

## Wordsmith™ Interview with Visual Thesaurus August 2007



### Method Acting Approach to Copywriting

Visual Thesaurus subscriber Sarah Williams runs a busy copywriting company called Wordsmith, based near Oxford, England. When we spoke to her recently, she quipped that “copywriting is a bit like method acting.” Hmm, that got us curious. So we asked Sarah to tell us more about her approach to developing her clients’ communications. Here’s our conversation:

**VT:** How do you get into the minds of your clients?

**Sarah:** Most business owners or marketing managers are so close to their business that they can’t get outside of it. Sometimes we have to act like a little child, really, and keeping asking, What is that? Why is that? Why do you do it that way? And, Oh, why do people buy those? We ask very innocent questions, which will get our clients to explore what it is they do in as much detail as possible.

**VT:** What do you gain from these questions?

**Sarah:** Through this process of talking to the people in the business we gain two things. Firstly, we can communicate in their tone of voice. This helps us make their copy – whether on a brochure or on a website – a little bit distinctive. So when a potential customer rings up the company after reviewing their home page they will encounter a similar culture, if you will.

**VT:** So you’re trying to get into the business’s culture?

**Sarah:** Exactly

**VT:** What’s the second thing you gain?

**Sarah:** By working in this way, we get an insight into the two elements which make up what I call the “method acting approach to copywriting: – the outlook of the business and the viewpoint of its customers and

prospects. Different customers will have different needs, will be looking for different things, and that is what the copy needs to connect with.

**VT:** So how is that like method acting?

**Sarah:** In method acting, the actor is supposed to get inside the mind of his or her character, to see the world through their eyes, so to speak. In this approach to copywriting, the writer needs to see the world from the point of view of the business – what is it that they are selling? – and from the point of view of their market – what is the customer looking for, what is it they need?

**VT:** Can you give us a real-world example of your approach?

**Sarah:** I can give you a precise example. I have a client who runs an acoustics consultancy. They have two completely different markets and two completely different client bases. On the one hand they work with architects and developers to make sure that the buildings they are working on are acoustically sound and meet acoustic regulations. For this particular market you need very, very straightforward, short sentences that use Anglo Saxon language: “Have you got a problem? We can solve it. Here’s how...bang, bang, bang.”

For their other market they produce noise maps, which are beautiful things if you’ve ever come across them. They’re computer simulations – maps – of the noise produced by, say, roads, freeways, airports, docks, and things like that. They create these maps for clients to comply with European Union government regulations. All the countries in the EU have to produce noise maps of every imaginable kind in towns and cities. So you’re talking about thousands of governments agencies that require this service. These agencies are not looking for, you know, “have you got a problem, we can solve it now.” They’re looking for credentials. They’re looking for, “We are incredibly clever and we can do this beautifully.” For that market we write marketing copy in academic language, that is French Norman Latin language.

**VT:** Can you explain the difference between Anglo Saxon and French Norman Latin language?

**Sarah:** Anglo Saxon is nice, short, straightforward language, usually a dynamic active language, while French Norman Latin language is the language of power and education and the law. Fundamentally, if you think about how French Norman came to be used in England, after the

Norman conquest in 1066, you can see how the two types of English came to be established. The Normans were in charge of the law-courts, the Church, the schools, all the organisations that held power – the Anglo-Saxons were only allowed to speak their own language amongst themselves, carrying out their crafts, or tilling the fields or whatever. So Anglo-Saxon English now tends to be the language of action – do, take, grasp – while French Norman Latinated language – execute, acquire, apprehend – tends to be scholarly language or legal language, and to carry a sense of formality and power.

**VT:** The work you're doing sounds like you're making your clients think about their customers in ways they perhaps haven't before.

**Sarah:** What we try to do is interpret what my clients offer, and describe it in a language that their customers can connect with. Let me give you another example.

**VT:** Sure.

**Sarah:** One of my clients that we went to see the other day, extremely nice people, run a tire recycling business. They've got huge shredders and drop tires into them, which come out as little bits to make surfaces for playgrounds or various other products, whole range of stuff.

They are very, very hands-on people, the whole company, which is run by a father and his four sons. They're very practical and know what they're doing. But could they talk about it? They had very little in the way of company literature to draw on so we decided to physically go on-site with them and have them walk us round to explain the process.

**VT:** Like a journalist?

**Sarah:** Yes exactly. Walking around their work site helped them open up because they could get all excited about, well, "this machine costs tens of thousands of pounds and it does that" and "we're going to export this to the Far East" and so on. They could talk about it because they could see it, touch it and feel it.

