



Rule #1: Consider the Audience

You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? Well, I'm the only one here.

–TRAVIS BICKLE IN MARTIN SCORSESE'S *TAXI DRIVER*, 1976

In getting your message across to the world-at-large, your first question might just be how large is that world? Who are its inhabitants? Do they share common interests or do their priorities differ?

Actually, back up a moment, your very first question probably is: Just what is my message? Assuming you've already asked and answered that, in the next split second, ask yourself who you're trying to reach. And how you'll be talking to them.

Your audience will help guide copy tone and length, whether in print or online. If you expect a big percentage of newbies – people new to your product or service – then more may be more. (Though concise is always in.) Don't shy away from providing your mission and some background about how you'll benefit their lives. If you expect lots of repeat visitors or “early adopters” – people familiar with what you do and why they want it – then take the path of less is more. Concentrate on what makes you different. And desirable. Plus how to get whatever you're selling.

It's In the Lingo

Think about the language you use. No, not adults-only. I mean: do you acronym or not? As a general guideline, avoid it. Who likes to read alphabet soup?

Take a health-related topic, for example. If one audience is scientists or doctors, you're free to speak at a more technical level – as long as you still stress benefits, not just features. If you also have a consumer audience, create a marketing piece directed at their interests. Or a dedicated section of your website. If consumers are your primary audience, they get more real estate. Drive others to a “for professionals” area.

A website or brochure designed to reach an experienced audience may or may not use technical lingo. It will assume a certain knowledge base – something you can't do with the uninitiated. For them, consider spending more time on the value sell.

Make it easy for new visitors to get the details they want and for repeaters to avoid slogging through things they don't want to read again and again. How? Categorize. Compartmentalize. Organize your page or brochure for the way we naturally read – in bits and layers. A headline here, a caption there, a few short paragraphs, a testimonial. Use bullets, pull quotes, sidebars, fun facts.

Get Toned

Is your text serious and formal or warm and personal or somewhere in between? Casual, entertaining, straightforward or inclusive?

Fit the tone with the occasion, including the seriousness of the issue being addressed. Humor or even light-hearted banter goes a long way to selling your message. But take care. Promoting a new cancer treatment? Not the time for witty. Promoting a new restaurant? Depending on the mood, funny – or at least friendly – can be the ticket.

Your audience will respond when they feel you are talking to them. After all, they're the only ones here.