your company?

Can you imagine a symphonic orchestra in which the conductor doesn’t have time to conduct because he’s too busy playing the piccolo?

Why would you play the piccolo, when you have your orchestra to conduct?

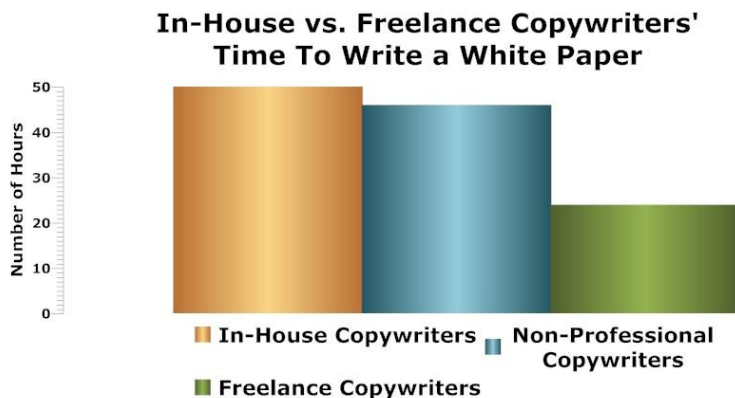
Excuse #2: “Why Pay For Something That I Can Do Either Myself Or At Least In-House?”

There are many things that we can do ourselves. Once upon a time Henry Ford owned sand-processing plants to make glass for his cars. He thought it would have been a waste of money to buy glass from other companies. The problem was that making glass shifted his focus from making cars.

Many IT companies are on the opinion that if something can be done in-house then it must be done in-house.

Many IT companies are so busy fiddling around with non-core activities that often lose sight of what their own businesses are all about. According to the Outsourcing Institute, businesses are losing 38 cents on every dollar by engaging in “miscellaneous” non-core activities. This lack of focus erodes morale, and makes people question their leaders’ competency levels.

Employees do their best to hard and fast, but if management leans the ladder of progress against the wrong wall, at the end of the climb all the people will fall into the bottomless abyss of organisational doom.



According to Michael A. Stelzner’s study¹, freelance writers can write white papers in about 24 hours, while in-house writers take 50 hours and non-professionals take 46 hours.

Now, the result may not be exactly the same with other marketing documents, but I dare to bet some vital parts of my anatomy that they are very close to these white paper-writing numbers.

This finding is significant for several reasons. First, many IT business owners assume there is a steep and long learning curve for freelance writers to bring themselves up to speed on the business. This can be easily solved by hiring writers with subject matter expertise and industrial experience in your industry.

Of course, that adds to their fees quite a bit. In the IT sector there are only a handful of good

¹ The White Paper Writer Industry Report

freelance copywriters with technical degrees and industrial experience.

Yes, you can save money by engaging in-house staff for writing, but what is it that they have to stop doing in order to start writing?

Excuse #3: “I Can’t Work With Strangers”

That’s sad because some of the most talented people that could add the slight edge to your company may well be out there as strangers. And in the 21st century, those people are connecting with each other and achieving amazing feats. Since you can’t beat them all by yourself you might as well join them.

It may be comfortable and convenient sitting behind a computer screen on your own, but can this approach help you to achieve your biggest goals?

If you can, then keep doing it. If not, you’d better change your approach.

Excuse #4: “My Business Is Far Too Complex For An Outsider To Understand”

Maybe it’s not even complex but complicated.

What’s the difference?

Something is complex when it’s complex but consistent. For instance, the iPod is complex beyond belief. But it consistently and predictably produces the same results without surprise and disappointment.

Something is complicated when it’s complex but inconsistent with full of unpleasant surprises. For instance, the Windows operating system is mind-bogglingly complicated. Every time you turn on your computer, always something different happens. Microsoft has raised inconsistency and unpredictability to an artistic level.

A complex system can be explained and understood.

A complicated system can be explained but basically no one can understand it.

And if a copywriter can’t understand your business, it’s not because the copywriter is a simpleton but because your business may be an incomprehensible mess.

