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Letters that Sell

EVERYONE WRITES LETTERS that sell, and every letter has as its purpose the selling of something: goods, services, ideas or thoughts.

Someone may say that a family letter has no such purpose, but consider this: a letter telling about the children seeks to promote a favourable impression of their welfare and happiness; a letter telling about illness is designed to gain sympathy; the letter that says nothing but "I hope you are well" is selling the idea "I am thinking of you".

Family letters are usually rambling letters. They would be improved both in their readability and their informativeness if they adopted some of the principles that are used to sell goods and services. Business building letters, on the other hand, could with advantage incorporate some of the friendly informality of family letters.

Salesmanship of any kind is basically a person moving goods by persuading another person that he needs them, or winning that person's support or approval of an idea or a plan.

Some non-commercial type sales letters are those that champion good causes, such as community welfare or health standards or national unity. They seek to influence the thinking of individuals or groups.

It is not a simple task to compose a letter designed to sell. Like any other product of value, it calls for craftsmanship. There are techniques to be learned, techniques of conveying ideas, propositions, conclusions or advice appealingly and purposefully.

In the beginning

In creating a letter to sell something we need to begin by thinking about the person to whom we are writing. A lawyer studies his opponent's case just as sharply as his client's; the manager of a baseball or hockey team analyses the qualities, good and bad, of members of the opposing team.

The writer must anticipate and answer in his letter questions that will occur to the reader: What is this about? How does it concern me? How can you prove it? What do you want me to do? Should I do it?

People buy goods or services because these will give them a new benefit or will extend or protect a benefit they already have, so the writer needs to translate what he offers into owner benefits.

The proffered benefits must be accessible and adapted to the reader's position, environment and needs. No letter is likely to sell sun-bonnets to people who live beyond the Arctic Circle or baby carriages to bachelors. We may classify a potential customer as a man, woman, company or institution that will have use for a product or service, has sufficient money to pay for it, and in whom a desire for possession may be created.

The reader's interest: that is the guiding star in sales letter writing. See his interests, his angle, and accommodate your stance to them. A simple precaution against sending a letter to the wrong person is to ask yourself what use you would have for the commodity if you were in the reader's place.

It is a good rule to spend more time thinking about the reader than about what you have to say. Otherwise you may become wrapped up in the virtues of your product so that you forget that the decision to buy rests with your prospect.

The self-interest of the person to whom you write is a major factor to consider in successful sales communication. When you remember it you give the impression that you have singled out this reader as being an important individual, and that is an excellent introduction.

It is not to be expected that the writer of letters that sell will know every person to whom he writes, but he must know certain facts: approximate income and age, occupational level, his business, and things like that. Then he is able to slant his sales points accurately toward the reader's needs, interests and purchasing power.

Know your product

The reader's attention should be attracted to the product or service, not to the grand style or picturesque phraseology of your letter. When you catch a person's

attention you are focusing his consciousness on something. Concentrate on your commodity. The best magnet to draw and hold attention is what you say about the product, showing it to be useful and the means of fulfilling a desire.

It is no small accomplishment to analyse and marshal into order the facts about a product so as to win the thoughtful consideration of a person who has plenty of other things on his mind.

In purchasing almost any sort of commodity the buyer has a choice between what you are offering and what others are selling. Your sales job is to show the superiority of your product. Tell why what you offer is necessary or desirable, what it will accomplish in your reader's business, and how it can be fitted into his present layout and his plans. Do not content yourself with telling about the article as it sits on display: picture it in use in the reader's home or factory.

Your letter needs to convey the assurance that you are telling the truth about your goods. It is not a sensational offer that makes a letter convincing, but the feeling that the reader can depend upon what is said. He should feel assured that he will be buying what he thinks he is buying. Customer dissatisfaction caused by misleading sales talk can cause shock waves that affect the whole selling organization.

Let your personality show

Make your letter sound friendly and human: put your personality on paper. Your letter is you speaking. Some of the features in your personality that you can display are: friendliness, knowledge, keen-mindedness, trustworthiness and interest in the prospect's welfare.

What you have in your mind about the good quality, appearance and usefulness of your product has to be communicated to your reader so as to arouse his interest, create a desire to possess, and induce him to buy.

Communication is not the easiest thing in the world to attain in writing, in art, or in music. Dr. Rollo May wrote in *Man's Search for Himself*: "We find in modern art and modern music a language which does not communicate. If most people, even intelligent ones, look at modern art without knowing the esoteric key, they can understand practically nothing."

It is not enough to write something so that it can be read. The degree to which communication occurs depends upon the degree to which the words represent the same thing for the reader as they do for the writer.

The recipient of a letter that is not clear is likely to blame its opacity on the lack of intelligence of the writer.

The art of composing sales letters is not one to be mastered by minds in which there is only a meagre store of knowledge and memories.

The art consists in having many mental references and associating them with new thoughts. Consider a poem. Its theme will likely have arisen from a single

event, but the images used in its construction will have been drawn from the total life experience of the poet.

