

Sales Letters that Sell!

by

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The average consumer is inundated with sales pitches. So if you're selling a product or service to today's ad weary consumer, if you want your sales letters to get results, you'll need a step-by-step plan that breaks down the barriers to buying. A plan that bypasses the head and goes right for the heart.

If the heart's in it, the brain will follow.

Buying anything is largely emotional. Whether it's paper clips or plain paper copiers, emotions lead the purchase. Facts, specs and the like are simply used to justify the decision, once made. Which means that everything about your sales letter, every sentence, every phrase must appeal to your customer's emotions.

What emotions?

The simple truth is, there are only two emotions that really motivate people: The promise of gain or the fear of loss--with the fear of loss being the stronger.

Example: Given the choice of headlines: "Save money in legal fees." Or "How to keep from being sued." The latter will probably get a better response.

Supporting the promise of gain and the fear of loss are seven key emotional hooks or basic human needs. No matter what your product or service, to be effective, your sales letter must directly address as many of these basic needs as possible:

- Safety/Security
- Wealth
- Good looks
- Popularity
- Self-satisfaction
- Free time
- Fun/Excitement

Okay, so how do you get them to act? How do you go from head to heart? What's the copy paradigm? Imagine you're in a baseball stadium facing an audience in rows of bleachers. It's the game of the century, ninth inning, bases loaded. And you've got a bag of peanuts you absolutely must sell or the boss will fire you on the spot. What would you do to get their attention? Yell "Peanuts?"

Start with a verbal “2x4”

You’ve got to hit them over the head with an emotional motivator. And that means you start with the envelope. Remember-- gain or loss--it has to be right there on the outside, in bold. (When was the last time you rushed to open a plain white envelope?)

Two examples:

Gain-- “We Put a Money-Making Miracle in this Envelope.”

Loss-- “Throw This Away and Work Hard for the Rest of Your Life.”

Okay. They’ve opened the letter and what do they see? A boring paragraph about your leadership in the industry? Stuffy sentences about commitment, innovation and dedication?

Whoosh. In the round file it goes.

Okay. Back to gain or loss—again, it’s got to be there in a headline they can’t miss. And it must reinforce the headline that compelled them to rip open that envelope. Both headlines must dovetail in their message and emotional impact.

Example: “Finish reading this letter and you’re halfway to becoming rich.”

Next comes the all-important body copy. What to say to leave them begging for your product. For this we go right into the consumer’s emotions, mining for clues to the perfect selling pitch.

What’s the problem?

A while back, McDonalds was beating the pants off its competitors. So Burger King hired a big powerhouse ad agency to gain them market share. They tried everything-- analyzing secret sauces, elaborate contests, toy tie-ins. Nothing worked. Finally, they sent out questionnaires, did focus groups, and literally stopped people on the street. And you know what they discovered? Not what consumers liked, but what they didn’t like about hamburgers. For on thing, the leading hamburger came practically “factory made” with everything on it. Some folks liked pickles, others hated onions or mayo. That was “the problem.” The solution was simple: hamburgers made to order, followed by the now all-too-familiar slogan “Have it Your Way.” The point is, you’ve got to find and exploit your consumer’s problem. And make your product the hero.

Life without your product--miserable

So, you’ve succeeded in getting your reader’s attention. You’ve discovered their “problem.” Now it’s time to remind them how many ways that problem affects their lives. If you’re selling a cordless electric lawnmower, you’ll want to remind them of all the headaches of their old gas powered mower. Like running out of gas, finding the gas

can, taking it to the gas station, driving back with a can full of smelly gas in the car, maybe spilling gas on the carpet. Once at home, there's the annoyance of yanking the starter until your arm feels like a wet noodle. And the fire danger of having a can of gas in the garage with kids playing near it. The point is, you want to paint a very troublesome picture of life without your product.

Life with your product—absolute bliss

Now that you've raised your reader's interest by making them feel the pain of life without your product, it's time to provide your solution. Here's where you'll briefly introduce yourself and your product or service. No more running out of gas, no more smelling gas cans in your new car, no more yanking that starter cord till your arm falls off. Just flick the switch and you're ready to mow. Plug it into your electric outlet and it charges overnight. Your worries are over. You go on and on, hammering home the fact that your product or service is the perfect solution. At this point, your reader will probably ask, "Sounds interesting, but who the heck are you to think you can solve my problem? I never heard of you."