If it’s a business, it needs clients. And you get clients either by assembling a sales army and condemn salespeople to dial for dollars or pound miles of pavements or do the selling in print with the aid of one copywriter.

I know lots of masochists opt for the sales force, and most of them are at the bottom of the industry.

Excuse #5: “Our Existing Copy Is Good Enough”

Well it depends what we call good enough. As Jim Collins says in his book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*, good is the enemy of great.

Many good IT companies can't become great because they engage in practices that have helped them to become good.

0.5% response rate to direct mail is regarded as brilliant. At the same time, there are IT companies that produce 15% or higher response rates.

And in my experience, companies with 0.5% response rate are contented with their success, while companies with 15% or higher response rates are inspired to achieve even more.

As Dan Sullivan, The Strategic Coach is fond of saying, “It's *only the best that want to be even better.*” Mediocre companies are happy to be better than terrible even if just a little bit.

Just read a bit about the Dunning-Kruger effect.

No matter who's written your copy, there is always room for improvement. It's just a matter of constant testing. Yes, it takes some time, effort and money, and, luckily, it only applies if you have big goals.

Excuse #6: “We Can't Afford Such Luxury.”

Maybe, maybe not. The fact is that you might be indulging in an even more unaffordable luxury: Maintaining a large sales force and condemning salespeople to do their own prospecting. Yes, you can save the price of good copy and the cost of having a marketing programme in place.

But what you win on the swings you lose on the roundabouts.

Statistically **49%** of your salespeople consistently fail to reach quota. **27%** consistently fail to make enough sales to cover their cost of employment. And the annual attrition is **43%**.

Add all this up, and compare it to good copy. And now sit down and give yourself a little heart massage.

Yes, the difference is so significant.

Excuse #7: “We Want To Hire A Full-Time Writer Very Soon”

What for?

Copywriting is knowledge work.

Unlike manual labour, the most important traits in a knowledge worker can't be measured; they must be judged and discerned.

Characteristics like interpersonal skills, passion, subject matter expertise, desire, inspiration,

innovation, creativity and pride can't be measured and don't show up in your time tracking system, but they are the traits that determine a copywriter's contribution to your company's success.

Unlike manual labour, knowledge work is non-linear and is not subject to the cadences and rhythms of assembly lines.

It's an iterative and reiterative process of the mind. The traditional metrics of productivity need to be replaced by judgment and discernment.

But there is an enormous difference between a measurement and a judgment: A measurement requires only a unit (e.g.: time) measuring stick (e.g.: clock) that any idiot can read. A judgment requires knowledge and experience. And not everyone can do it.

Not to mention that copywriters that are worth hiring are not looking for jobs. They had left their jobs for freedom, better pay and an opportunity to let their talents and creativity soar. They are not idiots to go back to the rat race and eke out a miserable living in the traditional and often oppressive and underpaid 9 to 5 grind.

An employee copywriter is as much of an oxymoron as a dress rehearsal for a porno movie.

Copywriters become employees because their copies don't sell, so they can't sell their own services. So, they seek out the protection of a corporate Big Brother where they can hide and cruise through life all the way to retirement.

Cynical? Somewhat.

True? Totally.

Yes, you can find so-called copywriters, many with journalism or English degrees, who look great on their resumes, but that's not what you really need. You need someone who can sell in print.

If they can't sell their own services, it's only logical to assume that they can't sell others' products/services either. Then what's the point in having them on the payroll.

Excuse #8: "We Don't Need Fancy, Big Words? Our Stuff Sells Itself"

In that case, how do you explain that Apple has never stopped marketing? Actually, for a long time now, Apple has been working with TBWA\CHIAT\DAY, one of the world's most expensive and most prestigious advertising agencies.

I don't think Apple is wasting its money on marketing. Look at companies that offer insanely great² products and services. They all have the right words on their materials. Not fancy words. Not big words. The right words.

² As the late Steve Jobs called Apple's products.

Think of Apple's slogan for the iPod, "1,000 songs in your pocket." Led by this slogan, by September 2012, Apple had sold 350 million iPods.

