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CRAFT YOUR WRITING FOR THE INTERACTIVE WORLD

Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret.

—Matthew Arnold, 19th-century philosopher

If you're reading this book you may be preparing for your career, even if you're not yet sure of your path. It's equally probable that the Internet is an integral part of your life and a central source of entertainment. It's how you obtain information, communicate with friends and peers, connect with new people and perhaps exercise your creativity. Here's the question to consider: Should you start using online media thoughtfully? Choose media and create content that supports your long-range aspirations? Consciously build an online presence to help position and qualify you for your future career and networking?

This chapter shows you how you to apply strategic thinking and good writing to your online life. Many benefits attach to adopting a business-like framework for your digital communication. For virtually every organization—whether corporate, nonprofit, governmental or professional—digital media are tools to share information, create communities and achieve marketing goals. You can adopt the mindset and techniques to achieve your own goals or set the stage for doing so. These approaches will serve you well in job hunting, demonstrating value to employers and running your own business or side gigs if that is on your agenda.

In a word, it is smart to think of your online life strategically. At the least, to paraphrase what medical students learn, do yourself no future harm.

STRATEGIZING YOUR DIGITAL PRESENCE

The best way to increase your social media engagement is to share content your audience is truly interested in.

—Nathan Ellering, Convince & Convert blog

The basic principle for using the Internet strategically is the same one this book recommends for succeeding with all communication: First, know what you want to accomplish, and know your audience.

LEARN HOW TO ...

- Write for digital media
- Strategize your online presence
- Create websites and blogs
- Use social media to advantage
- Connect with business communities

For professional marketers, the ultimate goal is usually to sell a product or service or charitable cause and build a loyal following. Much of the challenge is in defining *audience*. Marketers ask: Who do I want to reach? What does a typical member of this group need? What interests and concerns motivate this person? And, as appropriate: What is my typical prospect's age, gender, education level, income level? Consider his buying habits, problems and much more, according to the product or service. Professional communicators and businesspeople input all the relevant factors to create a "persona" to represent the typical individual they target.

They create content—meaning the collective material they post online—based on this envisioned audience (or audiences). In earlier times marketers depended on mass-audience vehicles like advertising in print and television. But the digital revolution transformed these tactics. Rather than hoping to reach the "right" fraction of the audience through a mass communication TV commercial or magazine ad, organizations can now narrow their gaze and reach the specific people they want. It's at heart the same tactic Warren Buffett describes, writing with his sisters in mind, described in Chapter 2.

See the Digital Revolution in Perspective

We're still adapting to the seismic shift in how we communicate. Today, traditional sources of information like books, newspapers and television remain with us but are challenged to adapt to the digital marketplace. The same is true of "brick and mortar" purchasing, which steadily moves online. The digital revolution also reduces the need for "colocation." Instead of working in a shared physical setting, more and more of us work in dispersed environments with coworkers, bosses and collaborators who may be virtually anywhere in the world, in any time zone.

The Internet also opens the playing field for small low-budget enterprises and startups, empowering them to compete with established enterprises. If they use the opportunity well, they can connect with their target audiences and, like big organizations, reach across geographic and cultural borders to sell, collaborate, partner. And by providing the infrastructure of the gig economy, the Internet opens up a world of possibilities for you if you want a side job or aim to become your own boss.

The digital tools that we use to connect with others and that influence us—social media, websites, blogs—add up to the new word of mouth. Given infinite choices we look to friends and trusted strangers for advice on what to buy, use, experience.

Here's the bottom line lurking in this quick overview: Online channels give us additional ways to communicate with our audiences, but work differently from traditional channels. Organizations and successful online personalities have learned: *Instead of broadcasting what they want their target audience to notice and respond to, they must bring that audience to the message.* This requires delivering the message in media the audience members like and frequent, and giving them material they will seek out and value. Today, readers and viewers must be earned.

