Becoming a High-Tech Marketing Writer

by

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WriteSpark Guides for Copywriters

A Note from Janice King

Do you want a job that offers variety? Creativity? Regular opportunities for learning? Do you thrive in fast-paced environments? Can you offer excellent writing and project management skills and a keen business sense? If your answer to these questions is yes, you can look forward to success as a high-tech marketing writer.

This guide will help you find a path to this exciting career. You will learn about the types of marketing communication (marcom) jobs and freelance opportunities available, the knowledge and skills you'll need, and how to make the transition from your current work.

You'll also find many ideas and resources for further exploration. Of course, I recommend one resource as a "must-have" for your bookshelf: my book *Copywriting That Sells High Tech*. It is the definitive guide to writing powerful promotional materials for high-tech products, services, and companies . . . the book you'll use every day.

The information in this guide is based on my 20 years experience as a freelance technical copywriter for a variety of global technology companies. It also reflects the insights of other marketing communication professionals who have shared their perspectives with me over the years.

Start reading, start planning, and start making the move to a new career. I wish you great success!

Opportunities in High-Tech Marketing Writing

The marcom and public relations (PR) functions in technology companies offer a variety of job and freelance opportunities for writers. Many people move into marketing communications from other writing jobs. Examples include technical writers who work in product development departments, journalists who work for industry or business periodicals, or engineers who have written technical articles.

Technical communication. If you work as a technical writer for a technology company, you are in an ideal position to learn about the projects, processes, and players in the marketing and PR departments. Much of your existing knowledge and skills will be directly transferable to marcom work, but you will need to learn new document types, writing styles, and writing techniques.

Communicator in a non-technology company. Writers or marketing communication/PR specialists in other industries also have readily transferable experience and skills, but may need to gain

knowledge in a specific technology area to be considered a viable job candidate.

Engineer or other technical expert. You have the advantage of in-depth knowledge about technology, but you will need to prove your marketing savvy and writing skills.

Students. Studying in a degree or certificate program in advertising, public relations, marketing, or communications can position you for a technical copywriting job in a company or agency.

The Job Market

Every technology company needs marcom and PR services, whether provided by employees, freelancers, or agencies. When you consider the number of high-tech companies in existence today, and how the industry continues to grow, marketing writers who can handle technical material will remain in demand.

In the United States, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the number of jobs for technical writers is expected to increase because of the continued growth and technical products and information needs. (Source: *Occupation Outlook Handbook*, 2010-11 edition, U.S. Department of Labor)

Salaries

For most people, the next question after "Can I get a job?" is "How much money can I make?" A search of the Web site **www.salary.com** in January 2012 revealed that copywriters in the Seattle, Washington area earned a median salary ranging from nearly US$43,000 for entry-level jobs to more than $66,000 for senior positions. Visit this site to get estimated salary ranges for your location of interest.

The rates charged by freelance copywriters are also attractive, ranging from $50-$125 or more per hour. (Source: Peter Bowerman, *The Well Fed Writer*)

Employers

A variety of employers hire marketing writers with technology knowledge and experience.

Technology companies. Jobs and freelance projects may be found in marketing, corporate communications, public relations, and investor relations departments. Individual product groups or subsidiaries also may hire marcom and PR staff.

Advertising and PR agencies. Target agencies that focus on technology clients. These agencies tend to cluster in cities or areas that are high-tech centers, but may serve clients in other geographic areas.

Multimedia and Web design agencies. These companies may be small and independent or the subsidiary of a large, traditional advertising agency. Look to these agencies if you want to be at the leading edge of the communications, media, and technology fields.

Trade publications. Magazines, newspapers, newsletters, and other industry-focused publications need writers and editors for both print and Web editions. Trade publishers usually seek writers with a journalism degree and reporting experience.

Consulting and freelance. For writers with substantial experience, numerous freelance and consulting opportunities are available from companies, ad and PR agencies, and creative staffing (temporary/contract) agencies. Independent writers may specialize by type of project, technology area, client size, or a combination of these factors.

