

How to write a

B2B Website

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Before you start

This section covers the questions you need to consider before you even put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard).

YOUR PURPOSE

The very first thing to consider is: what is your website for? Too many firms approach the project with the aim of 'having a website', which tends to deliver that goal but nothing more. As the saying goes, if you don't know your destination, any direction will do.

Every website should have a purpose, whether it's to function as an online brochure, generate enquiries, sell products directly or just build a brand. The site's purpose will underpin everything from its structure to its calls to action, and it's crucial to keep it in mind as you move through development.

Each page, each section and even each sentence can be subjected to the same criterion: how does this help us achieve our purpose?

WHAT YOUR VISITOR WANTS

The flip side of your own aim is the purpose of a visitor to your site. What do they want to achieve, and how can you help them achieve it?

If you've held a white-collar job where you had to make an important purchase, it's easy to put yourself in the shoes of the B2B website visitor.

The key questions they have are:

- Does this company offer the products or services that I need?
- Are the products or services of sufficient quality?
- Is this a company we can do business with? Are they established, stable, trustworthy?
- If we work with them, what will it really be like?
- Will choosing this company make me look good to my colleagues?
- Is there any risk of me getting in trouble or looking stupid as a result of buying from this company?

Your website needs to answer these questions, while at the same time raising any other issues that your prospect may not have considered, but still needs to. These may include factors that affect pricing or choice of product that may not be immediately apparent when someone comes to your business area for the first time.

tone of voice

For many firms, particularly smaller or younger ones, the website is likely to be the main, first or only extended piece of writing produced for their brand. So they may not yet have a developed sense of their written tone of voice – in other words, the way they want to say things in writing. It's worth considering this before you start to write.

In B2B, tone of voice tends to fall somewhere on a continuum between formal and relaxed. Traditional professions such as accountants and lawyers are more likely to gravitate towards the formal end of the spectrum, while 'younger' trades like software development may prefer something a little more funky.

However, there's no reason why a brand shouldn't redefine its tone of voice, or adopt an unexpected tone – in fact, it's one of the most effective ways to differentiate from the competition.

Defining tone of voice needn't be massively time-consuming, but it can provide major benefits when it comes to agreeing the wording of specific pages or sections later on.

→ For a quick overview, see my 'how to' post on tone of voice:
<http://www.abccopywriting.com/blog/2010/08/31/tone-of-voice-brand>

SEO

Search engine optimisation, or SEO, is a whole topic in itself and not the main focus of this guide. However, because it can affect so many aspects of a site, from the domain name to structure and headings, it's crucial to consider it before you start. Attempting to 'do SEO' on a website that's already been created is a recipe for compromise and poor results.

→ If you're completely new to the topic, read my guide to 'SEO in five minutes': <http://www.abccopywriting.com/blog/2011/03/14/seo-in-5-minutes>

Structuring your website

Before you start writing your site, decide what pages and sub-pages will be included.

You can always change your structure later, but it's still worth having some sense of what will be covered and where.

THE B2B WEBSITE RECIPE

Most B2B websites follow a similar structure, shown in the table below.

Page	Function	Sub-pages (optional)
Home	Confirm that first-time visitors are in the right place Introduce company, products and services Present the site navigation	None
What we do	Concise overview of products or services	Pages on individual products, services or client types
Our work Portfolio Case studies Testimonials	Real-world evidence of expertise or product quality	Pages on individual projects, clients etc
Why choose us?	Differentiators or unique selling points	Pages on individual factors
Resources	In-depth content and functionality aimed at specific audience sectors	Client login area FAQs White papers, newsletters, ebooks Technical specifications PDF brochures and product sheets
About us	Background information about the firm	Team profiles Vision, values or mission Approach, philosophy History News and events Press room
Contact	Contact details and/or response form	Pages on branches or locations

The order of sections, as presented in the navigation, may vary, but I would always suggest having 'What we do' first after the home page, then the other pages, then 'About us' second to last and 'Contact' last. I'll come back to this later.

You may not need all these sections. The simplest structure would probably be a four-page site (Home, What we do, About us, Contact), and this is perfectly adequate for firms who just need an 'online brochure'.

Whatever structure you choose, make sure every page has a unique and clearly defined purpose. This will be very helpful when it comes to developing the actual content.

VARYING THE RECIPE

Is there really a set ‘recipe’ to follow for structure? Well, I think there is, insofar as the audience’s preferences are known and predictable. And that partly depends on what you’re selling.

