

10 Questions to Ask When Hiring Your Marketing Communications Writer



**You've got the writer on the phone.
Now, what do you ask him?**

**An e-book by
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Introduction (or not)



You know what? Never mind an introduction. Let's just get started.

After all, you're a marketing manager looking to hire a marketing communications writer – or marcomm writer—to solve a business problem for you, and you don't need me to explain that.

Let's get to the questions.

“How much
do you
charge?”

*Nope, sorry. It's too soon for me to give you a good,
businesslike answer to this question yet.*

I'll come back to it later, though, you can bet on that.



“Let me tell
you about
this
project.”

It's extremely important for me to understand what you want to accomplish, so even though this isn't really a question (which is why I didn't number it), we should cover it early in the conversation.

Describe the project and your objectives to the writer. Provide enough detail for him to figure out whether he:

- has the technical chops for the project
- wants to work with you
- can do it efficiently

And, **since you're the customer, you should get to talk** about what's top of your mind before the writer starts talking.

So there.

“What kind of pieces do you write?”

This is really the first solid question to ask. If my specialties don't include the kind of content you need, then you had better keep looking.

Most marcomm writers write white papers, case studies, press releases, e-books, contributed articles, brochures, corporate backgrounders, newsletters, Web content and the pieces you use to **tell your organization's story persuasively**.

This differs from ad copywriters, journalists, scriptwriters, speechwriters and bloggers, to name a few. In particular, it differs from technical writers, who specialize in instructions, user guides and technical references. Not that there's anything wrong with that...but it's different from marketing communications content. Just sayin'.

There's also an important difference between business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) writing, so ask about that as well.

“Have you written about our industry?”

If I say “yes,” I make points with you. We have a lively chat about our common acquaintances, where they’re working now and the last time we saw them at a trade show. But if I say “no,” don’t count me out. Ask me how quickly I’ve come up to speed in other industries that were new to me.

You may be holding out to find the world’s best writer on deep packet inspection acceleration technology, because she’d be the perfect fit for your product. Unfortunately, she’s probably already working for your competitor. Don’t let the perfect become the enemy of the good if a writer shows **interest, willingness to learn and transferable samples.**

Most professional marcomm writers are a pretty quick study. Unless you’re trying to reach a demanding, technical audience with a deeply technical piece, you can usually afford to weigh experience and writing expertise favorably in your hiring equation.

“Have you written for the Web?”

If, like most organizations, you plan to put your marketing communications content on the Web, it's worth asking about my experience there.

- **Search engine optimization (SEO)** – Good marcomm writers know how to use keywords, outbound links and anchor text to make your content easy to find.
- **Blogging** – This is a complementary medium and skill to classic marcomm writing that plays a big role in providing valuable content to your readers.
- **Social media** – Almost everybody has some presence in social media. Professional marcomm writers exercise it for their own business and that of their clients.

Even if you're hiring a writer for a print-based project, you'll probably want to **repurpose the content** to the Web eventually, and your writer should facilitate that.

“What method or process do you follow?”

This is an acid test. My answer to this is what tells you that I do this for a living, not on a lark, because a professional marcomm writer has a clear approach and process to writing for you.

Here’s an example:

“I’ll review any reference materials you send me and interview two of your subject matter experts. Then I’ll submit an outline and request a time when we can review it, either over the phone or in person. Once we’ve agreed on the outline, I’ll interview any additional subject matter experts. Within five workdays of the last interview, I’ll send you a first draft...”

This is nothing complex, and it’s certainly no trade secret, but even a **simple process should make sense to you** and reassure you. If, instead, the writer says, “Oh, whatever works for you is fine with me,” or something equally vague, that’s a bad sign.

“I see. How much do you charge?”

Sorry, still too soon.

Here's why:

- It isn't that writers don't like to talk about money. It's that money is a quantitative issue, and the qualitative issues around marketing communications writing are just as important. By taking care of the qualitative questions first, **you'll see whether the writer can convince you of the fit.**
- A lot of people think that, once the money issue is out of the way, everything else will be easy. Writing projects are not like that. (In fact, most things aren't, are they?)
- If you talk about money right off the bat and the price seems high, it becomes hard for you to listen to anything else the writer says. Then you'll never learn the value in asking these other questions.

*again

“What do you need from me on this project?”

I should be able to tell you how much work you'll need to put into this. Sure, you're paying me to deliver marketing communications content to you, but I can't reach into your organization for everything, so I'll need help from you.

