How to Communicate Authentically in Print

-or-

"Finding Your Voice"

by Paul Myers

A [TalkBiz News](#) Report

Introduction

One challenge I see a lot of people having online, at all experience levels, is finding their "voice." A way of writing that communicates a unique and distinctive personality, rather than just another of the infinite monkeys, banging away at infinite keyboards.

What you're about to read began as one answer to that problem. It started life as a series of articles for [my newsletter,](#) but I quickly got the idea that it needed to be more than that. It also needed to be put all in one document, rather than spread out as emails, and sent over a period of weeks.

If you're developing any kind of content that's delivered online, your voice is one of your most important assets. Let's look at why that's true...

The Power of Voice

Science fiction fans will probably think of Frank Herbert's "Dune" when they read that phrase. The Voice, which compelled the listener to act on whatever command they were given. A lot of marketers talk about writing as though that were something they could achieve via plain text on a screen.

Even if it were possible, that wouldn't be the kind of thing we're talking about. We're looking for the kind of written voice that encourages people to read what you have to say. Not because they have to, but because they want to. Because they enjoy not only your message, but the way you present it.

More importantly, the sort of writing that makes people want more of what you have to say.

That is, in a nutshell, the power of an effective written voice. It's what keeps people coming back, gets them telling their friends, and picking their heads up when they see that you have something to say.

It's the thing that makes them go, "hmmm."

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In a post on a discussion board recently, Jason Moffatt asked the members to list the people whose emails they looked forward to so much that they instantly opened them to see what the sender had to say. As usually happens when a question like that comes up, a few dozen names were given. There were a handful, though, that came up over and over. Those people have wildly varying styles, but they all have two things in common.

They know what they're talking about, and they're authentic.

Two steps. Simple, right?

Knowledge is easy. It takes time and effort, but it's something pretty much everyone understands how to get. You study, you do things, and you learn from the process. We all do it, all the time. Being authentic is the part of that combo that trips up most people.

Isn't that an odd thought? That "being yourself" is something that anyone could have trouble with?

That's another thing we all do, at least some of the time.

We'll get into that in a later section. First, let's look at something that has a huge effect on how people view content online. This is important because it tends to set the expectations they have for their own material.

The Race to the Bottom

The problem is often as simple as a lack of good examples. There is just so much bad content out there. The search engines are full of stuff that's poorly written and clearly not based in anything real. After a while, it doesn't seem like quality matters.

In one approach, it doesn't.

For many writers, it becomes all about the keywords. When that happens, they tend to focus on quantity of content, rather than quality. Combine this with automation, and you get to the root of the stupefying amount of stupid stuff that's floating around.

The bar gets so low that a lizard couldn't limbo under it.

To understand that completely, we need to think about the technology a bit. Not to worry, this isn't going to get into doing things with it. Just understanding some basic ideas.

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In the beginning, Net-wise, was the directory.

Yahoo was the big one. You listed a site, and real humans looked at it before it was approved, to make sure it was useful and in the right category. When Y! was first founded, it was possible for a smallish team of people to look at every site that was submitted, every single day.

As the Net flourished and more people started creating sites, the current search engine model was developed. For the most part, sites are now found by having machines "follow" links on other sites that are already in the database. This is called "spidering."

Here's the thing you need to keep in mind: Computers are much cheaper than people. They're also easier to train. If you give them the right instructions in the right way, they'll do what you tell them to do, the same way, every time.

The trade-off is that they're not very smart, in the human sense of the word. The guys who train them (programmers) do what they can to approximate human decision-making, but it's limited. If you know and understand the limitations, you can fool the computers.

It started with a focus on keywords. These are the words on your pages that the search engines use to determine what they're about. In the early days, they were pretty much all there was to search engine optimization. A few headers, watch your density, and you were good.

Of course, people figured that out pretty quickly, and gamed the system. *(Are we surprised?)*

Google added the number of relevant links to the formula, and link farming became part of the process. Then page rank, to affect the weight given to a link. As social sites became more important, they started to give them more heft in figuring out where to put you in the rankings. So, the social sites got added to the SEO tool kit.

The majority of this stuff has been automated. It is now possible - and common - to write a nearly unintelligible article, automatically post it to a bunch of directories and blogs, automatically add links, and rank well for useful search terms.

