



Killer Messaging

Nine Mistakes that Kill your Marketing Messages

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Have you ever gone to a web site and come away from the content saying "I don't get it"?

You are not alone. You have seen the explosion of product content available on the web. And you have seen the adage quantity doesn't ensure quality proven time and time again. Often, product information is incomprehensible, boring, or simply unsuitable for the reader's purposes. It is so easy to publish content on the web that almost anyone can become an author. In the product marketing world, perhaps "anyone" has.

Gone are the days where the product marketer had a nice, fat budget to hire experienced writers. Now, product marketers are expected to compose much of their marketing content themselves. At the same time, the amount of content expected has increased. Impersonal data sheets and solution briefs are no longer sufficient in an information-hungry world. Content must connect with the reader. Writers must understand why the reader visits a site, what readers are looking for, and how to engage them on the reader's terms.

If you are writing content about your company and your product, this eBook is for you. I hope to provide you with simple techniques whose use can immediately improve your company and product content. Here you will find the top nine bad habits identified, illustrated, and solved. A checklist at the end of the eBook will help you remember to use these techniques consistently in your writing.

The focus of the techniques in this eBook is on introductory product marketing material. Introductory product material is defined as the first product content that the reader sees. This messaging sets first impression the reader will have of your product. Based on their impression, the reader will make a critical decision to either disregard your product, to evaluate the competition, to investigate your product further, or to purchase your product. You only get one chance to make that first impression. For this reason, your introductory product content must be clear, concise, and communicative. The techniques provided here will help you build the very best argument for your product.

So, go ahead. Give it a try. See how these simple techniques can help your writing capture and keep the attention of your reader.

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1. What is it and who is it for?

Two of the most important questions you can answer about your product are “what is it?” and “who is it for?” Is it a toy? Is it a gadget? Is it a tool? Is it software? Is it a service? Is it for a professional, an amateur, a child, ...? If you aren’t clear about what your product is and who it is for, then your readers probably won’t be either. You shouldn’t expect your readers to be intrigued by these mysteries and spend precious time diving deeper into your content in order to uncover the answers.

What does a bad definition of a product look like? Here are some examples:

“The Newton is the complete reinvention of personal computing.”

So what is a Newton? A personal computer? A pocket digital assistant? It is for a business professional, a student, a mom?

“The Digi Entertainment Center centralizes your various entertainment in one convenient digital location.”

So what is a Digi Entertainment Center? Is it a piece of furniture? Is it an on-line service? Is it a set of integrated electronic components? Is it for a digital guru, an entertainment aficionado, a computer-less household?

Define Your Product and its Audience

- ★ Define your product in a single, simple sentence. Put this sentence at the beginning of your product messaging.
- ★ Do not overload your product definition with descriptions of what the product does.
- ★ Do not rely on photographs, images, or your product name to do your definition work for you.
- ★ Describe who the product is designed for in layman’s terms.

How could we solve the problems created in our two examples?

The Newton is a set of software applications for personal productivity packaged in a handheld computer. The Newton is ideal for business people who find paper planners too bulky, limiting, and disconnected.

The Digi Entertainment Center is a specialized computer that lets technically savvy, home users store and playback television programs, videos, and music.

2. Feature Bonanza

Product marketers seem to be quite comfortable talking about their product's features. When you land on a product page on the web, you are instantly transported to a feature bonanza. Capabilities and specifications are in abundance.

Yet, the first language you should be speaking to your reader is about the benefits the product offers them. Because many product marketers don't seem to grasp the difference between a feature and a benefit, let's define them here.

A **product feature** is a characteristic of your product that describes its appearance, its components, and its capabilities.

The Digi Entertainment Center allows you to record up to three television shows at the same time.

A **product benefit** is an advantage or value that your product will offer its buyer.

The Digi Entertainment Center effectively replaces up to three VCRs saving you space, eliminating converter boxes, and simplifying setup for multiple recordings.

You should never make it an exercise for your reader to translate features into benefits. If you leave it up to them, they might not get it.

Connect Through Benefits

You connect with your reader by describing the specific benefits they will realize when they use your product.

- ★ **Lead with benefits.** Benefits grab the attention of your audience and help you establish a connection with them.
- ★ **Respond to pain points in your benefits.** By acknowledging the reader's pain, you create instant rapport with your reader.

For example, we could have tried to use the Digi Entertainment Center feature to try to make a benefit (product marketers do this a lot):

The Digi Entertainment Center makes it easier to record multiple, simultaneous television shows. (Doesn't this sound more like a variation on a feature?)

Yet, it still misses the impact of the benefit example. Note that two potential pain points are called out in the benefit example. One is tight entertainment cabinet space. The other is multiple, different mechanisms required to setup recordings on different VCRs.

