

10 Things To Keep In Mind When Hiring A Freelance Copywriter

By Shelby Swatek

Hiring the right freelance professional copywriter can give you the freedom to focus on more strategic aspects of your job while giving your communications a competitive edge with consistent, high-quality copy. As you consider your copywriter options, keeping the following points in mind will help ensure you hire the best copywriter for your immediate needs, and with a bit of luck, you'll find a writer who will be a valuable resource for years to come.

1/ Chemistry counts. Does the copywriter listen? Ask questions? Take direction well? Look for a professional-minded copywriter who isn't emotionally attached to his or her copy and responds well to constructive criticism. Sure, you're swamped, but by taking the time to meet a copywriter who interests you in person, you'll learn more in that face-to-face half hour than you'd ever be able to extract from a resume. For a successful relationship you need to find the right chemistry with a team-oriented writer who understands that at the end of the day, you are the client.

2/ Do due diligence. To what degree are the writer's samples written by writer, and to what degree were they edited by his or her clients, project managers, etc.? It is considered acceptable to include collaborative pieces in a portfolio — better to ask up front what their contribution was, and how many rounds of edits it took to get to the final stage. If you like what you see, try to find out how heavily the writer is typically edited by his or her clients. You don't want to hire a weak writer with good editors.

3/ Deadlines are everything. Does the writer give you confidence that he or she will consistently meet deadlines? Does he or she promptly return emails and phone calls? Know what you need when? When looking for a writer, keep in mind the turnaround typically required in your department. Some copywriters will tell you up front they require weeks to submit a first draft. That kind of schedule might work fine for you if your department works far in advance, but if last minute changes or additional project elements are even a possibility, you could find yourself in big trouble. Look for a fast writer who can deliver copy when you need it, who always delivers on time and will do what it takes to get the job done — even if it means working weekends.

4/ Look at the big picture. The writer with the lowest hourly rate won't necessarily end up being the least expensive. A talented writer with a higher hourly rate who can hit the mark with the first draft will be cheaper in the end and less frustrating to work with in the process than one with a lower hourly rate whose work requires extensive revisions.

5/ Weigh ability over "been there, done that." If you need a recruiting brochure written, it's nice to find a writer with a dozen of them under his or her belt. Nice, but not necessary. If you find a candidate whose writing you like, who exhibits the ability to write in the style you need for a project, give him or her a try. If you want further evidence the writer will be able to write in the style you're looking for, don't hesitate to ask him or her to provide additional samples or to do a brief writing test.

6/ Don't settle for less. Some professional copywriters take the position that it's the proofreading department's job to catch and fix grammatical mistakes, and think nothing of delivering drafts full of grammatical and punctuation errors. If you aren't prepared with a crackerjack proofing staff to avoid multiple rounds and potential costly and embarrassing mistakes, make sure your writer knows the difference between "its" and "it's" and considers it to be part of his or her job.

7/ Watch for jargon. Jargon-laden copy is evidence of a writer's not being willing to take the time, or not able, to understand his or her subject. A good writer who fully grasps subject matter will translate too-technical, undigested information from primary sources into accurate and clear lay language. A capable marketing writer knows that jargon makes a reader work harder — and if copy makes the reader work harder in this age of information overload, the reader won't stick around long enough to get the message.

8/ Know your options. Copywriting is typically purchased by the hour, with or without an estimate, or at a flat rate for the project. A flat rate will usually include time for a kick-off meeting, research, material review, a first draft, and two rounds of revisions. With a flat rate you are assured there will be no surprises, but you may end up paying more as the writer will have to project how long your project could take. An excellent alternative is to get an estimate with an agreed upon not-to-exceed price.

9/ Be prepared. Some copywriters will be happy to invoice you once the final copy has been delivered, payable within 30 days, while other writers require a 50% deposit up front for new clients or new projects, with the balance due and payable upon acceptance of the final approved copy. The latter typically require all other clients to pay one-third up front, with one-third due after completion of the first draft, and the balance due and payable upon completion of final copy. Make sure you know a writer's billing schedule before launching a project with them on board.

10/ Start small — and when appropriate, ask to try before you buy. Got a lead on a great new writer? Try hiring him or her to work on a small project or work on the first phase of a larger project. You'll get a good look at the person's work and working style. You may want to ask a prospective writer do a "test" or "homework" assignment, such as writing a short press release, editing existing collateral you know needs work, or writing a headline, subhead, and body copy for an ad for your industry — or all three, depending on your needs.

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