

Nonprofit 911 – June 19, 2009
Create Copy that Shines, Sings and Brings in the Bucks:
Tips for Writing for the Web
with Farra Trompeter, Big Duck Communications NYC
Sponsored by Network for Good

The MP3 audio transcript can be found at
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Farra began her nonprofit career in fundraising and social marketing for the National Breast Cancer Coalition. She has a master's of nonprofit management from The New School and a bachelor's from American University.

Without further ado, here's Farra.

Farra Trompeter: Hello, everybody. Thanks for calling in. I'm not sure how I'll live to this "shiny and bringing the buck in" title. But I'll do my best. What I've put together for you today is a real overview of basics for writing for the web, with the some principles that hopefully you can start adapting right away. If there's interest in this topic beyond the overview today and you'd like a presentation goes much deeper into email copy or writing for social media, I'm happy to talk to the folks at Network for Good about putting something together on that.

The first thing you should be looking at is page two of the slides. I'm going to refer to the slides off and on throughout the presentation, which his really an overview of what we'll talk about today.

First of all, why are we talking about writing for the web? What's so different about writing for the web than, say, writing for print? And what are some principles that you can follow? I'm going to share some guidelines to help you evaluate and improve your writing for the web, and then a lot of different resources.

From there, depending on the time we have available, we might get into some of the copy and content that's in the appendix, which is how to actually go through a process of creating content and best practices.

First of all, what's so different about writing for the web? As you all know, even on the course of this one-hour teleconference, you're going to get inundated with email messages in your inbox and lots of things coming at you.

With the information overload that we have these days, it means that our attention spans have really gone down. So with very short attention spans, it's more and more important to capture people's attention.

One of the things I like to say is the amount of different websites these days are sort of like watching TV. If you've got cable, basic or otherwise, there's so many different channels and nothing to watch. So these days, really getting people to focus on your website and stay there and find what they're looking for is important.

The other thing that's different is reading. Reading online is a lot different than reading in print. When we read online, we tend to scan the copy that's available. Our eyes are even a little bit slowed down by looking at a monitor versus looking at print.

So it's important to think about the way people read online as opposed to how they might read in print. In fact, a good exercise to get into is to think about website visitors as readers and think about how they're engaging with your content.

Another thing that's important is word count. One really great rule of thumb that comes Steve Krug -- who wrote "Don't Make Me Think, " that's referenced in the back in the resource section - is generally when you think about writing for the web, you should look at the copy that you've already written for print, if you have, and cut it in half.

Writing for the web is definitely a lot shorter and simpler than it's in print, which can be a hard transition for some organizations who are used to writing in a much more formal, longer fashion for grants or for other publications. Writing for the web is a lot shorter and simpler and more conversational.

Finally, the way that we're looking at content is different than how we're looking at in print. How we visually present it, the fonts we use, what we bold, what we italicize, what we offer as bullets, is very important. So how you visually present content online can really help the reader.

If you are looking at the slides, there's a picture on slide four of a guy sleeping at his computer. That's the last thing you want to happen when somebody visits your website. [laughs] Do not bore them to death.

What do people want when they're coming to your site? What do readers want? They want information immediately. People are coming to your site to get something. They may not know what they're looking for, or maybe they stumbled there on a very specific intent because of something they typed in Google or a conversation they had with somebody.

They want to be able to find it, and if it takes them a long time to find what they're looking for, they're going to leave. I would bet that if you look at web statistics, whether it's Google Analytics or others, you'd see a big percentage of visitors in that 0-30 seconds time spent on your sight.

While the average time on your site might be three minutes or seven minutes, if you really look at that breakdown you'll see, for many websites sadly, half of that traffic leaves the site within 30 seconds. So they're not finding what they're looking for. It's really important to get people to find what they're looking for as soon as possible.

They want to know your point of view. What's so different about what you have to say versus what someone else in your field has to say. So what's unique about you and what you're communicating?

They want up-to-date, relevant content. That might seem like an "a-ha" or a, "Yeah, really, what a surprise, Farra." But, no, in fact many organizations have been using their websites as brochures. They put a lot of effort together into posting content to their site and then they sort of leave it.

And people come to their site, look at the press room, and see the last article was posted from 2007. Or they go to your conference event page and see that there's still registration up and it was six months ago. But the pictures and presentation aren't available. So it's really important that once you post content on your site that you keep it up to date.

Just a few other quick points. When you ask for feedback, whether it's commenting on an article or sending you a message through Twitter, wherever it might be, a question in a email newsletter - if you're asking for feedback, it's really important to respond and respond pretty quickly.

So people more and more now, especially with the advent of Web 2.0 and social media, are looking for interaction. Not just from your organization, but even from other readers and visitors to the site.

And finally, if people do share information about themselves, they do want some privacy. I'm not going to get into a whole privacy policy conversation, but as many of you know, it's important to have one. And make sure that if you're collecting information, you let people know what you're doing with it.