You can even feed one article to a piece of software called a spinner, and let it automatically rewrite the piece into a bunch of different articles by substituting synonyms.

You can imagine the sort of word salad that produces...

Every attempt by the programmers to simulate the decisions a human being would make is countered by adapting the strategy to show the computers what they need to see to rank you well.

It's a technological arms race - straight to the bottom.

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That becomes a numbers game. When you're talking about very common and important terms, actual humans create enough links and content that useful sites tend to dominate the rankings. It's very difficult to counter the impact of hundreds of millions of live people talking about and linking to the things that matter to them.

This is why smaller operations tend to focus on long-tail keywords. The content creators look for search terms that are in low, but useful, demand, and for which they can easily beat the competition using mechanical systems to simulate human behavior.

Getting useful amounts of traffic this way takes a lot of content. Generating that volume of content requires paying a lot of money to good writers, or paying small amounts to people who can count keywords, but who couldn't write a proper shopping list.

People who can't write well can get into the business simply by satisfying the latter demand: Crank out tons of dreck, and sell it cheap. Reading some of what these folks call articles, I have to wonder if they have enough sense to properly follow the recipe for boiled chicken:

"Boil water. Insert chicken."

The easiest recipe ever. But leave out some of the common sense assumptions that go with it, and you end up with a nasty mess. Sort of like the content these "writers" generate.

Lowering the bar through automation results in ever-growing amounts of this low quality content. And that's a lot of what people see when they search for things. So, that's what they think is acceptable.

Hey. It was good enough to show up on the first page, right?

That's the technical end. Like I said, not real complicated.

Then there's the economic aspect of the business. You have a ton of "professional writers" out there who are pros only in the sense that they charge money for banging on their keyboards. *(There's that "infinite monkeys" thing again...)*

For the most part, these are intelligent people for whom English is a second language and $10 a day is a decent wage. Churning out keyword-rich "articles" beats a lot of what's available to them in the way of paying work. So, they do it. And they get their friends to do it.

You can't blame them. They're delivering what's asked for, and getting paid for it. It's honest work, and they're feeding their families. The result, though, is what's called "human automation." That's what many people think they have to compete with. But if you live in most western countries, you can't compete on those terms.

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The challenge, if you've been thinking in this way, is to understand the nature of competition. It's based on two variables: Price and value.

You can't compete with the volume creators on price. Not if you live in a western country, anyway. So, you have to go for delivering value that's high enough to overcome the price issue. There is one - and only one - way you do that with content:

Reward attention.

The higher the reward, the more attention people will be willing to give you. It's that simple. And the reward is measured in how they feel about your writing. If they know they can do something new with what they read, they feel more confident and optimistic. If they're entertained or moved in the process, that's another feeling.

Style and voice are critical in this. They determine whether the person understands and relates to what you have to say, which determines how much they get from it. They also affect the way people tend to view your content while reading it.

If you think this doesn't apply to your field, you may want to consider the effect "voice" had on one of the driest subjects imaginable: Economics. Specifically, the influence Alan Greenspan wielded as chairman of the Federal Reserve.

Despite working in the realm of numbers, people paid at least as much attention to how he said things as they did to what he said. Greenspan's style was arguably as important as the substance of his decisions and public commentary, and had dramatic impact on the economy on more than one occasion.

If "voice" can be that important to the work of an economist, how much more important can it be to you?

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Your written voice has an even more important effect that is not often mentioned. It acts as a filter, attracting people who look for the character it represents, and pushing away folks who have a different view than they associate with it.

That last part creates a lot of confusion. You'll often hear and read the idea that you should keep a mild and "professional" (read: emotionless) tone. The idea is that, by not taking the risk of offending people, you somehow build a bigger audience.

In some cases, that can be true. If, for example, you publish the results of market tests, you might keep more readers for a while based solely on the authority of your data. The challenge is that most of those people will feel no real loyalty to you.

The first person to come along and offer the same thing in a more human and appealing voice will take away your entire audience. Your visits will dry up, and your subscriber base will shrink to the point where almost the only people who remain are the ones who automatically filter your mail to a folder.

The ones who stay and read your content will be people who treat your info as data, and the competition's as considered opinion.

The almanac or the trusted friend.

Which would you rather be?

