What's the state of digital copywriting?

—

The annual survey 2013

Sticky Content

Part of the **Press Association**

Sticky Content's very first client, back in 1997, came with a ready-built website and simply asked that we **fill it with content**. There was no Google. No social to speak of. Barely any functioning e-commerce. And people used their mobiles to make calls.

16 years later, writing for the 'web' is a different ball game. To excel in this field, you have to be **more than just a good writer** – you need to be a copy optimiser. A cross-platform content strategist, devising adaptive, sustainable content formats. You need to speak IA, UX, search and social. You must understand the copy implications of agile design. You must embrace content metrics and measurement.

Why did we do this survey?

Simple. There are plenty of reports benchmarking content spend and predicting a dramatic increase in cross-platform content marketing activity. We know good online copywriters have never been more valuable or sought after. Yet we couldn't find anything that polled the market on the **qualitative issues around digital copywriting** and content production. We wanted to know if attitudes towards writing standards – and writers – were changing too.

Who is this survey for?

It's intended to be useful to a whole host of people: marketing professionals **building the business case** for content marketing; heads of content arguing for more time, resource and skills; content strategists struggling to sell in planning or governance processes; and talented copywriters under pressure to hawk their craft for £5 per 1,000 words.

We hope you find something you can use to further your own content cause.

Give us your feedback **@stickycontent, #stateofdigitalcopywriting** or online at **www.stickycontent.com/survey**

Catherine Toole,
Founder and chairman Sticky Content,
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We asked **365 content professionals** these questions:

Q1. 4
Where do you expect to find the best-quality written content?

Q2. 6
What are the challenges to good digital copywriting in your organisation?

Q3. 7
Can you give us an example of a company or brand that produces best-in-class digital copy?

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What does your content and copywriting activity involve?

Q5. 10
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Q6. 11
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What writers' guidelines do you have?

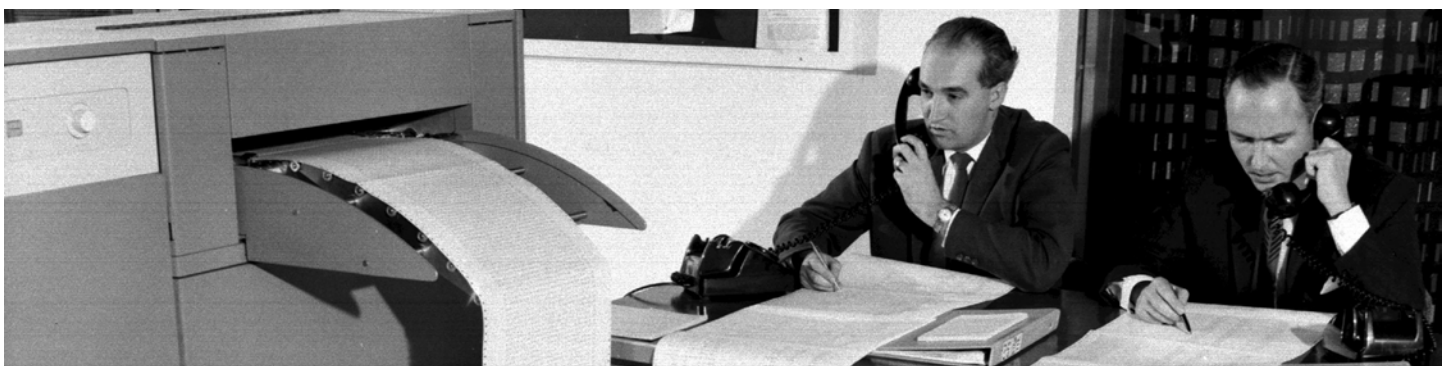
Q16. 25
What's in your tone of voice guidelines?

Q17. 26
How do you measure the effectiveness of copy?

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What's the most useful metric for measuring the success of a piece of copy?

Q19. 28
What's your reaction to a typo on a website?

Q20. 30
What's your online copywriting pet hate?



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Q1:

Where do you expect to find the best-quality written content?

Our survey says...

Most of our survey respondents expect to see the highest-quality writing in print: newspapers and magazines

6/10

Almost 6 in 10 people surveyed expect a brand's Facebook updates to be very poorly written

Respondents rate the copy on marketing emails and product pages as less than acceptable

People surveyed rate the quality of marketing emails much more highly than they do customer service emails

Sticky says...

Opinions are extreme when it comes to the quality of written content. Most of our survey respondents expect higher-quality content from print (with newspapers and magazines far outranking point-of-sale brochures) than from digital media. And 6 in 10 expect a company's Facebook updates to be very poorly written.

This is about people's expectations. Respondents might simply be reflecting a culture where print is expected to be higher quality because it's tangible, expensive to produce, and generally paid for. On the other hand, Facebook is easy and cheap to access, with a high turnover of content – so people expect the lowest-quality writing.

People still expect marketing emails to be better written than customer service emails. This is probably because customer service emails are thought to be lower priority, and end up either written by technical people or simply automated.

We think this is short-sighted. Customer service emails written by trained writers drive users to self-help online and deliver a measurable return on investment (through reduced call centre costs, for example).

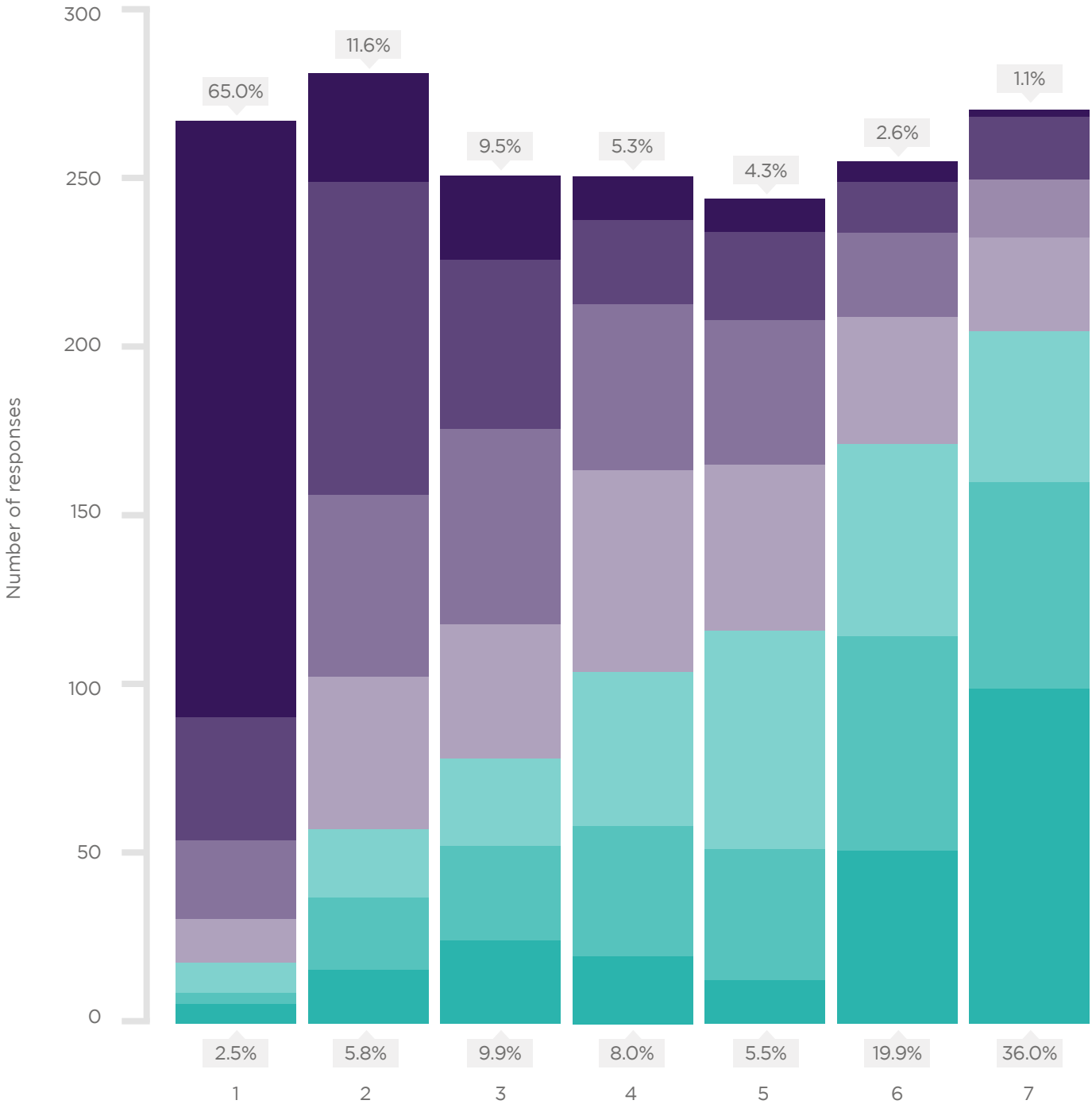
One surprising result is that corporate landing pages don't score highly. Google is now actively attuned to editorial quality, so we'll expect to see a big improvement when we measure this next year.