Just as technology is global, so too are high-tech jobs. Potential employers can be found in major business centers around the world. Many technology companies have branch operations in multiple countries, offering the opportunity to pursue jobs abroad or to stay in place and work remotely. Local ad agencies in a country may also provide an entry into international employment.

Job Titles

Jobs for marketing writers may be hidden behind a variety of job titles. Titles may be slightly different between agencies and companies, even though the work activities and responsibilities are similar.

Copywriter, marketing writer, or technical writer. Although copywriter is a term used most commonly by ad agencies, it is widely understood among marketing professionals to be synonymous with marketing writer. And although some people refer to all writers in a technology company as "technical writers," look carefully at the job description if a position carries this title. Technical writers in some companies do work on marketing materials. But in most cases, this title reflects a job focused on writing user manuals, online help files, Web content for technical support, training materials, and like projects. And unfortunately, technical writers usually receive lower pay and have lower prestige than their marketing counterparts.

Marcom specialist. This title is most commonly found in technology companies for jobs that involve marketing writing. A marketing communication/PR specialist is a staff job, working on many of the tasks and projects described in this guide. Depending on the size of company and scope of the marcom effort, a specialist may do a significant amount of writing—or none at all. Especially in large companies, a marcom specialist is primarily a project manager,

coordinating the work of freelance writers, agencies, designers, printers, and other production resources, with significant responsibility for managing budgets and schedules.

Marketing communications manager. A marcom manager typically supervises a staff, controls a budget, and manages the selection of and ongoing relationships with agencies. A manager may also be more involved with high-level planning and strategy for all marketing efforts, and less involved with routine project activity.

Media relations specialist. Sometimes called a PR specialist, this job focuses on conducting a company's publicity efforts through contacts with journalists, industry analysts, and other media outlets. PR specialist jobs can be found in companies or advertising/PR agencies. Writing projects tend to be limited to press releases, contributed articles, and other documents targeted to the media. Some PR specialists focus on community relations and communication with the general public, or investor relations for communicating with shareholders and financial analysts.

Localization manager. Companies that have a large international presence may hire staff or an agency to manage translation and adaptation of marketing materials to targeted countries or markets.

Web content developer, scriptwriter, and community/social media manager. In companies and agencies, writers develop or repurpose material for Web content. They may also write scripts for video, multimedia, presentations, trade show demonstrations, and speeches. These jobs often require experience in at least one of these media. New Web technologies are also creating new job opportunities, such as an online community manager or social media manager.

Tip: Run nationwide searches in the online job sites using keywords such as copywriter, content developer, social media manager, technical writer, and marketing to see the types of jobs available and their requirements for knowledge, skills, and experience.

What Marketing Writers Do

Technical copywriters typically write materials such as brochures, press releases, white papers, customer success stories, proposals, sales-related Web content, email and direct mail promotions, blog posts, and presentations. Specific tasks and assignments can vary substantially among jobs, depending on the size of the company and its marketing staff, your skills and interests, and the demands of the marketing environment. But most marcom jobs involve some combination of several activities beyond writing.

Agency-based copywriters must have writing skills for a wide range of projects, from print materials to Web content, video, email campaigns, speeches, and all types of online and traditional advertising. In addition, these writers must be able to write for a broad range of clients and topics, depending on the agency's business focus and the way it structures client services.

Project management. In many companies, the marcom staff spend most of their time managing multiple projects, with the actual writing, design, and production work done by others. In this case, the marcom specialist will focus on planning, coordinating resources and reviews, managing vendors, and tracking schedules and budgets.

Content strategy and design. As the Web replaces print for most marketing materials, the role of many writers and marcom specialists is evolving to the title of "content strategist." This role requires a solid understanding of the capabilities and appropriate use of diverse content elements, as well as principles for user-centered design of content and interaction on a Web site. Social media marketing efforts may also be part of this job.

