

The Death of the Salesletter

Web 2.0 and Its Impact on the Future of Internet Copy

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Dedicated to my lovely wife, Sylvie Fortin.

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Web 2.0 and Its Impact on the Future of Internet Copy

“If you only have time for one clue this year, this is the one to get: We are not seats or eyeballs or end-users or consumers. We are human beings — and our reach exceeds your grasp. Deal with it.”

— **From “The Cluetrain Manifesto,” Harper Collins, April, 1999.**

“One of the best kept secrets in America is that people are aching to make a commitment, if they only had the freedom and environment in which to do so.”

— **John Naisbitt, author of “Megatrends” and “High-Tech, High-Touch”**

Foreword

My initial intent wasn't to write this report. It's the result of a post I was envisioning for my blog at Michelfortin.com. The problem is, the blog post became so long that I felt a need to do either one of two things.

I had to either: edit my post and shrink it down to a bare minimum (preferably around 500 words), or break the article down into several installments.

The former was not possible because there's so much information I wanted to share, along with so much misinformation I wanted to clear up, that writing a single blog post wouldn't have done this topic justice.

Some of the changes I've seen, personally experienced and scientifically tested are so significant, that I was quite eager to share this information with you.

However, my passion and enthusiasm for the topic got the best of me: although posting the article in several installments was a more viable solution, trying to pick what part do I post first was more of a challenge than choosing what to cut out if I were to post it all into a single yet highly edited article.

I believe this information is important and timely, particularly with the New Year and the plethora of online predictions of late, along with recent events such as the whole Web 2.0 buzz that's creating quite a frenzy online.

Thus, I wanted to deliver my report as expediently as possible. (Posting this article in several installments would have delayed it even more.)

So I decided to go with neither of these.

Instead, I've decided to post the entire report as is. But knowing that some people may find this cumbersome, as it is longer than most blog posts, I've decided to convert it into a portable document. The result became this special report.

But there's another reason: since I get so many emails asking me what I think about this whole Web 2.0 thing, why people are starting to see low response levels with their salesletters, what are my predictions for 2007, and what do I think of the many reports of late (such as "the death of this" and "the death of that"), I've decided to answer them all in *one fell swoop*.

Moreover, I'm also giving you the permission to pass this report around. Provided that you leave this document untouched, you can offer it to your list, give it away as a download, add it as a bonus to your current offerings, or post it on your own blog. Feel free to distribute it.

I want as many people, copywriters, marketers and buyers alike, to get this information, because, as a copywriter for many of the web's top marketers, I'm seeing a significant transformation occurring that simply cannot be ignored.

(And it's *not* what you might think.)

I also want to make sure you understand that I didn't write this report as a way to make sales, build a list or create traffic for myself. While it may happen as a byproduct of this report, it's the least of my intentions.

I simply want to share some of my views on the latest trends affecting online businesses, specifically as they relate to salesletters, and to give back to a community that has been so generous to me.

If you think that I've written this report because there's something "brewing" in the background, don't worry. I'm neither going to pitch you something in this report, nor do I want your contact information to promote something in the future. There's nothing going on, other than my sincere willingness to share.

So let me to be clear: I'm not going to ask you to buy something, or ask you for your email address or contact information, at any point, in this report.

In fact, I'm not even going to ask you to click on any of my links inside this report. Do so if you wish, but you don't have to. Most of the links are provided as references only, and not as part of a pitch of any kind.

Also, you may be wondering why I, a salesletter copywriter whose livelihood depends on writing salesletter copy, would ever dare write a report entitled "The Death of the Salesletter" that could potentially jeopardize my career and my business, along with those of my colleagues.

(That's far from being the case, and you'll soon understand why.)

There are several things to note, here. First off, salesletters are *not* dead. They never will be. They are here to stay. However, what I am referring to are not salesletters as a sales process, but specifically long-copy, long scrolling web pages, particularly in their current state.

You know the kind, right? I'm talking about the big, bold, red headline; the multitude of multicolored Johnson boxes throughout; the bullets that seem to never end; the tons of hackneyed testimonials, often by the usual suspects; the countless PS's at the end; and the poorly designed headers, inconsistent fonts, lackluster typography and stock graphics plastered throughout.

That said, those are some of the things that exist because they work and have worked for a long time. I'm just as guilty of this. And the fact is, they will continue to work but mostly in new, untouched niches that have likely never seen a salesletter before, although even that possibility is becoming increasingly remote.

I'm a copywriter. If you know me, then you know that I've written top-producing salesletters for a lot of the most successful marketers online, from John Reese, Frank Kern and Kirt Christensen, to Armand Morin, Shawn Casey and Stephen Pierce (and many others).

However, I'm not only a copywriter by trade. I'm also a business person and marketer like many of my clients, owning several websites that sell goods and services on the Internet. I write my own copy, and my wife Sylvie Fortin and I have been blessed to have reached a considerable level of success, too.

But what you may not know is that I'm also a *fanatical tester*. Not only am I privileged to have written for top marketers and am privy to the many split-tests conducted by them, but also I personally test constantly.

As a result, I'm seeing some interesting test results that are showing trends happening right now — results that I want to share with you in this report.

Some of it might be ho-hum to you. Some of it might not. Either way, it is my hope that this report will offer some tidbits, insights and a different perspective that can help you and your business reach higher levels of success, particularly given the current trends we're experiencing.

However, there is a caveat: this is not some ominous, pessimistic outlook on both the nature and future of online copy. In fact, it's quite the contrary. It's a positive look at some of the changes we're facing, and how we can take advantage of the many opportunities that such changes are presenting to us.

Don't stop learning copywriting. Don't stop using salesletters. And by all means, don't stop applying good copywriting to all your websites. Stopping anything is *not* what I'm saying. (In fact, once you read this report you'll soon realize how copywriting is going to be even more important over time.)

But what I am saying is, you can apply just a few tiny changes, and channel some of those copywriting skills, tools and knowledge you have gained, into these latest trends and opportunities as a way to maximize your online sales potential.

Finally, I hope this report provides you with some ideas on how to increase your sales effectiveness (or inspires you to create some of your own). You may agree with it or not. And you may take what I say with a grain of salt. But for now, all I ask is that you read the following with an open mind.

(I welcome and appreciate your feedback. So please feel free to post your comments on my blog at MichelFortin.com. Search for "Death of the Salesletter," the blog post where I offer this free report, and use the short form at the bottom.)

OK, are you ready? Seatbelts please...

Web Two-Point... What?

So what exactly is Web 2.0? I'm not an analyst or some dotcom pundit. But being online since 1991 (or since 1982 if you consider bulletin board services), I've witnessed enough to have a good grasp of what's going on.

So here's my perspective.

At the dawn of the Internet the web was primarily a unidirectional, one-way communications process. The web was comprised mostly of static web pages, filled with hypertext and links. It was akin to the direct mail industry, only this time it was served up on a computer monitor rather than on a piece of paper.

In fact, web pages that worked the best, especially in a direct marketing context, were ads and salesletters that closely mimicked the long-copy print salesletters we often get in the mail.

For many years and until recently, this was true.

The most effective web salesletters, based on split-test results and actual response rates achieved, are those that looked similar to direct mail pieces. They're displayed in white, fixed-width centered tables, with colored backgrounds. Just like a salesletter you would place on your desktop. (The top of a real desk, that is.)

Why? It's because people hate change. We all do. Change is scary. We hate getting out of our comfort zones, and studies prove that we'll even react hostilely to something that's different and threatens that zone.

In fact, David Ogilvy, in "Ogilvy on Advertising," gave some wonderful advice on this subject. He said: "The eye is trained from an early age. Move away from what the eye is used to, and you stop readership."

So at the dawn of the Internet, people were used to magazines, newspapers and particularly direct mail. Therefore, websites that initially mimicked that to which people were accustomed were those that naturally produced the highest sales. This was proven in test after test. And to a great degree, they still do.

However, things are changing.

The Internet is no longer “new,” or at least not as new as it used to be 10 or even five years ago. The Internet is noted as being the fastest-growing medium in history, reaching over 500 million users in only five years, as opposed to the 13 it took for the TV or even 20 for the radio.

While the web is still in its infancy, it’s no longer a baby. It’s more of an independent, peer-seeking, moody, sometimes angst-filled, authority-challenging and demanding teenager that just graduated from grade school to high school.

(Web 2.0 is just another fancy way of saying the web is growing up.)

We’ve had over a good decade of it now, and we can no longer say that people are not used to the Internet anymore. In fact, while the Internet keeps growing, a recent study in the UK shows that TV audiences are on the decline, most likely because of the Internet. (Many other studies seem to parallel their findings.)

Just recently, the Internet has reportedly reached the one-billion user mark. It has become so pervasive in our culture that we now take it for granted. It’s such an intrinsic part of our lives to the point that we would be lost without it.

