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Calling All Designers Learn to Write!

By Derek Powazek

We've all been there. The client says, "Just design it. We'll flow the content in later." Or the designer says, "Here's what the page looks like. I just used gobbledygook for the text, cause that's not my job." Unfortunately, that's no way to design a good experience.

It may be fashionable to say "markets are conversations" or "design is about communicating ideas," but how can that be true if the designers aren't working with, or actually writing, the text?

User experience isn't just visual design

It's time we designers stop thinking of ourselves as merely pixel people, and start thinking of ourselves as the creators of experiences. And when it comes to experience on the web, there's no better way to create it than to write, and write well.

Let's look at everybody's favorite example of Doing it Right: [Flickr](#). Ask a bunch of people what they think of their experience at Flickr and they'll use words like "fun" and "friendly" to describe it.

Why? There's nothing uniquely fun about black text on a white background. There's nothing friendly about uploading and tagging, no matter how many whiz-bang AJAX tricks you use. Sure, the photographic content lends itself to a personal experience. But nobody ever talked about how much fun Ofoto was. And the community-oriented social networking features lend themselves to an emotional experience, but I think there's something more going on here.

I say: It's the writing. The friendliness comes from good old fashioned text. When you visit the site, it welcomes you with a random language. Hola! Salut! Shalom! When you log in, the button says "Get in there" instead of "Submit." When you upload a photo, join a group, add a contact...all of the associated text is open, encouraging, happy, and excited. And it has a significant impact on the overall user experience.

Text is interface

This is not just marketing text (though it's that, too). It's interface. This is text that can't come from the PR department—it comes from us, the designers who are responsible for the user experience. The text is as much a part of the UI as the colors, the pixels, the stuff that designers are usually concerned with. Perhaps more.

Take another example—a site I just discovered, also in the photo space. [Photojojo](#) is a labor of love created by Amit Gupta and Kara Canal. It's a weekly newsletter, and they've obviously spent a lot of time crafting the writing in the newsletter. But they spent just as much time crafting the words everywhere else.

When you get to the site, the homepage says, "Congratulations. It's your lucky day! You just found one damn fine photo newsletter." Below the email form, the anti-spam message doesn't say something dry like "we will not disclose your information to third parties." It says "We solemnly swear: "No spam, not ever." If you're curious enough to read the About page, you're rewarded with an entertaining story about how the two decided to start the site. No marketing BS, just two people who are really excited about what they're doing.

Now, I'm the kinda guy who unsubscribed from every email list I was on in 1999 and never looked back. I hate email. If the site had used traditional language, I never would have signed up. But their excitement was contagious, and before I knew it, I was plunking down my address. A click on a confirmation mail and the message I get on their website? "Dude, you rule." Damn right.

Beyond lorem ipsum

So if you're someone who hires designers, ask them what they like to read. Talk to them about their word choice in every button, every link, every title. Give them a crack at writing your about page. It's the designer's job to think about your site the way a user does, and tell them what they need to hear, and when they need to hear it. A designer worth their salt will be able to do it. And if your designer says, "I'm not a writer," it may be time to find one who is.

If you're a designer who doesn't think of yourself as a writer, it's time to reconsider. Buy yourself a copy of Strunk and White, do some research online, or take a class. Design is about communication, and it takes more than pixels to communicate.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Working the web since 1995, Derek Powazek is the creator of many award-winning websites, a couple of which still exist. Derek's claims to fame include designing the Blogger "B" and the Technorati identity, writing his book *Design for Community*, and cofounding *JPG Magazine*. He is the cofounder and chief design officer of 8020 Publishing.

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