Credentials time

Here's where you build trust by detailing key facts that build confidence in you and your company. You could start by listing some testimonials from satisfied customers. If these come from people in the industry who your prospect is familiar with, so much the better. And if you can get photos, phone numbers and so forth, it will add even more to your credibility. This is also the time to mention how long you've been in business and any articles that about your company and/or its products that have appeared in the local or national media (these can be particularly valuable, since they come from an impartial source).

Now that you've assuaged their fears about doing business with a complete unknown, they'll want to be totally sold about your product or service. Here's where you go into detail. And this is the perfect time to do so, because you've established trust. They won't be thinking about who you are, but what you can do for them--how you're going to solve their problem.

Detail benefits, not features

A key caveat here. Don't get your reader quagmired in "Featurespeak." It's easy to do and it's what most unskilled writers fall victim to. Featurespeak is for your sales team, not your potential customer. Avoid things like "Our new cordless electric mower features the X9T Autoflex handle, or the PT600 Zenon Battery. Better to say, "Our new electric mower's handle easily adjusts to your height for maximum comfort." Or "The easily rechargeable battery lasts up to 5 years without replacement." If your product or service has more than three major benefits, list them in bullet point form to make them easier to read.

Make them an offer they can't refuse

This is the crucial part of your sales letter. Your offer should be compelling, irrefutable and urgent. You want your reader to say, "This is a great offer, I've got nothing to lose but my problem." Try to combine the big 3 in your offer--irresistible price, terms, and a free gift. For example, if you're selling a cordless electric mower, your offer might be a discounted retail price, low interest rate, and a blade-sharpening tool. Try to raise the perceived value of your offer by adding on products or services--for electric mowers, it might be an extended warranty or safety goggles. Augment this with compelling benefits these additional products or services will provide.

Assuage with a guarantee

There's a little voice in the back of every customer's head that whispers, "Buy this and you'll be sorry." So make your offer bulletproof. Take the risk out of the purchase. Give the absolute strongest guarantee you can. It tells your reader you're confident in your product or service. Enough so to back it up with a strong guarantee. Don't be afraid to make this final commitment.

Motivate the procrastinators

So they're reading your letter and are pretty convinced that your company and your product or service can solve their problem. They want to buy. The mind is willing but the flesh is weak. Time to bring in our key motivator--fear of loss. One way to tap into this fear is by convincing your reader that because this is such a good deal, only a scant few mowers remain. Or that the extended warranty is being offered only for the next few days, or for the next 50 customers. Our old motivator--gain--can be used here as well. Example: "Buy now and get a \$20 gift card--FREE!"

Call to action--KISS

You and your staff know what readers need to do to buy your product or service, but your readers are inundated with offers every day. And each offer has a different procedure for buying. Give them a break and walk them through the order/purchase process. And KISS (keep it simple stupid). Use simple action words like "Pick Up the Phone and Call Now!" If your phone number spells out a catchy slogan or company name, always add numerical phone numbers. If they need to fill out a form and mail it, say so. And if possible, use large type on your form--especially if you're selling to seniors. Be clear on what they're ordering and for what price.

ABC!

Follow Alec Baldwin's admonition in the movie Glengarry Glen Ross--"ABC...Always Be Closing." Sprinkle your call to action throughout your letter. Ask for the order. Then when you give the call to action at the end of the letter, it won't come as a surprise, but just another reminder. Better still, if they're ready to order halfway through your letter,

they'll know what to do.

Postscripts are magic

Nobody reads postscripts, right? Wrong. The P.S. is the third most read element of a sales letter—after the headline and any picture captions. The top wordsmiths use several (P.P.S) in their letters. It's one of the best places to remind readers of your irresistible offer. But you have to be brief and compelling, establishing urgency and value, and drawing on your key motivators of gain and loss.

Drive it home on the order form

The order form is where some of the greatest sales are won or lost. It's where that little voice in the back of your customer's head comes alive once again and says, "You'll be sorry" or "You sure you want to buy this now?" It's what I call Preemptive Buyer's Remorse." Time to bring in our top gun persuaders--gain and loss--one last time. Use the same persuasive arguments as before--only be brief, more compelling and urgent.

Do you want the steak knives or the El Dorado?

Okay, you've got the prized Glengarry leads. And the formula for writing a winning sales letter. Start by knowing your prospect's problem, then drive home key benefits using the emotional motivators I've described. And don't forget Alec Baldwin's other maxim, AIDA--Attention. Interest. Decision. Action. Get their attention, build their interest, convince them it's the right decision, and finally, urge them to act. Good luck. You've got 26 letters in the English language. How you use them can make all the difference ...between getting the steak knives or the Cadillac El Dorado.