So if we keep insisting that the web is still “young,” we’re lying to ourselves... and more importantly, to our prospects.

But Web 2.0 is more than just a label on a medium that’s growing up. The way the web has evolved is just as important, going from a one-way, linear, static communications medium, to a two-way, bidirectional, dynamic *conversation*.

This isn’t new. It was predicted many years ago. For example, I wrote about it as early as 1999 in various articles. But I’m far from being a visionary. I just saw where we were heading based on what others have foretold before me. In fact, the coming of Web 2.0 was predicted as far back as 30 years ago.

Chris Locke, co-author of the book “The Cluetrain Manifesto” first published in April of 1999, claimed that the web is not comprised of computers, companies, or even consumers for that matter, but of *conversations*.

This thought-provoking book, which can now be read online for free at Cluetrain.com, contains some of the most innovative ideas about the Internet.

(They certainly were at the time.) In fact, some of the first bloggers on the Internet, even before “blogging” was coined as a term, were the authors of Cluetrain.

But it goes further back than that, even before the Internet.

In the late seventies in his book “Megatrends,” futurist John Naisbitt wrote about several significant future shifts — one of which predicted that our society will become not only more high-tech but also more high-touch. (And that was close to a quarter of a century ago!)

Largely due of the rise of the Internet in our increasingly fast-paced culture among other things, Naisbitt saw it important enough to write a spinoff book a decade ago entirely dedicated to that single “megatrend,” appropriately entitled, “High-Tech/High-Touch.” Here’s a brief synopsis from Naisbit.com:

“Focusing on the effects of technology in reshaping society, the book brings together a mountain of evidence implicating technology in relentlessly accelerating our lives and stirring profound yearnings for a more emotionally satisfying existence. In our craving for emotional authenticity, Naisbitt locates the great challenge of our frenetic era.”

Nevertheless, what does this all mean?

While Naisbitt never mentioned it directly, my interpretation of his trend is this: the more technology-driven we become (i.e., the more automated, static, robotic and impersonal we become, as is the case with the web), the more we will crave and seek out human interaction.

Why? It’s just human nature. We are social animals. We need to communicate, interact and socialize with other people. It’s just who we are.

While the Internet was mostly technical, uninviting, and daunting in its early years, the now millions of people online have jumped on the bandwagon for a reason. As Locke said in Cluetrain, “They came for one thing: each other.”

Online, these predictions-cum-reality take the shape of tools and technologies that help facilitate that interaction, as well as actions marketers take to humanize their digital presence by giving their electronic façade a human face.

From as simple as a blog, a message board, an ezine or a discussion list (and now audio and video), to as complex as customer relationship management technology, marketers do and should do what they can to humanize their websites.

When we observe what's going on, we can get a sense of where things are heading, such as by watching the increasing popularization of social networking sites, and the creation of new interactive technologies aimed at facilitating user-rated content, user-submitted content and user-reviewed content.

Now, while such things are affecting the Internet as a whole, and how people browse and use it, do they also apply to how they buy from it?

Astute marketers are paying attention, because these trends do offer some interesting clues into *human behavior*, as well as how they will eventually and ultimately affect salesletters and sales-driven websites.

Again, from Naisbitt.com: *"In a High Tech world with an increasing search for balance, High Touch will be the key to differentiate products and services."*

Bottom line, people want to connect with other people. They want to deal with, trust more and buy from other people, not computer monitors. In fact, what they really want is to feel more secure and comfortable. As a result, they are screaming for credibility. They want more proof. They want to believe.

And they most certainly want to buy.

Think "social sites" don't really apply to salesletters? Think again.

If they can't get the proof they seek from the businesses themselves, they will look for it elsewhere, whether they do so consciously or unconsciously — including, and probably more so, social networking sites.

Why do you think there's an explosion in blogs? But don't think they're limited to some rank-and-file netizens spewing senseless diatribe about their meandering thoughts "du jour." They're certainly not.

For example, take a look at how they're also used with affiliate marketing, particularly promotions based on recommendations and peer reviews.

(Just think of all the videos now popping up all over the Internet offering a product demo or review, often used as a way to recommend and pre-sell products currently sold on a, you guessed it, long-copy salesletter somewhere.)

People are tired of hype and scams. But contrary to popular opinion, they are not moving away from salesletters. They simply want to believe more, they want to trust more, and they certainly want to buy more.

If people seek proof, credibility, opinions, feedback and recommendations from other sources like these “gathering sites,” or if they tend to buy more with the help of these videos, demos and reviews during product launches or in affiliate promotions before they see the salesletter, then the question is...

... “What about the salesletter itself?”

Ah, yes. There’s the kicker.

Hype or Hope?

The next question is, what does Web 2.0 have to do with salesletters, if anything? And how does it affect them? For marketers, Web 2.0 presents a number of new opportunities and avenues that allow more interaction.

More specifically, tools created by Web 2.0 can help to not only humanize but also magnetize a website, which, in turn, gives marketers the ability to create better relationships with prospects, and supplies them with better tools to offer more proof, communicate more effectively and develop that trust they so seek.

In terms of marketing, it can leverage a viral marketing campaign by creating a certain buzz about the business, which can enhance a website's traffic, exposure, stickiness and, to some degree, believability.

But in terms of salesletters specifically, which is what I really want to focus on, it can serve up a sales message in the way the user wants, not how the business behind it wants or thinks their users want.

Rather than being sold, people are literally telling you how they want to buy. And this brings a whole new level of interactivity to websites that either was previously unavailable, or, until the emergence of new web applications and the penetration of broadband, was impractical or expensive to do.

These web applications include audio, video, scripts, interactivity, personalization, database-driven content and data fetching and delivery tools.

A lot of the hype surrounding Web 2.0 is mostly generated by the creators of those web apps that facilitate interactivity. Either that or it is most often if not always inspired or instigated by someone who wants to make money from it.

(Ah, yes. Good old capitalism.)

But is this whole Web 2.0 just hype? No.

While the concept of Web 2.0 is overused, don't let it steer you away from what it really means, particularly when it comes to web copy: *interactivity*.

The evolution of the Internet (which led to the creation of the applications that fed the buzz and created the frenzy in the first place) simply cannot be ig-

nored, because it's radically changing the landscape of the web — and above all, salesletters online (or more specifically, *how* people are buying online).

Let me explain by giving you a few insights of my own about what Web 2.0 means, how it's changing things in terms of copywriting, and where it's heading.

First off, you might be expecting me to make some “predictions.” I hate Internet predictions. Why? It's because the Internet is, at its core, mostly unpredictable. It has become more user-driven (as it should be), and therefore, much like the stock market, volatility increases when more players enter the game.

(If it was predictable, we wouldn't have gone through the dotcom bust.)

Some copywriters, like John Carlton among others, have recently said that Web 2.0 is a bunch of hoopla, and that copywriting and salesmanship are the same — regardless of the medium or how the medium evolves.

He's not the only one. Dan Kennedy has been touting for years that the Internet is just another medium, and that salesmanship is salesmanship.

I agree, but to a degree.

I'm not contradicting these guys, who are actually my mentors. And I'm not saying that salesletters and salesmanship are dying, either. Not at all. And I'm also not saying that it's not about salesmanship. It certainly is. Both Carlton and Kennedy, as well as many others, are 100% right.

However, there's more to it than that. I think just relying on those statements alone, at least without a proper understanding of what's really going on (and how Web 2.0 is affecting online sales mostly in indirect and subtle ways), is incomplete for a variety of reasons.

The salesletter is not dead. Of that I am certain. But the online salesletter with long-scrolling copy, especially the poorly written, lackluster, hype-filled salesletter, is indeed on its last legs.

What I am seeing is, better results with salesletters that are getting shorter, stronger, pithier, cleaner, and more “nichified.” But there's even more than that.

They're also becoming more *dynamic*.

Salesletters are changing not because people are changing — they are changing precisely *because* human behavior will never change.

New tools and processes have entered the ether, which allow us to cater to human behavior far more effectively. But such advances are subtle and not as dramatic as some of the Web 2.0 pundits have stated them to be.

Yes, there is a lot of hype and hoopla. But it's actually because of the hype that the *real* changes are happening so subtly yet significantly, mostly behind the scenes, clouded by all the dust kicked up from the Web 2.0 buzz.

However, no matter how many times I hear people say “the Internet is just another medium,” I tend to ignore it or reflect on the true purpose of such a statement. (Admittedly, I have been guilty of saying this, too.)

True, the Internet is a medium. But human behavior is human behavior, and that will never change, regardless of the medium. So applying the rules and fundamentals of salesmanship, on any medium, won't change things.

But the Internet really *is* different.

Let me give you an example.

Are infomercials salesletters? I mean, can you put a long-copy written salesletter on television, and force viewers to read it, to buy your product? Of course, not. You probably could, but you wouldn't put up a long-copy salesletter on TV because, obviously, it would be nonsense for a variety of reasons.