To use an analogy, if you want to see hummingbirds, scattering breadcrumbs to feed many kinds of birds doesn't make sense. Hummingbirds don't eat breadcrumbs.

Marketers today decide which birds they want to attract and endlessly analyze which food—or content—will pull them in and keep them coming back.

Online Media and You

It's important to remember that while social media are incredibly effective for distribution and engagement, it's just another tool in your marketing and communications tool bag. I get excited about new technologies because the possibilities for engaging supporters increase exponentially. But what always matters most is having a powerful story that you can share in an authentic way.

—James Wu, brand and business strategist

Unless you want to use online media to see yourself talk or share your life with a few friends, the key for you, too, is to understand the audiences you want to reach—and others that may matter to you down the line. Consider your personal goals. At this point in time, do you want to stay in touch with friends? Find new ones? Share experience or knowledge? Have fun? Experiment with your creativity and show it off? Learn about something that interests you and connect with people who share that interest?

All fine. But are you ready to find career leads or foresee a time when you will? Do you want to build networks and relationships that will support your future aspirations? It's never too early to take these goals seriously, because the building process is slow. And it's cumulative. Everything you post becomes who you are, and online media have long and mostly indelible memories. With any activity at all, you are already building a reputation and online personality.

Take an honest look at whether you are building an online self that is positive and embodies how you want to be seen in the long run. The online world is your open-to-everyone electronic résumé, and it's wise to assume everyone who wants to know what you're about—prospective employers, clients, friends, dating partners—will find it all.

Another general principle that can work for you: The Internet is incessantly hungry. It devours information at a breakneck pace. Organizations of every kind devote more and more resources to feeding it with blogs, press releases, websites and social media posts. You may have noticed that as new social platforms emerge, they become “professionalized”: Experienced marketers mount well-financed campaigns, sometimes successfully, other times not.

On the other hand, the abundance of material makes it increasingly difficult for both companies and individuals to gain attention. Material must be of high quality and real value to readers. If you don't build it really well and deliver what your readers want, they will not come, or keep coming. This is where we arrive back at writing.

Why Online Writing Matters

If you think of digital media as offering principally visual experiences, think again. Study after study demonstrates that the words are pivotal. Yes, people naturally relate to and love visuals: photographs, video, gifs, other graphic forms and good design. But in many communication channels, the role of visuals is to engage attention and pull people into the

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written material. Even in video, words are essential to delivering the message or at least providing meaning and context. The words may ultimately be few—but they must be just the right ones, which is a challenge.

Communicating visually via your favorite social platforms may be part of your daily life. But recognize the limits of what you can communicate purely with visuals. You can deliver the elements of your daily experience with friends through creatively used images, but not ideas, or much information. Without writing, it's hard to plan beyond the moment. You can't collaborate. You can't share or transfer ideas beyond the most basic. Remember, writing enabled human beings to record what they learned so that others could build on the collective knowledge over generations. That's how we developed civilizations and every field of knowledge. All of which still depend on writing.

People in your work life need you to communicate in words—written and spoken. Use writing to communicate with yourself, too. Create a written plan for your career and you'll give yourself a head start on developing your ideas so you can move naturally toward your goals. A written plan serves especially well for strategizing your online life. What do you want to accomplish? Who do you want to reach? What is the best way of doing so? This may lead you in better directions you haven't considered—for example, investing energy in platforms like LinkedIn, where employers, hiring managers and prospective customers scout for talent.

A plan will also reinforce your personal commitment to good writing. When you view the various channels strategically, you are more apt to choose those that matter to your future. Then it becomes more obvious that *you are what you write*. *Online, credibility depends on writing quality*. Consider how you judge unfamiliar material yourself. Do you not unconsciously judge it by the writing? The digital world empowers anyone to be a seller, author, critic or expert. So the intrinsic question is: Why should I trust you? What signals tell me that you are authoritative and honest? That I should take you seriously?