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Key

Wonderful
Woeful

1 Print (newspapers and magazines)
2 Printed brochures/point-of-sale
3 Landing pages on corporate websites
4 Product pages on e-commerce websites
5 Marketing emails
6 Customer service emails
7 A brand's Facebook updates

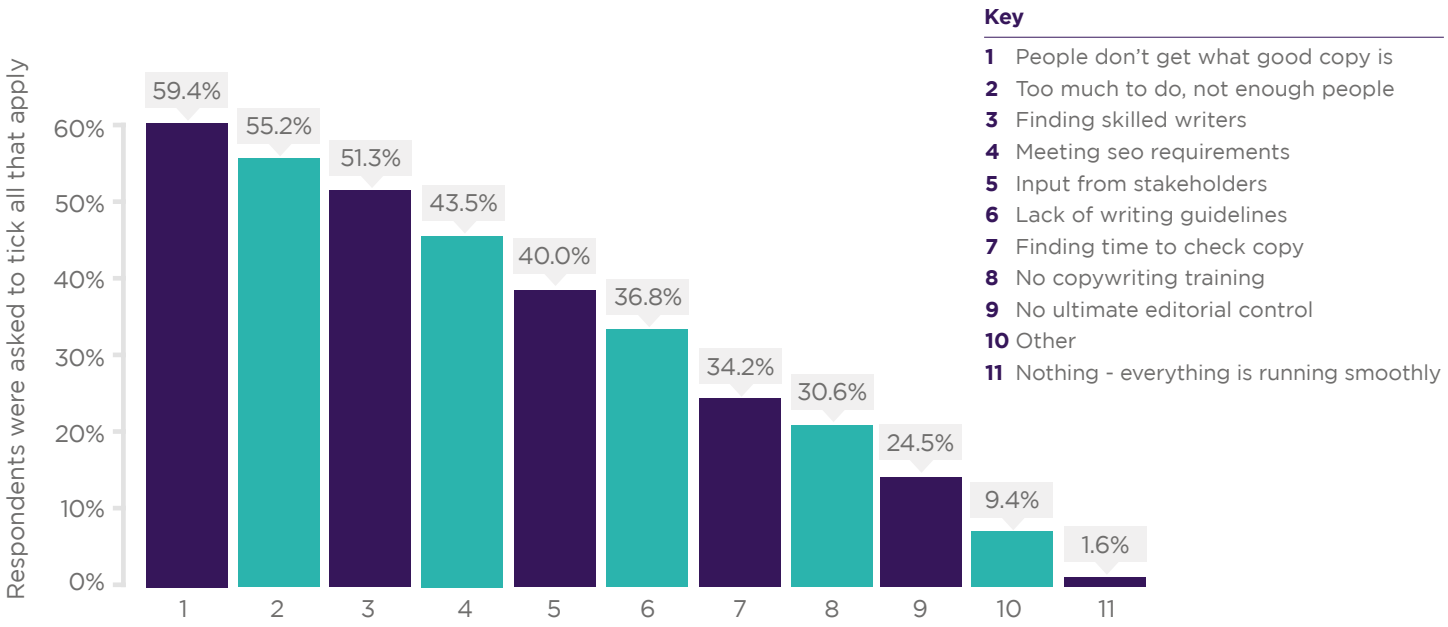


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Q2:

What are the challenges to good digital copywriting in your organisation?

Our survey says...



6/10

6 in 10 say the biggest challenge to producing good copy is that people just don't get what it is

1/2

Half of our respondents struggle to find skilled writers

>1/3

Over a third of respondents have insufficient time to check copy

44%

44% of people surveyed worry about meeting seo requirements

1.6%

Only 1.6% of respondents say everything is running smoothly when it comes to digital copywriting

Sticky says...

Our survey has already suggested that digital copy needs to be better written. So why isn't it? The biggest reason for 6 in 10 respondents seems to be that people just don't get what makes good copy.

As one of our respondents says, 'Copy is seen as nail varnish applied at the end rather than an essential part of a digital project.'

One of the big challenges to good copywriting is the difficulty of meeting seo (search engine optimisation) requirements, with just under half of our respondents citing it as an issue. Do people still think that digital copy is all about keywords? Or is there an emerging understanding that seo copy is much more about editorial quality nowadays?

All this casts an interesting light on the fact that half of content people are struggling to find skilled writers. What skills are they looking for? And what are they willing to pay for them?

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Q3:

Can you give us an example of a company or brand that produces best-in-class digital copy?

Our survey says...



Sticky says...

Some of our respondents were a bit bashful about ranking Innocent as the best example of digital copy ('Is that too predictable?'). But that didn't stop the soft drinks company from coming top of the list. But are people confusing best-in-class web writing with a strong tone of voice?

Maybe people are simply mentioning brands they like. Amazon has effective customer service copy, but its editorial content is largely user-generated. Apple is more about information design than copy. And what about Soap & Glory? Its offline and on-pack communications are certainly copy-led, but do they work online?

We recently heard MailChimp's content curator speak about the sophisticated way in which they ensure the consistency of their voice and tone online, so it's good to see their hard work rewarded with a mention.

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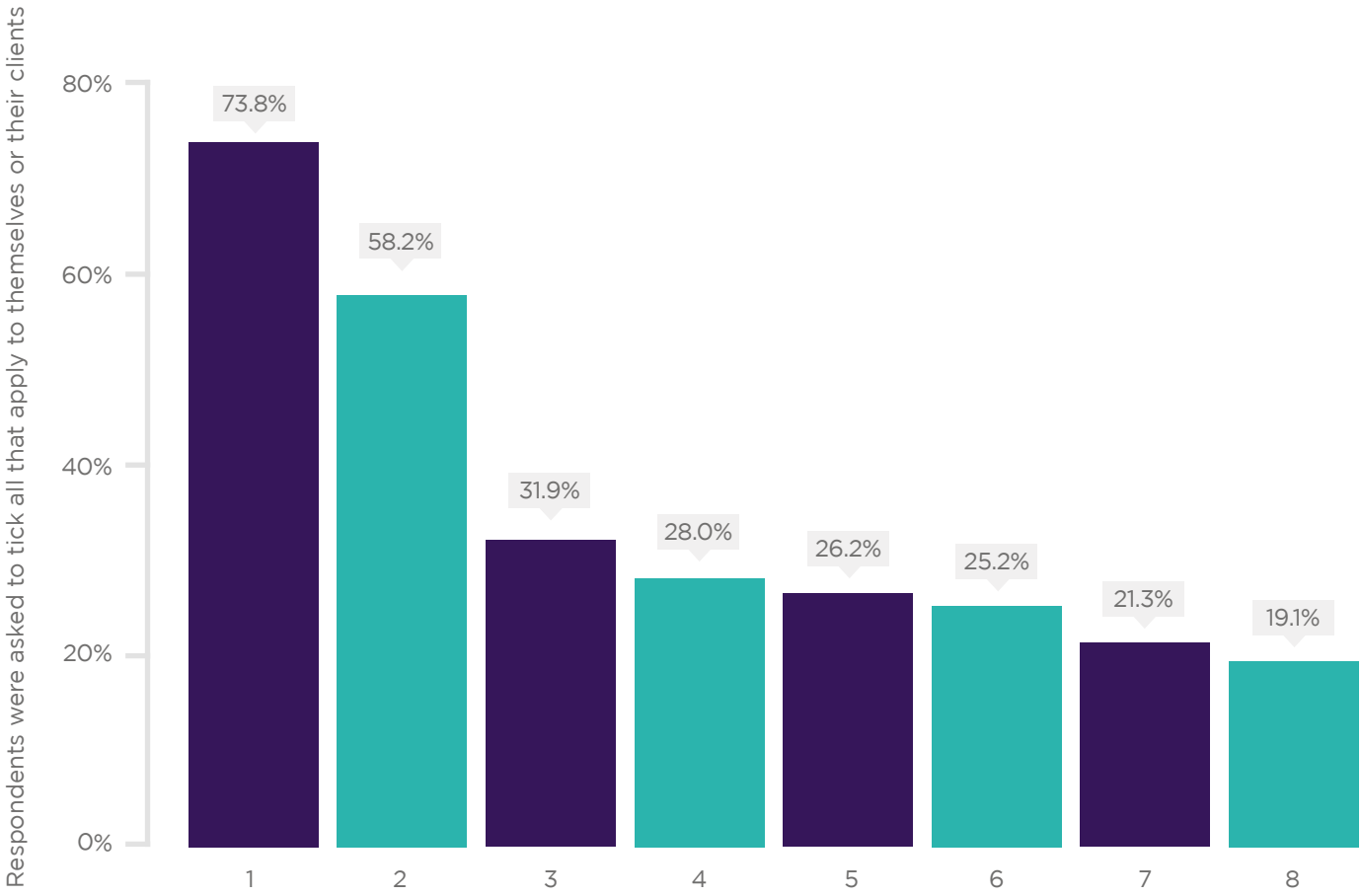
Q4:

What does your content and copywriting activity currently involve?

Our survey says...

Key

1. We check and proof our copy in situ before it goes live
2. We have language and style guidelines to help us write
3. We have standard content formats to structure our writing
4. We have a budget allocated just for content
5. We have a set of customer personas to help us write focused copy
6. We have an official content strategy for the business
7. We audit our copy regularly to benchmark and maintain standards
8. Training in web writing is given to everyone who writes



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3/4

3 in 4 of our respondents check and proof copy before it goes live

60%

Nearly 60% of people surveyed use language and style guidelines

<1/5

Under a fifth of respondents train all their content creators in web writing

1/3

Only a third of respondents use detailed content formats

3/4

Three-quarters of respondents have no official content strategy

Sticky says...

Back again to quality in digital copywriting – 3 out of 4 people we surveyed check and proofread copy before it goes live.

Nearly 3 out of 5 use style and language guidelines. All of which suggests that online copy is mostly grammatical, accurate and credible. So maybe it's governing content post-launch which is the real issue.

Not many of our respondents have a content strategy, user personas or content formats. And after copy is uploaded, even fewer are reviewing live content further down the line with regular audits. As well as helping to improve existing copy, audits also generate feedback for copy creation. So they maintain a better-quality content offering overall.

Ginny Redish,
author of Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works

"I'm glad to see that so many copywriters check and proof their copy. But, without a content strategy and personas, how can you know if you are writing the right copy for the right people?

Online, every piece of copy must serve a purpose that you can explain. If you can't say why you are writing this – what you want to achieve, what you want site visitors to do because you wrote this copy – you can't measure success. If the copy serves no purpose, why put it on the site?"

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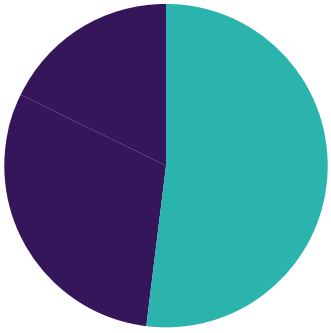
Q5:

What does the content workflow look like in your organisation?

Our survey says...

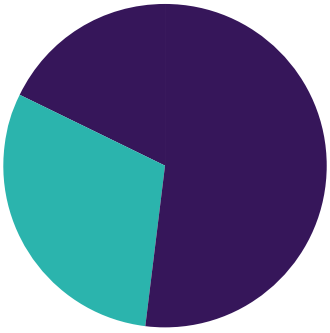
51.9%

'We write copy on demand, in response to business needs'



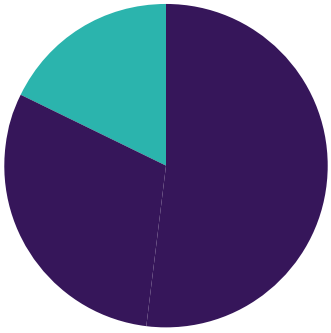
30.5%

'We have a content plan, but it's usually hijacked by other priorities'



17.5%

'We roll out copy on schedule according to a content plan'



>1/2

Just over half of our survey respondents write copy on demand, in response to business needs

1/3

About a third of respondents have a content plan which ends up being hijacked by other priorities

<1/5

Less than a fifth of people surveyed roll out copy according to a content plan

Sticky says...

The majority of our respondents don't have a content plan. Instead, they're often writing copy reactively, according to business needs. Sometimes it just has to be this way, of course.

But planning ahead in true old-school editorial style can generate enormous production efficiencies and drive up quality by allocating to each part of the creation process the time and resource it deserves.

Of those who do have a content plan, about a third say that it ends up getting hijacked by other priorities. What this argues for is the value of having a clear editorial hierarchy where people take responsibility for actually implementing the content plan.

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Q6:

What writing resources do you have available?

Our survey says...

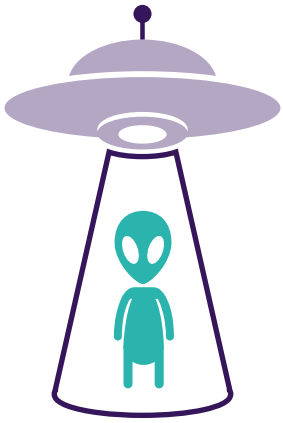
55.6%
Trained writers in-house



57.9%
Trained writers you outsource to (agencies or freelancers)



66.5%
Other contributors (product managers and marketers)



2/3
Product managers and marketers are generating some of the copy for two-thirds of our respondents

>1/2
Just over half of people surveyed regularly use specialist agencies or freelancers to create copy

Sticky says...

Who exactly is writing digital copy? Not always trained writers. In fact, 2 in 3 of people surveyed say it's product managers and marketers are doing some of their writing. 17.7% of respondents say they only have internal stakeholders such as product managers and marketers available to provide their copy for them.