I think one of the simplest and probably most well-known websites out there that you can think about, that does a good job of writing for the web - in a very odd way, because it's written by a community, so it's not necessarily following a formal organizational guideline. It's not odd, it's just different than how it may work in your organization. It's Wikipedia.

I'm an image here of the word "duck" on Wikipedia. You can see way Wikipedia is set up. There is an intro paragraphs, there is a table of contents which drives you deeper into the content, and just very quick, simple sentences. There is a picture of the item on the right side -- which is often where our eye goes -- with some quick associations with it. In this case, the classification. But there might be some other information.

But it's very simple and to the point. Now while Wikipedia is, again, run by a community of editors, I think the way they've set up their basic layout is really helpful, and is a good general rule of thumb when we're thinking about writing for the web.

I just want to get into some principles of web text. A lot of these principles come from books that are referenced at the end. But I find this really helpful - there are three sort of guiding principles. One is orientation, one is information, and the third is action.

Orientation is that sort of background information and navigation. So when I come to your site, what is the structure that you've set up to guide me to what information I'm looking for? That's often the site map, the information architecture, the navigation on the top or left or right of your site. How are you guiding me through the site?

The next is information. What are you offering to help me understand the content and the mission of your organization.

And finally, what's the action you want me to take? Those of you who work in marketing know a big sort of refrain is the "call to action." Whenever you put something out there, you need to be really clear about what that call to action does.

So if you've got an ad out there, the call to action might be to visit your website or to make a donation. What's that call to action in your copy? Even if your copy or your web page content isn't necessarily something that's driving donations or actions or signups, what do you want people to do with it?

So let's talk for a second about the first principle, orientation. I'm looking at a slide right now that says that completely on it. I don't actually have the official page numbers that you're looking at.

This one says, "Principles of Web Text Orientation." So your home page is generally the one that mostly guides the orientation. This is the page that welcomes you. Think about Google and how right away, Google has probably the simplest. All we want to do is go to that site and search. It's very simple. It's to the core.

With your home page and with your whole site, wherever you have navigation and you are orienting me through the site, it's important for that to be coherent and consistent.

One of the things we mean by that's if the navigation is in one place on one page and then another within the site, it's very confusing to the reader. They're not sure where to go.

So often you see sites have similar places for navigation, not just within their sites, but within their sector, because that's what people are used to seeing. And while you might want to be different, if people are used to seeing navigation, for example, on the top, or the left, or the right of your site and around the frame in that sort of upside down "U" that we see on many sites, it's worth following that because that's where comfort is.

So what are some of the things to think about with orientation? Even though I said earlier that writing for the web is different than writing for print, people still read the same way.

Here in this country primarily, people are reading from the left to the right; that's usually how you see content flow. And generally speaking, we're used to seeing the key points right in the beginning. And when we're looking at a website, it's often in that F pattern where you are looking at a website and then go over to the right.

So how can you use that to guide your website presentation of content? The other is headlines. This is sort of very typical and you will see some examples in this presentation of newspapers and magazines.

I think that following the journalistic style has really informed writing for the web. So people are using headlines to guide the reader. The keywords, the content that's about the article, and you are trying to signal to the reader, "This is what the article is about. This is what you are looking for," is often in the title and the sub-titles.

So let's look at the New York Times. The New York Times is a classic example of writing for the web, and again, a magazine or a newspaper. You can see with their site, their headlines are very short and simple.

In the example I have here it says, "Top cleric calls for inquiry as protestors defy ban in Iran." So right away we know what this article is about. They did it in 10 words or less. And there is even a blurb following that that's about one or two sentences that explains what the article is. I can either read that and get a sense of what it is or I can even dig deeper into the links.

I think that's a real good guide. Some people may just read that first sentence or two, so how are you letting them know what the article is about?

Another good example is the White House website. Whitehouse.gov, if you haven't been to it lately, has obviously redesigned with the new administration. But you can see on their site that it's very simple. It's designed in columns. We can easily see what is coming in from the blog, what is the latest legislation that has been signed. We can search the site.

You can see the navigation up on top: the briefing room, the agenda, the administration, about the White House, about our government, and contact us. That navigation gets repeated further in the page in the footer.

It's very simple and I know where to go. I can also see the information they're highlighting in this rotating slideshow in the center.

Let me move onto the next principle, which is information. When you're presenting information -- again, some of this may sound very simple, but it's worth repeating - it's important to be clear and correct.

If you are presenting content particularly, if you're an organization, let's say, that works in the scientific field or in any organization, whenever you are quoting your authoring information, it's important that you check and you dot your I's and cross your T's, even things with just using grammar. It's important that you are spelling things correctly in your referring to things.

Being audience centric. There are two things to think about with audience centric information. One is literally sometimes providing information, calling out for that

audience. "If you are a parent, click here. If you are an activist, click here. If you are a school, click here."