Unlike a print ad or salesletter, television has movement and sound. It's active and engages more senses than copy written on a piece of paper. And when people flip channels, their attention needs to be captured and their interest needs to be engaged far more vigorously than, say, a plain, static direct mail piece.

So if you don't put a salesletter on TV, then why put one *on the web*?

Well, it's because, in the days of Web 1.0, the Internet was similar to direct mail. It was originally regarded as an electronic version of the direct mail piece.

It simply offered a new opportunity to direct mail marketers to tap new markets and deliver more of their sales messages. It was easy to use the Internet as a form of direct mail, and not necessarily because it is or has to be like it.

So the web was, and was very successful at being, another “direct mail medium,” if you will. And given the very limited tools at the time (e.g., browsers were once only text-based), and the fact that slow dialup connections were the norm, text-based direct mail was *perfect* for the Internet.

But that was then.

(Keep in mind, when the Internet began it was fragmented and mostly used by geeks from Universities and institutions that *interacted* with each other using tools like bulletin boards, Gopher, and Usenet newsgroups, all of which evolved into the Internet of today. And “interaction” is the key, here, and I’ll come back to this because it’s truly important.)

When people say that “the Internet is no different than direct mail,” they’re not trying to sway people to using the web as a direct mail process. They’re referring to human behavior, salesmanship and the fundamentals of copywriting as being the same — regardless of the medium.

And that is what they really mean.

As a communications medium, the Internet is no different than direct mail, the radio, TV and so on, because they are all received by human beings. The way people respond to a direct marketing message is no different on the Internet than it is with a print salesletter.

But here’s the thing: it’s not the message that’s changing. It’s the delivery. The way people get interested in and respond to that message is what makes the Internet completely different. It’s how people *interact* with the message.

Let me put this in another perspective: in direct mail, you have one choice and one choice only. You read it or you don’t, period. It’s what Gary Halbert calls the “A-pile, B-pile” sorting process. That is, when you go through your mail, you sort the must-read mail (the “A pile”) from the junk mail (or “B pile”).

Two simple options... one choice... no interruptions (other than environmental distractions, such as background noise, gatekeepers, the reader's busy schedule, screaming kids in the background, whatever).

Radio and TV are different, but just slightly.

For example, with television your options have multiplied by the number of channels available — from 12 in the antenna-based VHF/UHF days, to 50 with cable, and now to several hundreds with satellite and digital TV.

While you have several options to deal with, it's still just one choice. Your choice is what one show will occupy your attention at that moment in time. From all the channels available, just one show on a single channel, at any given point, will be the one on which you focus your attention — for as long as it keeps it.

Now, enter the Internet.

How Is The Internet Different?

Nowadays, it's no longer a choice between the A and B piles. It's no longer a choice between hundreds of stations or channels. It's a choice between millions if not *billions* of options called "websites."

But there's something else.

The Internet has multiplied not only the number of options but also the number of choices, too! (If you want a hint, think of those choices as "applications.")

From millions of web pages (as opposed to just hundreds of direct mail pieces, TV channels or radio stations), to various delivery methods for each one (e.g., text, audio and video), to additional applications that equally demand attention (on the web as well as on a computer desktop), a user's choices have therefore become *exponentially* more complex.

In other words, your web salesletter is now competing not only with millions of other websites but also with email, instant messengers, RSS feeds, web-based applications, and desktop programs, all of which are vying for your reader's attention, as well as their input.

Thousands of new interruptions are notifying them of something they must attend to, such as the latest email, some instant message or a recent blog post. And that short list is more of a minimum than it is the norm, I'm afraid.

Let me share with you my situation to give you an example (and keep in mind, being a copywriter I'm not as active as most marketers). Aside from the applications I mentioned earlier, as well as the typical antiviral and anti-spyware programs running on my desktop, I also have:

- Numerous statistics programs running in the background that track my websites, analyze my server logs and manage my split-test campaigns;
- A Clickbank® program that notifies me when I made a sale, manages my affiliates, publishes my sales and commissions reports, and more;
- A PayPal® monitoring software that instantly notifies me when a sale is made or when someone makes a payment to my account;

- A Google AdSense® tracking and reporting tool that notifies me, every 15 minutes, about my current earnings on all my websites;
- Helpdesk software that keeps me in constant contact with my support staff who handle all my orders, queries, contractors and billings;
- Fax software that allows me to send and receive faxes from my computer desktop at a moment's notice; and more.

And that's just an iceberg's tip. They do not include web applications online that are competing for my attention, too (including word processors with which I write my clients' copy, as well as programs that manage and run my promotional campaigns, mailing lists, websites, you name it).

As the saying goes, we are being "pinged" from a variety of sources.

That's why I call this the "ping factor."

We are constantly being pinged. But if the ping factor isn't enough, Web 2.0 makes it even more complex. Just as satellite TV has pushed standard cable TV to new level, so is Web 2.0 pushing the ping factor to a new level as well.

MySpace has its own proprietary messaging system. Google Talk and Skype allow you to make and receive phone calls via the Internet. Browsers are now tab-based rather than window-based, allowing you to have a multitude of websites open at the same time that flash when they need your attention.

And the list goes on.

Nevertheless, let's take a closer look at how Web 2.0 is not only changing the Internet but also distancing it even more from other media.

Hype notwithstanding, if "Web 2.0" exists it's because something is indeed going on, whether we realize it or not. After you peel all the layers of controversy away, you'll start to notice how Web 2.0 is really affecting our industry.

But the changes are not as overt as you might think. While the hype may have been instigated by creators of new web applications, the hype itself didn't

cause these changes to occur. In fact, they were the result of them. The buzz simply brought it to more people's attention.

So if you're trying to cut through the hype and trying to understand how things are really changing, simply look at the underlying patterns, trends and *behaviors* on which the hype was created in the first place.

I know this personally, as I've seen and experienced some of these changes firsthand. Tests are starting to show a shift in the way people surf, read and, of course, buy online. (It started gradually, but the momentum is building.)

For example, I'm seeing long-copy salesletters losing their effectiveness, and shorter copy starting to outsell them. As a proponent of long-copy salesletters myself, you can imagine how much of a wakeup call this was for me. And if you're a copywriter or a marketer, it should be your wakeup call, too.

Is it truly the death of the salesletter? Not really, so don't go sounding the alarm bells yet. They're not disappearing. However, the current long-copy, long-scrolling salesletters that are so pervasive nowadays are indeed being *replaced*.

Perhaps it's better to call it a new "sales process" rather than a new salesletter, because the salesletter, in principle, is here to stay. It's just the way the message is delivered, and how people read and respond to it, that's really changing.

With web 1.0, static messages were thrown at the user in the hope she will read it, get moved by it and act upon it. And the popularity and level of success of a website, beyond response, were largely based on traffic and pageviews.

While pageviews will always remain a useful statistic, as more sites become dynamic, database-driven and "widgetized," pageviews will become less valid over time. (I'll come back to what "widgetization" means in a moment.)

Simply put, the web is turning into a more interactive medium, as it was meant to be from the get-go. As a result, we're going to see fewer pages serving up more content on the fly and in different formats, than in single, long-scrolling web salesletters or opt-in forms.

Sure, technology will play a big role. But Web 2.0 is not about technology, as some might suggest. It's about *people*. And human nature will never change.

Therefore, the tools, processes and applications we now have at our disposal are not going to create a massive transformation. They are simply offering us an opportunity to analyze audiences more effectively, deliver messages more effectively and obviously sell them more effectively.

In turn, they grant our prospects the opportunity to do what they *always* wanted to do, from getting the information they want in the way they want it, to choosing how they want to buy, rather than how you should sell them.

For us marketers, giving the user a voice and more control over their content means letting them tell us how they *want* to be sold, rather than interrupting them with your sales message in the hope they will read it and respond.

That last paragraph is crucial, so it bears repeating: Web 2.0 is about giving the user more control and selling them in the way they want to be sold.

Or let me rephrase it differently so that you truly understand its significance: it's about what someone *wants* when they visit your website (judging by what they say or do), rather than it is about what we *think* they want (judging by what pages they visit or what links they click on).

So now that's out of the way, let's take a look at what all of this really means in more specific and concrete terms.

Shorter Salesletters But More Copy

Long, scrolling salesletters are dying. It's a fact. There are two main reasons for this. Remember, I said an evolution and a revolution are currently taking place. And both of these are contributing to the *death of the salesletter*.

The evolution is this: users are demanding for better quality, more content, more proof, less hassles and greater interactivity. New technologies therefore help to enable that experience. And really, that's what it's all about:

It's about the *experience*.

As more and more people enter the web, get broadband, and gain access to groups of people who they can connect and interact with, as well as with the preponderance of applications that fight for that person's attention and interaction, the long-scrolling salesletter no longer works as effectively as it used to.