Put some flavour into your letters so that they taste good. Your letter will not be like anyone else's. That is a virtue, just as being an individual is a virtue in conversation. Who wishes to be a carbon copy of a textbook letter or to parrot phrases that other people use?

Practise talking on paper as if you were on the telephone. First write down the imagined questions asked by the person on the other end of the line and then your answers, given in simple, direct and pleasing words. To humanize your letters in this way with the natural idiom of conversation does not mean that you use cheap slang or clever verbal stunting.

Show some style

The style in which you write is not a casual feature of your letter. It is vital to your reader's understanding of what you are saying to him. It is not your job to please the reader's sense of the aesthetic, but to tell and explain plainly what is necessary to introduce your goods or your idea to his favourable attention. This may be done in a way that has grace and comeliness.

Never "talk down" to a reader. Make him feel that he knows a great deal, but here is something he may have missed. There is a big difference, when trying to build business, between making a suggestion and preaching a sermon.

It is highly important in writing a letter to sell something that it should be appropriate. Whatever your writing style may be, it will fit the occasion if it gives this particular correspondent information that will be useful to him, conveys to him a feeling of your interest in him and his business, and assures him of your goodwill.

Besides being grammatically correct, language should be suitable. At one extreme of unsuitability is the language that is too pompous for its load, and at the other is the language of the street which belittles the receiver's intellectual level.

Your words should be the most expressive for their purpose that the language affords, unobstructed by specialty jargon, and your sentences should be shaken free of adjectives — the most tempting of forbidden fruit to a person describing something.

Properly chosen words will convey your appreciation of the addressee as a person, and such friendliness is contagious. Some people are afraid to be friendly in their letters. They fear they will be thought of as "phonies" who have disguised themselves as Santa Claus for the occasion. Being friendly and showing it should not raise this scarecrow. It would be a grave mistake, indeed, for any of us to indulge in flowery language foreign to our natural talk; but it is no mistake at all to incorporate in our letters the warm, personal language that comes naturally to us in person-to-person social contacts.

Letter writing invites us to use the same etiquette as we use in courteous conversation. We look at the person with whom we are talking, converse on his level of understanding, speak gently, and discuss matters he considers important or interesting.

What the reader of your letter will notice is not its normal courtesy, but the extra touch that demonstrates care and understanding, a genuine interest in the reader's wants, a wish to do what is best for him, and the knowledge you show of how it can be done.

Everyone who writes a letter has a moral as well as a business reason to be intelligible. He is placing his reader under an obligation to spend time reading the letter, and to waste that time is to intrude upon his life plan.

There is an eloquence of the written as well as of the spoken word. It consists in adapting a statement to the receptive system of the reader so that he will have maximum help against confusion, against mistaking what is incidental from what is fundamental. A familiar device to use in this effort is to relate the new commodity you are offering to something that is familiar.

Use suitable formulas

There are formulas you may wish to make use of. Your letter must conform in some respects to what letters are expected to be. This does not mean pouring all letters into the same mould. Within the accepted pattern you are free to develop your talent for expression.

Skill is needed in the use of formulas. A form letter reveals itself to the reader and gets short shrift. It is possible to make use of the form as a guide to what points to cover, and then speak your piece on paper in a natural way.

Here are three formulas for letters. The first may be called the sales formula, the second the logical formula, and the third the rhetorical formula.

(1) Get attention, provoke interest, rouse desire, obtain decision. Attention is curiosity fixed on something; interest is understanding of the nature and extent of what is new and its relationship to what is old; desire is the wish to take advantage of the proffered benefits; decision is based on confidence in what the writer says about his goods.

(2) This is summarized: general, specific, conclusion. You start with a statement so broad and authoritative that it will not be disputed; you show that the general idea includes a specific idea; the conclusion is that what has been said about the general idea is also true of the specific.

(3) This is very simple: picture, promise, prove, push. You write an attractive description of what you are selling; you promise that it will serve the reader well in such-and-such a way; you give examples of the commodity in use, proving that it has utility and worth; you urge the reader to take advantage of the promised values.

Selling needs ideas

Selling is done with ideas, so never throw away an idea even if it is of no use at the moment. Put it into your idea file where it will rub against other ideas and perhaps produce something new. The file is like an incubator. Thoughts and fancies you put into it will hatch out projects and plans.

Imagination helps in this operation. A correspondent of ordinary ability may never write anything that is not absolutely accurate and yet fail to interest his readers. This is a real weakness: to be perfect as to form but lacking in imagination and ideas.

Imagination should be given priority over judgment in preparing your first draft of a letter designed to sell. Then put reason to work: delete what is unnecessary, marshal your sentences into logical form so that your ideas advance in an orderly way; revise your words so that your thought is conveyed exactly as you wish it to be.

When you tell the advantages of your product or service or idea, and show how it will fill a need in the reader's life or job, in clear, truthful words placed in easily understood sentences brightened by ideas and imagination, you have done a good job of writing a sales letter.