Realistically, nothing sells itself. But if there has been a company that has come damn close to that position, that's certainly Apple. Yet, just to be on the safe side, Apple has a great marketing programme too.

Excuse #9: "Copywriters Are For Campaign Work. We Don't Have A Need For That Right Now"

Well, copywriting is the part of marketing, and marketing is not a campaign but a never-ending process.

Just think of your website.

Can you imagine saying that today is campaign day, so let's put on some great copy, but the campaign ends tomorrow, and we can put back our crappy copy which is really cyber vomit and literary excrement written by some Elance writer with broken English somewhere in Swaziland or Papua New Guinea.

Of course, you keep your best copy on 24/7.

And the other reason is that cold bore³ copy is never as good as warm barrel copy, that is copy that has been tweaked over time.

Smart business owners have royalty agreements with their copywriters, so they can continually tweak their copy for better performance.

Excuse #10: "It's Too Expensive"

I've heard this excuse from IT business owners who have herds of expensive lawyers, accountants and graphics designers on the payroll as full-time employees.

Do those people need legal, accounting and graphics work to be done on a full-time basis? Hardly ever. Yet, they keep them.

Most business owners are willing to pay for contingencies (possible lawsuit or tax audits), but refuse to pay for solid strategies to grow their businesses. It's the same as saying, "If I don't replace the burnt-out engine in my car, I can afford to buy the best insurance in the land."

Yes, but without an engine, the car can't move.

Every cost should be looked at as a relative number. Interestingly every peasant (and I used to be

³ Taking the first shot from a sniper rifle with a clean barrel. It's extremely difficult because you have to anticipate where the shot will go. Only after the first shot, you can adjust your DOPE (Data On Previous Engagement). Also, after a first shot is fired, carbon residue sets on the inside of the barrel, which changes the bullet's trajectory.

one) knows how much more seed corn he needs for the next season to double his harvest.

In 2009, I wrote a media kit for a client for \$47,000. If you look at the number in isolation, it may look high. The client paid because she was aiming high. Her aim worked out, and, to date (July 2013), her media kit has played a major role in landing \$8.2 million of new business. And she keeps using that media kit because it works.

You tell me. Was it really expensive?

Excuse #11: “Our Marketing Person Writes All Of Our Promotions And Ads Already.”

It sounds the same as saying, “my OB/GYN does all my dental work.” Granted, they both work in body orifices, but those orifices are drastically different and are located at opposing ends of human the body. I made this amazing discovery when I worked as an assistant embalmer.

Also, if your marketing person writes copy, then who does marketing? When you hire a copywriter, the copywriter and the marketer should work together to create the best results.

Yes, there are copywriters who are well versed in marketing, so they offer both marketing and copywriting to their clients, but they don’t work at companies as employees.

Apart from Google and a few more companies, no one could pay them enough to sell their freedom for a paycheck, 2 weeks of vacation, a medical plan and a pension scheme (a.k.a. scam?).

Excuse #12: “I Don’t Want To Share My Deepest Business Secrets With A Stranger”

Well, you already do that with your lawyer, accountant and doctor. And they have better things to do in life than talking to their friends about the confidential pieces of information about you and your company.

Yes, you decide what you share with your copywriter and what you withhold, but the more you share, the more information your copywriter has at her disposal to make the copy as good as possible.

Excuse #13: “Why A Copywriter? We Have An Ace Sales Force”

Using a sales force to penetrate new markets is pretty Neanderthal, not to mention that it costs too much. But that’s also what conventional wisdom dictates. And there are some masochists out there who enjoy the stress of managing large sales forces.

But the problem here is two-folded with sales forces...

1. As published in Selling Power Magazine, according to a study by the Corporate Executive Board, **57%** of the buying process takes place **BEFORE** buyers reach out to contact sellers. By the time your salespeople meet prospects, the buying decision is **57%** made. Now buyers are looking for the best deal. So, the haggling starts.
2. There is a huge difference in buyers' mentality. When meeting salespeople, prospects' guards are up. They are anxious and worried about being tricked into unwanted purchases. Their suspicion, scepticism and cynicism are through the roof. But when buyers read your copy in their own time, they have their guards down. They are undisturbed by salespeople and more open to accepting what they read. Their suspicion, scepticism and cynicism melt away almost to non-existent.