Again, depending on what your content is about, making it really simple for people who have self-identified, if it makes sense for your organization, to find what they're looking for.

The other thing we mean by audience-centric is really thinking about who those users are, who those readers are, and what they're looking for generally. What again is unique for what your organization is providing and is important for people to hear from you different from anywhere else?

While there may be primary audiences that you're looking to serve, anyone might come to your website through Google or through referrals. So is there something on your site for everyone?

While you don't want to cater to every single person in the world, it's important to cater to your target audiences. It's also important to just think about what the outsider who we're not always thinking about thinks if they visited our site. And finally, how are you organizing information?

So I want to talk briefly about the audience issue again. One thing that we have done here at Big Duck which is very helpful is develop user scenarios or user profiles, and there's an example of that coming up.

A user scenario really just helps us think about, "Who is the typical person that's coming to the site? What are they looking for? What do we want them to do on the site? What do they want to do on the site?"

Writing those user scenarios ahead of time, either before you develop your website or even while you have got your site up and running, you really want to think about whether or not your site is being audience-centric.

It's really helpful to get you out of the mindset. You eat, sleep, and breathe your mission and organization everyday. But the people coming to your site often don't, except for a small minority. Many of them, again, are just popping by for a few minutes every few weeks.

So what are they looking for and how do we make sure they're getting it? User scenarios are one way to do that. It's just important to think about that while your organization might be open from 9-6, your website makes your organization available every minute of the day. So people are going to be coming to you for information that they're looking for, and you need to be able to provide that.

If you are offering information, think about the order of it. What we mean by order and organizing is if you are telling a story about something related to your mission, describe it using stages, so first this happens, then this happens, then that happens, offering sort of a logical framework for your order.

So you might be referring to a lot of statistics and backup. And if you are, putting those at the end. Not starting off the article or your page of content with a lot of links outside, but putting that lower down in the copy so that people can find out where you got your resources from if they want to learn more.

And finally, using categories. And this is the thing we see most often writing for the web and nonprofits, which is grouping material together based on what it's about. So creating sort of subtopics for everything you are talking about.

There are three types of visitors that we like to think about that come to your site. One is a reader, another is a user, and the third is a viewer. A reader is the kind of person that's, as pictured in the slide as three visitors, someone who is really, maybe as in this picture, taking their magnifying glass out. But they're going to read every single thing you have to say.

This is somebody who might print out the pages from your site. They're going to spend a lot of time on your site and go from page to page because they're really eager to find out what you have to say. We see this particularly with health organizations and with patients and family members who maybe were just diagnosed with something.

Another audience is the user audience. These are people who are probably most of what comes to your site. These are people who know what they're looking for. They come to get it and then they leave.

Finally there's the viewer. These are the people who just sort of come and scan. And if they're not immediately intrigued, they leave. The viewer is looking for more graphic or light entertainment, where the user is going to have a little bit more patience and take time to look for the information they're interested in. But they may not spend as much time on your site as a reader who will have the most patience and go looking in every corner to go find the information they need.

I mentioned before a user scenario and I have one here that was written by an organization that we worked with called Cross Cultural Solutions. They're an international travel abroad service agency.

In developing their user scenario, those of you who are around my age might recognize the picture here. This is Brenda from "Beverly Hills 90210." They used her picture. One of the things we do when we create user scenarios is usually just go on Google images or Flickr and find a random person that maybe looks sort of like the story you've written.

Just again, help keep it outside of ourselves and make it seem it like it's a good user. We like to have this be a fictitious profile, but it's based on an actual person that maybe you know about, who's coming to your site.

So here you can see in this user profile, and I've seen these sort of written in a lot of different ways. We talk about the occupation, how old they are, their gender, either education or where they live.

Some of this content may be less relevant than others for your organization. How comfortable are they online? What are they looking for? And what are they likely to do when they visit the site? This is just really helpful to make sure that they're getting what they need and finding what they're looking for, both from your general navigation but also from the content itself.

Another good example of writing for the web is American Red Cross. And I mentioned before the idea of being audience-centric. One of the things that I think is interesting about their navigation is you can see it says, "Preparing and Getting Trained," "Getting Assistance," "Giving and Getting Involved," "Working with the Red Cross" and "Your Local Red Cross." Now, it's clearly audience-centric.

For example, working with the Red Cross could easily be employment, job opportunities, or for career seekers. But they've given it a title that makes sense with everything else. "Giving and Getting Involved," is clearly for donors and volunteers. "Getting Assistance" is for clients and so on. "Preparing and Getting Trained" is for professionals who might want to - or other people who want to get trained to deliver emergency relief services. So you can see that they've created their site and the navigation to speak to what you - as the reader - is looking for.

I wanted to mention another website for you. This is a site that we helped develop for Parent Project Muscular Dystrophy; it's Community.ParentProjectMD.org. And this site is a social network site for members of Parent Project Muscular Dystrophy. PPMD is an organization that works with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, which is a rare but fatal genetic disorder.

