

Building Blocks for Marketing Documents

by Jack Massa

Many technical communicators are familiar with structured writing. We use standard structures or "building blocks" to create instructional and reference documents for both print and online delivery. We repeat standard structures throughout a document wherever the same kind of information needs to be presented.

The benefits of structured writing are well known. Readers learn to recognize the structured pages and building blocks by their consistent layouts, titles, and subheadings. Structured writing helps readers find information quickly: By merely glancing at a page, readers know what kind of information to expect. At the same time, writers learn to write more productively because they know what information they need to develop for each topic and its components.

The concepts of structured writing are not usually applied to marketing documents--such as print and Web brochures, specifications sheets, e-mail newsletters, promotional letters, case studies, and white papers--perhaps because marketing communication (marcom) is generally considered more free-form and creative, and less structured, than other kinds of business communication. Well, marcom *is* more free-form and creative. Still, certain common building blocks can be discerned in marketing documents, especially those created for technology products. These building blocks recur in technical marcom because they're proven to deliver necessary information effectively to the reader. If you create marcom (or want to), then learning to recognize and use these common elements can make you a more productive and effective communicator.

Attractors

In instructional and reference documents, we usually design headings, subheadings, and opening paragraphs to make the content immediately clear and to help readers decide whether or not to keep reading. In marketing documents, on the other hand, we often want to attract readers' attention and *convince* them to keep reading.

I use the term "attractor" for any title, headline, or opening statement designed to grab readers' attention and persuade them to read on. If you need to create this type of building block, it helps to look at examples of advertising and marketing writing that you find powerful. What kinds of words, statements, and effects do they use to draw you in?

Following are some techniques you can use for writing attractors:

- **Put a new twist on a familiar phrase:** "We like to stay close to the cutting edge (without skating off)."
- **Connect two key ideas with a repeated word or phrase:** "Upscale styling. Up-front pricing."
- **Appeal to the reader's emotions:** "Aging parents. College tuition. Are your investments working hard enough?"

- **Appeal to the reader's current business concerns:** "Today, you need high-speed data transfer just to stay in the game."
- **Ask rhetorical questions:** "Need your documents reviewed by tomorrow in Boston, Buenos Aires, and Brussels? No problem!"

Purpose Statements

A purpose statement defines the product (or company or service) and explains its purpose in plain, easy-to-understand language. This building block is often used at the beginning of brochures, specifications sheets, and other marcom documents that describe a product or company.

You can think of this building block as the distillation of your marketing message. In one or two sentences, the purpose statement tells readers who you are and what you offer:

"SuperWebViewer allows you to distribute and view large-format documents via the Web," or "Builder Software Solutions develops and distributes software for architects, engineers, and contractors worldwide."

Features and Benefits Lists

This building block is another familiar element of technical marcom documents. Features are the characteristics or qualities of your product or service. Benefits describe what the product or service can do for the customer.

Remember that customers never buy features. They buy benefits. True, you must explain what your product or service is and what it does, but you must always relate this information to the readers: How will it benefit them?

Often, features and benefits are presented as linked pairs. In the following example (for a fictitious network security service) the features are bolded, with the corresponding benefit following in the same bullet point.

The benefits of Castle Network Security include:

- **Secure, round-the-clock monitoring**--Ensures the availability of your critical business systems.
- **Expert network technicians on staff**--Help you diagnose failures and quickly find solutions.
- **Real-time monitoring of scheduled processes**--Ensures the completion of unattended jobs, such as overnight data backups.
- **Comprehensive device profiling**--Helps you prevent failures before they occur.
- **Network management software agents**--Give you the data you need to improve overall performance.

Supporting Facts

Facts support marcom documents by lending weight and credence to the argument. Technical audiences, in particular, are far more likely to be convinced by facts than by other means of persuasion. There are several contexts for presenting supporting facts in marcom documents:

- **Experience.** Emphasize your record of longevity and success: "Since 1983, engineers around the world have used our software on their most demanding projects."
- **Test results.** Discuss favorable results of tests or surveys that measured your products against those of competitors: "In an independent survey of 500 Web surfers, our search engine ranked highest in surfer satisfaction."
- **Independent validation.** References to third party reviews can be extremely useful, especially if the third party is well known and respected in the field: "Rated a *PC Magazine* Best Buy nine years running!"
- **Research.** Industry research can lend support to your message even if it's only indirectly related to your offer: "A November 2001 report by MerryWeb Marketing Company estimated that nine out of ten dollars spent on banner ads are wasted. That's why we stress lead generation through client references and direct e-mail techniques."

Specifications

Specifications are facts that give detailed or technical information about a product. They are usually presented in tables or bulleted lists. Most technical communicators are familiar with presenting specifications in documentation.

In marcom documents, it's important to include specifications for technical audiences, who will evaluate your product in comparison to the competition or in relation to other products or systems they may already use. For this reason, you may want to include specs such as "supported file formats," which show compatibility with other products or standards.

Testimonials

Testimonials support your marketing message by referencing satisfied customers. They are very powerful building blocks: It's usually much more convincing for others to speak well of you than for you to speak well of yourself.

A testimonial may be a short and pointed quotation, or it may take up several paragraphs, combining information about the satisfied customer's case history with words of praise. In many cases, companies develop customer success stories as separate documents, each illustrating how their products serve different kinds of customers or different industries. Following are examples of short testimonials:

PrintGold is the best investment we ever made in our network.

I was very happy with the whole support experience. This is much better than the support I've received from other software companies.

Call to Action

The call to action is among the most critical building blocks for marketing documents. Usually situated at the end of the document, it tells the reader how to take the next step in the sales process. It assumes your marketing message has succeeded and answers the question: What next?

The call to action must be clear and simple to follow. It should tell readers exactly what to do and also give them a good reason to do it.

So if you're tired of working late because your printers took the afternoon off, call PrintGold Corporation today.

Contact us now and start protecting the health of your network. After all, if your network sneezes, your business could get sick.

Using the Building Blocks

To use the building blocks, start by thinking of the purpose and audience for your marketing project. Design each document to include those building blocks that will best communicate your message and will most likely convince the audience to respond.

Table 1 illustrates how frequently building blocks are used in various technology marcom documents. The table is based on my own observations and sixteen years' experience in creating marcom.

Table 1. The Frequency of Building Blocks in Selected Technical Marcom Documents

	Attractor	Purpose Statement	Features & Benefits	Supporting Facts	Specifications	Testimonials	Call to Action
Brochure	Always	Always	Often	Often	Sometimes	Sometimes	Always
Spec Sheet	Sometimes	Often	Always	Always	Always	Sometimes	Always
Web Brochure	Always	Always	Always	Often	Sometimes	Often	Always
E-mail Newsletter	Always	Often	Often	Often	Sometimes	Sometimes	Always
Promotional Letter or E-mail	Always	Always	Always	Often	Sometimes	Sometimes	Always
Case Study or Customer Success Story	Often	Often	Sometimes	Always	Seldom	Always	Always
White Paper	Often	Often	Sometimes	Always	Sometimes	Sometimes	Often

Learning More

These seven building blocks appear in different forms in many kinds of marcom, both in print and on the Web. To learn more, examine marketing documents that you find effective. Look for instances of the different building blocks and how they are used. You can continually improve your skills as a marketing writer by studying and implementing the best examples of the craft.

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