

How to Write Better Product Concepts – and why it's worth the effort.

Written product concepts are one of the most important stages in the development process for a brand's marketing and communication activities. As all subsequent steps build upon these concepts, a brand's future success depends directly on just how well they are constructed.

For marketing departments, written concepts often lead to a sobering moment of truth. As consumers and experts alike evaluate them unadorned, with no visual support, those that have not been thought through thoroughly are often rejected out of hand. For a written concept to be really successful, every word and phrase has to be just right.

Interestingly, it's often the junior members of a marketing team who are asked to write the concepts that a brand's future may depend upon. Fortunately, it is possible to learn how to write concepts well, although a great deal of practice is needed before excellent results can be achieved on a regular basis.

A White Paper from:

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How to Write Better Product Concepts

This White Paper explains how to write excellent product concepts for a brand, to improve that brand's chances of being successful both in concept tests and in the marketplace. Pragmatic guidelines are included, as well as a fictitious, worked example, which is built up step-by-step to illustrate the method.

With these Guidelines and quite a lot of practice, anyone working in marketing should be able to write better concepts – and, as result, find themselves doing their whole job a little better too!

Introduction

„We look for different skills in our marketing teams today than we used to. Nowadays, we place more importance on negotiating skills, experience of dealing with retailers, social media capabilities, being able to handle a heavy workload, etc. Anyone who meets these qualifications shouldn't have too much trouble writing a few lines for a product concept, should they?“

Written product concepts are a standard part of the marketing and communication development process at many companies nowadays. There's good reason for this: Reliable learnings can be gained from testing product concepts for new products, re-launches, etc. for a relatively small investment.

To maximise the learnings gained from written concepts, they need to be excellently constructed, which is unfortunately rarely the case. For confirmation of this, ask any market research company about the quality of the written concepts they are asked to test – they won't be very complimentary.

Why aren't marketing departments producing better written concepts? Many companies simply underestimate the time, effort and experience required to produce high quality concepts on a regular basis. Working in the abstract also doesn't suit everyone. Companies would, in fact, be well advised to place the responsibility for writing concepts with those who really enjoy the challenge.

Typical Product Concept Structure

Product concepts are structured in a broadly similar way from one company to the next. Usually, they consist of just three paragraphs:

1. Consumer Insight
2. Benefit
3. Reason to Believe

A short summary line is often added at the end, to tie the main ideas together.

Anyone following this structure to write their own concepts should bear in mind that the three paragraphs aren't separate boxes that can be filled out in any order. On the contrary, they're a linked chain of thoughts, where each builds on the one that's gone before. The three paragraphs should also fit together perfectly, without leaving any unanswered loose ends.

Taking a closer look at each paragraph:

Concept Writing Tip No. 1
Plan four hours (!) on average for each written concept that's required.

Concept Writing Tip No. 2
Write concepts as a linked chain of thought, rather than as a series of boxes to be filled out and then put together.

Consumer Insight

Consumer Insights should be the starting point for all written concepts and the platform to build the whole idea upon. The insight chosen should highlight one of the Target Group's specific needs, beliefs or feelings about the product category or brand concerned. The aim is to create a kind of tension that can be answered later by the Product Benefit.

Insights needn't be written in the personal form, „Sometimes I ...“ but it is helpful to do so: It's easier to spot “manufacturer speak” and wishful thinking, when the words are formulated as if they're coming from consumers' mouths.

Some purists insist that Consumer Insights should always revolve around personal conflicts that need resolving. In practice this isn't a must, as often an unfulfilled wish or the mention of a recurring, unmet need is the best choice.

Finding actionable insights requires in-depth knowledge of your consumers, so it's advisable to re-visit a brand's complete market research findings – even those collected for other purposes – for clues. This knowledge can then be supplemented by learnings from online sources such as forums, blogs etc.

The following guidelines should also be helpful when searching for insights with the potential to spark good ideas:

- *Identify Consumer Insights, don't invent them.*
Resist the urge to formulate an Insight that just happens to lead straight to the Benefit you think your brand should be promising. There is little chance such an Insight will reflect true consumer thinking.
- *Pursue only those Insights the majority agree with.*
Ignore one-off opinions, even interesting ones, if they're not representative of the Target Group. If you don't, the concepts will be rejected in market research and you'll probably have to start again.
- *If necessary, research Insights directly.*
Set up tailor-made qualitative market research, to answer specific questions you cannot yet answer. Valuable learnings can be gained even from small-scale qualitative tests, for a fairly small investment.

