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On Writing a Sales Letter

SOME PEOPLE look upon the writing of sales letters as an occupation that demands a minimum of effort, but it is not so. This is one of the most difficult forms of selling. It is a job you have to think about.

Writing a sales letter is as creative in its own way as are short story and play writing in theirs. It is, too, as dynamic as any other sort of salesmanship.

Selling has not yet been reduced to a formula. Besides presenting a case, your sales letter needs to show sincerity, intelligence, integrity, good humour and genuine interest in serving the reader.

To succeed in its mission, your letter must do these four things: get attention, arouse interest, create a desire, and evoke action.

You may pique curiosity by opening with a statement of something new, or of something old in a new form or setting; you go on to show the benefit of this new thing to the reader; you give proof of the efficiency, durability and good value of the article; and you gain a response by making it easy for the reader to decide that he wants and can obtain this article.

Sales letters are one evidence of the change in advertising technique. A sales campaign is no longer a matter of blasting away at random in the hope of bringing down whatever gets in the way. We live in an advertising world in which market research, copy testing, and other devices thrive. A company needs to know before starting a campaign the market it wishes to tap, the selling points which will be most effective, and the best method of carrying out its purpose.

Because of its directness, flexibility, variety and economy, the sales letter furnishes a satisfactory medium for a great deal of merchandising under these circumstances. Its user can, so to speak, "call the shots". He can limit his expenditure to a few dollars or he can spend thousands, reaching a few selected prospects or scores of thousands of secondary prospects.

There are people who say that advertising by mail is unduly wasteful because much of it goes unread.

This is true only when shoddy pieces of advertising literature and unimaginative mechanically produced letters are sent out. They seem to announce at once "I am not worth opening".

The growing body of evidence about mail readership and habits tends to show that well done sales letters win attention and create a climate favourable to the writers' products.

When you write a sales letter which turns out to be particularly successful, you will find that you have taken these steps: you determined the prospect's needs, you described goods or services to meet those needs, you showed that the goods or services do meet the needs, and you passed along your conviction that your company's goods had superiorities over those of competitors' goods.

Vital in this presentation is that you address the prospect individually and say something that is of interest to him. You talk with him as you would if you were face-to-face.

What is salesmanship?

Selling is your presentation of the virtues in your goods or services in such a way as to persuade prospective customers to buy your company's products or to take some other action. To do this effectively your letter should be, above all, clear and easy to understand. It should, before trying to persuade, succeed in convincing the prospect of the quality and reliability of your goods.

Linking the interests and desires of your prospect with your goods or services is a fascinating game.

If your letter shows logically, clearly and fairly that the goods offered will satisfy important purposes in the prospect's life or business, and if it tells convincingly about the economy of the purchase, then the fundamental desire that is in everyone to want to own, to use, and to enjoy the goods that give satisfactions will move your prospect to buy.

Such a happy ending will not be reached without planning and thought. This is not to disparage inspiration and enterprise, but to say that fullest use cannot be made of sales letters without all four.

In planning a sales letter it is useful to write down something like an armed forces appreciation of the situation. What is the sales proposition? What is the point of strongest interest to the person you are addressing? What is the purpose of your letter — to make an immediate sale, to introduce a salesman, to sharpen up a newspaper or radio or television or magazine series of advertisements? What facts must you tell?

Most important of all is the question: what do I know about my company's product? The more a salesman knows about what he is selling, the better he can shape his sales story. The more a salesman can show his acquaintanceship with the qualities and uses of his goods, the greater will be the confidence of the prospect in giving an order. The prospect cannot be expected to respect a salesman who has not enough respect for himself to become acquainted with the products he sells.

This, of course, means going into the woods to scratch the bark of trees as well as standing off to view the forest in perspective. It may mean learning about the principles of design, construction, materials and processes.

No amount of writing skill can make up for lack of substance. You may shout your opinion about your product until you are blue in the face without moving a prospect to buy. He is interested in the facts, not your opinion about the facts.

Pertinent facts for the writer of a sales letter to uncover include these: How is the product used? Where is it used? When is it used? Why is it used? Why is it not used more than it is? Has it any new uses?

This sort of knowledge does not come from scanning catalogues or manuals or fly-sheets. It demands knowledge of acquaintance. But there is more to all this than fitting one's self to write authoritatively: one also learns to write interestingly. This can be the most delightful part of the writer's job: to go out into the unknown territory of the factory or store or office and explore it for sales possibilities long overlooked. They need not be big things, but merely simple things which make talking points.

Complete knowledge is not within the range of human capability. We do not need to imitate the poet in the story who, in order to describe a fractured leg had to go out and break his own leg. But we owe it to our quest for excellence in our letters that we find out everything necessary and everything possibly useful.

This includes facts about competing goods and services. To know what the competitor supplies gives

you points of comparison about quality, performance and cost. Comparison is the basis of reasoning. Had we never known joy, it would be impossible for us to identify sorrow as sorrow.