Good writing demonstrates that you relate to reader interests, communicate clearly, and have something to say. Without good writing, good ideas don't matter—they don't really exist if they aren't well expressed. And when people look for insights into what kind of person you are, it's the content and quality of your writing that generates a positive impression, or not so much.

One more reason to write well in everything you post: Today's online world is alarmingly competitive. To access its remarkable opportunities, whether to promote your career long range or find an immediate job, client or customer, you must contribute outstandingly and thoughtfully. So much good stuff is online, free for the taking, that even giving it away is a hard sell.

ADAPTING TO INTERACTIVE MEDIA

There's more "content" than ever. But it's also harder than ever to find signal amongst the noise and facts amongst the fiction—let alone inspiring ideas and high-level discourse, which is what the internet was meant to be.

—Ev Williams, CEO of Medium and cofounder of Twitter

Do you need to master a whole new skillset to write well in digital formats? No. The basic principles are the same as you've practiced for everyday writing, with some adaptation. A primary rule for e-media: Aim for a lightning speed read. People scan and dive to find out if a website, blog or post interests them. Therefore, almost always, get to the point immediately. Never force readers to dig for what they came for. Tell them immediately they're in the right place, and keep them going with good information and strong writing.

Guidelines for the Mechanics

Stay Short and Simple

- Use familiar one- and two-syllable words.
- Write straightforward, clear sentences without a lot of clauses, averaging 6 to 14 words long. Work in an occasional one-word sentence for punch.
- Keep paragraphs between one to three sentences long, and use some one-sentence paragraphs.
- Keep pages short enough to read with minimal scrolling.

Stay Active and Lively

- Build with strong action verbs, preferably present tense. Don't water things down with tentative language like *will be*, *can be*, *should be* and passive constructions.
- Choose concrete nouns rather than abstractions—even when writing about an idea.
- Don't bog sentences down with unnecessary words and repetitions.
- Minimize descriptive adjectives and adverbs (*most* experienced, *amazingly* efficient, *revolutionary* idea, *groundbreaking* innovation, etc.).

The road to hell is paved with adverbs.

—Stephen King, novelist

Stay Positive and Upbeat

- Keep the tone light and bright unless common sense dictates otherwise (on a funeral home website, for example).
- Use a conversational tone. Warm and friendly works; a spontaneous feeling is great, but not easy to achieve.
- Show confidence and avoid hedgy words like *sometimes*, *possibly*, *perhaps*.

Helpful Online Techniques

Use inverted pyramid style. Anticipate that your readers may stop one-third of the way through a blog post or your home page. So know your core message, and communicate it early.

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Imitate journalists: Put the most important information at the beginning of each page and each copy block. And put the most important words of each headline and sentence on the left.

Find ways to say you. Rather than “Customers will save hours of time with G2,” say “G2 saves you hours of accounting time.” And rather than using the abstract third person (he, she, they) frame your ideas in first person (I, we) to more easily achieve the personal, warm tone you want and lead you to use wording that’s more friendly and direct.

Opt for we rather than I. If you’re representing an entity rather than yourself, say *we*. It’s more credible. You’re usually entitled to do that even if it’s a solo operation. If you’re a designer and a job requires a writer, you’ll bring one in, right? If you’re out of town and can’t handle a call for computer repair, won’t you ask a friend? Therefore you’re engaged in a team endeavor.

Create information chunks. Small chunks are easily absorbed and remembered. Cognitive psychology research claims that the brain can remember only seven or eight pieces of information at a time, whether words, numbers, sentences or bullet points. Unless you’re deliberately writing for people you’ve profiled as liking a lot of long, dense information, break material down into short pieces.

Position yourself specifically. If your company focuses on telecommunications or recruitment, say so, rather than referring to “management services.” If your filtration systems are designed for water in hot climates, say so. If you serve customers only in Delaware, say so. Concrete information works best online. Many websites make it hard to figure out what the organization does. Don’t be like that. Tell people what you do, who you do it for and where, if relevant.