B2B websites have their conventions like any other medium: people expect to get their information in certain ways. If you’re marketing something relatively straightforward, like stationery or cleaning services, there’s no point messing with the formula for the sake of it. If you want to send a meta-message of ‘difference’, ‘innovation’ or ‘creativity’, you might consider varying the structure, headings or navigation. The question is whether that impression of difference is worth the cost in visitor disorientation – or even irritation.

THINKING ABOUT THE USER JOURNEY

It’s easy for B2B websites to become a dumping-ground for things the firm wants to say, which aren’t necessarily what the visitor wants to hear. In planning your B2B site, it’s crucial to consider the ideal user journey.

By ‘user journey’ I mean the visitor’s progress from the home page to wherever you want them to be. Normally, you want them to make an enquiry, often by phone, email or response form. So the navigation, and other elements within the site like calls to action, should reflect that.

If you have a lot of pages, it might be worth having a main navigation for key pages, with secondary links in a sidebar or footer. That’s what I do on my own site (on the advice of a user-experience professional) and it’s boosted conversions enormously.

However, it’s not all about you. Your site also has to reflect what visitors want to find out, not just what you want to tell them. So your ideal journey has to answer their most likely questions before it asks for the sale, without drowning them in product detail or corporate boasting.

Your home page

As the first thing people see, your home page is by far the most important part of your site. And although it may include less content than many other pages, it's worth putting serious effort into getting that content absolutely right.

WHAT A HOME PAGE NEEDS TO DO

In my table above, I said that the three functions of a home page are:

- to confirm visitors are in the right place
- to tell them what you do
- to show them your navigation.

That's all. In other words, there's no need to overload the home page. Specifically, there's no need to launch into a detailed description of products or services, since 'What we do' and its sub-pages will do that. All you want is for people to arrive and form certain impressions:

- 'The company provides the product/service I'm looking for.'
- 'This site looks professional, clean and easy to use. I'm going to enjoy my visit here.'
- 'There aren't too many links/link categories, and I understand what they all mean. It will be easy to find my way around.'
- (as a result of all the above) 'This looks like a firm we could do business with.'

In other words, your home page is 25% information and 75% reassurance. It says that you're a capable company that cares about its customers. And that care starts right now, as you offer the visitor a relaxing, manageable and user-focused online experience.

ADDING EXTRA INFORMATION

Of course, many B2B home pages offer much more than this. It's common to see panels linking to key services, 'about us' pages, blog posts and other parts of the site. That's fine, and it gives a strong impression of a 'happening' company, but always remember the user journey.

The visitor has just arrived, probably for the first time. They may never have bought products in your sector before. Are you sure you want them to bypass your 'What we do' summary and go straight to a service page, or start reading your latest blog post?

Now, some visitors will want to do exactly that – personally, I'm always judging companies by their blogs. But there's a difference between *allowing*

it and *encouraging* it. Don't fall into the trap of being bored with your own offer; put what you do centre stage, however over-familiar it may feel to you.

SEO

From an SEO point of view, your home page is the most important page in your site: the one most likely to appear in search engines, and the one where people are most likely to arrive.

To maximise your chances of ranking, you need to consider the most likely word or phrase that people will use to search for your product/service, and integrate it into the content wherever you can (meta page title, <h1> tags and text). You can use Google's Keyword Tool to find the most popular key phrases for your sector. The more popular a search term is, the more competitive it will be.

For B2B firms, this can require humility and realism. For example, if you like to use a phrase like 'HVAC solutions' but your audience searches for 'office heating', you may need to rethink the way you describe yourself.

→ If you're completely new to the topic, read my guide to 'SEO in five minutes':

<http://www.abccopywriting.com/blog/2011/03/14/seo-in-5-minutes>

Explaining what you do

This section looks at how to describe your product or service offering at a high level, and how to structure any subsidiary pages.

YOUR 'WHAT WE DO' PAGE

This is the heart of the site, where you present a concise overview of your products or services. It's a natural first step when people want to learn more after the home page, and therefore should be positioned after it in the navigation and perhaps linked from the home-page text too.

I personally like the title 'What we do' because it's direct, simple and conversational. Alternatives include 'Our services', 'Our products', the old favourite 'Solutions' or something more active like 'How we help you'.

If you have a few products/services (say between three and 12) you might want to create a simple table that shows and/or describes each one, then links through to the relevant page. This sort of device doubles as an overview and a navigation. If your services naturally form a process or sequence, you could also use a flow diagram.

HOW MANY SUB-PAGES?

For some firms, a single 'What we do' page may be enough. This has the advantage of placing very light demands on the visitor, and moving them towards the sale more quickly.