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Then there's the idea that a strong opinion on one side or another of an issue will chase off part of the audience. That's usually true. If it's a carefully considered opinion, you won't lose as much as you think, though, and you'll gain a great deal in loyalty.

Worried about the "middle ground?" Don't be.

The people in the middle are usually there because they either don't care (which removes them from that issue anyway) or they haven't yet made up their minds. Those people appreciate strong opinions that are based on intelligent consideration of the facts. They may not agree with your conclusions, but they'll give them appropriate weight.

They'll respect you.

People with existing and highly polarized opinions will fall into one of two camps, usually. There will be those who agree with you, and will stick with you. They'll become fans. You reflect and strengthen their beliefs.

Those who disagree will not care much what you have to say, unless they perceive you as an active threat. Either way, they're not going to do anything to help you. Being "soft" on the issue won't attract them.

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I'm not suggesting that you necessarily take extreme positions. Faking a belief will always catch up with you. Nor do I suggest that you leap to tall conclusions in a single bound. Decision for its own sake isn't any more real than just faking a stance.

And you don't need to be a screamer. Most people interpret that as a defensive posture. Very

few of us make decisions based on the rantings of a person who verges on hysterical. The ones who do are usually on the edge of hysteria themselves.

One of the keys to being authentic is saying what you really believe. That requires clear thinking. That whole "knowing what you're talking about" thing. Yes, clear thinking can be hard work. But it takes you out of the arena with the $3/500-word article crowd, and puts you in the running with the Big Boys, content-wise.

Your style and your voice will decide where you finish.

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Before we move on to the next section, there's one more belief that it might be useful to think about. It's another one you commonly hear when talking to people about how they present their information. The usual way of expressing it is, "I write what I write. That's just me. If people don't like it, that's not my concern. I'm not going to be phony to impress someone."

That sounds fine, on the face of it. What most of these people really mean, though, is "I'm not going to make an effort to improve."

It's like saying, "Yes, I know that X, Y and Z are unhealthy ways of living, and make people avoid me. But that's who I am. I'd rather be sick, angry and alone than change who I am."

Eating better and exercising more isn't going to make you an unhappy person. Learning to deal with stress is good for your health. Addressing the things that make you lash out at others isn't somehow hypocritical.

Learning to be more effective in your writing isn't going to require that you become a different person. It just lets people see the real you more clearly.

Unless you're Dr Evil, that's not usually a bad thing.

The Elements of Voice

I should probably have titled this, "Everything you always wanted to know about style, but couldn't find in Strunk and White." The problem with that is, it's not really "everything." It's also a bit too long a title, even for me.

Still, I hope it will be everything you *need* to know.

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Up to this point, I've used the words 'style' and 'voice' almost interchangeably. Let's get clear on the difference between those two things right now. They're closely related, but not exactly the same.

In written content, your 'voice' is what creates a perception in the mind of your reader. It determines how they feel about and respond to you, and is the sum of a lot of things. It also changes across various pieces. If it's consistently authentic, it will give your readers a clear picture of you as a person.

Your voice is mostly determined by the tone created by your word choices and the attitude(s) they convey. Those can be tentative, moderate or authoritative; happy, sad or matter-of-fact; cautious, reckless or methodical. Anything that gives clues about your character or attitudes falls into the realm of voice.

Another factor is the context in which you are writing. If you used the same words in a forum post as in an article in a newsletter, for instance, they might be perceived quite differently. If the comments in the forum are in response to a particularly nasty post, as an example, you might seem quite restrained and balanced. Those same words in an article to a large group of people might come across as a bit over the top.

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Location is a relatively minor part of context, but it's important. More important is knowing your readers, and what they expect from you. A large part of that is defined by the culture of your market. If you're not a serious gamer, and you try to sound like one, you're going to get caught. You're going to violate the expectations they have of their peers.

That's the first big hint: **Do Not** try to fake another group's slang. There is nothing that tells your audience, "I'm a fraud," faster than getting caught trying to fool them with their own language.

That doesn't mean you can't talk to them. If you're a computer wizard, and you want to play in the gamers' market, you can. You have a shared set of terms in which to communicate, and you may be able to be a big help to them. Just don't pretend to be something you're not.

Keep in mind that people in your market have other interests as well. They usually have friends and associates who have nothing to do with the topic. They communicate with those people all the time.