Recent research and split-tests show this to be true. It's not that less copy will sell more (although that may be the case). It is how that copy is *delivered*.

The web is *not* like radio, TV or direct mail. It's all of them combined, with the added element of interactivity that other media don't have, which is what makes the Internet so unique.

So it's only natural that the web, which initially started out as a digital form of direct mail, is evolving into a multifaceted, interactive, multimedia experience.

But that evolution is happening not just because it was a natural, unfettered progression of the medium. (It is, but only in part.) It's also brought on because, like it or not, people are slowly getting *fed up*.

You see, there's a quiet revolution going on.

The web is literally crammed with poorly-written, long-scrolling salesletters that swipe each other in incestuous markets that are becoming more and more bombarded by, and tired and leery of, these red-headlined, hard-hitting, salesy, hype-filled, multicolored, stock-graphic-donned web pages.

The snowball has just begun rolling downhill. More and more people who hit online salesletters are going to be turned off by them, and there's no end in sight — unless, of course, your salesletter is:

- For a product launch that has created wide appeal, delivered quality content and generated massive anticipation beforehand (think of the multitude of product launches using social proof, buzz and joint ventures);
- For an existing, highly targeted market that has an existing relationship with the author, and established a certain level of trust and credibility with them already (think of targeted email lists); or,
- For pre-sold markets, often through existing relationships (think of joint ventures or affiliates notifying their lists about the salesletter, and recommending the product to them).

But even in these cases, I submit that salesletters are falling out of favor as well. Lately, we've been bombarded with product launches. We've been hit with opt-in pages. And our inboxes have been inundated with long, template-based, copied-and-pasted emails promoting the “next best thing.”

Add to the mix the constantly increasing number of spams, scams and snake oils, as well as their salesletters that look as if they were put together by preschoolers, it's no wonder that people are demanding more credibility.

However, if and when they do work, I also submit that many people do not read them from tip to toe. (This is not just a wild guess. Tracking studies as well as market research have proven this to be true.)

Some of these launches, like the salesletter I wrote for TrafficSecrets.com for example, are so anticipated — and the market so targeted, primed and pumped — that, even if the salesletter uses well-written long copy, a great percentage of the people will simply skip it and look for the “buy now” button.

Now, are salesletters still important during product launches? Absolutely.

While it's important to be sensible and realize that the copy isn't the predominant factor behind the success of a well-executed product launch, I think it's

just as important to understand that the salesletter is indeed crucial, and that it's not the purpose of the salesletter but its presence that makes it so.

I did a call with Sterling Valentine and Mike Morgan about the whole salesletter-for-product-launch phenomena, and posted the recording on my blog at Michelfortin.com. In it, we offered proof that salesletters during an anticipated launch can outsell a short or poorly written one.

But my thinking is that the market wanted a salesletter as a way to answer specific questions they had (and used the salesletter more as a reference tool than a persuasion tool), and to feel more secure about their buying decision.

Granted, some people will read the salesletter. But many will only read certain sections, and most won't even read it at all. I do this myself: I skip the bulk of it, scan for specific pieces of information I need, or just look for the order link.

(If I can find a simple review elsewhere, whether it's an email, a blog post, a video or even a demo, that's even better — of course, that's if I didn't get one before hitting the salesletter in the first place. It saves me time from having to wade through a mass of copy to finally get to the information I really want.)

Nevertheless, here's what I mean when I say that the mere existence of the salesletter is part of the marketing process. I call it "UPA," or an unconscious paralleled assumption. That is, people unconsciously assume there's a parallel between one part and its whole.

For example, if a retailer has dusty shelves, people will be turned off and likely never buy from it — even if, unbeknownst to them, the product and customer service are great. Why? It's because people will tend to conclude, "If they can't take care of themselves, how in the world are they going to take care of me?"

The reason is, people want to feel secure in their purchasing decision. Similarly, the salesletter makes the prospect feel comfortable about buying from it, whether they actually read the letter or not at all.

Look at it as a sort of "safety net," if you will.

They can go back to the salesletter at a later time, they can use it as a backup, or they can skim it for pertinent bits, ever *after* they make the purchase.

They also think that, “If the author took great care in selling the product (or in this case, took the time to write a salesletter), then they will take great care of me.”

On a call several weeks ago dedicated to “online predictions” by top marketers, five of the most well-known marketers joined in to prognosticate about the future of the Internet in 2007. One of them was my friend John Reese. John threw in his “death of” spin by calling his prediction “the death of ugly websites.”

Long-scrolling copy that’s poorly written and poorly designed is pushing people away. Why? It’s because they are communicating a lot more to your audience than just the words — albeit unconsciously.

In this case, the prevailing UPA is that the salesletter, if it looks as if it was put together hastily, poorly and clumsily, with no care given to its quality or presentation, then the product must be just as shoddy.

Add to all that the fact that there are so many shoddy-looking salesletters out there, particularly those selling scams and downright poor-quality products, a well-written salesletter that’s pithier, properly formatted, and professionally designed will stand out from the crowd almost instantly.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

The point being, long-copy salesletters are just not as appealing anymore. But don’t just blame the copy or the copywriter. Let’s not forget the reader, too. In today’s fax-email-microwave world, our time is becoming fast-paced, overburdened, and significantly scarcer.

Bombarded by marketing messages and applications all competing for our attention, we’re under an enormous amount of pressure. Even with all the new technologies that are supposed to help us organize our time more effectively, it’s only getting worse and not better. (Remember the “ping factor?”)

Let me ask you a question: how many salesletters have you read, word for word, from beginning to end? Answer that question *honestly*, now, even with salesletters from which you’ve actually bought.

Not many, if any, I’m sure.

Granted, a reason may be the fact that the salesletter may have been poorly written, untargeted or uninteresting. But even when they're not, with so much taxing our time nowadays, reading it all is just too labor-intensive.

When you're faced with a 5,000-, 3,000- or even a 1,000-word salesletter, reading anything that long, particularly if it looks anything like a salesletter, seems incredibly daunting — even just scanning through it can be exhausting.

Shorter salesletters are more effective. That is, pithy, brief, to-the-point copy is showing better results in split-tests than the converse. But be careful, here. When I say “shorter” copy, I don't mean less copy.

What I mean is, less *textual* copy.

Salesletters offering even more content but delivered in other ways are actually outpulling long-copy salesletters with endlessly scrolling text.

Here's an example: you may have a 3,000-word salesletter on one hand, and on the other you may deliver that same message but with 800 words of text, a 200-word sound bite, and a 2,000-word video (which could very well end up in delivering even more copy when all these formats are combined).

Long-copy salesletters don't have to be shorter. I'm a big believer in long copy and will continue to be. However, long-*scrolling* copy is being replaced by a sales message that delivers the same if not more copy but in different ways.

Why? Again, it's because the Internet is different than other media. A web page no longer has to mimic a direct mail piece. It doesn't need to.

As a matter of fact, because of all the options the Internet offers, you now have the ability to deliver even more copy than you would, say, in a dense-copy display ad, a direct mail piece or a TV infomercial. Plus, the Internet has grown in popularity precisely *because* it offers so many different options.

(Remember all the talk a few years ago about “convergence?” The buzz may have died, but we're definitely seeing media converging right now. Just look at all the music stations you can now “listen to” on satellite TV, or all the TV shows you can now watch on your computer, on the Internet.)

Look at the evolution: you can only read print. Radio is a step up from print, as you can listen to it. Television is another step up, as you can watch it, too. But the Internet is yet another step up, above and beyond all of those things, because you can read, hear, watch *and* interact with it, as well.

Some people learn better by watching... others, by listening... and others, by doing. The Internet therefore communicates more effectively because it allows people to respond to information in the way they feel most comfortable with.

So why not give it to them?

(This is important, so let's look at this more closely.)

Multisensorial Salesletters

Video is said to be Web 2.0's killer app. But is it video itself? Not really. It's interactivity. Video engages all the senses. Ample split-tests show that the more you engage the user's senses, the greater the response.

When I used to teach professional selling in college, we used a textbook called "Personal Selling: An Interactive Approach," by Ronald Marks, Ph.D.

In it, Dr. Marks makes the case that using audiovisual aids in face-to-face sales presentations can increase a person's sales effectiveness. (And remember, this book was written in the 80s, before laptops became popular.)

That's not breaking news, I admit. But here's what I've found fascinating. The author states that multimedia-generated sales presentations — with a mix of text, graphics, photos, animation and sound — capture attention and arouse interest more effectively since they appeal to all the senses.

Marks also claims that, with multimedia presentations, prospects are 43% more likely to be persuaded, will pay 26% more attention, learn 200% faster and retain knowledge 38% better. Learning time is also reduced by 25-40%.