Fictitious Example – The FakeCake Company

Our step-by-step worked example is for a fictitious manufacturer of ready-made cakes – The FakeCake Company in Ovenbach. Facing increased pressure on prices from both private labels and cheap imports, they're looking for relevant insights to help develop and launch a unique, new product range. Group discussions have provided valuable information, particularly about the psychology of today's purchasers of ready-made cakes.

The Insight chosen is formulated as follows.

“Even when visitors surprise me, I like being able to offer them cake, but I'm not very good at baking. Frozen cakes are pretty big and take too long to defrost, while most ready-made cakes look so industrial, I can't offer them to anyone I like. But I can't always go to the bakery...”

Concept Writing Tip No. 3

Use the most perceptive insight, not the most obvious one.

Benefit

In a written concept, the Benefit is the brand's answer to the tension that's been set up in the chosen Insight. The Benefit is usually a combination of rational and emotional/ psychological elements, which explains how the brand's product can resolve the issue that's been set up.

The Benefit should be written in a way that makes the brand appear to be as unique as possible – no simple task, as most products in today's crowded categories offer pretty much the same advantages. It's important to do so, however, because the degree of differentiation achieved has a direct effect on both brand preference and the price premium a product can maintain.

The following guidelines should also be helpful when formulating Benefits to match the chosen Insights:

- *Avoid the superfluous.*
Don't list all of a product's attributes, just those that help provide an answer to the chosen Insight. If this means an important selling point is missing, then the wrong insight has probably been chosen.
- *Don't exaggerate.*
Resist the urge to describe your product in terms that are objectively too favourable. Overpromise can sometimes lead to product trial but disappointment always leads to long-term rejection of a product and even other products that the brand offers.
- *Write descriptively with no hard-selling and no poetry.*
Don't write concepts like advertising copy. Their purpose is to explain ideas in a neutral way, not to sell or romance them. Obvious sales patter can even lead to a good idea being rejected in a test situation.

The Benefit for The FakeCake Company

Building on the above Insight:

“Even when visitors surprise me, I like being able to offer them cake, but I'm not very good at baking. Frozen cakes are pretty big and take too long to defrost, while most ready-made cakes look so industrial, I can't offer them to anyone I like. But I can't always go to the bakery...”

FakeCake has come up with the idea of baking small, ready-made cakes that are not uniform in form or appearance and look almost like home-made. Both the surface and the edges of the mini-cakes are just a little different each time.

The Benefit in the written concept is formulated as follows:

Now there's FakeCake Originals: Individually-shaped Mini-Cakes that look almost like home-made. The three delicious varieties are perfect for sharing with a guest – or with yourself.

Reason to Believe

The „Reason to Believe” or RtB, (also sometimes known as a “Reason Why” or “Support,”) is a simple explanation of how the brand's product can deliver the Benefit being promised in a credible way.

A Reason to Believe should be short and to the point and ideally contain a word or two that is not commonplace in the category concerned. Here too, it is worthwhile trying to be different from the competition.

Concept Writing Tip No. 4

If no functional differentiation is possible, make the brand seem unique on a psychological/ emotional level.

Concept Writing Tip No. 5

Avoid using difficult terminology and the language of other brands.

The following guidelines should also be helpful when formulating a Reason to Believe to suit the Benefit being promised:

- *Don't write a shopping list.*
Resist the urge to list all of a product's positive properties and concentrate instead on those that differentiate the product and support the Benefit directly. Some category „musts" might be necessary too.
- *Use the simplest possible terminology.*
Avoid words and expressions that pose as many questions as they answer. In most product categories, consumers have only limited time and patience to try to decode terminology or interpret information, in order to understand what is actually being said.

The Reason to Believe for The FakeCake Company

As an explanation for offering the above Benefit:

Now there's FakeCake Originals: Individually-shaped Mini-Cakes that look almost like home-made. The three delicious varieties are perfect for sharing with a guest – or with yourself.

The Reason to Believe in the written concept is formulated as follows:

No two FakeCake Originals are completely alike, because every one of them is finished by hand. Whether it's Chocolate-Cranberry, Wild Orange or Country Cheese, each is a true Original.