If your range is broad, however you'll probably want sub-pages for each product or service. However, I still think it's worth having a line or two about each one on the main 'What we do' page, perhaps as part of a table or list of services. This allows visitors to get a quick overview of the whole offer without having to go 'down' a level.

A hierarchy with more than two levels is probably too confusing, particularly for the first-time visitor – unless you have so many products that you need to place them into categories linked from the main 'What we do' page.

You might want to reflect your product hierarchy in your navigation, for example by having a 'fly-out' menu that appears when visitors mouse over the 'What we do' link. This has pros and cons: it reduces the number of clicks to the ultimate destination (usually good) while allowing people to bypass the service summary on your 'What we do' page (possibly bad).

CREATING SUB-PAGES FOR EACH CLIENT TYPE

Instead of listing types of product or service, you can break your customer base down into types of client, then create a page for each one where you explain your offer to them.

For this to work, your categories need to be:

- **understandable:** people recognise themselves described in their own words
- **distinct:** there's no overlap, and people aren't confused about which category applies to them
- **exhaustive:** everyone will be 'caught' by one of the categories.

As with product types, you could create a simple table designed to direct different types of client to the product/service most relevant to them. If you have just a few client types (say two to four), you might even want to do this on the home page, and omit the 'What we do' page altogether.

The logic here is that the messages (or tone of voice) for each group are so completely different that there is no point having a page aimed at all of them. Instead, you want to 'segregate' them at the earliest opportunity and start talking to their individual concerns.

This sort of division would be particularly appropriate for companies offering a 'go-between' type of service that takes the work of one type of company and passes it to another.

MIXING PRODUCTS/SERVICES AND CLIENT TYPES

Sometimes, firms find that they have a group of services that are applicable to most clients, and also a particular group that they want to address specifically. Following this through gives a site structure that mixes these two taxonomies.

For example, if you look at my services page, you'll see a section on 'digital' (a service) and another on 'agencies' (a client type). I also used to have a page called 'international' that specifically addressed overseas clients.

This sort of thing can seem like a bit of a bodge. And it probably does impede the gestalt effect of the site by making it seem less whole and harmonious. But as long as all headings and categories are clear, distinct and justified, it's probably the 'least worst' option in terms of targeting your

website content if you have both products and client types you must address.

COVERAGE AND DUPLICATION

Ideally, you want every page in your site to have a unique and clearly defined purpose, and for them to slot together to cover every relevant area without duplication or overlap.

However, people don't read websites right through, like a book. The closest print-media analogy would be the magazine, which people dip in and out of as they wish, without necessarily viewing all the sections, or viewing them in any particular order. (This is an important point to remember when you're developing all your website content in a single document.)

What that means is that you may want to accept some overlap if you think it will make things easier for the visitor. For example, you might choose to have a complete set of 'product/service' pages under a heading like 'What we do', and a complete set of 'client type' pages under something like 'Who we work with'.

Inevitably, there will be a lot of duplication between these two areas. But you might feel that's a price worth paying as long as people find the information that's relevant to them – whether they have a 'what I'm looking for' mindset or a 'my situation' mindset.

Describing your products and services

This section looks at the individual pages that describe your products, services or areas of expertise.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

These pages are where your B2B site really gets down to business and looks to close a sale. Here are a few pointers for making that happen.

- **Be concise.** People sometimes try to cover all bases and end up talking about everything everywhere. Remember that people have clicked through to learn more about this service specifically, so stay on topic.
- **Know your audience.** Identify them in terms of their responsibilities, priorities and concerns. Think about what they gain from your product, and what objections they might raise to it. And remember that they don't work in a vacuum – they may need approval or buy-in from those above or around them.
- **Benefits sell.** Make all features 'face outward' by converting them into benefits. In B2B services, most benefits boil down to 'make money', 'save money' or 'save time'. There may also be subtle or indirect benefits that you can allude to, such as enhancing personal career prospects.
- **Prioritise benefits.** Complex B2B products may offer a range of benefits – 'software as service' offerings are a good example. Consider a separate exercise to identify and describe the benefits before you start writing about them. This will help you select the one(s) you want to emphasise in the copy.

PROBLEM/SOLUTION

Problem/solution copy always works well, particularly for services. Describe the reader's situation, show that you understand it and suggest your product as the answer.

With this approach, the text falls naturally into the form of a story, which is easy to read and remember. Your copy is almost like an abstract case study, in that it describes the ideal or most likely process of benefiting from your service.

SEO

For individual product/service pages, it's worth considering what 'long tail' terms you could target. These are less popular search terms for which you have a good chance of ranking highly, because there is less competition.

