



So...podcast – Episode 10 Tom Valcanis – I Sell Words

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John: Greetings, John McKenna, So...podcast. Before we start talking to my guest, before you guys start listening, I need to clarify something. You have a business which is called I Sell Words. I need to clarify right now, and let me remind you, Tom Valcanis, you are being recorded. My first question, are you going to charge me to talk to me?

Tom: No, this is all complimentary.

John: Fantastic.

Tom: Yeah.

John: Tom, you've got a business which is called I Sell Words.

Tom: That's right.

John: Let's talk more about that. Of course, what's it all about?

Tom: I Sell Words is my copyrighting business, so that's content for websites, editing, blog posts, letters, resumes, pretty much anything that you need written I write.

John: How did it come about? How did you identify there's a gap in the market?

Tom: Um, I shouldn't say um. But um...

John: You can say um.

Tom: I can say um.





John: I'm not paying for them.

Tom: Oh that's right, they're free too. That's more of a grunt. You don't write those. So I was working in a not for profit organisation that dealt with sort of the internet related things and I was there for about two years and they overhauled their website and they told me to do their website copy. The thing is with that job, there wasn't much variety which is what I really crave in life in general. So I thought to myself, well, maybe I can do this for other people and make a business out of it. And from there I sort of started looking for other people on the side, other clients on the side, and once my client base outgrew, once I had more clients than I could handle just working as a hobby or side business I quit that job and started doing this full time. Yeah.

John: Really good. So I guess start at the beginning as far as you have a client, naturally you need to know what their message, why they've run you, why they talk to you. Of course it's not just done by phone. You got clients all around the world, is that right?

Tom: Yeah. So a lot of the clients, a lot of my clients are interstate. I rarely meet clients. It's very, very rare that I do. If someone says let's meet I'm kind of taken aback a little bit. Some international clients I have worked with but mostly Australian based, sometimes New Zealand but mostly Australia.

John: So as part of the briefing you do with your clients, what are some of your questions you're asking them?

Tom: Yeah, sure. First of all I sort of get to know why, what they want done. A lot of people say I need my website done, great, how long is a piece of string now? What's the design of it, do you have a design, do you not have a design? You can do it either way. You can design around the copy or vice versa.





John: I'm going to pull you up on some of your words, that's only because when you say the word copy, what does copy mean?

Tom: Copy basically means text. It's just the industry term that's come down from... I'll give you a brief history of it. Back in the day when newspapers were still a thing, well they still are, and written on typewriters, there would be a... Reporters would have a typewriter and they'd have a carbon copy. Carbon paper.

John: That's right, with ink it.

Tom: With ink in it, yeah. So they type up their story or whatever, and then they'd yell out copy and a copy boy or girl would come and take the copy and take it to the subeditor. So it's that word, copy, obviously we have email now but back in the day you would actually physically have this cadet reporter or young man or woman taking the actual paper off to be edited.

John: Another word to use was content.

Tom: Content. Yeah, content I think is more of a general term. Content is anything you see online. So you open up a web page, the content could be the text, the video, the audio. Anything that is consumable. When I say, in my view, content means the text on a page. But also I can write scripts for videos and audio spots and things like that. So it's really what underpins what you see online on a webpage.

John: A lot of people going along their own business and think they're doing okay, what goes through their mind when they say hm, I do need some assistance with this. What are types of triggers? How do you identify you actually go and get an expert?

Tom: I think when I first started it was a lot to do with necessity. They'd go to a web designer and it would be a bit of an afterthought. Like they think okay, their web designer does a design and then they say okay, that looks great, now where's all the text? And they're like well, that's not out department.





And then they'd either have someone in house or outsourced or they refer them onto me. So it is a bit of a value gap in so far that people aren't really au fait with what I do until they really need me. We used to do it all the time but there is a general perception out there that if you go to a web design company the text just magically appears and it really doesn't. And a lot of people that approach me, they have their design ready and they're ready to go but they don't have any text on there and that's what's holding it up. And as time has gone on people really want to have their page as discoverable as possible which means search engine optimisation, so ranking for certain key words on Google. So if you type in rope factory, your rope factory comes up first or on the first page as much as possible.

John: So in plain English what you're saying it if you use the right choice of words it's definitely going to help search engines find that web page.

Tom: Yeah it can, it's part of what's known as on page SEO, that means optimising the page to be as friendly to Google as possible. There's also off page SEO which is talking about links and all this other sort of technical thing, which I know a little bit about but I wouldn't say it's my core business or anything like that. But there's on page SEO, but then there's the second hurdle of trying to keep people on your page. The first hurdle is getting found, the second hurdle is convincing someone that you're the right business for them. So my real job is to keep people interested and get people to trust the website even though they've only been on it for five, 10 seconds.