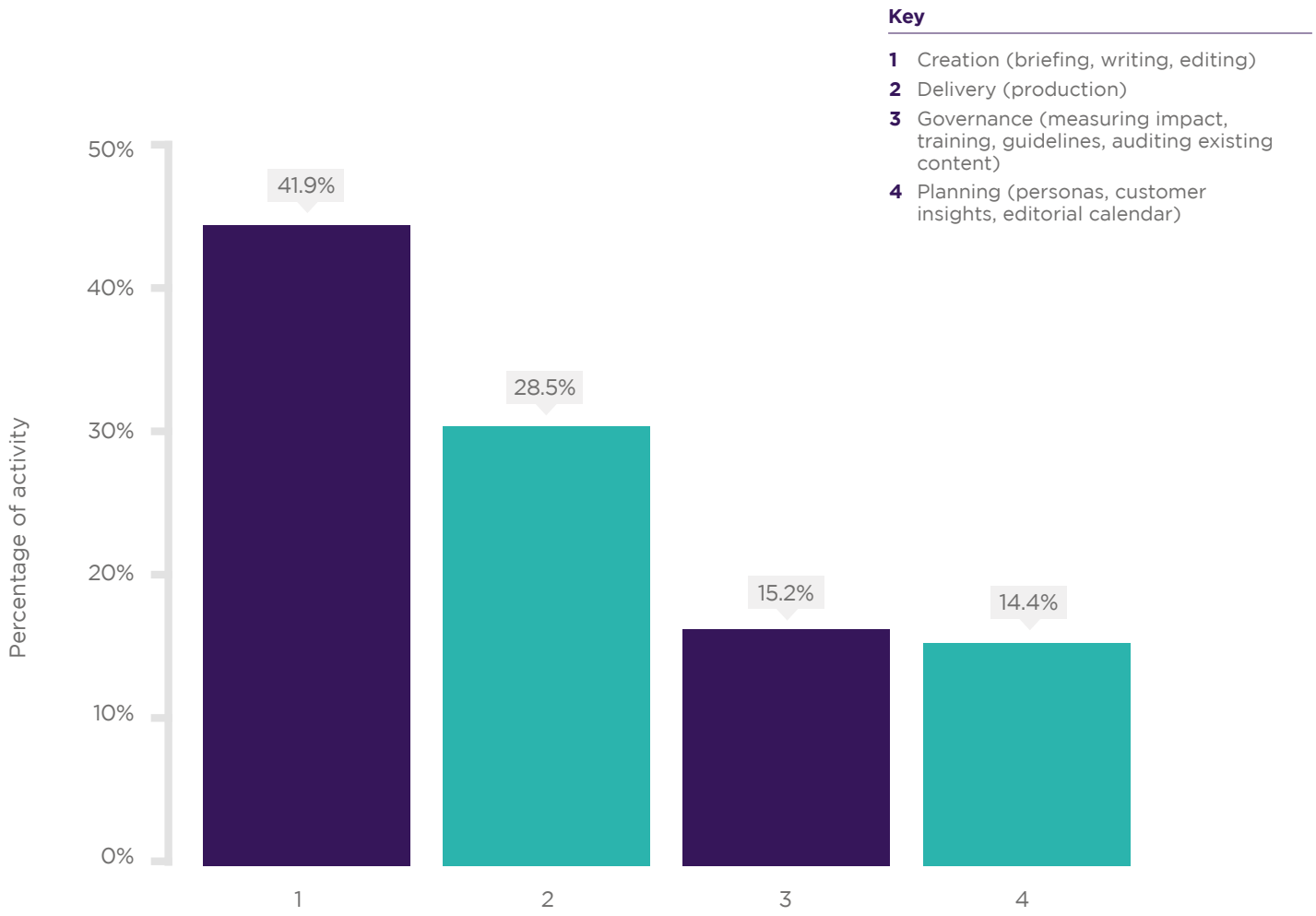
We'd argue that this is a false economy. Product managers might know best about the products and are an invaluable resource to anyone creating content. But a trained digital copywriter should be able to take this expert product knowledge and present it in adaptive, usable, effective content formats. They should be able to optimise copy for internal and external search engines, apply tone of voice principles, prioritise user experience and ensure copy achieves specific and measurable results.

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Q7:

What percentage of your content strategy activity falls into: planning, creation, delivery, governance?

Our survey says...



41.9%

The priority for our respondents is creating content – they spend 41.9% of their time doing this rather than planning, delivering or governing it

28.5%

People surveyed give 28.5% of their attention to delivering content – more time than for content governance or planning

14.4%

Our respondents spend only 14.4% of their time on planning content and 15.2% on content governance

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Sticky says...

In the first edition of Content Strategy for the Web (2009), Kristina Halvorson defines content strategy as 'planning for the creation, delivery and governance of content'. We already know (from the responses to question 5) that content planning, where it exists, tends to get hijacked. So it's not really a surprise that our survey respondents spend the least amount of their time (14.4%) on planning.

Nor is it surprising that the largest amount of time (70.4%) is spent creating and delivering content. 'Getting stuff live in time' tends to be what people shout about loudest. But is it really where the critical effort should be focused? Content governance helps to improve performance long after the hubbub of deadlines and stakeholder meetings has passed.

Measuring the impact of content, auditing the relevance of content, establishing quick fixes and long-term recommendations – these are some of the things governance can cover. We think people should be spending more of their budget on this, to see longer-term return on investment.

Kristina Halvorson,
author of Content Strategy for the Web

"My greatest desire is for people to feel so passionately about their content that they'll do battle to improve it... and this amazing survey shows they are.

It's a terrific weapon for content strategists everywhere – a solid business case to gain resources for adaptive, mobile-friendly, customer-pleasing content... the kind that transforms businesses from the inside out."

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Q8:

What's the trickiest thing about producing good copy?

Our survey says...

NO BRAINER / BIGGEST HEADACHE

- Measuring the impact of written content
- Maintaining and updating copy
- Getting budget/ building a business case for content
- Getting copy signed off
- Coming up with good ideas
- Writing the copy
- Briefing the writer



x2

Nearly twice as many people found it as hard to measure the impact of copy, as anything else

Generating good ideas, briefing the writer and writing copy are considered the easiest parts of the process by people surveyed

Getting budget and getting copy signed off are significant pain points

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Sticky says...

Our survey respondents think that it's as easy to come up with good ideas as to brief writers and write copy. And they think the trickiest thing is measuring impact.

We were surprised that people think idea generation is easy, as we're regularly approached to supply ideas for organisations where the well has gone very dry. As content marketing proliferates, the pressure mounts to generate fresh ideas which engage users, work cross-platform, and are sustainable over time. It's a serious stress point for content heads.

Respondents also reveal that they perceive briefing writers and writing copy to be easier than maintaining and updating copy. Perhaps that sheds some light on why people avoid content governance activities in favour of content creation (see question 7).

Jakob Nielsen
(for more information about Usability Week see www.nngroup.com/training)

"

It's encouraging to see so many respondents citing 'measuring the impact of written content' as their key challenge. This shows that people are certainly taking very seriously the idea that usable content can demonstrate tangible commercial value.

What I'm less encouraged by is that 'writing the copy' itself did not register as a more difficult challenge. This would suppose that current web-writing standards are universally high. This is certainly not evidenced by the usability testing we do and the people who attend our content seminars at Usability Week around the world.

More and more, we gather evidence that people's interest in online content is very easily exhausted when copy is unscannable, jargon-filled or verbose. Blog summaries perform better on corporate sites than full articles. The volume of email messages is now 300% higher than when we measured it in 2006. Comprehension scores for reading complex web content are 48% of desktop monitor scores. So getting the copywriting right is clearly a skilled activity worth focusing on.

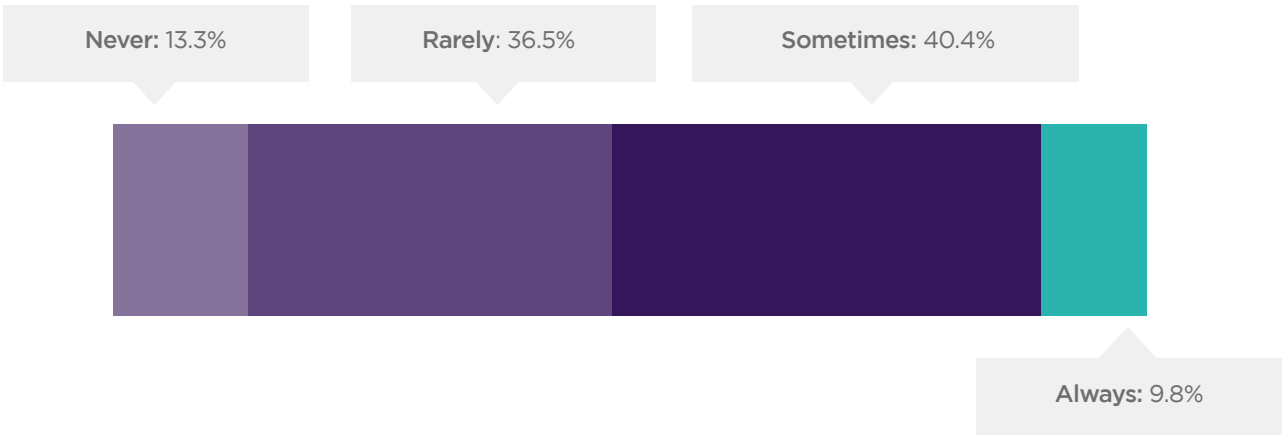
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Q9:

Is there a written creative brief for each piece of copy you produce?

Our survey says...



1/10

Only 1 in 10 content professionals surveyed always use a written brief

>1/10

Just slightly over 1 in 10 of respondents have never had a written brief

1/3

For around a third of people surveyed, a written brief is a rare creature

Sticky says...