It won't matter to the dedicated gamer if you sound like one of his Dad's friends, as long as you can help him get more out of his computer and connection. That's what he's looking to you for. Give him that, and you're golden. Until you pull out the fake slang, at which point he's going to start laughing at you.

Most people respect knowledge and intelligence. Almost no-one respects a fraud. They wonder either, "What is he afraid of," "Does he think we're all idiots," or "What is he trying to scam me out of?"

That's rarely good for business.

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Style is a sub-set of voice. It's like the clothes you wrap your writing in - and yourself. Formal language and long, compound sentences are like a business suit. If you talk like a skateboarder, your reader is going to associate all the cliches with you that they do with that group. And, if you talk like a Cajun, you're going to be seen (or heard) that way.

Ah gawr-awn-tee!

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Anyone who heard a flash of Justin Wilson's voice in that last sentence, gimme an amen!

If I had ended that part with, "And that's the way it is," a whole lot of you would have 'heard' that in the voice of Walter Cronkite.

I could also have used "Words to live by," "word up," "bet on it," "bank on it," "get used to it," or any of dozens of other ways to say the same thing. Some of them probably even more ridiculous than, "word to ya muthah."

Believe it.

Style is about the words you choose and the tone they present. Voice is about the attitude you choose and the character it conveys.

Long-time subscribers to this newsletter know that I can jump from sarcastic to silly to teaching tones without warning. A question of mood, not message. Those are matters of style.

They'll also have noticed that I don't hesitate to use the precise word that's called for, even if it might not be familiar to everyone in the group. Some people think that's pretentious, so that's the "voice" they hear. Others get that it's an issue of respect for their intelligence, so they hear it differently.

Here's how I look at it: If a common word makes things less clear than a less common word, the common word is usually the wrong choice. It's easier to look a word up in the dictionary than to try and get correct results from an incorrect understanding.

Using the less effective word in order to keep a few lazy people from thinking you're pretentious just cheats the folks who want the best information they can get. Don't do it.

Don't ever talk down to your readers. That's a voice no-one wants to hear.

I could give pages of examples of the difference between voice and style, but I think this sums it up best:

Style is about how you say what you have to say.
Voice is about who's saying it.

That will become clearer as you practice.

Let's get back to that odd idea from the first part of the series - that maintaining an authentic voice - being yourself - is often the hardest thing a person can do when writing. There are two main reasons that's true. The first is that people worry too much about being themselves. The second is that they try too hard to fit some image of what they're supposed to be like.

If you try too hard to be yourself, you're working at matching your words to the picture you have of yourself right at that moment. That picture changes based on too many things for most of us to keep up with. We tend to focus it on our surface emotional states, which aren't really what we are.

When those states change, our voice changes. We create confusion about who we are in the minds of our readers. Your style can change with your mood, but the underlying person should remain the same.

Think of it like listening to a saxophone. The same instrument can be used to play many forms of music, in many styles. The instrument itself, though, has a 'character' that is consistent and recognizable.

The song may change, but the horn remains the same.

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On the second point: Trying to be, or look like, something we're not, in order to fit someone else's expectations, is pretty common. It's a nasty trap. As soon as you want something from someone with different expectations, you try to be something else.

When I see someone stuck in that trap, I want to ask them,

"Who do you think you are, trying to please everyone?
Even God can't do that!"

Why would you think that people will only accept you if you fit a certain 'type?' Look at your family and friends. Are they all the same? Do they have the same styles and personalities?

Probably not.

Look at it from the other perspective. How do you feel when you're dealing with someone who tries too hard to be liked? Or someone who pretends to be something they're not, because they

think it's what you expect?

Ooops. The solution to this is, like many things, simple. And not always easy.

The first part is the most important: Any time you catch yourself thinking about what other people think of you, delete the part you just wrote and start over. Stop worrying, at all, about how you're perceived. Focus on making your message clear.

It's not about you. It's about the reader, or viewer, or listener understanding what you're trying to convey.

It's an interesting thing to watch. When you quit thinking about what they think about you, the real you comes through. When you quit trying to convince them, and just make an effort to be clear in your message, it's more authentic and more likely to be believed.

Stop trying to be anything, and they'll see you for what you really are.

Yeah, that may seem a little Zen. Consider it a bonus.

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There's another interesting side effect to this approach...