The Complete Written Concept

Now the only thing missing is a summary line at the end to round off the concept. This line should contain no new information and also work on its own, when seen separate from the concept.

The written concept for FakeCake Originals is now complete:

“Even when visitors surprise me, I like being able to offer them cake, but I'm not very good at baking. Frozen cakes are pretty big and take too long to defrost, while most ready-made cakes look so industrial, I can't offer them to anyone I like. But I can't always go to the bakery...”

Now there's FakeCake Originals: Individually-shaped Mini-Cakes that look almost like home-made. The three delicious varieties are perfect for sharing with a guest – or with yourself.

No two Originals are completely alike, because every one of them is finished by hand. Whether it's Chocolate-Cranberry, Wild Orange or Country Cheese, each is a true Original.

FakeCake Originals – individual Mini-Cakes for sharing.

The Acid Test for Written Concepts

Concepts that have been written using the above guidelines should already be strong and have a good flow to them but one question still remains: Can they be reduced enough to appear in summary form on the front of a pack – assuming, of course that the product in question is sold in a pack?

Concept Writing Tip No. 6

Keep Reasons to Believe simple – they're rarely the main reason for product purchase.

Concept Writing Tip No. 7

Reread concepts and be your own toughest critic – ensure they flow well and there are no loose ends.

The front of the pack is the most important advertising space for any product sold from a supermarket or drugstore shelf. It's only the pack front that can communicate with consumers before they take the product off the shelf – the most difficult hurdle to be surmounted before a product is actually bought.

As consumers never actually get to see written concepts, they need to be reducible to a few words that capture the essence of the idea and can appear on the pack-front. This is the acid test.

The best way to conduct the acid test for a written concept is simply to underline the key words in the concept and answer two questions:

- Can they all be integrated onto the front of the pack?
- Do they communicate the essence of the concept?

Doing the acid test for FakeCake Originals:

“Even when visitors surprise me, I like being able to offer them cake, but I’m not very good at baking. Frozen cakes are pretty big and take too long to defrost, while most ready-made cakes look so industrial, I can’t offer them to anyone I like. But I can’t always go to the bakery...”

Now there’s FakeCake Originals: Individually-shaped Mini-Cakes that look almost like home-made. The three delicious varieties are perfect for sharing with a guest – or with yourself.

No two Originals are completely alike, because every one of them is finished by hand. Whether it’s Chocolate-Cranberry, Wild Orange or Country Cheese, each is a true Original.

FakeCake Originals – individual Mini-Cakes for sharing.

The points that should appear on the front of the pack are:

- FakeCake Originals Mini-Cakes
- No two completely alike
- Finished by hand
- Ideal for sharing
- Chocolate-Cranberry (or other flavours)



The Fakecake concept passes the acid test. The most important elements can be included on the pack-front and they communicate the essence of the idea.

The Reality of the Supermarket

Written concepts are a means to an end. Once they’re approved and tested, they don’t appear again anywhere in the form they were written - they’ve performed their job. Traces of them, however, should be perceivable in all marketing and communication activities especially, as mentioned, on the pack-front. This is still far too rarely the case.

Concept Writing Tip No. 8

Ensure that the essence of the concept can be summarised on the pack-front.

To confirm this, take a few extra minutes the next time you go to the supermarket and have a closer look at some of the products on the shelves. How many pack fronts communicate the most important information about the product, as it would have appeared when underlined in the above acid test for written concepts? There won't be many, whichever supermarket you visit.

For those working in marketing, you probably don't even need to visit the supermarket to confirm this. Take a critical look at the front of your own brand's packs and ask yourself whether they communicate the essence of your product concepts – the Insight, the Benefit and, if relevant, the Reason to Believe. If they don't, then either the concepts they were based upon weren't that strong – if indeed there were any – or they haven't been transferred successfully to the front of the packs.

Whatever the reason, it's never too late to put things right and use your brand's most important advertising space to the greatest effect.

About Insight Driven:

Insight Driven is Mel Schoen's brand and communication consultancy in Hamburg with huge experience in:

- Strategic consulting for brands, including finding relevant Consumer Insights and integrating them into positionings, strategies and product concepts (!)
- New product and service innovation based upon relevant Consumer Insights.

Insight Driven also conducts a whole programme of Workshops and training sessions.

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