We already know (from the responses to question 8) that content professionals find briefing copywriters easier than measuring or maintaining content once it goes live.

Now we find out that fewer than 10% of respondents always have a written brief, 36.5% rarely have one, and 13.3% never have one. Is briefing considered so easy because it's done in a rush? Or not at all?

We think the value of a written brief – even if it's limited to a few lines in an email – can't be overestimated. Most of all, the brief must identify who the copy is for and what you want people to think, feel, or do when they read it.

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Ginny Redish,
author of Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works

"

This is a good question to ask and the fact that you got so many responses makes this a worthwhile survey to read. In this case, of course, every piece of copy should come from a short creative brief.

A creative brief should answer 3 sets of questions:

1. **WHY is this copy going on the site?** How will this copy help the site's business goals? What will site visitors do after reading this copy? How will you measure the success of this copy?
2. **WHO is the copy for?** If the site has personas, which personas do you expect to come to this copy? If the site doesn't have personas, create them on the spot for the copy: Who are they? What can you say about how busy they are, their motivation for reading the copy, their knowledge about the topic, their contexts of use – when, where, how will they be coming to this copy?
3. **WHAT conversations are the personas bringing to this copy?** What is the key message of the copy? What questions will readers want the copy to answer?

"

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Q10:

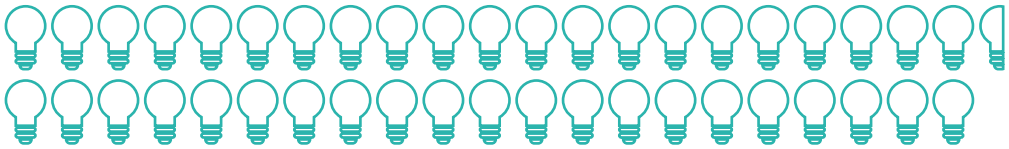
How many stakeholders does it usually take to sign off a key piece of web copy?

Our survey says...

43.0%
1-2 stakeholders



42.6%
3-5 stakeholders



9.5%
6-7 stakeholders



4.9%
8+ stakeholders



1-5

The vast majority of our survey respondents report between 1 and 5 content stakeholders. Almost as many respondents use 3 to 5 stakeholders as have 1 to 2 stakeholders

10%

Almost 10% of respondents have 6 to 7 stakeholders

5%

Almost 5% of respondents have 8 or more stakeholders

Sticky says...

About 2 in 5 of our survey respondents have 1 or 2 people involved in signing off key web copy. That's a manageable quantity – it's when numbers go over 3 that things can get tricky. So what's surprising is that so many respondents can have between 3 and 5 stakeholders. That's really quite a lot of feedback to incorporate.

We think that too many stakeholders giving too much feedback on a piece of copy rarely improves its effectiveness. Instead, it often results in what we term 'frankencontent'. If you're one of the 4.9% with 8 or more stakeholders, you have our sympathy!

As one of our respondents says, 'The biggest issue is that a stakeholder sign-off group is never fully identified before a project starts.' We recommend a content stakeholder management programme, which includes training those giving feedback in seo, copy best-practice and usability. We also think it's a good idea to limit feedback to individual areas of expertise.

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Q11:

Which stakeholders make the biggest dent in the quality of copy during sign-off and feedback?

Our survey says...

29.0% Senior management (board level)	**17.3%** Product managers	**17.0%** Marketing	**15.9%** Legal/compliance
12.4% Other	**4.9%** Brand	**1.8%** Designers	**1.8%** Seo

3/10

About 3 in 10 respondents point the finger at senior management for damaging copy the most

16-17%

Our respondents think product managers, marketing people and legal/compliance folks have the same kind of negative impact (between 16% and 17%) on copy quality

<2%

Designers and seo people are thought by our respondents to have hardly any negative impact (less than 2%) on copy quality

Sticky says...

We asked people to be honest when it came to answering this question. And they were. The indications are that senior managers interfere with copy the most and seo people and designers the least. Is this a reflection of the balance of power in many organisations?

It sounds like senior management might be more profitably involved in planning and briefing, rather than at the feedback stage. As one of our respondents wryly notes, 'Our copy is sent out to all senior managers, who then argue back and forth about what the key messages should be.'

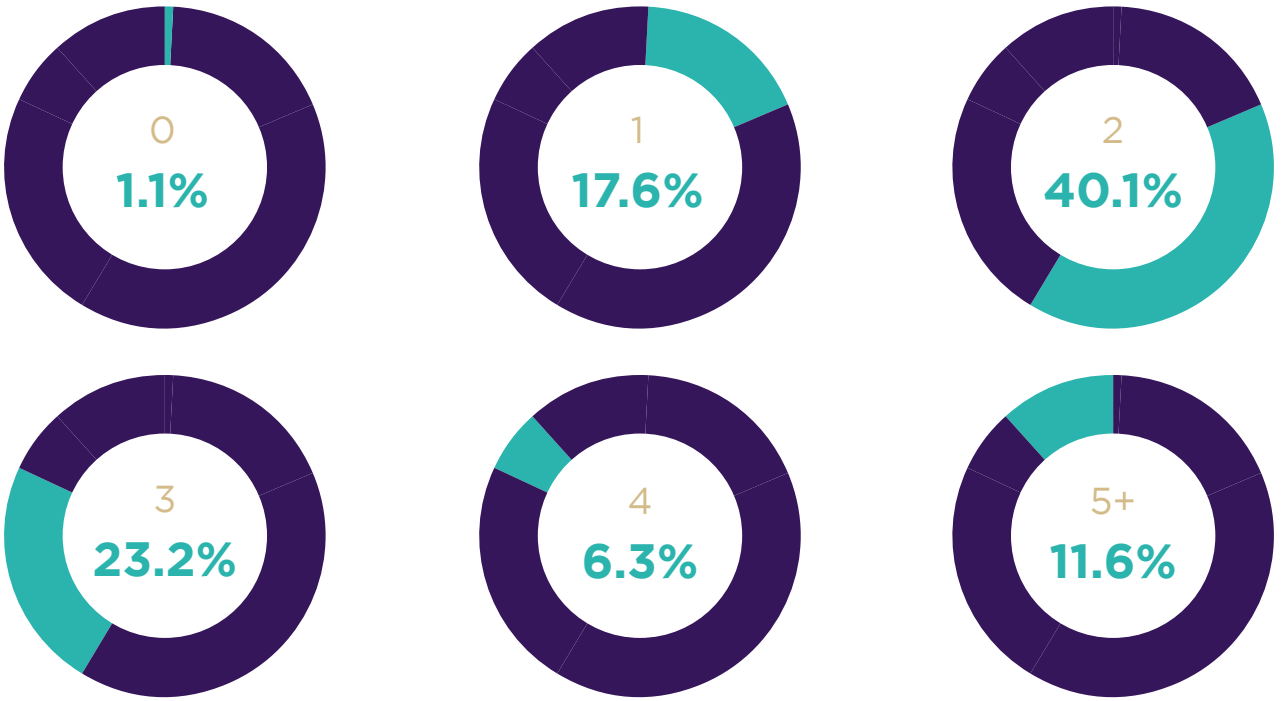
It's interesting to see that compliance people (who often get a bad press) are actually ranked as not much worse than product managers and marketing people when it comes to damaging copy.

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Q12:

How many rounds of amends does a piece of copy usually get?

Our survey says...



8/10

8 out of 10 survey respondents contend with 1-3 rounds of copy amends

1.1%

Hardly any (1.1%) of our respondents sign off content without feedback

1/10

1 in 10 of respondents incorporate over 5 rounds of copy feedback

Sticky says...

We've always found, like many of our survey respondents, that 2 rounds of amends is the norm.

But it's interesting that there's a tendency towards more than 2 rounds. Is this connected with the lack of written briefs (see question 9)? Or is it that stakeholders aren't giving feedback in the most efficient way possible?