This is a community that's always had a very active group of parents and people involved. And now they've taken and built a special site where they can share photos and they can join groups - they can have blogs, post videos. Some of you may have seen sites like this before. This is built on the Ning platform.

And what you'll see here is this is purely an audience-centric site. This is different than their main website. Their main website exists at ParentProjectMD.org, and that site's much more general about the issue. It has advocacy; it has fundraising. It has a lot of different things that you can do. But this site is expressly built for the members of their audience that want to communicate on a much more regular basis, and are frankly more interested in seeing the organization that's facilitating that conversation rather than talking directly to the organization.

Here they want to talk to other parents who have children with Duchenne. They want to share photos; they want to give each other advice on different doctors and treatment and different things that are happening with their children. So again, this is a very audience-centric site in its whole thing. And the content isn't even written by the organization; it's written by the community.

So the last principle of web text that I want to share with you is action. Many of us are involved with advocacy in our organizations. So there's always a sense of action. But

what we mean here is what is it again, what's that thing you want people to do when they're reading your material?

I think a lot of us are dealing with issues that are very negative and somber. But I think where possible - and again where it makes sense within your organization - have a positive attitude. So not only presenting the problems, but how your organization is working to be the solution is important. And that's one of the things that we mean about positive attitude.

Another thing is - and again especially with the sort of Web 2.0 social media world that we live in - it's important when you are presenting your text or your copy to discuss an issue. But listen, also, to the feedback you're getting. If you get comments to articles you've written, or emails in with feedback that's either contrary or different or asking for more, use that to generate the next level of content.

And even think about how you can host those two-way conversations on your site - again if you have a blog allowing comments - or even doing that within your site. And finally, if you ask people to do something, let's say make a donation, write a letter to a representative, or submit their name to sign up for a program, make sure that it's easy. The harder it's for somebody to take action on your site, the less likely they'll be to do it.

In other words, if I go to your donation page, and it's a seven-step process and I can't figure out where to put my credit card in, chances are I'm going to close and not come back and make that gift. So it's really important that it's simple and clear.

Some of the things that you should think about is, not only is it easy but why should I do it? More and more, as we're competing for attention, you've got to give people reasons to do something. If you want them to fill out a form, what do they get for doing that? If you want them to join your email list, why? How often are you sending those messages? What are you offering on your email list?

If you want them to take a quiz or survey, what are you going to do with the results? If you're asking them to donate, what will their donation go to support? That kind of thinking is what we're saying here. So if you ask people to take action, give them a reason why.

So just a few things in an action-oriented way: Live United, which is a campaign from the United Way and their website is LiveUnited.org. Here you can see they have within each of their major areas of education, income and health, they've literally been very action-oriented in saying that you can either give, advocate, or volunteer. And when you click on those pages, you are able to do just that.

You can see actually that the next slide is a picture of one of the United Way affiliates from Massachusetts. And here you can see on their site - again you can see this repeating of give, advocate and volunteer - but it's very simple. Their copy is very brief; it's to the point. There's an ask; tell us how you live United. And then there's a picture of somebody who says how they live United. So I can imagine, when I tell them how I live United, it's

possible they might include my picture when I do that. So that's just one example we wanted to share with you.

The last thing we want to talk about is just some guidelines. I'm going to go through these relatively quickly, because I want to make sure we have time for a discussion.

The first guideline is around style. I think it's really - obviously if you have a style guide for your organization or if you've done some messaging work, obviously you want to make sure that however you're communicating offline, in person - at an event, when someone comes to your door for services, when you are hosting a program - it's the same sort of style that you follow on your website.

Unless it makes sense for your organization, we suggest you avoid being too clever or cutesy. Again when you're cute or using a lot of metaphors, it can confuse somebody and make them much more likely to leave your site.

Using simple sentence structure is really - again it might sound silly to write that way. But say things like, "Sarah is on a call. She is presenting Writing for the Web." You know very simple sentences that are to the point make it much easier to read when we're scanning copy.

Complex words: These are what I often call the 50 cent, SAT words. If a word has more than three syllables, chances are I'm going to need a dictionary to look it up. [laughs] You don't want that to happen with your web copy. You know again, unless you are of course a very academic organization or it makes sense for you to have certain words in your copy, it's really important to avoid jargon and using terms that people won't know. One thing to help in your organization to avoid all of this is developing a style guide, and I have a link in the resources section which gives you a good example of that.

Tone: So what's the tone you should think about? Again the tone really depends on the personality of your organization. But generally speaking, the tone we see is mostly professional but conversational. You are an organization. You want to convey credibility and trust to donors and to program participants, but you also want to make sure that it's seen as inviting and friendly. Generally speaking, writing for the web is much more friendly and conversational than it is for print. If you are going to be funny, it's important to use that with caution, because humor can be misinterpreted when it's just experienced online. So how does that connect to you as an organization, what your personality is?