Take liberties to keep writing sayable. A conversational style works best for online writing, so test it with the read-aloud method. Be ready to take liberties with conventional English. You don’t need formal “literate” statements. Fragments are fine if meaning is clear. You needn’t (and shouldn’t) say:

If you’re interested in finding out how we at GBH can customize our consulting services to increase your company’s telecommunications efficiency, please call us at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Better:

Need more efficient phone service? Let’s talk. Right now. xxx-xxx-xxxx.

But take pains to look correct! Don’t write in any way that the reader might interpret as a mistake. You can write informally and build in dramatic effects, but your language and grammar must stay basically correct and your spelling must be perfect. If it’s not, poof! Say goodbye to your credibility.

Attend to your search terms. It's well worth some research and testing time to figure out your best keywords and search terms—the words people will use to find you. Include them in copy and headlines. But don't try to game the system. Google finds more and more ways to penalize those who try to manipulate their ranking process. Above all, substance counts.

Build in graphic techniques. In addition to using photos, illustrations or graphs as appropriate, engage the eye and help readability with strong headlines, subheads, bulleted lists, bold lead-ins, numbered lists and plenty of white space. But generally speaking, aim for simplicity and a consistent style. Don't mix a lot of fonts and colors or juxtapose cartoons and photos. Avoid graphic busyness that confuses the eye.

Guidelines for Building Your Positive Image

While certainly you can use your favorite platforms in a spontaneous way, it's smart to create a personal big picture. As part of your Internet planning, decide how you want to be seen. This guides you to make good decisions, safeguard your reputation and build for the long run. Not every message needs to accomplish long-range goals—but then, it's hard to know what might have impact or staying power.

The line between personal and professional is harder to draw every day. You may run the purely social side of your online life separately from the strategic side, but never imperil yourself by posting a careless remark, offensive language, hostile post or *anything* that might undermine you. You probably know people who've lost something they value with a single ill-conceived remark, not to mention the high-profile cases of entire careers obliterated by a tweet. Perhaps worse: losing opportunities you're not even aware of.

So here's your "never" list for online posts:

- Don't disparage or insult anyone.
- Don't use irony, sarcasm or any humor open to negative interpretation.
- Don't lose your temper.
- Don't use "bad language."
- Don't contribute to questionable sites.
- Don't post photos—or anything—you don't want your grandmother or employer to see, now or ever.
- Don't post anything with incorrect spelling, bad grammar or bad thinking.

TEN TIPS FOR USING ONLINE MEDIA

1. *Grab your readers with a good accurate headline and a visual.*

Alert scanners that the material is relevant to their lives. Use a visual whenever possible, if it's appropriate to the message.

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2. *Maintain interest with substance.*

Online readers simply will not stick around for unhelpful material unrelated to their concerns. Whether your subject is a product or a new idea or an opinion, and whatever the platform, provide your best thinking and information. Show a generous spirit: Share without worrying whether people will steal your ideas or perform whatever it is themselves.

3. *Distill and crystallize your messages.*

Reading on screen makes us grumpy. Even the best desktop screens flicker undetectably, tiring the eye. Moreover, the tiny screens of smartphones and watches just don't have the space for anything beyond a core message. So avoid posting wordy, meandering, repetitive material. Refine your messages.

4. *Dispense with all empty claims and inflated rhetoric.*

Statements along the lines of "I am the greatest expert in my field" or "This is the most innovative product ever conceived" are dead ends. You must demonstrate or prove your claims. Figure out what evidence could make your case: images, testimonials, results and so on.

5. *Don't waste a reader's time.*

Never ask your audience to decipher what you're saying or block their path to navigating the platform easily. Websites must provide clear connections to what's next. Don't force visitors to figure out how to turn off music or visuals (or ads if possible) they prefer not to experience. Always deliver on what your headline or promotional blurb promises.