He also added this interesting tidbit: "Audiovisual aids are especially valuable to the salesperson who sells intangible products."

On the Internet, isn't most if not all that is being sold intangible to a degree? You bet it is. Unlike a face-to-face sales presentation where you can bring a sample to the meeting, we can't physically inspect products online.

If using audiovisual aids and even computers in sales presentations weren't possible, Dr. Marks suggested the use of flip-charts, slides, exercises and forms as alternative tools in face-to-face encounters, particularly to engage the prospect.

(Can you see where this is going?)

I've said it before: texts tell but pictures sell. That's why eBay once reported that auction listings with pictures get the most bids (and I'm guessing it's the also case with audios and videos, now).

It's more than just for engaging all the senses. It's for giving more proof — proof people are so desperate for. It's substituting any of the senses lost in the sales experience that are otherwise possible in face-to-face presentations.

We can't see, touch, taste, hear, smell or inspect products online. So audio-visuals are giving back to the prospect some of what's largely nonexistent.

That's why Amazon.com has been in existence since Web 1.0, has survived the dotcom bust, and has been touted as one of the greatest success stories in online retailing, mostly because books are books. They only need to be read.

Additionally, scientific research and eye-tracking studies show that our eyes are naturally drawn to movement. My friend Alex Mandossian, a copwriter whose clients range from Thighmaster (Suzanne Summers), RONCO (Ron Popeil), Topsy Tail and many more, calls this giving your salesletter "eye gravity."

Online, this means video and audio added to your salesletter will sell more effectively because they engage more of the senses.

Some call them "multimedia salesletters." But I prefer to call them "multisensorial salesletters," not just because they engage the senses but because multimedia alone fails to include another dimension, another sense if you will, that the Internet allows (and that the TV, radio and direct mail don't allow, either).

And that's interactivity.

We're seeing an increasing emergence of more video, more audio, more content and more controls than ever before with salesletters. And by "controls" I mean more opportunities to interact with the sales message, such as a simple "play" button on a video, or forms on a sales page that can personalize the user's experience, and not just mere graphics and links.

Think tours, samples, reviews, demos, user-rated content, user-submitted content, widgets and, above all, *personalization*.

What's a "widget?" Web widgets are pieces of content that are flexible and dynamic. (Some people call these "ecosystems." They include RSS feeds, movable panels, drag-and-drop content, form submissions on the fly, and so forth.)

Content can be moved around, slide in, or “open up” on a web page, on the fly without refreshing the page, based on a user’s choice — whether it’s through forms, controls, or even as simple as scroll or mouse movement.

For example, widgets often refer to tools used in Web 2.0 or community-based sites. They’re mostly used for browsing, organizing and using the web.

(Widgets are not as significant in the sales process, but for now and in terms of how they can work with salesletters specifically, just remember that the same technologies that make widgets possible will have a lot to do with *personalization*, which itself is a significant factor in sales overall, as time goes on.)

Let’s go back to videos, for a moment.

Salesletters that have videos are going to increase over time. In fact, those with mini-infomercials embedded throughout not only are showing to be more effective in terms of sales but also will become increasingly popular, too.

We first started to see this with videos used for testimonials on a salesletter, or with “tours” that showcase the product being sold. But now, we’re seeing copywriters and marketers getting increasingly creative in how they incorporate videos in the sales experience.

(Surf around eBay for a bit and you’ll see what I mean. Another great example is John Reese’s Traffic Secrets, which was one of the first salesletters on the Internet, if not the first, to feature video snippets of the many DVDs it offers.)

Videos are now used to offer samples, demos, reviews, actual sales presentations, slideshows, viral marketing tools, and tutorials — including tutorials that teach people how to buy, consume the product, or use customer support.

This is not only a short list of the many uses for video, but also giving rise to what I call the “simplification” of the web.

The “Simplification” of the Web

“Simplifying” is a term I’ve coined to explain the growing (albeit always existing) need for more proof. The more samples you offer before you sell your product, the more you will invariably sell.

Blame it on the need to feel more secure about a purchase decision, or blame it on the pervasive lack of credibility with most websites these days, the reality is that people want to know exactly what they’re going to get before they buy.

Sure, copy can fill that need, but only to certain degree.

Also, by “samples” I don’t mean just free trials, either. They also include videos, audios, online demos, customer support chats, and interactive tools that allow the user to get a sense of what they’re buying (think of 360° virtual tours of homes on real estate websites, among others).

Fact is, the demand for more samples (or more specifically, more proof) will continue to grow. Like it or not, people not only want more proof but will demand it, which is why they’ll try to find it elsewhere if they can’t get it firsthand.

The user-driven nature of Web 2.0 is part of this “craving.” That’s why we are seeing more user-driven content online, which in turn is the factor that led to the emergence of social networking sites, communities, blogs and websites in which users can connect, opine, share, comment and interact more.

Sure, these sites are in large part for entertainment purposes and do nothing other than stroke a user’s ego (we all love to see ourselves, our pictures, our videos, or own content up online, such as on MySpace, YouTube, blogs, etc).

But if you pay attention, you’ll notice that many of them are places in which people congregate not only to interact with others but also to find out what people are talking about, what they are saying, and what their experience is, such as with products or websites, among others. And what they are buying, too.

(For example, Technorati features the most popular blogs. YouTube lists the most viewed videos. Del.icio.us showcases the most bookmarked sites. People are literally telling the world what’s happening — unlike corporate-fed taxonomies, these sites form a “Google Zeitgeist” of the people, if you will.)

So if people want more feedback, samples, credibility and proof, why not preemptively give it to them before they resort to such sites?

Thus, in terms of salesletters specifically, simplification allows copy to be transformed into dynamic messages, served up from a database, based on a user's experience and/or choices, while they are in the midst of that experience.

It's giving people the opportunity to choose the way in which they want to be sold. Along with widgets and applications now at our disposal, users can now create their own salesletter, on the fly, based on what *they* want.

I'm far from being a programmer. But I am a bit of a geek, and I do know enough about technology to know that you can simplify your salesletter a lot more than you can with what was previously possible.

(Other than audio and video, there are also web applications and scripts that are growing in popularity, many of them based on platforms such as Ruby on Rails, XHTML and RSS feeds, PHP, AJAX, and a slew of others.)

However, you don't need to be a geek or need to be that complicated — at least, not yet. It can be as simple as using web forms, buttons and checkboxes to determine the content your prospects want (or that's best for them).

But what's exciting is that you can make this process dynamic, and fill in the gaps for them as they move along, on the fly, throughout your salesletter.

One of the most popular ways to accomplish this is by using database-driven content served up on the fly with the help of AJAX — i.e., page-based, user-controlled DHTML, or dynamic HTML, which is a combination of javascript and HTML — with scripts you can get for free at Script.aculo.us.

(If you want a good example of what's to come, take a look at what Scott Stevenson is doing with [interactive salesletters](#). This is just the tip of the iceberg.)

But technology aside, what does this mean?

It means that the salesletter has the potential of not only becoming more personalized but also, and more importantly, becoming more individualized — and to become so quickly, easily and dynamically.

Individualization is far more than just personalization, which itself is proven to increase response and sales. In other words, it's more than just adding a person's name to the salesletter, or redirecting people to specific salesletters based on the choices they make. It's creating almost entirely different salesletters (or more specifically, sales experiences) for each and every individual user.

As copywriters, that is what we need to seriously think about.

Plus, adding interactivity is not limited to textual content, either. While the result is less copy that's more individually targeted, of higher quality and less cumbersome to read, you can serve up audios and videos that the user is specifically requesting (or needs, based on their choices).

Think of it this way: long scrolling salesletters are long because they mimic direct mail. And they are long for good reason. With direct mail salesletters, you want to give people as much information as possible to cover all the bases.

But in face-to-face encounters, you have certain luxuries you don't have in a one-way medium such as direct mail. You can qualify your prospect beforehand, engage them in a conversation, and ask targeted questions throughout.

This allows you to dig deep to find out exactly what they want, what makes them tick and what concerns they have. Copywriters typically do this before they write their salesletters while conducting their research. But in an in-person meeting, you can do this *during* the sales presentation itself.

In turn, this allows you to determine what pieces of information will be best for them as the meeting progresses, and to give them only those pieces of information so that you can modify your presentation on the fly.

In other words, based on their answers or reactions, you can handpick those features and benefits that are the most suitable to them, handle their specific objections preemptively, and even change the words you use that will be most appropriate and compelling for the prospect.

In direct mail, you don't have the same luxuries you normally have in sales encounters. On the Internet, it's the same — although Web 2.0 changes all that.

You can now cut through the fluff and filler, and get right down to the core message that most appropriately fits the prospect's unique situation, and answers their specific needs, their most pressing goals and their most burning questions — dynamically, as they go through the sales “experience,” just as you would if you were in front of them in a face-to-face encounter.