When you quit worrying about what people will think, and focus on being clear, you'll spot your own errors more often. In an effort to make your points more clearly, you'll find that your thinking becomes clearer.

That's something people notice.

As is often the case when I start talking about the thinking behind this stuff, it applies to more than just business. I think we can sum up the personal part of this pretty succinctly:

**How can people like you for who you are,
if you pretend to be someone else?**

Think about that.

Style?

Good news on that front: You already have it. A bunch of them, actually.

Think of the people you know. Do you have different ways of talking to different friends? Do you talk the same way at home as at work or at church or at the bar? Do you speak to your kids the same way you speak with your parents? Does your tone of voice change when your mood changes? Every one of those ways of speaking is a style. You don't need to learn them.

Ain't that cool?

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You may find that you want to "improve" one or more styles. That's a different thing, and not very difficult. Just takes a little practice.

Here's the process: Read or listen to someone who has a similar style, but one that's more polished or effective than your version. Note your own reactions to how they say things. The next time you sit down to write something in that style, watch your reactions to what you write. Don't judge yourself over it. Just notice those reactions. They're a Really Good Guide.

If it's not quite right, play with it a bit. Have fun with the challenge. Again, focus on making the message clear, not what people will think. Your style will eventually become part of the message. Keep at this, and you'll master that style. It's not an overnight process, but it takes a lot less time than you might expect.

Yeah. You'll screw it up once in a while. So what? The goal isn't to be perfect. It's to be better.

Keep in mind that perfection is a dangerous beast. **More people have failed while chasing perfection than any other prey. And there is no record of anyone surviving the encounter.**

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One of the most common things you'll hear people say when asked for advice about interacting with subscribers is, "Build a relationship. Make a personal connection." That's a lovely thought, but they almost always follow up by saying that the way to do this is to give them lots of free stuff, and "good content."

Let's get serious here. There's more 'free stuff' out there than any of us can handle. There's all kinds of good content on the web that we can get without ever having to deal with another human being at all.

That is NOT how you develop a personal connection with people online. You do that by being authentic, and by listening. Everything else comes from that interaction.

Everything.

If that's the only thing you remember from this report, you've gotten the main lesson: Be authentic, and listen.

Write Like You Talk

One of the most common expressions people use when teaching others to write for the Net is, "Write like you talk." That is excellent advice, but it's not usually explained beyond that vague aphorism.

Let's break it down into something you can actually use.

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We're going to keep this section relatively short. It's an important part of the process, but it's an easy one, if you're willing to do a little thinking. Well, remembering is more accurate.

We're going to look at 7 categories of communication that just about everyone uses. As you read each one, think about how often you use it, and how well it works for you. Also, consider which of them you tend to use when you're really excited about something.

I could go on for pages on each style, but that's not necessary. All you need to do here is recognize them.

They're already part of you.

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And the categories are:

Mirror: This is a person who talks to you in your language, about things that you've said are important. They use a lot of "you-centered" examples, and focus more on feelings than facts. A Mirror leaves you musing that they're a lot like you.

Competitor: There are lots of ways this style can manifest. The one we're concerned with is the mode in which the speaker or teacher motivates and challenges you. They focus on specific goals, and try to get you moving toward them.

Joker: This approach to communicating can be as simple as entertainment, or as subtle as using humor to make a point you might otherwise reject without thinking. The really good humorists know that there's a lesson hidden in every honest laugh.

Using humor in print can be tricky. Learn it, though, and it can be your best friend.

Teacher: This is the straight-up style. They tell you what you're gonna learn, they teach it to you, and they make you prove you understood the lesson. The thing that stands out about this group is that they have clearly laid out lines of reasoning, and they know exactly how they're going to explain things to get their point across.

Confidant: It might seem a little odd to talk about a broadcast communication taking this mode. How can someone you never really talk with seem like a confidant? It's simple: They already know your secrets, and they show it by sharing some of their own.

This is the person who really identifies with their audience. This is so strong that the reader or listener often feels like they're being spoken to directly.

If you find that people in 'real life' tell you things they normally wouldn't tell other people, this may be a strong style for you.

Listener: This one is easier than it sounds. This is the person who asks a lot of questions, and lets you pull the lesson from your own answers. They'll usually connect the questions to a common experience, to be sure that you're looking in the right place.

