Benefits first: Marketing's active voice

By Jason Karpf

"Use active voice, not passive voice." You should remember this admonition from college English class. Passive voice scrambles and weakens a sentence, elevating a direct object to the role of subject while defaulting to a measly linking verb and tacked-on prepositional phrases that conceal the sentence's true actor.

**Passive voice:**

The new product is manufactured by ABC Co.

**Active voice:**

ABC Co. manufactures the new product.

Marketing frequently slips into its version of the passive voice, reversing the essentials and diluting impact. This is not about the quality or mechanics of copywriting. Marketing's active voice concerns the two fundamentals of marcom content: benefits and features. The rule here: "benefits first, then features."

When developing your marcom, list benefits and features in a two-column chart. Fill in the features first (right-hand column), since they are the easiest data to compile and verify. Alongside each major feature, indicate the resultant benefit. Some features may jointly spawn a single benefit. Have your marketing team agree on all listed benefits and their rankings. Eliminate stragglers, those benefits most limited in application or appeal. You only have so much space and customer attention span.

Revision seeks and destroys passivity. In his book "Revising Prose," Professor Richard Lanham describes the "Paramedic Method" to achieve active voice. These steps include:

1. Ask "Where's the action?" "Who's kicking who?" (Yes, the professor knows it should be "whom," but even he believes clarity of expression is more important than slavish devotion to "stilted grammar.")

2. Put this "kicking" action in a simple (not compound) action verb.

We can adapt Lanham's Paramedic Method with ordered tasks when shaping the active voice in our marketing:

1. Ask "What does the customer need?"
2. Describe the need we fulfill (benefit).
3. Explain briefly how we do it (feature).

Why do marketers abandon their active voice? Professor Lanham asserts that people hide in passive construction, fearing the appearance of simplicity. Simplicity is blessed in all communication and mandatory in marketing. B-to-b marketing often crouches behind a wall of specs. Even hyper-knowledgeable, remorselessly efficient purchasers have emotional triggers. Pull them with a concise explanation of benefits and a call to action for the sales meeting, the proper setting for any extended discourse on features.

The best prose writers revise, tighten and realign their work. The best marketers do the same. Passivity is persistent. A direct object will drift to the front of the line in a sentence. A well-meaning but misplaced list of features will take pole position in an early marcom draft. Don't feel bad about this tendency unless it shows up at the printer, over the airwaves or on the Web. The active voice drives potent communications—in English 101 and the marketplace.

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