

How to write the perfect sales letter

The sales letter is perhaps the single most effective way of enhancing sales in a direct mail promotion. It can be sent on its own or as a covering page to a catalogue or other promotional material. In the latter case, a very good sales letter can double or treble a response rate – sometimes even more. In the case of a single letter sent on its own, a well-written piece might (by way of example) bring in a 2% sales rate while a poorly written piece might have sales of 0.5% or less.

And yet, despite its ability to generate really significant levels of sale, the sales letter is often ignored as a major part of the company's promotional effort. While hundreds, thousands or even tens of thousands of pounds can be spent on printing catalogues/leaflets, postage, telephone follow-up and the like, the sales letter, which can make such a difference, is often written quickly by someone with little experience in writing sales materials - total cost, maybe £200 printing.

As a result, this most powerful of tools, which is capable of rescuing a failing campaign single-handed, can end up with either a zero or even a negative impact.

Sales letters come in three guises: the bland, the negative and the positive.

The neutral sales letter

The neutral sales letter is so bland and middle-of-the-road that no one reads it. Typically it begins:

Dear Customer,

I am delighted to enclose a copy of our summer catalogue.

There is more to the letter than this of course, but no one ever reads it so no one ever knows.

Sometimes there are variations – perhaps by including the name of the recipient (Dear Mr Attwood) or, as I increasingly find Dear Mr Atwood, Dear Tony Attwood, Dear Mr House Mailings, Dear T Attwood, Dear Mr Mailings...

It is as if the writer is not only trying to con me into thinking that he has stuffed his precious catalogue into this envelope himself, but he is also suggesting that I am so dim-witted that I will be fooled into thinking, by

having my name (or something approximating to my name or my company's name) in a salutation at the top, that this is a personal letter. I am so stupid, in fact, that the personalisation approach will lead me mistakenly to believe that I have some sort of relationship with this person who is so delighted to send me his catalogue himself.

The negative sales letter

Going to the negative sales letter, we find people who attempt to grab attention in a wholly artificial manner.

Such people have learned that a sales letter ought to have a headline in order to grab attention but, since they have never analysed what works and what does not, they then go totally off the rails and write something like:

Free sex and chocolate

Unfortunately I can't offer free sex and chocolate but now I have got your attention I want to tell you about the special offers that we do have at the Carpet Superstore today...

Misleading headlines tend to annoy. Funny headlines are ok, as long as you keep the humour going throughout the piece, but headlines that are there to trick and which (worse still) then point out that the reader has been tricked, are no good at all.

It is like sticking a stamp on an envelope instead of having a postage paid impression in the hope that the reader will be fooled into thinking that this is a personal letter, and will thus open it. That part of the fooling usually works – but the trouble is that once we realise we have been fooled we then just get annoyed.

The positive sales letter

The perfect letter does not try to fool the reader and does not enter a make-believe world of blandness in which company chairmen fill envelopes and then write to one personally, saying how delighted they are to be doing so.

Instead, the perfect sales letter, the sales letter that will double your response rate, does the following:

- a) It grabs attention with a powerful headline about 25% of the way down the page (just where the eyes go).
- b) It then opens up a debate, writing to the reader in the way that one might speak to an interested potential customer, using language with

which the reader is familiar.

- c) Having discussed the main point, it then moves on to the way in which the writer's product or service can solve the problem that has been raised.
- d) The letter is easy to read, using short paragraphs of two or three lines each, with plenty of white space between the paragraphs and on the left and right margin.
- e) There's a signature and the name of the writer at the bottom of the letter, with a suggestion that the writer (not the writer's colleague or secretary or anyone else) is more than happy to talk with the recipient if the recipient would like to call. (Not, we note, the impertinent reverse that says, having written to you I will call you in a few days...)
- f) There's a PS which says something that throws the reader back into the letter.

Such a letter might be 300 words long, taking up a page of A4 - and those who are uncertain of the claims that a sales letter can double response rates will now say, "No one will ever read all this!"

And that is almost, but not totally, true. The majority of people, having been brought in by the headline and forced to read on because the headline is so interesting, will start to skim, taking in the first few words of each paragraph.

It is therefore vital that these opening words of each paragraph should be written in a way that trips up the skimmer - giving a reason to come back into the letter and making it sound as if this is THE paragraph to read. Even if you never read another paragraph in this letter, read THIS one. Such a paragraph might begin:

"It is sometimes argued that..."

Or

"The reason for this problem is..."

Or later,

"The best way to resolve this is..."

The rest of each short paragraph might well be ignored by the reader who is anxious to cut to the chase. However, it is surprising how much "unread" text is actually taken in by the reader, and it seems more than likely that text within the paragraphs is read subliminally through the very short term memory.