3. Sounds the Same

Chances are that if a potential customer is reading about your product, they are also reading about your competitors' products. They are wading through marketing hype that starts to sound the same. This is when they start having trouble differentiating your product from your competitors'.

Some product marketers seem to be afraid of comparing and calling out their product's differentiation from similar products on the market. Instead, they let their readers wade through their feature descriptions and figure it out for themselves.

For a potential customer, this is both difficult and frustrating. Readers might find themselves building consumer report- like spreadsheets to compare your product's specifications with another product's specifications. Yet, you are sitting on this valuable information. Somewhere in your piles of market research, you probably have a comparison spreadsheet created from your own competitive analyses.

The problem is that unless you have an analytic wonder for a potential customer, your reader isn't building spreadsheets. They are reading someone else's blog complaining about your product. They are reading some authority's product review. They are asking their friends' opinions.

Basically, they are NOT getting this important information from its best source – YOU.

Differentiate Your Product

- ★ **Add comparisons.** They should clearly highlight your product's positive differentiation in the marketplace.

Many of you may never have seen good examples of positive product differentiation in the marketplace. So, let's take a look at some examples for Digi Entertainment Center.

Unlike TiVo, Digi Entertainment Center does not require a monthly service fee for recording your favorite television programs.

To record multiple, simultaneous television shows, DVD recorders require you to purchase separate tuners. Digi Entertainment Center includes all of the tuners needed to record up to three simultaneous television shows.

Differentiation works because it favorably compares you with one or more alternatives on your potential customer's short list. You don't have to call out competitor names. As in the second example above, you can use a product category to make your point.

4. Technical Soup

Every sentence has an acronym or two. The technical jargon is so thick you could cut it with a knife. As your reader is trying to comprehend this description of your product, he is thinking, "people don't talk this way".

That doesn't mean that you need to write your marketing content so that it mimics verbal description. Yet, your marketing content shouldn't read like the technical manuals your engineers help create. As a product marketer, your goal is to interpret your engineer's technical jargon and present it in a way your reader can easily understand. The challenge is that it isn't easy to recognize when you've done that successfully and when you haven't.

The marketing content from our Digi Entertainment Center's home page provides some excellent examples of technical soup.

The NVIDIA GeForce 7600 GS graphics with 256 MB video memory allows you to play video games.

The internal, 500GB Aerial ATA hard drive allows you to store hours of digital content.

These statements have the following problems. Most of your readers will have to turn to alternative sources to understand what these statements mean. As detailed as this information is, it has left key questions unanswered such as: what video games can I play, how many hours of content can I store? By littering your product messaging with acronyms, you speak a foreign language foreign to your reader.

Address Real Prospect Questions

- ★ **Answer the questions a potential user of your product may have.** Use the questions and answers to formulate your introductory marketing content.
- ★ **Limit your use of acronyms.** Acronyms are for specialists. Move them to the specifications sheet.
- ★ **Remove technical details from your sentences.** Evaluate what remains. Next, ask quantification and qualifications (how many, how fast, which ones, ...) to add reader-oriented specifics to your statements.
- ★ **Minimize feature description when using features to support benefits statements.** You can develop more detail in other, more technical content.

Because product marketers understand the intimate details of their product, it is often difficult to recognize when you have passed the technical threshold of your reader. By using these guidelines, you can eliminate technical overload.

5. Content Overload

It is overwhelming for a reader to be bombarded at first glance with a long list of product benefits or features. No one can absorb all of that information no matter how nicely it is categorized, segmented, and formatted.

Yet, product marketers often opt for comprehensiveness in their introductory product content. Even the smallest, least important benefits or features are included. Perhaps they get caught up in their own product's details. Perhaps they don't understand their reader. Perhaps they are trying to reach more than one type of potential customer. Whatever the reason, content overload works against the product marketer.

We all know the saying that "quantity is not an indication of quality". This statement goes right to the heart of the product marketer's problem.

On the product home page, the Digi Entertainment Center uses four categories to list twenty different product features. The product features are presented in bullet form in a manner consistent with the following:

- **Connect your TV** with digital audio, DVI, VGA, or component video

High value features are included in the midst of low value features. Operational requirements (like the bullet above) are buried amongst capabilities trying to masquerade as benefits.

Prioritize Your Content

- ★ Use only your most compelling benefits.
- ★ Introduce features by describing them generally.

All product benefits and product features are not created equal. Some are more interesting and more compelling in your readers' eyes. That means that you have to prioritize your benefits and features. Separate those that deliver more value to your reader from those that don't.

Where you place those high value benefits and features makes a difference. Don't bury them in your marketing content. Call them out. Place them at the beginning of your marketing content. Format them so that they stand out.