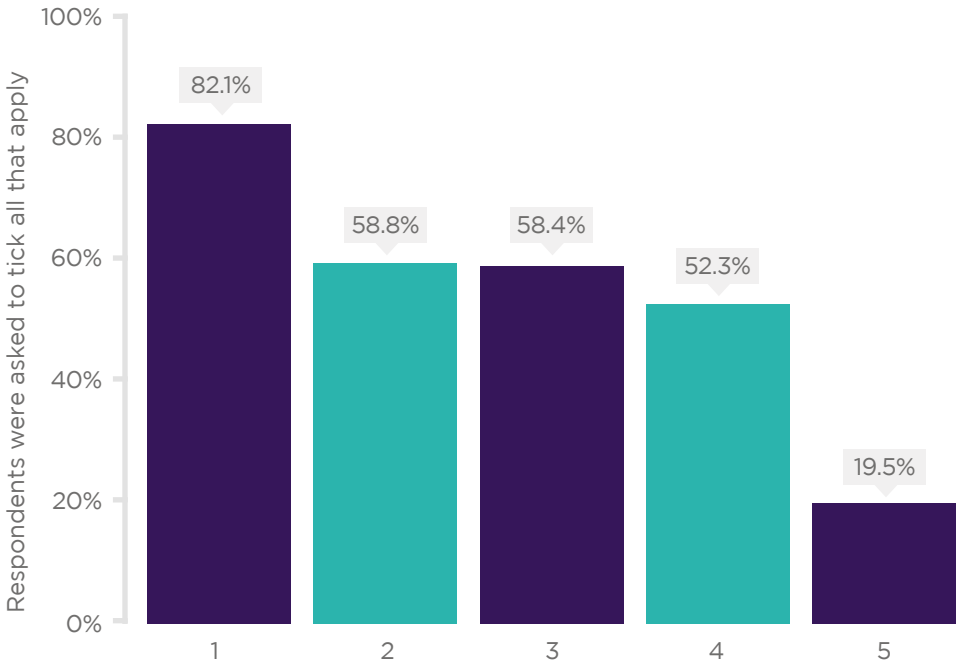
Stakeholder sign-off can take up a lot of time on large-scale projects. We've always found that the amends process can be contracted by giving stakeholders an insight into how and why we write the words the way we do – before they see the content.

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Q13:

What steps are built into your production process?

Our survey says...



Key

1. Proofreading
2. Extra pair of eyes (on proofreading)
3. Sign-off on content ideas before production starts
4. Checks for brand tone of voice
5. Auditing against writing guidelines

+1

Digital copy is routinely proofread by our survey respondents (often more than once)

It's common for respondents to need sign-off on an idea before they start writing

Few respondents check content against guidelines before it goes live

Sticky says...

As we've seen before, proofreading is taken seriously, but then who would admit to not proofreading?

We're surprised that not more of our survey respondents are checking for tone of voice. Is this because people have tone of voice guidelines, but don't know how to use them?

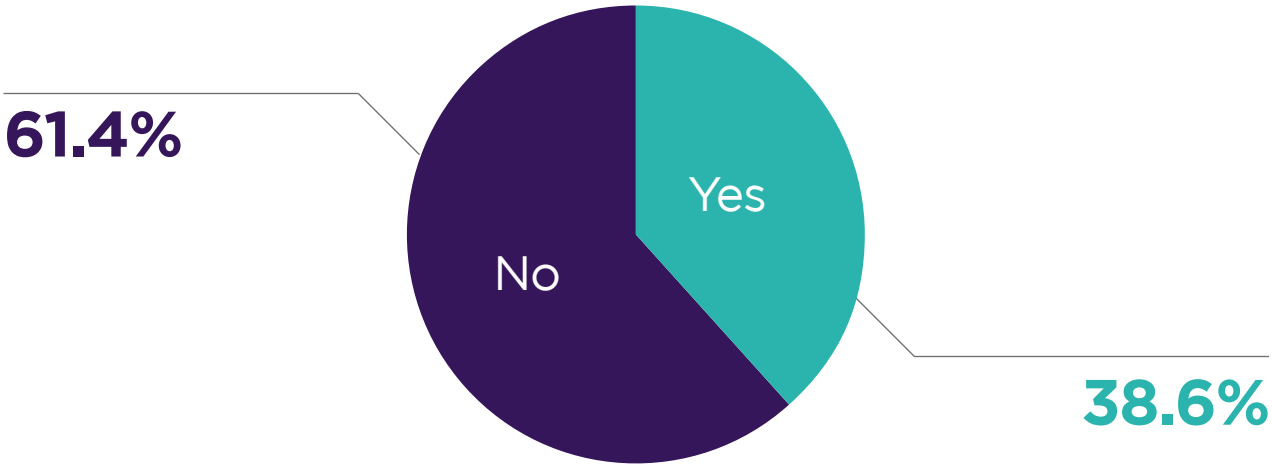
It's a tale of woe for writing guidelines overall – they're the least-employed tool for content production. We think that's a shame. Writing guidelines keep copy consistent, especially if it's written by lots of different people.

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Q14:

Do you think the content management system (CMS) you or your clients use affects the quality of published content?

Our respondents said...



'If the amount of effort required to just load the content is high it **discourages focus on the creative**'

'It can impose **structures that limit our ability** to write naturally'

'Things are **written to the shape of the space!**'

'Limits on length help keep copy short and snappy and **improve overall quality**'

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'Stifling design templates sometimes **get in the way of letting copy breathe** on the screen'

'It's **easy to publish**; so they do – in abundance!'

'There's **not enough flexibility** in terms of content format'

'Product managers have direct access to the CMS so it's **harder to manage quality**'

'It's too slow, **seo isn't easy to update and it sometimes deletes content**'

'It's a **poor editing tool**'

'It's difficult to use so **publishers aren't inclined to spend time on it** for QA purposes'

'**Strictly templated** – which is good for consistency, less so for copy flexibility'

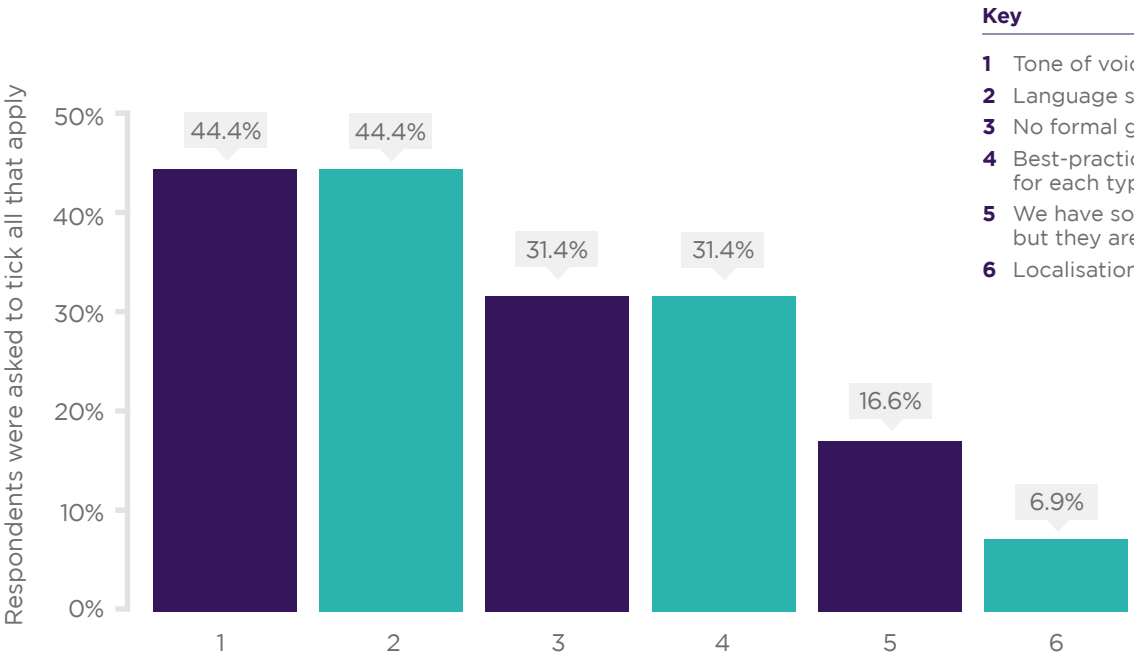
'CMS authors don't get a **feel for the look of a page as a whole**'

© Sticky Content Ltd 2013

Q15:

What writers' guidelines do you have?