I think a great example, though, of someone who has gotten away with using humor is the Great Schlep. This is a website that was an initiative that came around the elections where Sarah Silverman said, "Join me and make the Great Schlep to Florida and get your grandmother to vote."

This was targeted towards young Jews for whom a word like "schlep" is catchy and makes sense. You can even see things like Virtual Schlep, the Great Schlep, Obama versus McCain, give to the Schlep, very simple navigation.

Sarah Silverman's humor is very offbeat. And while some people might find it offensive, it really resonated with this audience, so it made sense.

I mentioned before personality. I think probably the most classic example of personality these days are those Mac versus PC ads where PC is pretty uptight and staunch-y and professional and Mac is young, and hip, and cutting edge.

I think when you think about your organization it's important to think, "Are we a MAC or are we a PC, or perhaps something else?" What are those personality traits for your organization?

It's a great exercise to do at a staff meeting. Have people describe who your organization was should you set your organization up on a date. Are they nice? Are they friendly? Who are you?

Once you come up with that list of personality traits, take a fresh look at the copy on your site and see if that's how you would describe it, or even your website overall.

What I have here is a set of personality traits, again, for Parent Project Muscular Dystrophy, the organization that I mentioned earlier. Some of the personality traits that they want associated with them in any way you experience them, whether you come through a program, visit their website, go to their conference, call them up and talk to them, is that they're a leading organization in this issue. They're an expert, but they're also passionate. They're comprehensive and influential, and very highly regarded within their field, and they unite the movement with other Muscular Dystrophy organizations, particular with Duchenne.

If you keep that personality list in mind and then look at the navigation, even, for the site, even how we organize the content on the site... We did things like calling certain sections "Leading the way" instead of "About us." Because we wanted to help position them as a leader, we created that section called, "Leading the Way."

And within every section on this website, you will see a brief description of what you'll find within it. So if you are not sure what is in the, "Caring for him", you can see that there is information about treatment, daily life, family issues, and more.

So this is a really good example of being clear about what that personality is and bringing that into the copy. It's also, if you were to visit the site live, you would hopefully get that feeling from just the overall experience and the design of it.

Another thing to think about when you are writing for the web is readability. How do we make our copy not only short and simple, but how do we use headings, as I mentioned before, and be really clear about the content we're providing?

One great thing to do is to provide a summary up front. When we were taught in grade school how to write, we were taught introduction, supporting point, supporting point, supporting point, and conclusion.

With writing for the web, as again as it is in writing for journalists, it's really that inverted pyramid of writing. You start with that conclusion, what is the big "A-ha" or summary for the article, and then you have the supporting points at the end following that.

So your first paragraph should simply be if I read nothing else, I would get the gist of the entire article. It's also important to use the active voice. The active voice is things like, instead of saying, "Make a donation" say, "Donate." I'm sorry. That's the strong verbs comment.

Active voice is saying instead of, "Farra presented on a call", being much stronger: "Farra is presenting on a call." Instead of, "The conference was attended by 500 participants," saying things like, "500 participants went to the conference and learned X, Y, and Z." So being much stronger in how you use your grammar.

A good example of this is on CNN's website. You can see, again, they've got a great headline with a description of what the story is. It's very simple to see what it's about.

If you look at a particular article, what is really interesting is something they have done recently where they have added story highlights, and I'm starting to see this pop up on a lot of websites.

So not only is there the entire article, but in the top there are four or five bullets that say, "This is what this article is about." So you can know that if you read nothing else, you get the gist of it in those bullets. Then you can decide whether or not you want to read the entire article.

I want to also share a little bit about print documents. Many of us have a lot of content that we produce in print, and we make a PDF, and we post it on our site so people can download it.

I think that's great. Again, there are those readers who want to take every piece of information you have and take it in. That's a great thing to provide for them. But if the content you are providing is only one page long or it doesn't involve a lot of graphics, it's worth thinking about not creating that as a PDF and recreating it as HTML so it's easier for people to just read without having to download it.

Another thing that we've seen lately is embedding a PDF within your site, like using a program like Script or Issue. If you are going to take your print document and put it online, again, it's worth reading it again, looking to see if you can cut out about half the words and make the tone a lot more conversational, but it's also important to think about formatting.

The Stanford Social Innovation Review --I have an example of an article from years ago entitled, "What Business Execs Don't Know But Should" about nonprofits. One of the things I think is really interesting about what they did here was you could see there was a number of different ways you could interact with the article. You can email it, you can download it as a PDF, you can order reprints, or you can print it. But you can also rate it. You can also add a comment to it.

So that's great. They're giving me a lot of ways to, again, interact with that article as a reader. But they have also created sub-headlines for each of the main points of the article: "Little Controller Respect," "So Many Stakeholders, So Much Consensus," "The Elusive Art of Nonprofit Measurement."

