4 common pitfalls to avoid when working with freelance writers [Video]

Freelance writers are responsible for creating content that brings visibility to your brand, yet they are often inadvertently kept in the dark, tasked with unrealistic objectives and subject to shifting timelines. These conditions eat away at a writer's ability to serve your audience and achieve your goals. Here's how to help to ensure you're getting the most out of your content marketing campaigns.

"On-the-fly" is not an effective content strategy

"When a writer fails to meet expectations, it's not necessarily because they weren't properly vetted," Shannon K. Murphy, chief strategist at Shine Content Strategy, told Search Engine Land, "It's because the marketer [in charge of your freelance writers], as talented as they may be, lacks editorial leadership skills."

Having a clear roadmap for the content you want to create is critical, and an outside content expert might be best suited to make that happen. "There's just a million businesses out there doing content because they've heard they should do content – they don't have a content strategy, they don't have a content strategist, they don't have a content calendar . . . it's just on-the-fly," said Carol Tice, founder of the Make a Living Writing blog and Freelance Writers Den community, recommending that brands without a clear content strategy "stop pretending you're coming up with it and give it to someone who will come up with it."

Writing content and building strategies are separate jobs

Hiring a freelance writer when your internal staff is not equipped to support that writer with a realistic content strategy, keyword research and clear instructions is akin to putting the cart before the horse.

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Jessica Foster, Carol Tice, Heather Lloyd-Martin and Mel Carson discuss how to find and foster relationships with content writers on Live with Search Engine Land.

During our session of Live with Search Engine Land focusing on how to find and foster relationships with content writers, Heather Lloyd-Martin, CEO at SuccessWorks, and Jessica Foster, SEO copywriter and content strategist at Keys&Copy SEO, pointed out that expectations must be realistic, and that writers and in-house staff may not have the experience, skills or tools to put together a practical set of target keywords or content strategy.

“A regular writer is not necessarily going to know [whether ranking for a set of keywords is feasible],” Foster said. “When that doesn’t work, it’s not going to be the client saying, ‘My bad, I gave you the wrong key phrases’,” said Lloyd-Martin, suggesting that inexperienced brand publishers are likely to blame writers when their campaigns fail to achieve the desired goals.

Hiring a content strategist or outsourcing both the strategy and writing to a content marketing agency may cost more upfront, but when managed properly, that investment can save your organization time and money over the long run.

Keep your writers in the loop

“What I hear from the writer is, ‘I am sitting around waiting for topics and they’re not showing up, they should have been here two weeks ago’,” Tice said.

When writers are told to expect a new assignment but do not receive updates or instructions in a timely fashion, they may have to rearrange their schedules when that assignment finally does come through, diminishing their morale for the content and the employer. “Writers cannot pay their bills on that inconsistency and they’re going to look for clients that can deliver those topics on time, on a consistent basis,” Foster said.

Similarly, when writers submit content, they expect employers to stick to their publishing calendar. Holding content indefinitely erodes a writer’s sense of purpose and may prevent them from building their portfolios.

Respect professional boundaries

“Clear expectations around deliverables and scope are crucial,” Molly Conicella, associate director of community management at Skyword, told Search Engine Land, “Everyone benefits from having really clear assignment summaries so that there are no surprises (while still leaving room for creativity).”

Beyond scope creep, agencies and brand publishers should also communicate through professional channels (via email instead of text message, for example, unless the writer prefers otherwise) and limit their communications to standard working hours. “It’s important to see the writer as an extension of the team, so treat them as such,” Conicella said, “Value their ideas, their personal lives, their timelines.”

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