Storyteller: For some people, this is the hardest style to master. For others, it's second nature. The storyteller relates things he wants you to learn to experiences with other people or things. They use analogies and parables to guide you to the point, without hammering you over the head with the lesson until the very end.

It's easy to dismiss the stories as being made up. You'd be surprised at how often they're drawn from real life. Storytellers are naturally social creatures, and keen observers of other people.

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Any of those seem familiar? Maybe all of them?

Think about the conversations you've had in the past week or two. Which of these approaches did you tend to use the most often?

Or, consider how you talk when you're with the people who respect you and listen to you the most. Is there a different way of communicating that you use with those people?

Which style do you use "by default?" When you don't know a person well, and end up talking with them at a party or other social setting, is there one that works better for you than the others?

Yes, there is some overlap between the styles. Don't worry about that. The goal isn't to get you to shoe-horn yourself into one specific way of communicating. It's to make you aware of the ways you already use effectively.

If one or more of them seems to fit your usual approach, use that in your writing. It will come across as more natural than trying to do things the way your high school English teacher taught you.

If nothing really stands out, start to make a habit of thinking about each conversation you have - after it's over - and seeing what works for you and doesn't.

Adapt your writing to fit the parts that work.

Write like you talk.

Pick Your Places

One of the things a lot of people struggle with, even if they're already good writers or speakers, is finding the right place to make their contacts. This section, obviously, is more about those connections and building your network than it is about content and products.

Voice has a big role to play here, too.

Finding the right people should not be a problem online. Even the most shy and introverted person can find a useful and effective medium for their message. The trick is knowing in advance which one is going to work best for you.

Here's a basic breakdown of some social types, and the mediums they may want to try out:

Very Social: This is the person who likes crowds, and has to be involved with people on a regular basis. The one who feels at home and is welcomed and makes friends just about everywhere they go.

If that describes you, you can use any medium online. You're going to have the knack for finding contacts and speaking the group language quickly.

Test whatever looks good. You will probably want to start with the biggest individual-to-group exposure options, like forums and social networking sites. Your skills will let you shine in these kinds of venues, and you'll develop an audience quickly.

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Group Social: The folks who fit this style tend to do very well within groups of people they know, or with whom they already have something in common. They tend to have well-developed social skills, but they don't see the point in mixing with a lot of strangers with no shared interests.

If this is you, you can (and probably will) work in the larger communities online, but you'll tend to develop your own circle of regular contacts. You're likely to be more active and productive in targeted niche communities.

You may also find that forming your own communities, such as niche forums, email discussion lists and Facebook groups, is a more comfortable and effective way to find and communicate with the people you're looking for.

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Task Social: This is the sort of highly-focused networker who has a specific end in mind and will easily connect with people who can help them achieve it. As a rule, these folks keep their social lives separate from business, and are clear and precise about what they want and what they have to offer.

That doesn't mean they're unpleasant and abrupt, although some are. As a rule, they're the

kind who'll make good companions for a business lunch, but won't hang around for a long conversation when it's done.

If you're the "git 'er done" type, you will find it easier to work in places like Facebook and Linked-In, where you can locate and contact people who make their own goals and assets known up front.

You may also want to join a forum or two in your field, and do just enough conversation to be a recognized member. The majority of your work will be behind the scenes, using more direct means of communication.

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1-to-1 Social: This is the guy or gal who wants to deal with one other person at a time. They are usually better listeners than talkers, and will often look for someone else to be the public face of their business.

They tend to form few relationships, but those will be very strong. The best business partners for these folks are either highly social, or skilled at media advertising. This allows them to focus on the details, while their partner drives the marketing.

If this is you, you have some work to do. You need to know exactly what you're looking for, what you can offer them, and where to find them. Then you have to approach them in a way that gets them to listen.

Fortunately, since you're usually looking for highly social types, most of your good prospects are going to be open to talking with you.

After getting enough recognition to have a legitimate basis for contact, I recommend the telephone.

Seriously. You'll do better with chat, Skype or the phone than what will feel like more "public" channels.

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Non-Social: These folks are more solitary types. They don't want to deal with crowds at all, and prefer to communicate anonymously, through bulk mediums.