The rule of seven (our minds can easily recall up to seven numbers) doesn't work for more complex ideas like benefits and features. Keep your list of top benefits short. Three is an ideal length. Roll up your features to a few, high level categories. You can develop the supporting details for those features beyond your introductory marketing material.

6. The Adjective Swamp

Adjectives are the spice of marketing content. Unfortunately, adjectives can't make poor marketing copy better. In many cases, the abuse of adjectives contributes to the ineffectiveness of the marketing content.

There are two areas where adjectives create problems in marketing content. The first area is proliferation. Product marketers must think that the more adjectives they use, the better. What they don't realize is that strings of adjectives cause the reader to tune-out.

The Digi Entertainment Center's industry-leading, high definition, superior performance technology delivers value to those who want an integrated, easy-to-use, single source entertainment console.

Not only are the two important nouns in the sample sentence lost, the meaning of the sentence is simply incomprehensible.

The second problem area is the selection of adjectives that through overuse have become meaningless. Here's a short list of some of the most ineffective adjectives:

powerful, high performance, industry leading, next generation, scalable, user-friendly, superior, unmatched., easy-to-use, breakthrough, revolutionary

There are two consequences of using overused adjectives. First, their use diminishes the reader's trust. Second, it makes your product messaging sound like your competitors' (because they use these too).

Carefully Choose Your Adjectives

- ★ Use adjectives sparingly.
- ★ Select precise adjectives.
- ★ Quantify instead. Quantification makes a more memorable impression.
- ★ Don't lose your strongest ideas in strings of adjectives.
- ★ Don't string together more than two adjectives.

The reason marketers have gotten into this adjective swamp is that they haven't been discriminate in their selection and use of descriptive adjectives. Using the above techniques, you can quickly escape the adjective swamp.

Your strongest ideas deserve their own sentence. Here the meaningless adjective "industry-leading" becomes a significant, trustworthy proof point:

The Electronics Forum has given Digi Entertainment Center the highest rating of 9.5.

7. The Longest Sentence

Product marketers have a lot to say. They know that the first sentence of their first paragraph gets the most reader attention. This introductory sentence can determine whether the reader reads on. Yet, if product marketers truly believe this, then why do they try to stuff everything they want to say into an impossibly long, completely unintelligible first sentence?

Have you noticed that product marketers can create paragraph-long sentences that seem to go on forever. One idea flows into the next idea and five lines later, the sentence ends. Even with commas and semi colons, the reader can't consume that much information without the well-defined breaks that a period affords.

The Digi Entertainment Center allows you to build a library of digital content that encompasses television programs that you have recorded using either the standard or high definition interfaces, music that you have downloaded or captured directly from CD, videos that you have downloaded or recorded from video source inputs including VCR feeds and DVDs, and games that you have downloaded or accessed via DVD.

Unfortunately, the reader won't find these long sentences only in the introduction. The use of long sentences tends to be a part of a writing style. Thus they are carried throughout the content making it equally incomprehensible.

Focus Your Sentences

- ★ Express only one concept per sentence.

Sentences were made for single ideas and single ideas were made for sentences. If the idea is important enough to communicate, it deserves its own sentence. By simplifying sentences and limiting them to a single concept, you help ensure that your content is consumable.

The second benefit of focusing your sentences is that it helps the marketer more clearly communicate the idea. When the marketer tries to combine multiple ideas into a sentence, they all seem to get jumbled. Any ability to present the central idea in its best light is lost.

The Digi Entertainment Center allows you to aggregate all of your digital content into one organized library. You can store television programs that you have recorded on video tape or directly with the Digi Entertainment Center.

8. The Monotone Monologue

Most people have been the recipients of a monotone monologue at least once in their lives. The speaker drones on and on. The words have no rhythm or inflection. It is almost impossible to remain attentive when the phrases and words all sound the same.

The same thing can happen in the written word. The written form of the monotone monologue is like a boring book at bedtime. It helps the reader fall asleep.

By definition, most marketing content is a monologue. The marketer is the one speaking to the reader. What turns an interesting monologue into a monotone is its style. When sentences all share a similar length and structure, they become tedious.

The Digi Entertainment Center is the only entertainment center you need. The Digi Entertainment Center is the only one to incorporate multiple tuners. Only, the Digi Entertainment center delivers a 500 GB storage capacity.

When the character of the sentences is at the same emotional level, they lose their impact.

The Digi Entertainment Center has received rave reviews from PC Week. Early beta customers are so excited about its unique capabilities. Every feature of the Digi Entertainment Center is lauded by the merchants. The extremely impression collection of features is sure to impress you.

Use Variety

Variety is the best tool to add to your writing style toolbox.

- ★ Choose the words you use more precisely to simulate inflection. Select specific words that incorporate emotion.
- ★ Mix up sentence length to establish rhythm.
- ★ Use fonts and punctuation to accentuate volume.