What you're hoping is that your product/service page will appear in search results and visitors will click through to it directly – in other words, that the page will function as a landing page.

Targeting these sorts of niche can be more art than science, because you are trying to second-guess how people will describe a very specific or unusual product/service. But it's certainly worth bearing in mind, particularly if you're selling something with a high single-order value where one visitor can make a big difference.

If you know that you are one of a very few firms offering a particular product/service, or even the only one, this becomes even more important. It's also important that the page does all it can to orient the visitor who arrives there first by confirming that they have indeed found what they're looking for.

We've become accustomed to finding what we want immediately through Google, so people will be feeling trepidatious if they were faced with a page of diverse, obscure and possibly irrelevant results just before they clicked through. Make them feel welcome.

→ For more information on targeting long-tail terms, read this guest post at my blog by SEO expert Kes Phelps:
<http://www.abccopywriting.com/blog/2011/10/04/seo-long-tail>

Proving your capability

This section looks at ways to demonstrate and document your skills and experience. It's more relevant for service providers than product manufacturers, who will probably feature customer reviews on their individual product pages (if anywhere).

YOUR 'OUR WORK' PAGE

This is where you back up the claims of your product/service section with real-world evidence – examples of things you've done that people can view, watch or read about.

For most service businesses, it's likely to be in the form of case studies, while creative firms (photographers, designers) might prefer to show the actual work they have done, perhaps accompanied by a mini case study.

In creative industries, this section is often entitled 'Our work', and it's not a bad title for other types of firm either. 'What we've done' echoes the form of 'What we do' while arguably sounding a little less natural. Other alternatives include 'Portfolio', 'Case studies' or something more colourful like 'Success stories'.

There are as many approaches as there are B2B firms, and only you can know what will work. Here are some points to consider.

- **Give context.** Don't forget to describe the client business, even if they are very well known. People need to put your work in context.
- **Focus on benefits.** Just as service pages should always emphasise what you can do for clients, so your case-studies should explain what benefits you delivered for the specific client. Remember, benefits usually boil down to making money, saving money or saving time.
- **Tell a story...** Narrative formats always work well. Describe the work you did for the client in a roughly chronological way, beginning with their problem and moving through what you did for them before describing the outcome. If you want, you can add cross-headings so readers can skip to the parts that interest them.
- **...but be flexible.** Don't shoehorn your content into a story format if it really won't go. Use the format that works best for what you want to say.
- **Case studies are like bits of string.** In other words, there's no set length you should achieve. Your case study should be as long as necessary to say everything you need to. If you're dealing with complex or technical solutions, don't be afraid to describe them. Your prospects may well be interested and even if some of the detail goes over their heads, it still demonstrates in-depth knowledge.

→ For more on writing case studies, see this blog post:

<http://www.abccopywriting.com/blog/2010/01/05/case-studies-how-to-write>

TESTIMONIALS

Third-party testimonials are a very powerful way to add weight to the claims you make on your site, and particularly in your ‘Our work’ section.

They work equally well when collected into a single page (‘What clients say’) and shown alongside individual projects. In fact, including them in both places is OK in my opinion.

If a client has written a long, rambling testimonial, edit it down to the key points, indicating omissions with ‘...’ if you feel you have to. Don’t let them re-describe the context of the project if you’ve done that elsewhere.

When requesting testimonials, try to get the client to focus on business benefits – how they made money, saved money or saved time as a result of the service that was delivered.

‘WHY CHOOSE US?’

For many B2B firms, persuading prospects to choose them with a few well-chosen words is a big ask. If players in their sector are broadly similar to each other, and customers aren’t making buying decisions on the basis of branding or other emotional factors, then details become much more important. And that’s where a ‘Why choose us?’ page comes in.

‘Why choose us?’ makes explicit what has already been implied by your ‘What we do’ page, your individual service pages and supporting pages such as case studies and testimonials. It functions as a round-up of all the things that make your company different from, or better than, your competitors, expressed as reasons for the prospect to go ahead and buy.

Earlier on, I discussed the importance of understanding your prospect’s likely priorities. ‘Why choose us?’ is a chance to talk directly to them.

If you’re including a number of reasons, make sure it’s a pleasing number: three, five, seven or 10. More than 10 reasons is almost certainly too many – you’ll be duplicating content or splitting hairs by that point.

Talking about yourself

This section is about providing information about your company, team and approach. Most firms have some level of 'about us' content; for some, it's a brief page, but for others it may run to several pages on a range of themes.

WHY 'ABOUT US' SHOULD NEVER COME FIRST

As the title 'talking about yourself' indicates, this part of the site is essentially self-centred. From a visitor's point of view, it may be secondary or optional.