If this sounds like you, the thing to do is focus on a business model that lets you pursue the quiet you want, while still making money. While you can do this with content-based models, you're more likely to succeed using processes that are more in line with traditional direct marketing. Create an action page (salesletter, CPA or affiliate landing page, subscription form, etc), and learn to drive traffic using mass media and paid advertising.

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Understand, please, that everyone has some of each of these preferences in their personality. I've seen super-social people "in real life" who couldn't manage to start a conversation online, and offline hermits who were the life of the virtual party.

Generally, your online style will match your offline style. Don't force it, though. You may find that something different works for you when you're behind that keyboard. It may be a single style, or a mix of things.

Go with it. Use what feels comfortable, and what works.

I want to throw one major caveat in there for you... Focus on results. Have measurable steps laid out, and follow them. It is far too easy to get sucked into the time vortex of virtual communication and lose big chunks of time to what ends up being entertainment. That's fine if it's what you're looking for.

If you're online for business, make sure you're doing business.

Three Simple Exercises That Will Help

Talk, Then Type: Tell someone a story about something that happened to you recently, or something you've seen. Get into it, to the point where the person listening is actively engaged in the telling.

Later, sit down and type out that same story. Try and give the same sort of impact to it that you got when you had the advantage of tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures.

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Imitate Art: Grab something from an author you like to read. Read a short section, and ask what it is about that author's work that gives you an impression of them as a person.

When you feel you've got that pinned down, write something, about anything at all, that clearly communicates that aspect of your personality to the reader.

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Change Reality: Take the story from the first exercise, and change it around to give a different lesson or emotional twist. Change the ending, assign different motives, whatever you like.

Hey... it's fiction. You're not required to show it to anyone, or pretend it's true. You want to see the thing from a different perspective, and learn to express that perspective clearly.

Storytelling is the most powerful form of the writer's art. Master it, and you can do anything you want with the written word.

Getting There

Like everything that relates to writing, there are things you need to do to get really good. The first is to read, and pay attention to what the authors are doing to create the feeling you get from their work.

The second is to practice. There's no substitute for it. Fortunately, with voice and style, the practice doesn't need to take a long time. You're refining something that's a part of you, not learning new skills.

The third - and this is the tricky one - is to develop a consistent awareness of what you're saying and why you're choosing to say it that way. This means all the time - including regular day-to-day conversations.

You can consider the third step optional, if you like. It isn't strictly necessary, but it has the highest and fastest payoff of the three. The payoff for that one shows up in every communication you engage in, anywhere.

The Power of Quality Content

In an early section of this report, we talked about the "race to the bottom," and how many people are trying to build businesses on massive quantities of low quality content. That tends to create some pressure on the middle-ground.

Do not cave in to that pressure.

Here's the thing: Crap eventually ends up in the sewer, where it belongs.

As various channels get clogged with the junk these bottom-dwellers are churning out, the owners of those channels will be forced to clean things up. If they don't, they're going to lose their audience, and they'll disappear anyway.

Article directories will further tighten their standards. Google will make more adjustments to their algorithms. Blogs will get more strict about the comments they approve. Forums will crack down harder on drive-by posters.

The bar will continue to be raised. As it is, these effluent empires will be washed away.

It's going to be a long, slow flush. As it happens, you're going to see a lot of people whining about how unfair the various sites involved are being. And some, determined to play the volume game, will look for more and bigger ways to coast on the work of others. That will create even more pressure to clean the parasites from the system.

Wailing. Gnashing of teeth. Biff! Boom! **Pow!**

Like that.

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Now, there will always be people who want the quick, short-term thing. That's normal. And there will always be ways to work the web that suit those folks. Most of us, though, have better things to do than thrash around, looking for one new approach after another, wondering when the hammer's going to come down on our heads again.

And if you're doing content, there are only so many ways to use it.

Here's the good news: Quality content will not only survive The Big Flush, it can be used and re-used in a lot of different ways. And it lasts.

The majority of topics allow for content that is largely evergreen. Basically, it doesn't have a shelf life, and can be used over and over, for as long as you like. It can also be expanded on, or tied into other topics or parts of the same topic.

Quality content helps build your reputation. It gives people a reason to help you, since it helps them. It is an asset that becomes more valuable as it's used. You can re-purpose it, re-write it, and re-submit it. You can expand it, condense it, and combine it to create more valuable products.

You can also improve it.