Yes, it's possible to use a sales force for prospecting. In the military, as punishment, I had to clean urinals with a toothbrush. So, it's doable. But what is the price of such a retarded method?

Excuse #14: "I Have A Degree In English. I Can Write"

Good. So can Lee Child, Steven King and J. K. Rowling.

But they are also smart enough not to write their own promotional materials.

They know the difference between writing and copywriting.

Knowing to write means you can write great novels and other documents to educate, inform and entertain people. That's valued in academia and in the wide wild world.

But the big earth-shattering, Titanic-ripping question is this: Can you write to sell?

We all know the term "*starving artist*".

Why does it happen?

It does because writers (a subset of artists) can write to educate, inform and entertain people, but can't write to sell.

Remember John Kennedy from the intro section, "Copywriting is salesmanship in print."

It's not education, information or entertainment in print. It's is salesmanship in print.

And this is the bee's knees and even the wasp's nipples.

And that is exactly the one thing that no degree in English can teach people.

Oh, one more thing. Salesmanship in print with a deadline.

Let's remember that excellence on a deadline is much better than perfection some day.

Reason 15: Copywriters Don't Work Hard Enough

"90% of what we call 'management' consists of making it difficult for people to get things done." ~ Peter Drucker

Many managers love watching their people struggle against all sorts of odds to do their work. Professional service firm expert David Maister concluded many years ago that managers are good at demanding excellence from their people, but are hopelessly pathetic at helping them to do excellent work.

Also, in my experience, the more incompetent managers are the more viciously they demand excellence from their subordinates.

Instead of helping their people, many managers enjoy rolling all sorts of obstacles in front of and throwing all sorts of curve balls at them and joyfully watch them struggle to overcome the artificially created difficulties to get their work done.

And when the work gets done at less than excellent manner, managers start hunting down the incompetent nincompoos who can't do excellent work.

This behaviour is pretty prevalent in government and unionised workplaces because in those environments the sole requirement of becoming some kind of boss is years of tireless kissing up and kicking down.

In the private sector, there is a certain level of meritocracy, but brownnosing still applies.

So, managers don't appreciate quiet but consistent high performance; they appreciate visible busyness and struggle.

Salespeople who do 300% quota are reprimanded for not working hard enough. But salespeople who do 70% quota with lots of drama, song and dance get praised and promoted.

Copywriters usually get hired by senior executives, but, during their projects, they work with lower level managers and line supervisors. And it's almost always these lower level managers who criticise copywriters for not working hard enough.

The notion is that any idiot can write words on a computer screen.

So, sooner or later this notion of "lazy copywriters" goes all the way to the boardroom, and at one point top management says it will no longer tolerate lazy people.

And copywriters are lazy because they merely write.

The revenue their copy generates remains irrelevant because, as we discussed earlier, effort is more respected than performance.

That copywriter should struggle, huff and puff as he's doing his work.

As a result, when companies want to sell more, most of them hire more salespeople.

Why?

Because they can be watched and criticised as they struggle against all sorts of managerial obstacles trying to do their jobs.

In the meantime, don't sell harder. Market smarter and your business will be better off for

it.

About The Author



Since 1998, after a 16-year industrial stint as an electronics/computer engineer, project manager and technical buyer, Tom “Bald Dog” Varjan has been working with privately held information technology companies and independent IT professionals to market and sell their complex, high-ticket and hard-to-explain IT solutions to high-end, sophisticated clients, using crisp, clear and compelling sales copy, so his clients don’t have to rely on the haphazard and unpredictable nature of using armies of salespeople and don’t have to use ugly, filthy, mind-numbing cold-prospecting grunt work to acquire clients. For more information, you can visit Tom’s website at <http://www.ITBusinessWriter.com>