It's very unlikely to be the first place potential customers go, because they will be approaching your site with a mindset of 'what's in this for me?' In many cases, it may not feature in the user journey at all. However, it may still be important for other types of visitor, such as potential employees or business partners, or those researching your company, such as reporters.

As I've already suggested, 'About us' should be positioned second to last in your site navigation. As well as catering to visitors' most likely priorities, this also sends important implicit messages, such as 'your priorities come first' or 'who we are is less important than what we can do for you'.

Putting 'about us' right after the home page is like telling someone your life story the second you meet them. Of course, that's exactly what some people do, but it doesn't endear them to others. Insofar as it's possible, you want your website's 'conversation' to be 'let's talk about you' rather than 'me me me'.

THE TONE OF 'ABOUT US' CONTENT

Because 'about us' is probably not critical to the visitor's buying decision, it's an opportunity to spread your wings a bit in terms of tone of voice. It's probably unwise to be completely off the wall, but bear in mind the visitor has indicated at least some interest in what lies 'behind the mask' by clicking through to this page.

If your home page is the elevator pitch and your product/service pages are the client meeting, 'About us' is a bit like the chat over coffee. It can give a sense of the ideas, dreams and passions that lie at the heart of your business. This is particularly important for one-person or very young firms, but every company has its personality.

HISTORY

This explains how the firm started, how it developed and where it's got to. It naturally leads into a summary of how you'd like to develop in the future – but don't reveal anything you don't want a competitor to know.

People's appetite for history is usually quite modest, so keep this section short and concise. A title like 'Our story' can make the content sound more interesting.

COMPANY

This covers things like location, number of branches, staff numbers and so on. It's the sort of thing that has to go somewhere, but has very little intrinsic interest, so don't dwell on it.

MISSION AND VISION

Mission and vision statements have become established as something that companies 'should' have on their sites. In many cases, though, they fail to add much value and may even harm your visitors' impressions – particularly if they're wordy, pompous or downright incomprehensible. So if you want to include a statement like this, keep it very short and express it in the plainest possible language.

The difference between mission and vision, to my mind, is the focus on present and future. While a mission statement describes what a company does today – the people it serves, the value it delivers – a vision statement outlines its ambitions, or desired future state. In practice, however, the two terms are often used interchangeably.

TEAM

Showing team profiles brings a welcome human dimension to a B2B site. If people can write their own profiles, it's a chance for them to have a (small) stake in the firm's website and the wider culture of the company, which is positive.

However, it's worth retaining the right to edit them so you can make sure they're reasonably consistent. Even though they come from different people, you don't want a range of lengths or tones of voice, which will give an overall impression of indiscipline or lack of focus.

Some firms, particularly creative ones, ask people to include a quote or preference (e.g. favourite biscuit) that reflects their outlook. Whether you do this depends on the culture of your firm and the tone of voice you're aiming for. It's also vital that funny or entertaining content actually hits the mark – otherwise the effect will be the opposite of what you intend.

Closing the deal

This section is about the business end of your B2B website: getting people to take action.

CALLS TO ACTION

It's never too soon to start asking for the sale. Remember, your aim is not to get people to read every page on your site, but to prompt them to take action. So you need a clear, unambiguous call to action visible throughout the site – probably on every page.

Your call to action might be an in-your-face device like a phone number in a highly visible green panel at the top right of every screen. Or it might be more subtle, like a link within the text to your 'Get in touch' page (with the imperative phrase 'Get in touch' functioning as a call to action.) Whatever you do, you need to make sure that people can clearly see what they should do when they want to take the first step towards working with you.

→ For more on writing calls to action, see
<http://www.abccopywriting.com/blog/2009/12/07/calls-to-action>

YOUR CONTACT PAGE

Most B2B firms I've worked with can't really sell anything without a dialogue, so they're usually keen to get prospects to phone them. Your phone number should therefore be prominent on the contact page – probably the first thing people see.

However, some prospects want to keep some distance in the early stages, or may prefer to reach out to multiple potential suppliers before choosing one to work with. To cater to them, it's worth including a simple email link or perhaps a contact form.

If you do have a contact form, don't ask people for loads of information just for the sake of it. All you really need is a name and an email or phone number. Give people the chance to provide more info if they want, but don't require too much or you risk them just giving up. If you offer a relatively small set of product or service types, you can provide check boxes so they can indicate – with an absolute minimum of effort – what they might be interested in.

→ For some firms, a quirky or unusual contact form may encourage response. See my own take on this here:
<http://www.abccopywriting.com/get-copywriting-quote>

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