- **Materials** – Forward whatever research, presentations, data and literature you want reflected in the piece.
- **Interviewees** – Set up interviews with your coworkers and customers during the project.
- **Reviewers** – Appoint coworkers to review drafts, and follow up with them to keep the project from stalling.
- **Design** – Rely on the writer for content. Have your designer lay out the final version for the writer to review.

Maybe you want to be more involved, rather than less. If you consider yourself a hands-on marketing manager – or if your job is riding on the piece – then let the writer know that you want to collaborate and provide frequent input.

“Can you send me some samples?”

Now, wouldn't I be some kind of professional marketing communications writer if I couldn't send you samples?

These samples should be sufficiently relevant to land in your comfort zone and help sell you on the writer. Look for:

- **Audience** – If you're in the gas turbine industry (B2B), you don't want to see ad copy for breakfast cereal (B2C).
- **Emphasis** – Good writing focuses on the reader's problems, not the organization's glory. Also, the samples should balance business benefits and technical benefits.
- **Structure** – The logical flow in the samples should be apparent to you, even when you're skimming.
- **Readability** – Diagrams, callouts, charts and images make for easy reading – a strong advantage (and talent).

Even if the samples are not in your exact industry, they should still help convince you that the writer can absorb your subject matter quickly and convert it into good content.

“What do you do better than anybody else?”

*Let's say you have five priorities on this marcomm project. If I tell you four – or even two – things I do extremely well that match your priorities, **you'll be greatly relieved** and ready to work with me. If not, then you know it won't be a good fit, and you can keep looking. **Either way, you win.***

Typical answers for a professional marcomm writer include:

- “I write everything from the reader's point of view.”
- “People call me to speak on your topic all the time.”
- “I've been writing about your industry for ten years.”
- “With me you get SEO, blogging and graphic design.”
- “I'm a quick study and I write very fast.”
- “My writing never bogs the reader down.”

Good marketing communications writers understand enough marketing to know their own Unique Value Proposition, and that proposition should appeal to you when you hear it.

“So, are you interested in the project?”

*Another acid-test question. You may as well ask me this point-blank, because if I'm not interested in it, **we can save each other some time** and get on with business.*

In the same way that not every manager is interested in working with a given marcomm writer, not every marcomm writer is interested in working on a given project. Part of being a professional writer is knowing when the fit is right and declining a project if it isn't.

If the writer is interested, then you've got confirmation that you're going down the right path.

“What paperwork should we put in place to get started?”

You and I will need to wrap some paperwork around the project. We can use yours, if you have it, or mine.

- **Consulting agreement** – This is for setting minds at ease, not for agitating them. Because people forget what they’ve said over the phone, delete e-mail, and don’t take the same notes, you need to put something in place that crystallizes expectations: process, length of the piece, timeframe, cost, number of review cycles, and so forth.
- **Non-disclosure agreement** – This protects you more than the writer. It shows you take your content seriously.
- **Purchase order** – This helps the writer get paid, which is important if you want to work with him in the future.
- **Down payment** – It’s not unusual for a professional writer to ask for a down payment. It’s your way of staking a claim to his time and attention.
- **Form W-9** – Get the writer’s tax ID for Accounting.

“But no,
really –
How much
do you
charge?”

Once you've given me an overview of the project, I've convinced you of the fit and you think we could work together, let's talk about money.

Here are a few benchmarks and ranges for professional marketing communications writers:

- \$1.00-1.25 per word
- \$50-150 per hour
- \$3500-6000 per white paper
- \$300-750 per article/post

Variables include word/page count, number of interviews, research to be done, the writer's experience and the amount of work you can give her.

Remember, you're about to hire somebody to **get valuable ideas from your organization and turn them into valuable content that will bring you valuable customers**. That's an investment, not an expense.

*finally...

So hire your marketing communications writer, and start getting more out of the relationship.



Content educates your prospects, tells your story to the world, makes search engines happy, and gives you something to show journalists before briefings. Finding a good fit with your marketing communications writer is a big part of that.

Besides question 1 about money, I also occasionally hear question 7 about samples, question 5 about method and question 3 about industry experience. Prospective clients rarely ask me the other questions, but I think they (and you) should.

I've written this e-book as if you were asking me, a marcomm writer, these questions. Maybe someday you will, but even if you pose them to somebody else in the profession, they will help you hire the right writer and get the most out of your organization's content.

About John White and [venTAJA Marketing](#)



I'm a marketing communications writer (does that surprise you?) for technology companies. On my blog, [The Content Buffet](#), I post on how marketing managers can get more out of the relationship with their writers. It's dirty work, but somebody has to do it.

Would you mind taking 2 minutes to give me your feedback on this e-book? I'd like to know what you think of it. [Please take this short, 8-question survey](#). Thanks again.

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