When we speak, we use inflection, rhythm, and volume to accent our words. We can do the same in writing.

With *one* box, the Digi Entertainment Center replaces all of the components you have been collecting. Are your favorite television shows on at the same time? Record them all with Digi Entertainment Center's multiple tuners. Don't worry about space. Digi Entertainment Center can store 100s of shows, movies, games, and 1000 of songs.

9. Visual Repetition

A visual parallel to the monotonous monologue is repetitive arrangement. When the marketing content is presented in a single visual style, the message gets lost in the flatness of its appearance. Nothing in the message seems to stand out. Nothing in the message is memorable.

With the Digi Entertainment Center you can:

- Enjoy ease-of-use
- Get optimum performance
- Connect your devices
- Record your favorite show
- Build your library
- Categorize your content

Originally, these bullets appended descriptive statements. Even with those statements stripped out of the bullets, the effect remains the same. The reader begins to tune out after the third bullet.

As we have recommended earlier (section 5), it is important to prioritize your content. However, this list could be the result of what was weeded out during prioritization. To further hamper us, the reader expects consistency when they see bullets. So, it will be difficult to apply the variety techniques we learned in section 8 to solve this problem.

We will need to use visual devices to help make these messages consumable and memorable.

Use Formatting

- ★ *Start out with an enticing, stylized header.*
Summarize the content to come.
- ★ *Don't start out immediately with bullets.* Set the context by introducing the section with a few sentences or a paragraph of prose.
- ★ *Turn lists into bullets.* Make the bullets short and to-the-point. Then follow them with an indented sentence or two of explanation.
- ★ *Use call out boxes.* Draw attention and/or extend the discussion for key areas of content.
- ★ *Add charts, graphs, pictures, icons that supplement your main point.*

As your digital world has proliferated, its complexity has grown. The Digi Entertainment Center removes that complexity by delivering the following benefits:

1. **Ease of Use** – only one interface to learn
2. **Full Connection** – simply plug in ALL of your devices
3. **One Library** – build your entertainment library in one place

Checklist: Your 9 Tips to Better Marketing Content

Improve Your Content

- 1. Define your product and your audience.
Always begin your product messaging by defining what your product is in a single, simple sentence.
- 2. Describe your product's benefits.
First connect with your reader by describing the specific benefits they will realize with your product.
- 3. Differentiate your product.
Add comparisons that clearly highlight your product's positive differentiation in the marketplace.
- 4. Lose the technical jargon.
Use your introductory marketing content to address the questions a potential user of your product will want answered.
- 5. Use only your most compelling content.
Prioritize your content. Use only your most compelling benefits. Introduce features by describing them generally.

Improve Your Presentation

- 6. Discriminate in your adjective use.
Avoid the adjective swamp. Select precise adjectives and use them sparingly.
- 7. Limit your sentences to a single concept.
Eliminate the "run-on" sentence. Focus your sentences by expressing only one concept.
- 8. Add inflection, rhythm, and volume to your words.
Variety is the best tool to add to your writing style toolbox.
- 9. Make the page visually appealing.
Format your visual presentation using headings, prose, bullets, indentation, call outs, and pictures.

Interested in Improving your Product Messaging?

I believe that every product marketing person should answer “yes” to the above question. I am always in search of and still learning new messaging techniques. The underlying basics of messaging never change. It is all about finding that engaging connection. However, the pervasive use of the Internet is defining a new style for marketing writing. Consumers (those who consume our marketing prose) are expecting to see those same techniques that make good web content in other forms of our marketing collateral.

About Pam

- ★ Pam Hudadoff has been introducing and implementing innovative marketing techniques in high tech companies for over 18 years. She has worked in market development, product marketing and marketing communications while in positions at IBM, Sun Microsystems and iPlanet. Today she applies these skills to help start-up, mid-sized and large companies meet the marketing and sales challenges of this Internet-based world.
- ★ With this eBook, Pam is tackling the question – **how can marketers create more effective messages to attract customers.**
- ★ To help you critique, improve, and create effective product messages, Pam offers group workshops and related consulting services. For more information about these offerings, contact her at **pamela.hudadoff@appliedproductmarketing.com.**

Related Reading on Product Messaging:

All great product messaging starts out with strong underlying content. The discipline I use to create that compelling content is the “**customer value proposition**”. Learn the essentials of customer value propositions in my eBook:

[The Customer Value Proposition: Differentiation through the Eyes of your Customer](http://www.appliedproductmarketing.com/), available at <http://www.appliedproductmarketing.com/>

Resources on my Bookshelf/Computer:

The Chicago Manual of Style (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon: 2000).

<http://www.dictionary.com/>

The company names used in the examples in this eBook are fictitious and are not meant to represent any company that offers similar services.