6. *Keep a lid on your emotions.*

Enthusiasm is fine, passion for a subject is great, but don't get carried away. Overall, an objective-sounding but positive tone is most persuasive. Showing negative emotions like anger, frustration and impatience can harm you and your cause.

7. *Exercise good people skills.*

The digital world is social, so use your best manners. Respond to comments and criticism—courteously. Share generously. Give your best. Other people are doing so, and so must you.

8. *Soft-sell the commercial.*

If you're selling or promoting something, don't do so overtly if the channel suggests it's out of place. Try to make it part of the value you offer. Many businesspeople elect to self-promote in only one out of five tweets, for example. A blog can showcase your special knowledge or viewpoint, yet not be *I* centered.

9. *Build in the interaction.*

Aim not to give lectures and pronouncements. Expect, feed and encourage audience participation. Work at presenting ideas or information in ways that entice a response.

Ask thoughtful questions, request opinions and input, share an idea that's a bit edgy or controversial. And follow up with responses to keep the conversation alive.

10. Foster relationships creatively.

Just like in the face-to-face world, building online relationships takes time. Don't expect to post a comment or blog and become an overnight sensation. The online world is already heavily populated. Emulate the way children make friends or join a social circle: They watch a group from the sidelines for a while and feel things out by observing the interaction and rules of the game. Then they'll "kibbitz" a little—make comments about the action. Eventually they feel comfortable asking to join the play. Similarly, research the blogs, groups and content communities that relate to your interests and goals. See what people talk about and what concerns them. Contribute thoughtful comments. Ask questions, start conversations, follow what others say and continue to contribute. Absorb the culture and you'll start to see what it values, where the gaps are, what of value you might contribute.

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WEBSITE WRITING: WHAT'S DIFFERENT

Websites over the past few years have evolved from "one more marketing tool" for organizations to front and center in the marketing/communications/PR/branding mix. For many buyers and information seekers, websites are the main port of call for finding what they want. Many organizations use social media, e-mail campaigns and even paid advertising as conduits to a website, where in-depth substance lives and the sale is closed (or not).

Whether you need your own website depends on where you now are in terms of your career and what you want to accomplish. If an online résumé will best showcase what you offer, a website is a core need. If you are marketing something other than yourself, or plan to, a website is also essential. Thanks to online do-it-yourself platforms like WordPress and Wix, building a website has melded into blogging. So you can create a website or a blog or something in between. Whatever works for you, the strategies that have evolved for website creation and online writing are useful to know.

Highlighting the differences between print and digital writing is helpful. Foremost, online writing involves more dimensions. It's not about "just" writing. Websites, and most other online media, are visual and dynamic experiences. Planning must cover design, site architecture, navigation, images, perhaps video. Who should oversee this complicated venture? Many sites are planned by design and production specialists—but this process often produces ineffective sites. When graphics are created, and then someone is called on to fill in the copy blocks, little thought is given to the site's set of goals and how it fits in with the organization's overall marketing.

At companies and nonprofits with resources, the best sites are produced collaboratively by a team led by marketing and communication specialists. The team's designers work to translate these decision makers' ideas into visuals that support the message, and the technical people make it happen.

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- To get the word out about causes or brands; 84% share because it is a way to support causes or issues they care about.

As reported by Garrett Moon, 2015. “Why People Share, The Psychology of Social Sharing.” *CoSchedule*. Retrieved from <https://coschedule.com/blog/why-people-share/>.

Using Twitter’s Micro Magic

When you work with 280 characters, it’s hard to believe that you’re using a highly effective business communication tool, let alone one that fosters political revolutions and might serve as a president’s main communication platform—but, of course, you are. And by now most of us refrain from telling people what we’re eating for lunch (except for famous chefs, whose lunch is riveting to followers).