If there is no essential difference between your goods and those of a competitor, you are driven to the use of incidental differences. These, though comparatively weak in argument, may provide you with points of appeal if you do not try to blow them up so as to make them seem vital.

Know your prospect's wants

Your letter cannot be made to appear as if you were interested in the man you are writing to unless you make an estimate of his wants and interests. Frank Kingdon tells in his book *How to Master Salesmanship* about a list he saw in the office of a candidate for the presidential nomination. It gave the name of every delegate, and opposite every name there was a notation of the one appeal which could most effectively be made to him. That was thorough preparation for a big selling job.

The failure of a big percentage of all sales efforts may be traced to the fact that the salesman started too soon to talk about his product without connecting it with some specific want or buying interest. By emphasizing the point that is vitally important to your reader you set the stage for your presentation.

Personalize this to understand its importance. How are you going to appeal to a man of middle age who arrives home from work, shuffles through the mail, has dinner, and sits down in front of his television set or radio until bedtime? Surely not by writing about your wants or your company's superlative goods. You can catch his attention only by hitting his interests.

You are writing to help the reader, perhaps to solve a problem for him, or to offer a service he is likely to want. The key to the heart of the selling letter is this: "Why should he do what I am asking him to do?" Your prospect is hungry for facts that will enable him to do a better job or to live more happily: if you handle your proposition from his point of view in language which touches some of his motives it will be next to impossible for him not to find it interesting.

It is worth reminding ourselves every once in a while that human desires and their satisfactions form the fundamentals upon which all selling methods should be based. Some things that people want are necessary to their survival, but they also want things that contribute to their comfort and enjoyment. Some wants are natural, like food and water, but others are acquired.

It is part of your job to ferret out what primary or secondary wants are satisfied by your goods or services. Then you must describe in a winning way how the goods you offer will contribute to your prospect's satisfaction.

Persuasion is based, among other things, on knowledge of what makes men tick. It requires acquaintance-ship with human instincts, which are still, in spite of our advancement in culture, powerful in provoking us to action.

There may be scores of lists of the instincts and emotions, but most of those of importance to the writer of sales letters are included here: gregariousness (which includes mixing well with people and having social acceptance); parental bent; ownership; fear; housing; hunting; migration; anger; freedom; leadership; display.

Can you make your product appeal to more than one of these instincts and to more than one of the five senses? Then you have a powerful tool in your hand.

Your sales appeal

Some people say "selling argument", but "sales appeal" is better fitted to letter writing. Prospective customers who would enjoy crossing swords with you over a counter or beside a fireplace will not go to the bother of writing you, and your "sales argument" is a dud.

The appeal should be centred on the product, and not on the language or style of your letter, but both language and style are needed to see that the product is presented desirably. It is through language that you appeal to rational motives like financial gain, economy, security, and saving time; and to emotional motives like pride, innovation, emulation and social prestige.

Probably you will wish, in most letters, to use both forms of appeal. There are more and more good things coming to the market every year, but they get more and more alike. It is easy to show rational benefits, but harder to show superiorities.

Here is where imagination becomes of paramount importance. Selling is not done by disputing, but by using appealing ideas. No man of feeble imagination ever achieved real success in business, and no person of feeble imagination can compose letters that sell. Even to think up a dull idea requires a superior mind.

Imagination means recalling past experiences, emotions, feelings and perceptions and putting these together with a present situation and new facts in combinations of infinite variety.

If your imagination is working at full tilt you will express yourself with that individuality which adds so much to the pulling power of a letter. You will seize upon some particular corner of your subject, some particular slant on it, some particular degree of intensity in it, and make it all seem quite new.

As an illustration of imagination at work, consider the story of the blind beggar, told once before in these *Letters*. He found his tin cup filled and running over when he changed his "I am blind" sign for one reading "It is springtime and I am blind".

However, imagination must be bridled by judgment and common sense. What you intend to be picturesque may run imperceptibly into the fantastical and grotesque. Reason will tell you where fancy treads on ground where she has no natural right.

Imagination will enable you to think up illustrations that will appeal to your readers, illustrations which permit them to convince themselves of the truth of what you say. General ideas about the quality, use and merit of your product are important, but an example of its performance or an instance of user satisfaction speaks persuasively to the interested prospect. Case histories and experimental analyses provide powerful sales material. Comparing something unknown with something already known makes it possible for you to talk about the unknown. In fact, convincing by analogy is one of the most effective tools in selling.

Requirements of a letter

Your letter must be appropriate, accurate, clear, concise and complete.

Because you do not meet your reader face-to-face, he will form his opinion of your firm entirely from your letter. You must not be careless in your use of language, in your perception of the reader's needs, or in your appreciation of his position in life.

Your letter must be addressed to the reader in his language, fitting his personality. This means the avoidance of both stilted style and frightening fluency. Readers will laugh at the stuffed shirt writer, but they shy away from polished phrases.