Let me show you how long copy can sometimes backfire.

Handling objections can be a double-edged sword. While answering questions that users might have can prove useful to the sale, covering all the bases in a long-scrolling salesletter can also create doubt when there aren't any to begin with, and thus become counterproductive.

If you're handling a nonexistent objection, you need to be pretty effective in handling it, because you've now created more doubt in the mind of the prospect. And what do we often do to deal with this? Of course, we add more copy!

But with on-demand content, the user has more control over how they want to be sold, and they don't have to read everything to be enticed into your offer.

Rather than a long-copy salesletter that's purposefully long to cover all the bases, you can now use technology to serve up pieces of content that specifically individualizes the sales experience for that one prospect at that moment in time.

Just like in a sales presentation done in person.

Personality-Driven Sales Experience

People have different buyer personality styles. In fact, according to behavioral science, there are four: drivers, analyticals, amiables and expressives. Sometimes, they are labeled differently, but they are nevertheless the same.

For example, Dr. Tony Alessandra, in his best-selling book “The Platinum Rule,” calls them “thinkers,” “socializers,” “directors” and “relaters.”

But regardless of the labels used, this means that different people communicate, relate and buy differently, based on their predominant personality style. Drivers prefer end-results. Analyticals are persuaded by facts. Expressives are moved by feelings. And amiables seek out relationships.

I’ve written about this on my blog and in several articles. But my suggestion, at the time, was to create a salesletter for each personality style, if and when your target market is comprised of more than one predominant personality.

This is not just about niche marketing, such as writing a salesletter that caters to a specific industry, group of people or product category.

If your sales copy specifically relates and caters to a predominant buying personality, your chances of connecting with your audience, at a deeper, more psychological and emotional level, will invariably increase your sales.

(Are you starting to see how powerful Web 2.0 is? Rather than having 2, 5, or 10 different salesletters where each fits a prospect’s particular niche or personality, you can work with one and one only, dynamically serving up the content to appeal to that person, without any additional websites, links or pages.)

By the way, some people say that choosing better, more compelling, more emotional or more “appropriate” words is manipulative. And by “appropriate,” I mean words that are conducive to making a sale with that particular prospect.

Manipulative? Maybe. But not in an unethical way.

It was Paul Myers, who said it best when he said: “Split-testing is not about manipulating people but about finding out what they really want.” I would add to that: “It’s about finding out how people want to be sold, and giving it to them.”

Look at Web 2.0 as a more efficient, highly compressed and dynamic form of split-testing. You serve up content exactly as the user requests it, when they do. You don't have to run split-test campaigns, then wait and see what people like. You give it to them as they want it, when they want it.

If you want to see how simple this can be, here's a small test you can run right now. Keep in mind that I'm oversimplifying for the sake of this example.

Just add a few forms or buttons (like HTML drop-down menus, radio buttons or checkboxes) on your sales page, in strategic locations. But rather than waiting for the forms to be submitted, simply hide the extra pieces of content (or variants thereof) throughout your content using "DIV" tags in the HTML code.

(In other words, wrap <div> and </div> tags around the extra content you want to hide. This content becomes unhidden based on that person's choice as they go along by clicking boxes or buttons, which is done with javascript or CSS. In fact, you can associate them with videos and audios they interact with, too.)

Test to see the kind of results you get. I bet you'll be pleasantly surprised.

Again, I'm simplifying for the sake of the example, here. If you're more technically inclined than the norm, you can figure out how to do it yourself, or just have someone else do it for you. There are many free scripts on the Internet that can help, including AJAX from Script.aculo.us, which I mentioned earlier.

If your prospect is a driver, then forget all the fluff and get your salesletter to serve up only the bottom-line results after they click just a few checkboxes. If your prospect is an analytical, then have more facts and data about your product drop in automatically into the salesletter. With amiables, have more testimonials show up throughout the salesletter in strategic locations.

Nevertheless, I submit that adding simple interactivity can increase the effectiveness of any salesletter. Is this true in all cases? Probably. Probably not. I haven't seen it used in all industries to make an empirical guess.

But given human behavior and everything you've read thus far, my guess is that it's going to increase sales in more cases than not. Plus, what you may not know is that this is currently being done by some top marketers. And let me tell you that their results are nothing short of amazing.

I've seen conversion rates more than double with interactivity. And this is not limited to the content on the sales page proper, either. Look at the entire "sales experience," from beginning to end. For example, you can:

- Dynamically insert opt-in forms;
- Mold offers and price-points on the fly;
- Redirect users to different order forms;
- Add upsells or downsells to the order page;
- Make additional offers on the thank you pages;
- Play multimedia automatically once the user scrolls to a certain location, or once they fill out specific forms, such as on the order page;

And much, much more.

Ultimately, based on a user's preferences the salesletter becomes individualized, engages the reader and offers the content they want, thereby selling them in the way *they* want to be sold, and does it all dynamically.

It can also present that content in their modality of choice, whether it's audios, videos or demos. In fact, audios, videos and demos are catering to an even greater behavioral style — one not just based on buying personalities but also on the user's preferred method of communication.

You've heard of "visual," "auditory" and "kinesthetic," right? And you probably have a good idea of what those are. If you don't, or if you want to know how they relate to Web 2.0, then let's take a closer look at these. Shall we?

Sensory-Driven Sales Experience

Online video has exploded. But it's more than just the demand for video. It's *interactivity*. Videos offer sight and sound, but online they also offer touch since they have controls like "play," "pause," "fast-forward," etc.

When you combine this with my earlier statement that multimedia engages more senses and therefore appeals to more people, video specifically allows you to deliver your message in a number of ways that appeal to different modalities of communication, if not all of them.

"Visual" means that people learn or communicate by seeing. "Aural" means they do so by hearing. (It's often mistakenly referred to as "auditory." Auditory means what can be heard and not how one perceives by hearing.) And "kinesthetic" means people understand better by "feeling" or "doing."

(In face-to-face encounters, for example, salespeople are often trained to watch out for signs that hint at what the prospect's preferred mode of communication is. For example, visuals will say "I see what you're saying," aural will say "I hear you," and kinesthetics will say "I have a grasp on the situation.")

Yes, video is both visual and auditory, since it includes both sight and sound. But online video specifically also has a kinesthetic component.

Basically, online video has control buttons that need to be pushed in order for the user to view it. But now, with Flash® technology that allows forms to be added to the video, online video therefore caters even more so to all modalities.

(Just take a look at the new Camtasia 4.0, for example, at Techsmith.com. Camtasia, which is a screen-capturing software, not only records your desktop but also its new version allows you to add forms, surveys and quizzes to your videos. Even better, it allows you to provide feedback and even jump to specific locations in the same video, based on a user's answers.)

But will the online video infomercial replace the salesletter? No.

Unlike TV for instance, online we have the ping factor I talked about earlier. So if your video is too long, the user will definitely be interrupted during the process, whether it's by their email, instant messengers, RSS feeds or whatever.

They will get distracted, lose interest and never buy. (Or you will need to work harder at getting them back on track. Thus, it defeats the purpose of including video in the first place. Unsuspecting marketers will either blame the video for their low conversions, or — you guessed it — feel a need to add more copy!)

Not only that, but if an important, salient point in the video is being mentioned (one that could literally clinch the sale with that particular prospect) while that person is being distracted by something else that's pinging for their attention, you've just lost the sale.

Long infomercials don't work online just as much as long-scrolling copy doesn't work — or doesn't work as well as it used to. The Internet is different. Just as you shouldn't use the Internet as another form of direct mail, you shouldn't use it as another form of TV, either.

It's best to use small snippets of video, throughout your salesletter, to grab people's attention, move the sale along, support or emphasize key points, simplify your offer or product, and/or provide extra elements of proof.

If the audio or video is too long, you're failing to get them involved in the sales experience. They're in listening or watching mode, and they're no better off than if they were to watch TV or listen to the radio.

You're not engaging all the senses, which is offering them an invitation to be distracted and, above all, to procrastinate and not buy.

Instead, use bite-sized chunks, like 5- to 10-minute increments, throughout your salesletter, in strategic locations. That way, you can engage the user more effectively and get them busy interacting with your sales experience.

Plus, by doing so you also give them the ability to choose those specific videos they want to watch. (Be careful, however. Too many choices will only confuse your prospect. Remember that, if you give people too many choices, they won't make one. Let their actions make those choices for them.)

Where do you put videos in salesletters specifically?

To give you a good idea of where to add video, think of the AIDA formula. Use videos to grab attention, create interest, increase desire, and induce action. In

other words, use them near your headline, in your product descriptions, for your product demos, as elements of proof, with before-and-after comparisons, in your testimonials, on your opt-in page, on your order page, and so on.