Desire of the reader to do what you want done is created, just as in conversation, by both rational and emotional means, by proof and by persuasion, by giving reasons. Some goods and some buyers need nothing more than facts. An office manager buying pencils or pens for his staff will respond to an informative, factual, statistical sales letter. He is already sold on the idea of using pencils and pens, so you do not have to coach him about their usefulness: in fact, you may lose a sale if you give the impression of "teaching grandmother to suck eggs". What is needed is to catch his attention, give pertinent information about your product, and show him why buying from you will be profitable to him.

Try to make the information you give really enlightening. Comparing something unknown with something already known makes it possible to talk about the unknown. The analogy (like that between the heart and a pump) can be used as an aid in reasoning and in explaining or demonstrating.

The soft sell

The tone of a letter designed to sell something should be persuasive rather than insistent. It should seek to create a feeling of wanting, or at least an urge to "let's see".

People do not want to be told how to run their affairs, but anyone who shows them how to do things more economically or faster or better will find keen listeners. Soft sell gives the prospect credit for knowing a good thing when it is shown him, and acknowledges his right to make up his own mind.

The soft sell is recognition of the Missouri mule in human nature. Try to push a mule and he lashes out with his heels. Try to pull him by the halter rope and he braces his legs and defies you to budge him. "In the old cavalry," says A. C. Kemble in *Building Horsepower into Sales Letters*, "they said all it took to get a mule working for you was to recognize that he was an individualist who hated nagging and needed a chance to make up his own mind about things."

One hears a lot in advertising circles about "appeal". It is, according to the dictionary, "the power to attract, interest, amuse, or stimulate the mind or emotions."

Obviously, when you wish to influence someone you must take into account the kind of person you are addressing and what you want him to do. Your appeal must touch his feelings, needs and emotions. It strengthens your position if you can relate your own experience to that of the person you are addressing and write your message around the overlap of that experience.

The sort of mistake to be avoided with great care is slanting your appeal in a way that runs counter to the feelings of those whom you wish to influence.

It has been found in recent years that the advertising messages addressed to older people *as* older people did not win the desired response. In travel, for example, only a very small minority who want or need a sheltered situation are attracted by the semi-custodial "trips for the elderly".

The Swiss Society for Market Research decided that "to sell anything to the over-65 age group it is important to keep one concept in mind: most senior citizens are vigorous and independent. Don't try to reach them with a head-on approach to the senior market. It probably won't work."

Writing a letter that pleases the recipient is not enough: it must be designed to lead to action. Do not fear to be explicit about what you want. Coyness in a letter is not attractive, and it exasperates the reader. Answer the reader's questions: "What has this to do with me?" and "Why should I do what this person is asking me to do?"

You may answer these questions and encourage a purchase by appealing to emotional motives like pride, innovation, emulation, or social prestige; or to rational motives like money gain, economy, security, time-saving or safety.

Read your letter critically

Imagine your letter to be your garden upon your return from vacation. You have to get into it and prune, clean up, tie up, and trim the edges.

Read the letter as if you were the recipient. How does it strike you? What can be added to attract attention? Is there anything irrelevant in it? Read the letter aloud to capture the conversational rhythm.

If you are not satisfied, do not crumple up the paper on which your draft is written. Try rearranging the paragraphs, the sentences, the words. Give the letter a new twist. Change the shape of your appeal. Delete anything that is distracting.

Be careful when trying to shorten a letter that seems to be too long. While a letter should be as short as possible, consistent with clearness and completeness, it is not the length that counts, but the depth. Since clearness and brevity sometimes get in the way of each other, remember that the right of way belongs to clearness. It will make a good impression if you find occasion to write: "I can be quite brief because this letter deals with a topic already well known to you."

The end of your letter, like the end of your pencil, should have a point. It should answer the reader's natural question: "So what?"

Follow through

Do not let your customer forget you. When you produce a piece of copy that hits the bull's-eye, that is not the time to sit back and take things easy. It is a time to imagine what you would do if you were in your competitor's chair . . . and then do it first.

Competition is a fact of life. Wherever there are two wild animals trying to live on the same piece of land or two persons depending upon the same source of sustenance, there is competition. The customer who was a prospect to you before he bought your goods is now a prospect to your competitor. With the proper follow-through attention he will turn to you when he needs up-dating of equipment or new goods.

Writing a letter that sells goods or ideas, and following through so as to retain the customer, requires just as much specialized talent and mental ability as any other kind of advertising, if not more.

When you run into difficulties, composition of the sales or follow-up letter may give you a feeling of confusion. You may feel like throwing up your hands in despair of finding the exactly right slant or the perfect array of words. That is not unnatural. Nietzsche, the German philosopher, said in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "I tell you, one must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star."

The effort is worthwhile. When you set yourself to snap out of the depressing pedestrian type of letter that is so commonplace, you are raising yourself and your firm to a place where people will sit up and pay attention. As a student of sales letter writing you will generate ideas, as a philosopher you will assess the letters as to their purpose and usefulness, and as a writer you will energize them.

To summarize: the backbone of the principles of writing letters that sell is made up of these vertebrae — know why you are writing and what about; believe in what you are writing; be tactful and friendly and truthful; base your appeal on the prospect's interests . . . and check your letter and revise it.