The Craft of Copywriting

Alastair Crompton

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This is an unusual book in that it contains a lot of useful information but is also very entertaining. Although it concentrates on advertising, many of the ideas it contains can be applied to copywriting in a broader sense, extending to brochures, newsletters and press releases.

Crompton wrote the first edition in 1979 while working as a copywriter at Doyle Dane Bernach in London. As one of the team that created the long-running 'Inch-War' campaign for Ryvita, his ideas are well worth reading. In the book, he analyses his own and other people's campaigns, assessing why they work (and in one or two cases don't work) and how the creative people came up with them.

Although there is background to the advertising industry and how agencies work that is unlikely to be useful to technical communicators, the remainder of the book covers more relevant themes, particularly for communicators in broad roles that may cover almost anything a business needs to write. The discussions of target audience and media are interesting, as are the techniques for coming up with ideas when you have none and for writing tight effective copy.

In his introduction to the second edition, Crompton says he is told by colleagues that young writers today have little time for the skilfully reasoned arguments by which products were sold in the past; they are bewitched by television and the drive to create vivid impressions. This struck a chord with me as I believe that technical communication sometimes goes down the same route. In my opinion, although overall document design is critical, emphasising visual appeal at the expense of solid content and structure cannot benefit the reader.

I would recommend this book to anyone as an enjoyable paperback at a paperback price that can educate while entertaining. You never know, you may discover you've missed your vocation and that you can write fantastic advertisements (sadly not true of me!).