I suppose that's the other thing about copy writing. There are so many different ways of learning and understanding the world – you have to harness them in your work. There are four main models of understanding, through touch, hearing, reading and speaking. Some people have to be in a particular space in order to actually understand it. You need to use as

many different kinds of modes of understanding as possible to connect to your client and their customers.

**VT:** Now you sound almost like a psychologist

**Sarah:** Well, if you're writing copy for a website, you have no idea who's going to be reading it, of course, so you have to provide as many modes of understanding as possible. You know, so it rings a different bell for people and you connect with as many different people as possible.

**VT:** That's interesting. So you have to accommodate the way people understand as you develop copy.

**Sarah:** Absolutely, and you have to consider how they're going to move around in it.

**VT:** What about the message you're working to get across?

**Sarah:** That depends on the reaction you want from the prospective customer, which will influence, of course, how you write your copy. There's a whole range of different marketing styles, from getting up on your soapbox and shouting to telling the unvarnished truth.

I try to emphasize to all our writers that I'd rather stay away from the, "If you don't buy this your children will hate you for the rest of your life" style of writing. I don't like to rely on fear and envy as much as saying that something is really good, and you're going to love it. I prefer to go through benefits.

You know the old marketing chestnut about my favourite radio station, "WII-FM"?

**VT:** No, what is it?

**Sarah:** It stands for "What's in it for me."

**VT:** That's hilarious.

**Sarah:** It's a good one, isn't it?

**VT:** So WII-FM has to lurk somewhere in the background.

**Sarah:** It's got to be in every piece of copy you write. So when the client reads it or the prospect reads it they understand what's in it for them. They're not interested in anything else.

You have three companies that start their marketing material by saying well, we were established in 1202, you know, and our great-great-grandfather travelled across the Ukraine to set up our company?

**VT:** But no one cares.

**Sarah:** You just have to remember those radio station letters.

**VT:** What about the actual medium of the web. How does that affect your copywriting?

**Sarah:** People read material on screen in a completely different way. If you're reading a printed page you tend to scan down the middle, if you're a competent reader. You just read blocks down the middle. But if you're reading a computer screen you read across the top from left to right and then go down in a big kind of golden triangle. I've seen this reported in a huge number of eye scanning studies done by big corporations, and banks in particular, who are obviously very interested in knowing where to put their key messages. If you haven't got your message in the top left hand corner, more or less, you might as well not bother.

**VT:** People aren't going to get it.

**Sarah:** For many kinds of copy. But if you're writing really hard marketing copy then you also want a page that you scroll down and down and down until you think you're going to drop off your chair with boredom.

**VT:** Is that why Ebay and Amazon and companies like that take this approach?

**Sarah:** It works. It's the old adage that you have to hear it seven times before you actually comprehend it. So they repeat the same message seven times – or more – on the page, and by the time you've got to the bottom you're actually going to say all right, okay, I'll push that buy button. It might seem counterintuitive, but it works.

**Comment by subscriber**

Brilliant stuff here Sarah. For years I've told those who cared to ask that a good advertising writer must be of two parts: a journalist who goes out and get's the story (as you do in the case of the tire recycler) and a litigator who argues the client's case in the court of public opinion. My own reminder of what must be in every ad I call the WIFFY (what's init for you – you have to excuse the surplus F but it reads better that way).

The important, really important, point Sarah makes is that the advertiser and the customer look at the world through different lenses. And the job of the writer is to build a bridge of understanding between them.

**Arthur Einstein**

**Comment by subscriber**

Intuitively obvious Sarah! One of my mathematics professors would often shirk a proof step by uttering his axiomatic “It is intuitively obvious that...” His was not a mutual perception.

Your article has stimulated my intuition for the first time in a long time. Had I read descriptions of copywriting in, say, Wikipedia, I would not have finished their article.

I have vividly retained your message because it thoroughly stimulated my intuition. I have learned something because it is retained.

**Charles Bays**

**Comment by subscriber**

We agree, and would add another distinction: PR people have a tendency to focus on what their clients want to SAY to the public.

Good advertising people focus on what the public or the customer want to HEAR about.

We try to get into the minds of the customers because that's who's going to read the ad – and buy the product. And since we don't buy many industrial products ourselves, that is definitely “method acting” for us.

**Timothy Orr**

**Comment by subscriber**

Utterly wonderful – by which I mean totally useful. I have a different name for a similar approach. I tell clients I am their “designated idiot”. Thank you, Sarah, for the peek inside.