Our survey says...



Key

1. Tone of voice document
2. Language style guides
3. No formal guidelines in place
4. Best-practice examples with instructions for each type of content we produce
5. We have some guidelines somewhere, but they are never used
6. Localisation/translation guides

<1/2

Just under half of our survey respondents use language and style guidelines

Localisation and translation guides are used by the fewest respondents

Almost half of survey respondents either don't have content guidelines or don't use them

Sticky says...

What's telling here is the fact that language guidelines are common, but copy templates less so. In other words, there's guidance on the feel of copy and details of spelling and grammar, but less help with the practical business of writing for the web.

We've found that strong, usable content templates, with best-practice samples and execution guidelines for contributors to follow, can save a lot of time briefing and amending. They can also include the elements – link copy, seo, usability – that CMS templates often don't cover.

Our prediction for next year is the increasing development of adaptive content templates. These deliver a high return on investment by making it simple to reuse copy across multiple platforms and cut down on localisation costs.

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Q16:

What's in your tone of voice guidelines?

Our survey says...

11.6%
We give examples of best-practice writing but for print assets only

16.5%
We list tonal values with in-depth instructions for how to write to each

24.1%
We give examples of good writing for all channels, including digital



43.8%
We have **no specific tone of voice guidelines**, just a brand book

37.8%
We list tonal values for our brand at a high level - phrases like 'we are expert'

Respondents were asked to tick all that apply

Most content professionals surveyed aren't using specific tone of voice guidelines

2/5
About 2 out of 5 of respondents have a sense of high-level tonal values, but nothing more detailed

Relatively few respondents are using best-practice examples to set the standard for copywriting across print and digital

Sticky says...

Most of our respondents don't have formal tone of voice guidelines. This suggests to us that even where brand guidelines are in place, they're not giving enough attention to the effect words can have on audiences.

Perhaps industry people still tend to think tone of voice is all about ad copy, that it should be memorable and create impact (and not much else). Much online copy actually needs to be functional and support changes in behaviour – something which is just as much a part of tone of voice.

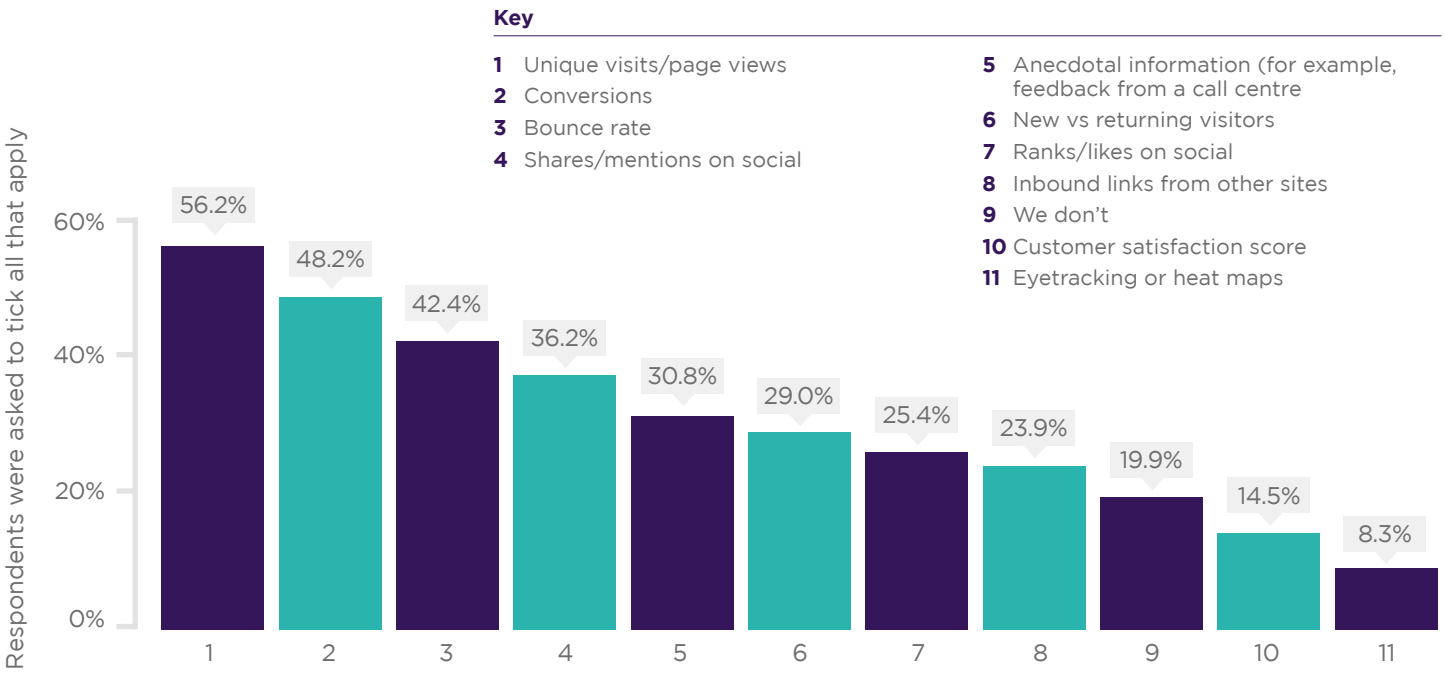
Even where tone of voice guidelines are present, many seem to be simply lists of tonal values. How easy are these to implement, practically? Only some have detailed definitions of values and multiple best-practice examples – which we find to be the most useful for writers.

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Q17:

How do you measure the effectiveness of copy?

Our survey says...



Most of our survey respondents use number of unique visits or page views to measure copy

<1/2

Just under half of respondents focus on conversions to measure copy effectiveness

Metrics in common use for copy are social media shares as well as anecdotal feedback such as that from call centres

1/5

1 in 5 of our respondents aren't measuring copy at all

Sticky says...

We were particularly interested in the response to this question, because we think measuring the success of a piece of copy is crucially important, but misunderstood.

To see that page views and bounce rates are still some of the most commonly-used copy metrics could suggest that people don't know how to effectively measure copy.

The relative importance given to social shares is interesting. Are people measuring Facebook likes and Twitter followers because they're key to their business? Or because they're metrics that are highly visible and easy to obtain? These are metrics that show the volume – but not necessarily the value, or engagement levels – of an audience.

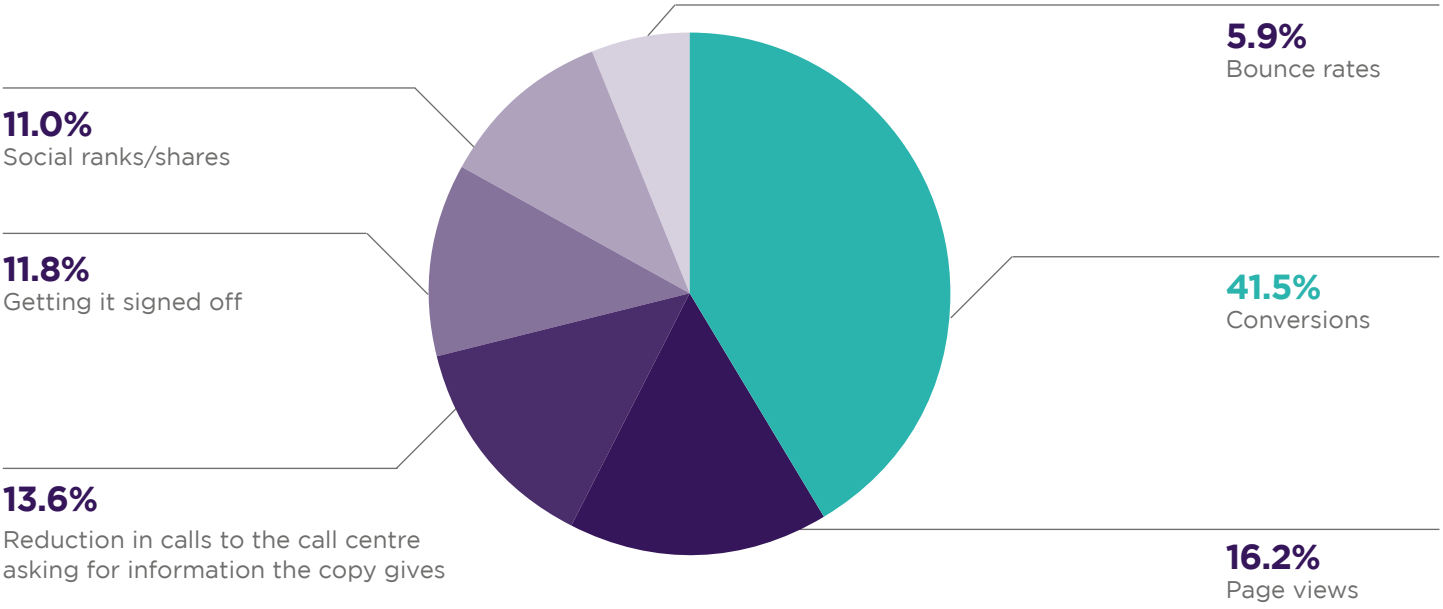
Most surprising of all is how few of our survey respondents measure copy performance at all. After all, without supporting evidence it can be hard to build a strong internal business case for content investment.