Writing and graphic design. Some companies and agencies specifically hire writers for writing jobs. In this case, you may develop a variety of materials, either from your own original writing, or by editing drafts written by engineers or other staff. Small companies may want a marcom employee who can also handle graphic design and Web programming tasks. In most companies and agencies, these functions are separate and the writer, designer, and developer work as a team.

Sales support. Marketing writers may prepare extensive proposals, develop customer-specific documents, or prepare the slides and scripts for sales presentations or events. Some marcom specialists focus only on projects related to channel communications with salespeople, dealers, or retail stores.

Planning and strategy. Most marketing communicators have some input into the marketing and PR plan and strategy for a product, service, or event. In addition, they must have good planning skills to manage their own projects effectively.

Questions for Your Exploration

Which of the jobs listed here interest you?

Which jobs provide a transition path from your current work?

Which skills and projects are relevant in your current job or previous experience?

Who are the potential employers in your area of interest?

What contacts or resources can you leverage for exploring job opportunities?

Cultivating a Marketing Mindset

In order to write effective sales and PR materials, you'll need to think like a marketer. This means understanding the fundamentals of marketing a company, product or service, as well as the unique issues and strategies involved in marketing technical products.

Business management. Basic principles and practices for running a successful business and an effective marketing department.

Business and consumer marketing. Techniques, activities, and strategies for marketing a product to a business, or if appropriate, to a general consumer market.

Technical subject matter. The increasing complexity and rapid change in most technologies require that marketing writers understand the subject matter themselves in order to convey it clearly to others. You don't need to become a geek, but you will need to understand enough that you can build a good rapport and work productively with subject experts.

Communications principles. The fundamentals behind clear, accurate, ethical, and persuasive communication—written, oral, and interpersonal.

Business Climate

Marketing writers must understand other issues that affect the product and company.

The company's industry. What are the issues and trends influencing the actions of the company and its competitors?

Customers' industries. What issues and trends are customers facing? How are these factors influencing the company's actions and direction?

Related industries. Developments in semiconductors, operating systems, the Internet, or other core technologies may have a significant impact on a company's product development, competitive positioning, or marketing strategy.

General business issues. The current state of the economy, changing roles for people and technology, and the increasing importance of electronic commerce are examples of factors that may seem to be unrelated to marcom, yet may have a profound influence on company and product positioning.

Company Environment

You also need to know the factors that determine a company's competitiveness.

Stage of development. Is the company a start-up, growing rapidly after its first product success, or a mature company? The competitive environment is very different for each of these stages.

Strengths and resources. What are the company's competitive advantages? Examples include brand strength, a highly technical staff, access to development labs, or important business partnerships.

Problems and challenges. What hurdles must the company overcome? Perhaps the company is struggling to correct a misperception by the market, or to address the problems created by a product released prematurely.

Market scope. Is the company a general-market, major-share competitor? Or a smaller, more niche-focused player?

Competitive factors. Who are your competitors, really? Certainly the companies that sell similar products. But could dealers, partners, even customers be competitors in certain situations?

The Marcom Environment

Besides knowing the environment for your company and product, you must understand the factors that will influence your work on marcom projects.

Mission and goals. If your work experience has primarily been in a technical communication group, you will find some significant differences in marcom mission and goals because the focus is on generating sales, not on providing post-sale customer support.

Activities. A technical copy writer's tasks and assignments can vary widely according to the needs of a product launch, event, or competitive response.

Schedules and budgets. Marcom schedules are not always tied to product delivery. Trade shows, actions by competitors, and the company's financial considerations can be factors in determining types of projects and deadlines. In general, marcom projects are smaller and have much tighter deadlines than is the case with documentation. In contrast, budgets are typically much larger for marketing materials.

Audiences. Audiences aren't just prospects or customers—they can include editors and journalists, industry analysts, investors, distributors and resellers, and employees.

Media. Print, Web, email, blogs and community content, video, online demos, Webinars and live events—all are forms of marcom media that need marketing writing skills.