And if I click on each of those headlines I could go within the article. So I might just want to read about how to be a better crossover leader as opposed to the whole article. And that lets me jump to exactly what I'm looking for, which will make me much more likely not only to stay on that website, but to come back and to tell my friends about it. And that's one of the big things we want to have happen when people visit your site.

There is a picture of Script, which is a great PDF embedding program. But then we've got some resources here. We've done a podcast on this topic of writing for the web. Our podcast is called The Nonprofit Jungle and you can get to it through iTunes or on our website.

We've also written article about writing visually, so really actually thinking about that visual presentation. There are some great guides on this topic. Again, I mentioned before style guide. [Webstyleguide.com](http://webstyleguide.com) is really helpful. And there are some other papers that Jacob Nielson has written on this topic.

And finally, there are some books if you really want to get into it on this topic called, "Writing for the Web" by Crawford Killian, "Contact Critical" by Jared McGovern and Robert Norton, and "The Web Content Style Guide", which again goes with that URL webstyleguide.com.

So with that I'm going to turn it back over to Rebecca and we will open up for questions. There is also a PDF of an appendix that gives you guidelines on how to create content and some other thoughts on best practices.

If you have downloaded those and have questions about that, I'm happy to answer those as well.

Rebecca: Excellent. Thanks, Farra.

Nancy writes in with a question. She says, "Hi, Farra. Any recommendations for encouraging staff to write with more personality, more informality, more of a conversational language when they contribute to our organization's website and our blog?"

Farra: Great question. I think maybe it's worth doing an exercise showing them a before and after; taking a piece of writing that either you have done or that someone else has done and then rewriting it with personality to show them an example of what that means. A lot of people might say that, but they're so used to writing formally, so used to, again, particularly you see it in grant writing and other context, that it's hard for them to change their mindset and be more conversational.

Another great thing to do is show them examples from other great organizations in your field. Take your mission or take your primary work, Google it, and show them, "Here is how they're talking about it." Find some examples of people who are using personality that's within your space and show them how to do it.

Rebecca: We have a question from Martin. Martin is probably in a similar boat with some other folks on the phone. Martin says, "A lot of the websites shown as examples are very sophisticated and they look professionally designed by a graphic designer. What are some suggestions for smaller organizations with a small staff and no money to spend on graphic design, and they have limited graphic design skill themselves?"

Farra: The topic isn't really about design, but I'm happy to take a stab at it since we do design here too. I think that if you can't engage the skills of a professional designer, there are a lot of templates available that will help you look a little bit more professional through a lot of different services that you might use to manage your website. You can also just think about that presentation of content. If you can't at least make the outside frame look very professional, how can you take your content and make that really shine?

So using those headlines, using bullets, using really short and to the point information. I think if you can't get a professional designer to help you with your site, and there are a lot of freelancers available, particularly now with the economy. You can probably put an ad on Craig's List and get a lot of people who are just looking to build their portfolio or volunteer for you.

But if you don't have anybody who can help you with that, less is more. I think a lot of people sort of, especially early on in the web... It was sort of like blinking lights and marquee use, and black, and all these different colors.

It's really important; more and more simple and understated tends to help signal more professional than the other way around.

Rebecca: We have a couple of questions from Valerie. Valerie wrote in and says, "Our organization deals with pet hospice. The problem we're dealing with is that people see this as death and only death. How can we help them see there is hope for the quality of life left, possibly to be cheery with our language on the website? There is such a fear factor and misconception. Is there a way to say that without belaboring the fact or talking down to our readers?"

Farra: That's a great question. I think it's really important not to get that patronizing tone, because I think that will often --I don't know your field of hospice that well, but I think that if you were to be patronizing, you might wind up turning them off and losing your readers. But I think on the flipside, being too cheery might be seen as being either cold or inappropriate. So I think it's a fine balance to have to try and strike that.

I mean, I would imagine you could talk about both sort of the grieving and what happens when there is a loss. But I think you can also talk about life and see if there is any good news that you can celebrate and do it in a way that shows people that there is work that you are doing beyond just care toward the end of life.

I think again, as I mentioned, it's always good to look and see what your peers are doing. I think it was Shakespeare who was all about getting inspired from others. So I think if you are not sure how to handle your particular issue, it's worth looking around and seeing if there is anybody else out there that's doing it well.

In your case, not just within the animal care, I imagine people who are dealing with hospice for people and humans are going through the same issues. So maybe taking a look around and seeing how they're doing it.

Rebecca: Our next question is regarding slide 14. "Do you have any tips for writing those user scenarios? Can you describe what the process is for determining those readers and how to decide what they're looking for?"

Farra: Sure. Good question. One of the things I like to do is sort of go through an initial exercise and talk about who are the target audience of your site. For some people, what might do is gather staff together in a staff meeting or a special meeting and get them to list off who are those target audiences. Instead of saying things like "donors" and "activists," try and get them to really boil that down. So again, in the case of this organization it might be college students or young women, or it may be potential program participants who are typically X, Y, and Z.