John: Tom, naturally you've got your own style when you write. However your client base are quite diverse.

Tom: Of course.

John: Are you mindful there are certain times when you need t change your style to match that person?





Tom: 100%. So in the briefing phase actually I give people a questionnaire, and the questionnaire basically asks them what your business does and maybe some other questions that they haven't thought of in a while. Like what is their mission statement, who is their target audience, who is their competition, like really get to know that business inside and out. And for some business obviously there's a style that they're looking to push so I always give in the briefing phase a test page. A test page is three variations of copy or text styles, so it could be really, how do you say, professional sounding. It could be a bit more humorous or light hearted, or just really plain and very direct. So the client itself can say yeah, this is how we want to portray ourselves. So it's not just me doing one size fits all, it's really trying to find the voice of that client and how they want to sort of project themselves into the world.

John: Are there particular myths out there around words and spelling and grammar that you might want to give us an example about just to share? Because I think it's great that you're doing what you're doing and we all think we're plodding along and know our stuff, but surely you might have an example of something like that?

Tom: I think the big bugbear for me anyway, and for a lot of people is not knowing the difference between the your possessive and you're contraction. So Y-O-U-R and Y-O-U-R-E. It's just sort of accepted in this day and age that some people just don't know and don't care to know. And to be fair, if you can understand what they're talking about, that's fine if it's not critical.

John: Is that you being precious or do you think the audience pick up on that also?

Tom: I think if you're just sending off a text to your best mate it's not going to happen. I know my friend, if you're listening Aaron, it's not spelled that way. And you know, they're quite bright people but just the spelling of very minor words like that, it's not that big of a deal and they're not professional communicators. Which is fine, not everybody is. But if you see that on a





webpage it looks very unprofessional and people who, it looks like you don't have attention to detail. Which is very important.

John: Obviously we're talking about messaging, using words that are written down and of course there's always going to be a purpose. One of my favourite words is concise and that's a real challenge because when you are concise you say that I don't want to lose the message.

Tom: Yeah.

John: What are your thoughts around that?

Tom: Concision is everything.

John: Say that again?

Tom: Concision is everything.

John: Concision, what does concision mean?

Tom: Concision is to be concise. Let me start from the start, a lot of professional communicators, it comes from academia. Academia, if any of you are...

John: Excuse me, of course they are. All my audience are very smart people.

Tom: Of course they are.

John: How dare you even ask, very smart.

Tom: Of course. But for those who'd never went and who are the smartest people in the room who never went to uni, in my view, there's a lot of arbitrary word limits. So explain something in 2000 words, you don't have to. In the real world no one is asking you to do that. But in academia and university and things like that they are asking you to explain things in word limits that are just made up. And that sort of ruins people writing abilities





because they're thinking okay, well now if I use more words and bigger words this makes me look professional and intelligent, and it really doesn't. It really limits how many people you can communicate to. Especially people who have English as their second language. If you use all these big words and more words than necessary it just confused people and it dilutes your message. And you're just like why don't you just tell me that.

Sort of like there's a lot of corporate speak, and obviously there's a place for that, like legal speak and things like that where they're trying to cover every base and they're trying to sort of be a bit vague with things. But in day to day business, and I always go to this example of Warren Buffet, he writes his annual reports like he's writing it to his sister. And his sister is not an investor or a financial person at all but he says I want as many people to understand this as possible and you do that by using as few words as possible.

When I was editor of the Hysteria Magazine which is an online rock and roll magazine I was always telling my writers to use as few words as possible to say the same thing because you get your point across because that's what you're here for. You're not here to wow anybody with your vocabulary, because most people don't care. And we're here to entertain an audience and give them a story. So make it as entertaining as possible and easy to read as possible.

John: Is there a lot of history in the fact that on job applications and assignments you've always got that you must be a minimum of 250 words. So we've been conditioned, have we, to have a word count going on?

Tom: Yeah, I think so. Especially in school. Even if you don't go to uni or TAFE or anything like that. It's like you have an essay, it's like 1000 words or something like that, and then you go out into the big bad world, big nice world, and you think people expect these word limits and to explain things in long form when really it doesn't do you any favours. Especially people are struggling to read what you've written.