If you start out with decent information and a tolerable style of delivery, you may feel that project is complete. Nothing could be further from the truth. Any product can be improved, as your writing skills and knowledge of the subject grow.

The thing that determines when a product is complete is not your ability. It's your market. If the need or desire still exists, there are still sales to be had from it. Those sales will not be hurt by adding value to the product. And the potential for expanding your business through similar offerings will grow as customer satisfaction with your initial offer improves.

Some of the biggest digital product businesses in the world started with a single product, which has been used for years as the introduction. The growth came from two main things: Increased sales of the initial offer, and additional products on the back end. All focused around the ideas in that one effort at the beginning.

Try that with bulk trash.

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One thing that many people miss in this business is the commercial value of voice and style. They don't contribute directly to the content of a product, but they can be very big factors in its success or failure.

You'll often see or hear people saying that all they want are the facts, figures and processes. They'll dismiss everything else as hype, fluff, trash, padding, garbage, nonsense and filler. But only until they read something that's done well.

By "done well," I do not mean that the content has been bloated with useless extranea. I'm talking about a product in which the nuances that look like fluff in poorly written materials come through with real meaning. Where the author conveys a tone that matches what the reader, listener or viewer associates with the topic.

And, yes, when the product entertains them.

People genuinely don't like to have their time wasted. They also don't like to be bored.

If you're boring, only a machine will get maximum use from your data. Human beings learn better when we're engaged and attentive, and that doesn't happen when we're falling asleep. We thrive on humor and stories and the personal touch.

Those things are functions of voice and style. Get them right, and you don't just have customers and clients. You have friends and fans.

You'll also have people telling you what a jerk you are. Contrary to popular opinion, that is not a bad thing. Well, unless you really are just being a jerk. (It happens.)

You will never make everyone happy. As soon as you get to the point where you're getting compliments on your work, you'll also hit some people who just don't like your style. It's

inevitable. That's why they call it style.

I have friends who sold 10's of 1000's of hard copy books before getting involved with publishing online. They ALL became upset when they started getting emails from what one of them called "the cranks." Some got angry. Others were emotionally crushed. Some tried to improve to the point that the insults would stop.

Sure, you can always do better. And doing that will certainly turn up the volume on the compliments. It will never, however, satisfy the people who don't like your style.

Trying to please everyone is a sucker's bet. You'll lose it every time.

Compliments and complaints go together in this business. You can't really be sure you've got it right until you're getting both.

When that happens, you've made it.

Paul

If you like what you've just read, you may want to sign up for the newsletter it came from. We have a good time, and occasionally even talk about things that can help you make more money online. (Okay, it's mostly the latter, but having a little fun with life never hurts.)

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Comments? Suggestions for additions? They're always welcome.
Send them to: paul@talkbiz.com

Finding Your Voice. Helen Keen explores the impact of a condition she once suffered from known as selective mutism, a rare anxiety disorder that has been described as a phobia of speaking. Â As Helen knows only too well, it can be a lonely place to grow up in as the quiet child is so often, 'the forgotten child'. It wasn't until Helen was in her early twenties that she managed to break the silence. Find Your Voice, Honor Your Expression, and Develop Your Confidence with Jennifer Hamady. Â î€Ž Online Course. Make powerful changes with your voice at your pace. Register Now. î‹ One-on-One Coaching. Personally work with me to develop your voice. Learn More. î€¢ Free Resources. Read articles on vocal and performance techniques. Read Now. Discover Your Voice, Find Yourself. Let me help you become the most powerful and joyful communicator you can be. Meet Jennifer. "Is it my authentic voice?" and "How can I let my voice be heard through the choir of voices that surround me each day?" To me, these feel like distractions in the true quest to unveil our voice. I believe there are many paths to oneness, and certainly many paths to finding your voice in a given moment. So many of us live lives of quiet desperation -- deferring our dreams or using the excuses of time, money or others as why we aren't expressing our unique gifts or our special talents. You know you're supposed to write but do you ever find yourself staring blankly at the blinking cursor? Never feel trapped with writer's block again. Let us guide you with these 7 super simple prompts that are PROVEN to increase motivation, heal heartbreak, help you gain confidence, and cut through the fog of your writer's block. ADD TO CART. Â A Simple Guide to Get Unstuck: Unlock Creative Power and Find Your Voice. ~ $99 ~. You have a feeling you need to write something.