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Q18:

What's the most useful metric for measuring the success of a piece of copy?

Our survey says...



41.5%

The most useful way to measure copy success is through conversions, say 41.5% of respondents

11-16%

A similar proportion of respondents (ranging from 11% - 16%) indicate that page views, call centre traffic reductions and social shares are the most useful metric

5.9%

Bounce rates are the least useful copy metric (only 5.9%)

Sticky says...

It seems the most commonly used metrics are some of the least useful. In question 17, most of our survey respondents said they measure page views and bounce rates – but now we discover few actually consider these figures of any use.

There seems to be a kind of institutional inertia at work here. People are still using traditional page metrics, even though they can't actually do much with them. What people want to measure increasingly is 'engagement' but this is tricky to do and to define.

Ultimately content needs to contribute to the bottom line and so quite rightly, conversion rates are considered the most useful content metric by most (41.5%).

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Q19:

What's your reaction to a typo on a website?

Our survey says...

21.0%
'They **don't care** about the quality of their writing'

23.1%
'Their **quality control** process isn't working'

19.9%
'Looks like they **never check** their pages'

16.0%
Other (respondents offered their own reasons)

12.8%
'Whoever wrote the site was **rushed**'

3.6%
'Whoever wrote the site was a **poor** copywriter'

3.6%
'It **doesn't bother me** – everyone makes mistakes'

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20-23%

Approximately the same proportion (20% to 23%) of our survey respondents blame quality control, as 'carelessness' or a 'lack of checking' for typos on a website

3.6%

A minuscule number of respondents (3.6%) don't think online typos matter

Sticky says...

The content professionals we surveyed think a typo on a website is a black mark against a brand. It's 'shoddy', 'tinpot' and 'unprofessional'.

But people are less inclined to blame individual copywriters than the lack of process. This is especially the case for the respondent who admits to once missing out the letter 'f' from the copy line 'press the shift key'.

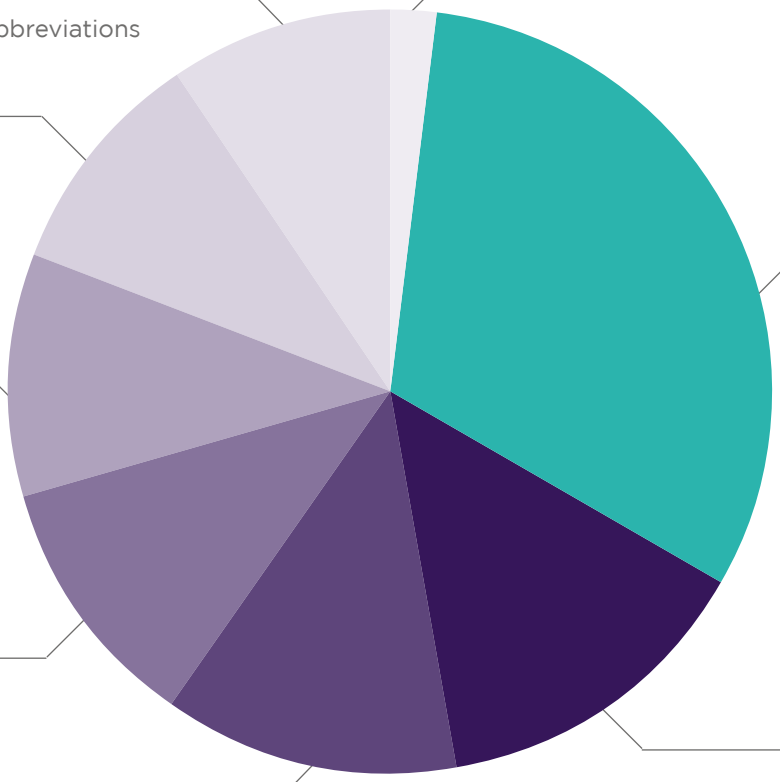
We think it's inevitable in editorial work that the odd mistake sometimes creeps in. And a digital typo is relatively easy to fix. But anything more than the odd mistake can damage the credibility of a brand, so it's imperative to put old-school editorial proofreading processes in place.

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Q20:

What's your online copywriting pet hate?

Our survey says...



9.3%
Jargon and unexplained abbreviations

2.1%
Corporate empathy, with clichés like 'it can be daunting' and 'we understand...'

9.6%
Link text that doesn't describe the content it's linking to (worst culprit being 'click here')

31.3%
Copy that's over-long and doesn't get to the point

10.3%
Copy that's about the company, not the user ('we do this,' rather than 'you'll get this')

11.1%
Exclamation! Points! Everywhere!

13.9%
Faux-formal words like 'utilise' and 'ensure', instead of plain English words like 'use' and 'make sure'

12.5%
Other

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1/3

The biggest copy irritant for our survey respondents (about a third of them) is over-long copy that fails to get to the point

2.1%

Only 2.1% of respondents mind faux empathy in online copy, eg 'we understand your frustration...'



Self-consciously formal language, exclamation marks, vague link text and jargon are all online copywriting pet hates mentioned by our respondents

Dan Fielder,
Managing editor,
Sticky Content

"It's interesting to see that many respondents – marketers and clients – take the issue of relatively minor things like typos very seriously. Yet what we know from years of usability research is that the things that really bother users are rather more radical. Users hate digital copy that doesn't get to the point, isn't easy to scan, or has no clear purpose or call to action.

Great copywriting is all about finding credible answers to the users' eternal questions: 'So what?' 'Who cares?' 'Why should I read this?' 'What's in it for me?' But without a brief or a clear sense of what effective and well-planned digital copy looks like, there's a danger that site owners and content creators will continue to disappoint users – even if they weed out all the typos..."

Sticky says...

The biggest pet hate of our survey respondents (about a third of them) is the same thing that comes up in usability labs again and again – waffle.

We couldn't agree more. Online copy which is long and pointless can't be scanned easily, won't be understood and, therefore, has very little value.

We've always quite disliked the kind of forced corporate empathy which generates such phrases as 'We're sure you'll agree...' and 'It must be hard...', but only 2.1% of the content professionals we surveyed think that's an issue. They're more bothered by online copy which offends in the opposite direction – too internally focused, or too much jargon.

Just for the record, other pet hates mentioned were 'Americanisms', 'keyword stuffing', 'underlined words that are not links' and 'ellipses'. So there...

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This is the first State of Digital Copywriting survey to be published by Sticky Content.

We plan to do it annually from now on.

Our team of digital content specialists are all passionate about online writing and editing. The 20 questions we asked reflect the issues we are hearing our clients and peers discuss day in, day out.

There were 365 unique respondents to our market research, which took the form of an online survey conducted between October 2012 and March 2013. We also collected a number of responses manually at industry events over this time.

By far the biggest chunk (20.7%) of survey respondents are marketers, followed by copywriters (10.6%) and content editors (9.8%). Significant numbers of people identified themselves as consultants (3.9%) and content strategists (3.6%).

Our thanks to everyone who took part.

Want to write about our survey?
We're happy to supply the source data for this survey to journalists, bloggers and industry opinion-leaders.
Please emailus@stickycontent.com

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