Processes and players. You will need to understand all steps in developing a marcom project, the roles of everyone involved, and the protocol for reviews and approvals of concepts, draft text, and final layouts.

Questions for Your Exploration

Which elements of the required knowledge do you possess?

What other types of knowledge do you need to develop in order to pursue your specific marcom job interests?

What are your resources for doing so?

Tip: See the recommended reading and Web sites on www.writinghightech.com.

Developing Skills for Technical Copywriting

A successful copywriter must cultivate skills that are general to communications of all types, as well as skills specific to promotional writing.

General Communication Skills

The skills of planning, research, analysis, project management, and interviewing as well as knowledge of communications processes will be the foundation for your work.

Planning and strategy development. As part of the marketing team, you will choose the best communication content and media to meet a marketing objective, then create a plan for developing, distributing, and maintaining them. For online content, knowledge about search engine marketing and analytics tools for Web sites.

Research. You will need to know how to find useful information or resources for a project, whether internally in the company, from a customer, an online search, etc.

Project management. This set of skills includes the ability to coordinate people and other project resources; control budgets and schedules; handle politics and personal opinions in the review and approval process; and adapt to changes as the project develops.

Audience analysis. Any communication can have a variety of audiences, both internal and external to the company. By creating audience profiles, you can understand the interests, needs, and motivations of each audience segment—and how to communicate with them more effectively.

Interviewing. Whether conducted in person, by telephone, or through an email exchange, interviews are an important means of gathering input for most marcom projects. You will need to be comfortable and efficient in handling interviews with subject experts, customers, and company executives.

Structuring information. Knowing how to present information effectively is critical for any writer who wants to capture a reader's interest and understanding. With communications media now ranging from print documents to webinars, videos, and podcasts, from web pages to blogs, wikis, and Twitter tweets, copywriters need

new skills in structuring information. See a detailed discussion in this content post from the Copywriting That Sells High Tech blog.

Multimedia insights. As communications expand, you need an understanding of when and how to communicate effectively in words and visuals; in print, online, audio/video, or through online social networks.

Publication processes and production. Most marcom jobs do not require in-depth skills in desktop publishing, HTML, multimedia editing, or other tools. Instead, content production is handled by graphic designers, a webmaster, or other personnel. However, marcom jobs do require strong PC skills, with proficiency in word processing, presentation, and often content management software.

Writing Skills

The writing skills required for technology marketing can make the work both challenging and fun. As a marketing writer, you will be expected to write:

Fast. Marcom deadlines can sometimes be expressed in terms of *hours*, as in the case of a press release that must be sent to the wire services before the stock market opens. Another common situation is when a product feature won't make a new release, changing the text in a brochure that is otherwise ready for printing or posting.

Final copy on the first draft. Most marcom projects go through multiple cycles of writing and review, but you won't have that luxury in all cases. For each project, you must attempt to produce the best and most complete work you can in the first draft.

With flexibility. You will often juggle multiple projects with changing directions and deadlines. These changes mean you must be willing to "let go" of text that you may have slaved over for hours and think is a particularly brilliant piece of work.

In multiple styles. In a typical week you may work on a very technical white paper, detailed updates to a product data sheet, then a highly creative trade show invitation. However, your text in these varied projects must always adhere to corporate standards for branding and writing style.

With power. In one way or another, your words must motivate the reader to take the desired action (usually, to buy your product). *Tip:* One way you've learned to write persuasively is in your resume.

For search engine optimization. The ability to write text and use text elements to improve search engine rankings is now an essential skill for copy writers.

Creatively. One of the biggest differences from documentation and most journalistic writing is that marketing writers can often exercise a great deal of creativity. But remember, exaggerating the truth isn't creativity. Instead, it can become the basis for legal action against your company.

Fun and Rewards

As a marketing writer, you can look forward to several rewards for the challenges and demands you'll encounter. Among these rewards are: a variety of projects, your byline on articles and blog posts (occasionally), working with creative people, talking to technical experts and customers, and, always, expanding your knowledge and skills. You'll often have fun with the writing process.