(I should add at this point that it has been put to me that, if I am using subliminal techniques, then this is illegal. However, although there is an EU Directive 2005/29/EC outlawing Subliminal Advertising (which is defined as advertising that uses short unseen messages to influence the viewer without his being aware this is happening), it is a directive specifically concerned with advertising on television and similar media. If the use of short paragraphs, which people don't read in the normal sense but simply "take in" while skimming through, does make a difference in advertising (as I believe) it is not in any way illegal.)

The five types of good sales letters

Sales letters can be pitched in any one of five ways:

a) By selling on price

This is the traditional manner of selling and usually does little more than stress the price. However, although this is the most common approach, it is also the most problematic since it is the easiest thing in the world for your competitor to drop his/her price just as quickly. The reason for it being common is because it is simple - not because it works well!

b) By highlighting a benefit

Despite the demand that one should sell on benefits rather than features which is on page one of every book on marketing, most direct sales work on features. The approach which really works best in terms of sales, however, involves putting the benefits in the sales letter and the features in the brochure or catalogue.

c) By asking an interesting open question

Open questions have no set answer and cannot be dealt with through a "yes" or "no". Interesting questions make you think and ponder - they make you want to read on, even if you think you already know the answer - just to find out if the writer agrees with you. "Why not hurry over to our cheese counter and try some seriously strong Cheddar today?" is not an interesting question. "Which model of car breaks down the most often on Britain's roads?" is an interesting question.

d) By telling a funny (generally slightly surreal and unbelievable) story

The story needs only to have the slightest relationship to your business or product, but it needs to gain attention and hold the reader's imagination. It is by far the most cost-effective way of building a brand name and brand awareness.

e) By entering the world of feelings..

..and drawing the reader into a world in which he/she engages with the product emotionally. Cars, jewels, carpets, curtains – and even computers – can be sold emotionally.

The act of writing

Writing the perfect sales letter takes time. I started writing sales letters for the Neanderthal communities of southern France 400,000 years back (ok, I exaggerate, but I have done it for a while), and it still takes me several hours to write a page. If you are not experienced at this task and are not used to writing in short paragraphs which have snappy starts, finding a PS that draws the reader in and hitting exactly the right note with the headline - then it will probably take you a lot longer.

If you can write a sales letter that brings in terrific results and write it at the speed that you can achieve when writing a note to your favourite aunt, thanking her for this year's birthday present, then you are God's gift to writing and I will probably want to offer you a job.

The tone, the “voice”

Everything within your letter should be written to an individual – not a group. Never, ever say, “some of you will know that”. It should be written in a way that is not too far off how you would speak to a person. If you really do go up to potential customers and say, “NEW!” or “70% DISCOUNT IF YOU BUY THIS WEEK” then carry on and write to them in that manner.

But if you actually try to engage your customers in conversation, exploring the positive points of your product or service in relation to the perceived needs of your customer, then you are heading in the right direction. If it sounds horrible when you read your letter out loud, it probably is horrible.

Never compromise on the letter

The letter is the item within your mailing that can make the difference between win and lose. It is much more powerful than the brochure or the catalogue because, by and large, it determines how your recipients will respond to the brochure or catalogue.

What the good sales letter does is slow the reader down. It forces the reader to focus, to think about the things you want him to think about. It forces the reader to resist that temptation to throw the whole package into the bin.

It forces the reader to say, “oh, there might be something in this for me”.

That is the effect of the letter, and as such it determines your response rate. If the letter is so bland or so trite that it alienates the reader then the package goes into the bin. If the sales letter is missing, then, unless there is

something amazing on the front page of the brochure that will slow the reader down, the package goes into the bin.

Thus the sales letter is the most important element in the sales pack. And as such, why would you want to compromise on the letter?

A sample

There is a sample sales letter on the internet complete with an explanation as to why it was written as it was at <http://www.solo.ac/example1.html> - you might find it helpful to study this page.

Alternatively you can send a copy of your sales letter to tony@hamilton-house.com along with your phone number and I will call you back with my thoughts on how the letter might be developed to raise response rates further. Or, if you would prefer, just call 01536 399 000 and we'll have a chat.

Endpiece

A final thought, do not try to put illustrations in a letter. If you would like to know why, there is a lot of information on this and on all the other rules of the psychology of perception on www.theory.bz

If you want to know more about our mailing lists there are details on <http://www.hamilton-house.com/gateways/lists.html>

If you would like to read occasional comments on the creative side of direct mail, you can subscribe free of charge to our news and discussion group by emailing creativedirect@yahogroups.com

If you are interested in email lists there are details on www.yesmail.org.uk

If you have any questions, please do give us a call on 01536 399 000.

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