For instance, even if it's just as simple as showing a screen-captured video of how to process their order, adding videos to your order forms adds a whole new dimension to your sales experience. It's something I've personally tested with some pretty impressive results. (Here's a tip: use the video to highlight the guarantee on the order form. This alone has increased conversion rates in split-tests.)

Part of the reason why I believe they work so well is that they not only educate people on how to buy, but also show what's happening *after* they buy, such as giving them a peek at the resulting "thank you" page after the order is processed.

Regardless of how intuitive the ordering process is, it doesn't matter. People still want to be led, whether consciously or unconsciously, and whether they actually need direction or not. It's just human nature.

You're giving the prospect an idea of what's on the "other side," so to speak. By showing them what they will see and get once the order is processed, it helps to increase confidence in your offer. It also helps to reduce buyer skepticism, which leads to order abandonment and even refunds.

Using videos during the ordering process, whether on the order form as they're buying, or on the thank you page after their order is processed, is also a great opportunity to teach the prospect on how to consume the product.

Look at it as a multisensorial "stick letter," if you will. (If you don't know what a "stick letter" is, essentially it's a letter that not only thanks the prospect for their purchase after they buy but also educates them on how to consume the product. Sticks letters, or in this case "stick videos," help the order to stick, thereby reducing potential refunds or returns.)

It's all part of the simplification process I talked about earlier.

The more proof you can provide your prospects, the more comfortable they will feel in buying from you, and the more sales your salesletter will generate. And videos are proof in themselves, not only in their content. Why? It's because of that UPA I talked about earlier. Videos give your salesletter instant credibility.

When I first began my career as a copywriter, I specialized in cosmetic surgery. And a plastic surgeon's greatest "ace in the hole" is their ability to let prospective patients see before-and-after results.

Even though a doctor's profession has a certain level of intrinsic credibility, before-and-after pictures are always more credible than the words from the mouth of a physician, no matter how convincing they are.

When I consulted with plastic surgeons, I often recommended the use of videos. I told them to get willing patients to come to their offices so we can record their results. That way, the doctor can simply pop in a video showing before-and-after case studies while in consultation with a prospective patient.

(Better yet, if doctors can get prospects to meet with willing patients to see the results for themselves, up close and personal, the higher the number of surgical procedures they will book as a result.)

Similarly, look at videos as your salesletters' "ace in the hole." They're a perfect opportunity to show exactly what you offer, from "every possible angle," to give the prospect a clear and deeper understanding of what they're buying.

The Demise of Dull, Drab and Dingy

With “user-driven copy,” the fact is, people can choose what they want, how they want it and when they want it. And that is what’s working really well right now, not because it’s new but because it’s *natural*.

The progression of the web (regardless if you call it Web 2.0 or not) is simply an extension of how people behave. Businesses and websites are finally waking up. And they’re giving their users what they want, ask for and prefer.

Here’s an example.

In Web 1.0, we were limited by text, graphics and links. When cookies came along, they helped to customize the user’s experience to a degree. But cookies are still limiting. They are static in nature, require more pageviews to make them useful if at all, and as we all know carry risks such as privacy and security issues.

With Web 2.0, we see the emergence of tools that not only allow but also encourage interaction *without* the use of cookies. If content can load up dynamically on the same page, without refreshing it, the more comfortable, secure, efficient and interactive the user’s experience will be, and therefore the more apt the user will be to buy and enjoy the buying experience.

As a result, we’re seeing less pages, links and cookies, and more buttons, forms, graphics and “controls” to serve up database-driven content, on the fly.

The evolution is part of the revolution, too. It’s more than just a confluence. They are independent but also interdependent. They feed each other as well as allow the other to flourish. The more evolved the tools become, the more people will see a need for them and want to use them.

A good example of this is broadband. In the days of dialup, web pages became so memory-intensive, people were screaming for more bandwidth. Broadband came along with its bigger “pipes.” But now, video, audio and more are filling up those pipes, which are starting to burst at the seams.

(Nature abhors a vacuum, right?)

So is the case with salesletters. See, the increasingly cynical user (who’s tired of labor-intensive sales processes, stale or inflexible buying experiences, and

the plethora of scams and hype) is demanding for better quality, more content and greater proof. What we're seeing is the wheat being cut from the chaff.

Reading long copy is labor-intensive, even more now because of the nature of the Internet. The greater the potential distraction is, the greater the need becomes to write better copy that grabs their attention and gets them to start reading.

Therefore, the "death of the salesletter" is not in any way a call to stop writing copy or to stop learning how to write good copy.

Actually, it's quite the opposite.

You not only need to learn copywriting for different media (because it's all copy, really), you now must learn good copywriting if you want to keep up with the changes — and your prospect's demands.

As a member of my CopywritersBoard.com said so eloquently:

"No question, in some instances a sales letter is the best possible vehicle for converting someone... but the more audio-visual and interactive the web becomes, the greater the need for direct response copywriters to be versatile."

People are not demanding more proof. They are *screaming* for it. And that proof is not just limited to elements added to the salesletter to substantiate your case. It also includes the salesletter itself, the image it projects and the quality of the copy overall. It's perceived proof — or better yet, perceived credibility.

(And yes, it's all about perception.)

The UPA, if you recall, communicates proof in the form of perceived quality of your business or product based on the quality of your sales experience. If the salesletter is well-written *and* looks professional, not only does it make it easier to read but also readers will assume that the quality of your offer is equally high.

In 2006, we've seen a dramatic increase in the number of poorly designed, poorly written and poorly delivered websites, let alone poorly created products. It's no wonder that long-scrolling web salesletters are instantly regarded as "snake oil" by the majority of online users, nowadays — even when the copy is perfect.

I believe we've hit critical mass. But I don't think long-copy salesletters alone are to blame. Their prevalence is unfortunately paralleling the growth in spam and scams (just take a look at how phishing attempts have grown in the last year alone), which in turn makes any salesletter instantly suspect.

Thus, long-copy salesletters (or more specifically, salesletters that look like a salesletter) are slowly desensitizing netizens to automatically assume they're being sold, they might be scammed, they will be hounded with non-stop marketing messages, or they will be buying low-quality or incomplete products.

Don't look at it as the beginning of Web 2.0 being the end of low-quality websites (most salesletters fall into that category). Look at it this way: Web 2.0 is the Internet's way of throwing up their arms in the air, shouting "we've had enough!" and imploring for better quality.

The question is, are you listening?

While John Reese predicts the "death of ugly websites" (my friend Armand Morin calls these "cartoonish" salesletters), they're not the only ones. Mike Fil-saime wrote about it in his report, "The Death of Internet Marketing." John Barker, also known as "Mr. X," wrote about it in his "Death of Crap" website.

All these "death of" reports, including mine, should tell you something.

The revolution has started...

Show Me The Goods

The “Google Slap.” You’ve heard of it. You were probably affected by it. Essentially, Google, the world’s largest search engine, recently penalized a whole bunch of sites because they, too, judged them to be of poor quality.

Either they diminished their pageranks into oblivion, or they increased their AdWords costs by jacking up the prices if the campaigns led to poor content. (And as you probably know, this has driven a lot of marketers out of business.)

But keep in mind, Google didn’t make this change by pulling it out of thin air or to dictatorially decide what’s good for the Internet. They’re simply following what people want and giving it to them.

(In fact, when Google makes such major changes, let it be a good indicator of what’s going on in the marketplace.)

People want information. But more importantly, they want good information, just as much as they want more proof and credibility. Whether you have a junk site using black-hat techniques, or a long-scrolling salesletter or opt-in page that doesn’t offer anything of value in itself, it doesn’t matter.

Google is not slapping you, people are. And if Google doesn’t, people will.

Similarly, people prefer to buy than to be sold. This is nothing new. It’s always been that way, and most people know this at least to a certain degree.

So why are we still trying to sell people using hard-hitting, salesy, long-scrolling, poorly written and clunky-looking copy? There are a few reasons. One of them is because they worked. (And they still do to a degree.)

One of Dan Kennedy’s mottos is that clunky salesletters outpull clean ones. In my estimation the reason is, in a world stuffed with fancy design and shiny packaging from big advertising agencies, people have become somewhat jaded. So clunkiness is new and refreshing for a lot of people.

But I don’t think they buy from a clunky salesletter because it’s clunky. I think they buy because: a) they know the author, b) the clunkiness catches their attention, c) it’s different, and d) it communicates, to an extent, the UPA that the author invested more time and money in the product than on the packaging.

Dan Kennedy taught us well. Too well, perhaps. Being a mentor to many copywriters including yours truly, Dan influenced a lot of people with his advice.

The results speak for themselves, too. Clunky salesletters did sell more, but sales are declining. And what people fail to recognize is that when Dan made that statement, he was essentially talking about direct mail, not the Internet — and certainly not Web 2.0. (Remember, the Internet is different.)

Another reason is pure laziness. We slap up an opt-in page or salesletter, and we don't care about what it says, what it looks like or how it's read. As long as it converts, we're happy. Right? But at how much? And at what cost?