More flexibility. Marketing materials give you more flexibility as a writer than documentation projects that must adhere to rigid rules about writing style, word choice, and sentence structure. For example, you can use synonyms with greater freedom. Or begin sentences with conjunctions. Even write incomplete sentences.

Telling stories. No, it's not like writing a novel, but sometimes you can use fiction techniques such as dramatization, foreshadowing and flashbacks, or dialogue when writing case studies, contributed articles, brochures, or presentations.

Work with visuals. For most projects, you will work with a designer to create an integrated message of visuals, interactive graphics, and text.

Questions for Your Exploration

Which skills do you currently offer? Which do you need to develop?

What are your current resources, contacts, and activities for developing these skills?

Making the Transition

At this point, you should have a good sense of the type of marcom job you want, and the knowledge and skills you will need to do the work. But the transition path from your current work or studies may not be clear. Many of the suggestions presented here may be applicable to your situation.

For Employees

If you are already working for a technology company, you are in an ideal position to explore and transition to a marcom job.

Find projects. Look for marcom or PR projects you can write in your current role.

For Beginners	Advanced Projects
Data Sheets	Articles for Magazines or Online Communities
Press Releases	White Papers
Blog Posts	Showcase Brochures
Newsletters	Customer Case Studies
Updates to Web Content	New Web Content

Suggested beginner projects are often formulaic, meaning you can find models to follow among existing materials. Advanced projects require a higher level of knowledge and copywriting skill.

Find training. Contact local colleges and universities to find courses or certificate programs in advertising, PR, or marketing communication. If you already have marcom experience, but not technical knowledge, look for introductory courses in the technical areas that interest you or that offer the best employment potential in your location. See the Copywriting That Sells High Tech blog for information on copywriting courses.

Build a portfolio. Samples of completed projects are powerful evidence of your knowledge and skills. Collect and maintain copies of all materials you have written, both print and online, for your portfolio.

For Freelancers

Freelance copywriters face additional considerations for making a transition from other industries or other types of writing work.

Target your services. Instead of being an "I do it all" writer, clients may have an easier time matching you to their projects if you offer targeted services. For example, consider whether you want to offer writing services only, or additional services such as design and production or complete project management. You may also choose to focus on specific project types, media, or technology area.

Target your clients. Consider both companies and agencies as clients, but you may want to target by company size, geographic area, industry, or a combination of criteria.

Self-promotion challenges. Most marcom projects are small, with a short timeframe to completion. This factor means you will need to engage in nearly continuous self-promotion. You will face competition from other freelance writers, but also from ad and PR agencies. Although agencies can be a source of subcontract projects, they may feel threatened by your existing or potential relationship with a client. When you find an agency relationship that works well, tend it as carefully as your relationships with direct clients.

Learn More

I hope this guide has made you excited about becoming a high-tech marketing writer and ready to learn more. On the [Copywriting That Sells High Tech Web site](#), I've gathered the best resources for you—the books and other Web sites I personally recommend for furthering your exploration.

Of course, an outstanding resource is my book, *[Copywriting That Sells High Tech](#)*. It is both a superb tutorial for novices and an indispensable reference for experienced communicators. You'll find a wealth of ideas and techniques in this clear and practical book that you will use every day.

Don't wait! Take the next step for your success now!
Visit: *www.writinghightech.com*

About Janice King

Janice King is an award-winning freelance technical copywriter based near Seattle. Her clients include leading high-tech companies across the globe such as Cisco Systems, Nokia, Hewlett-Packard, SBC/Ameritech, Sprint, Texas Instruments, Microsoft, and Philips.

Typical projects include white papers, customer success stories, product brochures, Web content, magazine articles, blog posts, and content for online communities and social media marketing.

To learn how Janice's copywriting expertise can enhance your marketing and public relations projects, visit: **www.writespark.com**.