

Writing Letters that Sell

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People throw away more mail than they read. The sad truth is that most direct mail doesn't "speak" value nor does it speak "directly" to the target's motives and values.

Most sales letters are impersonal, wordy, confusing, difficult to read and improperly planned.

Properly planned and executed, your mailings will develop more and better leads, boost response to telephone campaigns, speed collections and improve account retention.

Although mass mailings remain an effective tool, personalized letters to defined users usually provide a better return on investment.

Here are some tips to sharpen three basic elements of every mailing – the envelope, the letter and the reply vehicle. The tips on writing copy also hold true for fax and e-mail transmissions.

"Mailing campaign failures are often converted into successes with one alteration or tweak."

People Judge Books by their Covers

Think of the envelope like a book's cover. According to direct marketing guru Rene Gnam, you have about four seconds to stimulate enough interest for the reader to open the envelope. Here are several factors that affect the reader's decision.

Secretaries, assistants, spouses, etc. may open and evaluate your mailing piece before the addressee. Eliminate first name prefixes (Mr., Ms., etc.), designations (CMC, GRI, etc.), middle initials and titles to enhance personalization and the appearance of familiarity.

What kind of envelope is most appropriate for the targets and the contents of the mailing? (*Regular #10, window, odd-sized, colored, etc.*) Consider your budget too.

Addresses printed directly on regular #10 envelopes receive a better response than labels. If you must use labels, match the color to the envelope or use transparent labels unless the label itself is special.

Avoid printing numerical codes and bar codes on regular business envelopes. They detract from importance, value, and personalization.

Executives usually perceive hand writing on business envelopes as unprofessional or cheap. Use hand-written envelopes when the envelope looks personal or like an invitation.

The response to your mail is often improved with a tasteful teaser or an outright pitch printed directly on the envelope. Don't lose credibility by printing "urgent" messages on envelopes that aren't mailed first class.

Stamps and first class mail usually provide a better return on investment when mailing to executives, managers and business owners. Bulk rate, third class and metered mail will provide a better return on investment when the mailing piece is obviously an advertisement.

Weigh a sample piece before you invest in printing. You might change the contents depending on the required postage.

Ensure that the printing on the envelope, the stock, the method of addressing and the stamp are of consistent quality and that they're congruent with the values of your readers.

Print "Return Service Requested" three quarters of an inch below your return address. When the addressee moves, your mail will not be forwarded but returned to you at no charge with a yellow sticker indicating the new address.

Caution: the post office changes its regulations without notice. Check with them regularly regarding this option and their other "return mail" options.

Here's a test. Add your piece to a couple days of mail. Would you open it? Better yet, invite trusted friends and associates to complete this test.

Tips for Writing Great Copy

1. Place action verbs in the beginning of your sentences (active tense).
2. Write the letter to one person (singular), not a group (plural).
3. Paint vivid pictures by using a thesaurus and a dictionary.
4. Be informal. Be concise. Use contractions.
5. Ask for, or recommend an action (a close) as often appropriate.
6. Arouse readers immediately with problems, potential outcomes, provocative statements or questions. But don't pose a problem you can't solve through their response.
7. Review & edit the letter at least ten times over several days to tighten and refine copy.

Make it Look Different & Easy to Read

People are more likely to read your letter if it looks different and is easy to read. Here's how:

- ◆ Limit your cover letter to one page. (There are rare exceptions.) Use separate enclosures for details about your organization, products or services. Print enclosures in different colors and refer to them in your cover letter.
- ◆ Print your letter with a 12-point font (or larger). Use larger fonts for older readers.
- ◆ Use serif fonts (those with feet) for most "body copy" - sans serif fonts for headlines.
- ◆ Avoid using too many fonts on one page! (two is a safe limit - never more than three)

- ◆ Incorporate pictures, drawings, diagrams and charts to gain attention or reinforce your message.
- ◆ Create graphics with copy and space by using bullets, indented paragraphs, bold face and underlining. Just don't overdo it.
- ◆ Always use a postscript (P.S.) to remind readers of a key point, a deadline, a special offer, another choice, another benefit or a prompt to read the enclosures. Most people read the P.S. before they finish the body of the letter.

The Reply Vehicle

Your reply vehicle may be a card, a fax form or an envelope. Refer to it at least once in the letter using creative names like: a pre-paid postcard, handy information request, postage-free response card, faxback, etc. Consider using graphics or pictures. Print the reply in a different color than the rest of the contents.

Never mail a sales letter without a reply vehicle unless you will absolutely, positively follow that piece with a telephone call within 48 hours of the reader's receipt. Do it anyway!

Offer 3 to 5 positive solutions on the reply vehicle; include a telephone number and an e-mail address. The reply vehicle may have to stand on its own as a selling piece. Often, it's the only piece readers will keep.

Remember

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