Complacency often starts at conversion rates as little as 1%, as we tend to forget that 99% *never* bought. And no matter how you spin it, 99% is still a significant number. So rather than trying to give what people want to make their experience more comfortable, we often resort to surreptitious tactics to boost response.

The problem is, we're only looking at increasing the conversion rate rather than lowering the non-conversion one. This is an important distinction, because we tend to focus on how we can get more people to buy, rather than trying to find out what's causing them *not* to buy.

Did you know that the highest increases in response rates, aside from the sales copy, have nothing to do with covert subtleties? (By those I'm talking about tiny changes, such as different colored-headlines.)

Granted, these things do increase response. But why? Is it because they're hypnotically inducing more sales? Maybe. But my thinking is, they're communicating greater credibility or proof, at least to some degree, for whatever reason.

Nevertheless, the highest increases in response I've seen are those that resulted from changing the sales *experience* — that is, from testing different ways of making the buying process as easy, as comfortable and as safe as possible.

If people want more content, then give it to them. If people want more proof, then give that to them. If people want less copy, then give them less. And if they don't want to be sold, then listen to them.

Let me give you an example.

The Google Slap notwithstanding, opt-in pages are no longer as effective as they used to be. My friend John Reese, on that same “online predictions” call I mentioned earlier, said to look at the evolution of the opt-in page, which is a great illustration of how the web is growing up.

In the early days, the web was so new for so many people that offering a free email list was as easy as pie. All you had to do is ask for people’s email addresses, and that’s it. People would literally clamor to be on your list.

(In fact, when I first started on the Internet, I remember being subscribed to more email lists than you would care to count. We’re talking thousands, here.)

After a while, opt-in rates, which were initially quite high, were starting to decline. So what did people do? They created opt-in forms with a bit of copy that asked people to join. Nothing fancy, but opt-in rates did start going back up again.

Then, as soon as they began going down, people created opt-in pages offering a “free email newsletter.” They added more copy that persuaded people into joining the newsletter. Signups went back up again, but only temporarily.

So next, they started bribing people. They offered multipart courses and email series instead of just newsletters. They offered free reports and bonuses as gifts for signing up. They used long copy to tease them about what they’re getting.

Same thing happened: opt-in rates went up, then down.

Today, what we’re seeing is a flip-flop. We’re seeing better results by offering people the content upfront (which is what they want in the first place), whether it’s an article, newsletter issue or free report, or even an audio or video, and then asking them to join our mailing list.

This is called the “Reverse Opt-In Process.”

You sway them to join your email list with the quality of your content rather than the effectiveness of your copy — let alone the value of your bribes. Hopefully, your content is good enough and enticing enough that it makes them want more, which they can get by joining your mailing list.

A great example of the reverse opt-in process is Brad Fallon and Andy Jenkins' StomperNet launch in 2006. StomperNet, if you don't know, is a coaching program that teaches specific strategies for creating top search engine rankings, resulting in massive traffic, and of course, more sales.

Now, SEO (or "search engine optimization") is a highly competitive industry. So trying to get people interested in an SEO salesletter let alone subscribing to a mailing list about it is a rather daunting task.

But at the onset of their campaign before the launch, Fallon and Jenkins offered a video. It not only offered a deeper understanding of the power of "natural search engine traffic," but it also gave a few inside tips along with actual search engine results, which they did by showing a live demonstration using Google.

The video was only the first one in a series of three, but the other two were yet to be recorded. So they gave people an opportunity to join their list to be notified not only when the other two videos were ready but also when the actual product behind it would launch.

While the videos did offer some actionable tips and ideas (which added more valuable content to the videos), they focused primarily on the proof of their SEO strategies than anything else. (There we go with that "proof," again!)

In other words, they gave people the "what" and not the "how." And the more powerful and valuable the "what" was, meaning the more proof they provided, the more enticing and compelling the "how" became.

(Needless to say, history shows that their attempts were tremendously successful, resulting in millions of dollars in sales on launch day.)

Nevertheless, this is just one example of simplification and where we're heading. You need to focus on content. You need to show your prospects more proof and credibility. And one way is to give them the goods upfront.

After you establish a certain level of trust, you have their permission to sell them. Some people say this is no different than Seth Godin's "Permission Marketing," or Dan Kennedy's "Gathering of the Herd." That's true to an extent.

The implication is not so much to bring attention to the process but to put it in perspective in light of Web 2.0, and the need for copywriters to hone their chops more effectively than ever before because of it.

In fact, let me share with you a few tips to give you some ideas on how all of this applies to salesletters and copywriting in general:

- Turn your salesletter into a non-salesletter (or at the very least reduce the appearance of a salesletter as much as possible);
- Be more newsy rather than benefit- or sales-oriented, or make your salesletter more article-, editorial- or press-release-like;
- Give more great content first (even if it's a salesletter), and sell them on the power of that content, not on the value of your tease or bribe;
- Tell more stories, and learn how to tell better, more captivating stories that, in themselves, offer powerful content beforehand;
- In fact, use copy to connect with your reader and empathize with them more, on different levels, rather than thinking linearly or unilaterally;
- Be discreet in your selling effort, and try to focus more on the newsworthiness and value of your information, rather than on the hype or hormone-pumping claims that seem too good to be true;
- Focus on building credibility, believability and, above all, relationships with your readers, rather than selling them too hard, too fast;
- Turn your sales process into a sales *experience* by adding interactivity through the use of programs, controls, forms and dynamic content;
- Use brevity, cut down on your copy's length, and edit your copy to be stronger, pithier, and more to the point;
- Incorporate multimedia and audiovisuals in your copy, even if it's as simple as giving the same copy but in different formats;

- Offer more proof, whether it's in the form of copy, audio, video, demos, samples, reviews, or whatever (remember, you want to give them the "what" but sell them on the "how");

This is far from being an exhaustive list by any stretch. It's just what came to my mind right now as I write this. I hope it stirs some new ideas for you or at least gives you some new things to test in your salesletter.

Bottom line, never stop learning how to write great copy, never stop using salesletters, and certainly never stop testing. But while you should stick with the tried-and-true, don't be afraid to try new things and go against the grain, too.

If you see a lot of salesletters using red headlines, surely this tells you that they're working. But if too many people are using them, their effectiveness will eventually wane. So try something else. Test a new color. Test a new headline. Or even better, test a new way to experience your salesletter.

You might be pleasantly surprised.

So, What's Next?

First, my thoughts on the whole Web 2.0 “social” craze: websites that offer social interaction, such as MySpace, Squidoo, del.icio.us, YouTube, Digg, blogs, discussion boards and so forth, do not affect salesletters directly.

Fact is, they are simply tools that help people to organize, simplify and optimize their browsing experience (and not necessarily their buying experience). I’m not trying to discount them. Not at all. They can be very useful in branding, establishing credibility, driving traffic, marketing, offering social proof and more.

But how are they useful when it comes to copywriting? Here’s the thing:

See how people use these services, and what they pull from them. Watch how they interact with others. You can learn a heck of a lot from simply seeing what’s popular out there, and why those tools are so popular. Because, the bottom line is, it all comes down to that fundamental denominator that pervades all markets, all salesletters, and all “web versions.” It’s...

... Human behavior.

Want to learn how to write better copy? Want to see how you can transform your salesletters into higher-converting pieces? Then learn what people want and what they do. In other words, learn good old-fashioned human nature.

Regardless of how things change, whether it eventually leads to some Web “whatever-point-oh” or not, human nature will seldom if ever change.

Granted, these changes we are seeing are important to note. But “The Death of the Salesletter” is by no means trying to suggest that you should stop learning how to write copy or that you should stop using salesletters.

It’s quite the contrary. The demand and need for greater, stronger, more skilled copywriting is going to invariably increase. Web 2.0, if anything, is forcing copywriters, marketers and business people alike to be more versatile, and to be more skilled in the art and science of direct response copy.

But as I said before, look at Web 2.0 as your wakeup call, telling you that you not only need to understand the fact that the web is indeed different than other media (and to start shifting your thinking), but also to get better at copywriting.

Audio is still copy. Video is still copy. Even programs that demand interaction are still copy. It's all copy. And it's all about *salesmanship*.

While Web 2.0 offers new tools with which you should get acquainted, don't get bogged down by it all, don't get caught up in the hype, and certainly don't stop learning how to write good copy because of it. Copywriting will always be more important than *and* because of any new technology.

Remember, technology is only a byproduct of what people want and not the other way around. So rather than getting caught up in the hype of anything new, focus on learning human behavior as a result of using that technology to discover what *they want* — and how you can use that technology to give it to them.

That way, you'll always remain a step ahead of anything new.

Enjoy the ride,



Michel Fortin, CEO
The Success Doctor, Inc.
SuccessDoctor.com