You can tweet to solve problems, get help or advice, let people know where you are and much more. Often it feels like you’re throwing information out into the world without expecting results. We all know stories about happy surprises: a reporter who won a plum assignment from an editor who noticed he was vacationing in a hot spot, a company that fixed a problem because it received a tweeted complaint, somebody who landed a dream job because an executive read her tweets and so on.

Rather than using Twitter in a random way, make it part of your strategic campaign to promote your goals. It’s a unique chance to establish yourself as a subject expert, connect with people who have similar professional or personal interests, and reach people you’d ordinarily have no hope of accessing. It’s also a principal means by which to direct people to more substantial online material, like your latest blog post.

All you have to do is be relevant, useful and interesting! Audiences expect from micromedia very much the same things they want from all media: substance, relevance and, ideally, entertainment.

Asked to explain his goal in tweeting, social media commenter Steve Rubel said, “To share my passion with the community and solicit ideas all with the intent of moving me toward my long-term goal of revolutionizing marketing communications through technology.” Your own goal may be more modest than that, but identifying it empowers you to choose good subjects and target audiences. You can be a firsthand source of information or ideas and at other times, “curate” by monitoring your universe for interesting things other people are saying and link to or retweet that information.

Always write well. People will help you get the word out by favoriting or retweeting your message if it has value, helps them look on top of things or is interesting or funny. Including images increases the number of retweets exponentially.

Twitter gives you a formidable way to keep in contact with employers after an interview, build your acquaintance with someone you met at a meeting, introduce yourself to someone you want to know and keep your presence alive in the minds of clients or prospects, many of whom monitor the site or actively participate.

Some Twitter Writing Tips

- Use fewer than the allotted 280 characters to facilitate retweeting.
- Abbreviations are OK *if you’re sure your audience will understand them*. If your readers may not understand texting shortcuts, find a different, tighter way to say what you mean.

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VIEW FROM THE FIELD: CHOOSING YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA WORDS

Think twice before you speak once—that's incredibly important. Does it fit with your message, your image? Try to keep the message consistent, and stay in context of your online persona.

Your writing must be clear and concise so people don't misconstrue what you say—they'll read into it and interpret, which is a big problem online. So write unambiguously. Keep away from sarcasm; many people don't get it. Never write when you're angry or impassioned. No vulgarity: It damages your credibility completely.

Use terminology that promotes your expertise and makes your message searchable by interjecting keywords, like for SEO. I keep a list of the top words I want to include handy. Also, you can check out what you write with a word cloud [e.g., via www.wordle.net] so you can look at a visual of your message and see what words you used the most.

—Bill Corbett, president of Corbett Public Relations

- Adopt an active tone. Use simple direct sentences—avoid *-ing*, *-ize* and similar kinds of words as well as cluttered constructions that need *is* and *are*. Good active verbs go a long way.
- Use short, basic words and only those that are essential to the message. Cut every unnecessary word and phrase.
- Make sure the finished message doesn't get so telegraphic that it's hard to understand.
- Ask for what you want. Saying "please retweet," for example, hugely increases the likelihood that people will.
- Check online sources (like Twitter itself) for up-to-date guidance on using the medium's conventions well.
- Don't send first drafts—review your message and work on simplicity, clarity and wording. All the editing guidelines in Chapter 5 apply. This limiting format is good practice for your editing skills.
- Don't blatantly self-promote. A general guideline is to tout your own article, blog, book or service once out of every four or five tweets.
- Write a snappy, concise profile in either a carefully honed paragraph or a telegraphic style. Many professionals like to cite a set of skills; for example, "Prettybook Prize Winning Writer, Editor, Communications Consultant"; "U.M. Senior, Nuclear Researcher-to-Be, Redwings SuperFan."

CHOOSE TO BRAND YOURSELF

Only a few of the current social channels can be covered here—and in any case, you need not and should not use them all. There's not enough time in the universe. How should you choose? Consider whether the platform is peopled by individuals you want to meet

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