Get people to sort of get as specific as possible when they think about those target audiences and then guide them through an exercise. One of the things that we usually try to do to understand audience is say, "How do they perceive your organization now and how do we want them to perceive you from visiting your website and having a much better experience with your copy, with your design, with its overall gene se qua? And then what are the actions we want them to take?"

In this case we want somebody to find the information they're looking for about programs and sign up and enroll.

So once we're clear on those different audiences and what they want to do, and how we want to shift their perception and by having a positive experience on our website, we then get into the user scenarios.

What I usually do is put up the categories on the board: name, occupation, age, gender, et cetera, and show people an example like the one here, and then have them write on index cards a story.

Have everybody on your staff take on a member of the audience. So maybe often a member of the target audience is a member of the media. Right? So a member of the media is probably someone who is super web savvy. They want to get statistics and numbers very quickly and very easily. Our hope is they get what they're looking for and then even call us for a quote, right?

So we come up with a story and then we write it. And then after that's written on the cards, I ask people to read that out loud, see if anybody has anything to share, and then type it up and add a picture to it.

Once the user profiles are all put together, the report is given back out to the group. And then ask them to continuously reference it. So again, it helps us keep in mind who our users are.

If you have the time and opportunity, talking to your users for real is even better, and you might do that through writing a survey and sending it out to your email list, or even having a focus group or interviews with users in person.

But this is just an exercise that can take a lot less time and be a lot more affordable.

Rebecca: We have a question here that says, "Do you recommend having a conversational tone for all websites, because right now ours is pretty straightforward and informative? It might even tend to be characterized as a little dry, but that seems to make sense for our mission. So what are your thoughts on having a conversational tone and how that might relate to developing the personality for your organization and website?"

Farra: Writing for the web is conversational, but it's important to back to the organization's overall personality. If it's a website for a scientific journal or something that has a very largely professional audience that's used to communicating in that way, it may be that the style that you are writing in, that drier tone, is OK. I think what I would say is take a look at your website traffic, how many people are coming to your site, how much time they're spending, how many pages they're looking at.

If you are happy with that number, if you are getting overall good feedback, then you might not have to change. If you're not sure, it may be worth doing the survey to people on your email list or calling up a few folks who you know interact with your content and ask them about it.

But again, generally speaking, because people are looking at your content pretty quickly and they're just looking to scan, it doesn't necessarily mean you have to entertain them. It just means you have to make it easy for them to absorb it in the way that they're reading the content.

Rebecca: OK. Let's see. "I attended last week's Nonprofit 911 call with Mark Rovner about storytelling. Do you have tips for writing effective profiles or volunteer stories? Does the inverted pyramid still apply?" I guess his question is just getting at what is an effective way of writing stories like this and integrating them on your website such that they're still web reader friendly?

Farra: Well I think I would start a volunteer -- or you often see like a donor profile or a staff profile. I think it's good to start off with, generally speaking, how they're connected to your organization. So that's again, if I read nothing else I would know that this is a person who has been volunteering serving meals to the homeless for seven years through our program. So like what is the connection and then how do they get involved with? And then I follow that with how do they get involved with you? What is the impact of their involvement with you? What are they working on in the future?

So I think it would still follow a similar pattern of that inverted pyramid, which you can see a picture of in the appendix, where you really start with that overall big picture. Who is the person and how are they involved with you, and then get into the details.

Rebecca: “In what cases do you recommend that users or other write the content for our web presence? For instance, you showed that great example where it was more of a social networking site to just a brochure site. When do you think that's appropriate for an organization?”

Farra: I think that sort of brings up a big question that's around your culture and your organization and control. Some organizations aren't ready to open up that control and let even other staff beyond certain staff, let alone users, contribute copy. So I think it's a bigger question as to are we really ready to open the floodgates and let people comment on things, and if we do, are we ready for errors that we might have to correct? Are we ready for critiques that we may not agree with? And really opening ourselves up. I think, depending again on who your personality is and what your organization is trying to do, it's really worth thinking about, is that in synch. If you're an organization that's trying to be transparent and build a community or build a movement on your issue, having your users be able to be part of that story and be able to contribute content is very much in line.

Again, if you're a medical institution that's delivering very straightforward, one-to-one services, maybe having your community contribute to your site might not make sense. So it really goes back to your mission and who you are.

We're actually at Big Duck doing a webinar next week on your website as an experience of your brand. That might be of some interest to people who are wondering about that. That's on June 24th, I think, at noon. And you can see about that on our website, at bigducknyc.com.

Rebecca: “Do you have any recommendation about how to be consistent, and do you recommend being consistent, across the various places that we do writing for the web? So our website, social network, email outreach. Do you have any tips?”