- John: Who are some of your heroes in relation to people who write words? Journalists or anybody, can you share that with us?
- Tom: Yeah, probably my biggest hero is Ernest Hemingway. He was probably the master of very short, sharp sentences.
- John: If people want to Google him how do you spell his name please?
- Tom: H-e-m-i-n-g-w-a-y. And there's also an app that actually helps you write like he did called Hemingwayapp.com.
- John: What do you like about him?
- Tom: As a man I really admire that he had convictions and he stuck to them. He went out there and got in the nitty gritty things. Instead of just complaining about stuff he went and fought in the Spanish civil war as a volunteer. I guess the modern equivalent is actually going out to help instead of just saying on Twitter someone should do something. But he wrote very good evocative stories, very personal stories, but with a very lean and very concise prose.
- John: Your business I Sell Words focuses on a variety of offerings to people. Content for websites. At the moment a lot of people of course are doing Twitter and very short, concise messages. Your thoughts on that?
- Tom: I think it's good. I think it's good to look at it in context. I think Twitter as a medium should be looked at as a sort of short little sharp bulletin of information. I don't think people should read into it, say when presidents or prime ministers Tweet something, they shouldn't think of it a detailed policy statement because it's not like that. I think there's a bit of a misconception or a look in the rear view mirror to think every statement on Twitter should be considered as important as a long form, important as an article or a book or something like that and it's just not, I don't think. I think Twitter dilutes, like gets in the way of real meaningful





communication. People put out their hot take, so to speak, and get angry and I think it's counterproductive in a lot of ways.

John: When looking at your website, Tom, I was really impressed, you've got a video there where you're very happy to share tips with people.

Tom: Mmhm.

John: Going on that line, what made you want to start your own tips?

Tom: First of all my friend said you should do it. And I'm easily lead. No, I'm not. And I think a lot of people, especially with writing because it's so linked with what we do now. If you think about even if you've gotten up in the morning to listen to this podcast first thing in the morning, which obviously you should do, 100%, you've probably read a whole bunch of things before you've actually clicked on to listen to this and it's quite likely you've written an email, you've written a tweet, you've written something. And I think a lot of people, I think there's a bit of a, I don't want to say special-ness, but there's a bit of a mystery around writing.

Like writers of this class of people who are specially trained or have some kind of esoteric knowledge that is inaccessible to the public. And it's not true. Everyone can write. There's actually a good book by Joel Saltzman, that's S-a-l-t-z-m-a-n, and he has a book called If You Can Talk You Can Write, which is true. If you can talk, writing is essentially edited talking. I guess putting out tips there's a lot of people out there who maybe want to improve their writing or have no idea how they could improve their writing and just putting it out there saying hey, you can make little tweaks that can really help you in your communication overall.

John: On that point, as someone who uses Dragon Dictate, which is voice activated, so there is that whole thing around you can talk, you can pick up a pen or typewriter, not a keyboard, but of course you've voice activated yours. You're talking and typing at the same time. There are so many different dynamics out there.





Tom: Yeah. I mean if you use dictation, awesome. Especially now I think it's gotten a lot better than when I was... well 10 years ago even. Especially AI driven dictation software. And this is another tip would be like if you have nothing to write about you just have nothing to report about, so actually sitting there and brainstorming is something we think of as something we do on a big piece of paper and we sort of talk to each other until we hit upon something. You can do that on the page as well. I think the medium of word processing, like you're confronted with this blank sheet and the blank sheet is daunting to look at. But the thing is that a lot of people write out a sentence and then they go I don't like that and they delete it. I think that's the worst thing you can do when you're writing something. I would say just do it once and, can I swear on this show?

John: Sure can, go for it.

Tom: Awesome. Ernest Hemingway said the first draft of anything is shit, so don't worry, it'll get better. Because back in the day if you wrote a letter and it was shit, and it would be shit because Ernest Hemingway said so, you'd have this two, three pages of handwritten letter that you have to throw away. But now it's like it's got to be perfect the first time, no it doesn't at all. Don't pressure yourself to think that. Anything you read has gone through multiple drafts. Don't think it just came out perfect.

John: That's right. You mentioned that in one of your other tips on the video about practice, practice, practice.

Tom: Yeah.

John: And I think if I can just, not so much plug what you're doing but obviously if you're doing this day in day out you are very good with your words. So as I mentioned earlier you don't need to be an expert in all things. So this is your gig and you do it well and you've got some great clients, people can have a look at your website. What is your website?





Tom: ISellWords.com.dot au.

John: So they can check that out and look at your contact details and emails. Tom, I've really enjoyed talking words, and thank you for not charging me for these words because I've made a word count on how many, there's a lot there. So I appreciate that.

Tom: Yeah.

John: Good luck for the future.

Tom: Thank you.

John: There are people who have different strengths. I love talking but I don't write. So it is a skill. Any take away you want to send to the world?

Tom: I think if you need help with your writing there's always help out there. I actually have a course on Skill Share and if you email me, tom@isellwords.com.au I can actually give you a couple months free. There's always help out there and if you are timid with writing don't be, it's something that comes naturally. And like I said, if you can talk you can write. So don't be afraid to get writing and practice as much as you can.

John: Sounds good to me. Tom, thanks very much for coming on So...podcast.

Tom: No worries, thank you.