Many pompous and high-flown letters are written that way because their writers are afraid to be friendly. They fear that they will be thought of as "phonies" who have assumed a disguise for the occasion. Being friendly should not raise this bogey. It would be a grave mistake, indeed, for any of us to indulge in flowery language that is foreign to our natural talk: but it is not a mistake at all to incorporate in our letters the warm, friendly, personal language that comes naturally to us in person-to-person social contacts.

Being accurate means having correct information which you write in an honest way. A single overstatement diminishes the whole of your presentation, and a single carefree superlative has the power to destroy the object of your enthusiasm.

People are entitled to demand of a sales letter that it give the best evidence about the worth of the proffered article. Do not, therefore, ignore qualifications or oversimplify a subject so as to make your letter misleading.

Being clear means that you draw attention to your goods in understandable language. Once you have delved into the principles, and decided the features about which to write, then you must turn your

findings into images for the ready understanding of your readers. Make sure by the clarity of your writing that what you say about your goods and services will be read with the meaning you intend.

Using language adapted to the reader, and words that are the simplest that will carry your thought, then you need to present your ideas in the best order. We are not talking about text-book prose. That has to be attended to for the purpose of imparting information as accurately as possible. What the salesman needs is an instrument by which to modify his reader's thoughts. Words are symbols, creating pictures in the reader's mind, and his reaction to these pictures has immediate significance to the writer. If the picture conjured up by a poorly chosen presentation is repulsive, that gives a death-blow to the hope of the favourable response the writer sought.

Business writing demands compactness. A letter should get down to brass tacks without being curt or incoherent. Your reader does not want to wade through sentences or paragraphs of non-essentials.

At the same time you must not economize on words foolishly. You should keep your letters as short as you can, but be sure you cover the subject effectively. Instead of length, use thoughtfulness. You should not hesitate to use a non-factual sentence to build a bridge between facts and ideas.

Completeness means that you tell your reader what he wants to know about your service or product. Imagine every reader to have a "show me" attitude.

Be thorough. Informative selling will give the buyer confidence and increase his satisfaction. It will also reduce the returned goods problem of your firm.

Style in writing

Writing is an instrument for conveying ideas from one mind to another. Your job is to make your reader grasp your meaning readily and precisely. The opposite of this idea of communication is illustrated by the Arapesh people of New Guinea. When some event of importance occurs, a birth or a death, a quarrel of proportions, or the visit of a government patrol, there are drum beats from hilltop to hilltop. But all that the signals convey is that something has happened about which the listeners had better become excited. Some of our advertising is of this sort.

The first requirement of style, then, is that what we write shall mean to the reader what it means in our minds. If we can achieve distinction of expression, directness, lucidity, dramatic quality, concreteness, and on suitable occasions some feeling of adventure in phrase and idea, then we do not need to worry about whether we have "style".

We must be wary lest in avoiding the foggy stuff which comes from the use of a vague intermixture of words, current phrases, hackneyed terms and fashionable expressions we fall into the other error: that of fine writing. Dr. Samuel Johnson said in 1773 — and

it is still one of the best rules — "Read over your compositions, and when you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out".

The tendency of solid business firms is away from all sorts of freak correspondence. They avoid devices which attract attention to themselves rather than to the spirit of their message.

Develop wide interests

The writing of sales letters is not an art to be mastered by meagre minds. Good letters emanate only from persons who can see and think beyond their own desks.

Salesmanship and the writing of sales letters demand study as well as experience. Ambitious letter writers will read widely, not only in business and technical literature but in cultural subjects — philosophy, economics, biography and travel, among others. It pays to be well primed on topics of general significance, because the more you have in your mind, and the better things you have in your mind, the more likely you are to bring worthwhile fusions of ideas out of your mind.

A broadminded man will have absorbed more than ideas about the mechanics of his job: he will have set up for himself a code of behaviour. The average customer is not an expert in the things he is buying. He doesn't know nearly as much about them as the salesman does. This lays upon the salesman an obligation to protect the customer, and to give him, if possible, something better than he would, according to the strict letter of his contract, expect to receive.

People do not patronize a store because it has Greek cornices over its windows, or because it puts advertising words together in more poetic periods, but because customers know that they get good commodities and honest service. Deed and word — what you offer and what you say about it — must march together intelligently. Whenever you draw attention to an attribute, define it: "Better" than what? "Newer" than what? "Faster" than what?

Checking the letter

Having written your sales letter, look it over with these questions in mind: Have I made my points clearly? Have I given all the information needed? Is my letter so worded as to place the emphasis properly? Have I avoided withered phrases and dead words? Have I eliminated excess verbiage? Has my letter a friendly feeling in it? Does it carry conviction of my firm's sincerity and the worthwhileness of what it offers?

The answers will probably be "yes" if you have studied your firm, your goods, your market, and your prospects' wants, and then written your presentation clearly and put yourself into the mood of your appeal. That is constructive salesmanship.