Farra: I think it's important to be consistent to a point. Let's say you've got a stream on Twitter, you can only say something in 140 characters. So the way you're going to interact with Twitter, and there's a whole things with re-Tweeting and how people are interacting on Twitter, which is very different than how you're going to interact with people on your website or even in your email. So I think on one hand you have to think about the actual channel: Twitter versus Facebook versus YouTube versus your website versus email. How are people used to communicating in that particular channel and keeping that in mind.

I think there's some inconsistency there, but there's a consistency in terms of what you're trying to get people to do. In other words, let's say your organization has a campaign to contact the Obama administration about something. That campaign name and the action might be the same, but how it gets promoted and the different things that people can do as part of that campaign, might be different based on the channel you're communicating in.

Hopefully that makes sense.

Rebecca: “Would you mind reviewing slide 15 about readers, users, and viewers--what their differences are, and how to cater to them and prioritize them?”

Farra: The question we had earlier around developing a user profile again goes back to the idea of: who are our key audiences and what do we want them to do on our site. So there is the sort what we're looking for our audiences and then there's the reality of who they're. This again can be interesting to look at you web states and try and get a profile. Generally speaking your biggest audience is going to be this user group. And then on the periphery for most organization -- again, yours might be different - will be the readers and the viewers. Those are sort of the more extremes on the bell curve, if you will.

A reader is somebody who, either on their first visit to the site or whenever they come to the site, they spend a lot of time. They will look in every nook and corner to find what they need. They will go from page to page to page. And they really see you as a valued resource, and your content, your organization is very important to their everyday life, maybe professionally. Again, maybe they're a patient or they're a caregiver or they're someone who is an activist with that'ssue and they're looking for that ammunition.

So depending again on what you do, the reader audience is someone who is really going to spend a lot of time on your site.

The middle audience is that user audience. These are people who are going to come to your site maybe once a month, maybe once every now and then, who are going to come with a very express "I'm looking for something." They're sort of the hit-and-run kind of an idea. Where a reader might download a lot of information, print it out, really absorb it, a user is going to come, get what they're looking for, and leave. And then the viewer is just going to quickly scan your site and probably not spend that much time at all.

I think you have to keep all three of these visitors in mind when you're presenting copy, but primarily cater to that user with maybe a little shift to the reader. If we were fully shifted to readers, then we wouldn't care how long our copy was and the way it was presented, because we know these people are going to look at everything.

However, most people who are coming to the site are these users, so we've got to make it simple. We've got to sort of offer - using bullets. I sort of think PowerPoint is a good lesson in writing for the web. It's very sort of high level. They want to know what it's about and what you're going to tell them, and then they'll follow it.

So that's the primary audience I would generally cater toward, again, with a shift toward readers.

Rebecca: We have a couple of similar questions, so I'll lump them together. These are from Jill and Lisa. They both work very specific organizations. I'll read Lisa's and Jill's is very similar in terms of content. Lisa's question is: "Hi, this conference call is really helpful. We're a small organization that raises money for an educational program in the developing world. It's a pretty specific program in a specific city. Is it better to focus our

writing on the general need rather than trying to get people interested in the this particular place? It seems like a bad idea, but persuading people to give to a particular school can be rather difficult."

And this is where it overlaps with Jill's question, I believe. "It would take a lot of explanation about the specifics and that seems like it could make it pretty word copy." Do you have any suggestions for those folks who are maybe raising funds for a specific, very particular cause, where there might need to be extra explanation, but you still want to make it relevant.

Farra: Yeah, I would say the web is built on links. It's time to love the links. By that I mean, I would start with the general. Give the sort of big picture of how this school or this program is an example of your work that helps children or changes lives in this way, in this country, in this region. And then offer through links more detail. "If you'd like to learn more about what we're doing in XYZ program, click here." That kind of thing. Perhaps more exciting copy than that. But something that basically says, "Here's the general picture. If you want more detail..." Let's say you're more of a reader, in the discussion we just had, here's something for you. If you're just looking to get a general gist, that's what we've provided.

On the flipside, you've seen websites like DonorsChoose, which have made a great case study of letting people look at very specific requests for support, where you can pick a classroom in a particular school in a particular neighborhood and support a need like textbooks, or whatever it might be that a teacher is looking for. That's worked really well for their donor audience.

So it really depends on, again, who that audience is and what we want them to do. It may be that your audience is looking for that specific copy, so if that's the case, then it's worth giving to them. The question is, is it immediately available or it just available within another click.

And I think that's where it's worth looking at how are people interacting with your copy now and maybe even asking them through phone calls, through in-person discussions, or through surveys, more about the kind of copy they're looking for. You'd be surprised if you put out a survey, you're actually going to get some responses to that.

Rebecca: Excellent. Wonderful. Thank you so much, Farra. We really appreciated having you.

Farra: It's been great to do this. Thanks so much. And if people have other questions, you can feel free to either funnel them through Rebecca or send them to me at Farra@bigducknyc.com.