

The Do-It-Yourself Sales Letter Makeover

By Marcia Yudkin

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For years, my most popular business service has been taking sales letters that aren't getting results and remaking them so that inquiries and orders pour in. At the risk of starving this cash cow, I'm going to reveal the mental checklist I use that accounts for a high percentage of the improvements I introduce. Ask this set of questions about your sales letter before you finalize it, and you'll be able to swell a trickle of response into a steady stream of profit.

* Do you let the reader know in the first paragraph why you're writing, and provide a reason to read on? Your recipient digs into the letter with the question, "What's in this for me?" An opening like "We are pleased to announce," for instance, usually provokes a "So What?" Instead, put yourself in the shoes of your reader, formulate your main point from that perspective and try leading off with it: "Until September 22, 1998 you have the chance to become one of only 2,346 people in the universe to own mineral-rich real estate on Asteroid A-17."

You can also satisfy this imperative with a provocative, topic-specific headline in big type above the date and salutation of the letter. For instance, I once headed a three-page letter about a publicity consulting program, "Finally, Fame and Fortune are Within Your Reach!"

* Do you provide a clear and compelling offer, or a specific action that you are asking the reader to take? An offer means something like, "For only \$29.95 you can have unlimited use of our health club for one month, along with a one-hour private session with one of our certified fitness trainers." At the very least, explicitly tell readers what action you would like them to take now, such as "Please return the enclosed prepaid postcard to let us know about your future landscaping needs."

* Do you explicitly describe the strong points of your offering? I found this copy in a car dealer's letter weak and vague: "Check our prices. They're probably better than you think. We guarantee they're competitive." I recommended changing that to "We'll match any competitor's price for an oil and filter change for your car." In my first look at a sales letter, I usually circle murky words and phrases all over the place and write, "What do you mean by this?" "And by this?" "And this?" Replace each generic, wishy-washy expression with more precise wording.

* Have you taken into account the fact that the reader may be receiving many competing offers and enumerated the principal advantages of your product or service? When a business-opportunity dealer wrote, "I learned the pitfalls of mail order the hard way. I bought many, many worthless programs," I urged him to reveal the dollar amount he'd wasted before finding the program that enabled him to turn a profit for the first time, and to elaborate on what made those programs worthless. Use this formula if you have difficulty putting your advantages into words: "Unlike other XXXs, we..." For instance, "Unlike larger law firms, at BB&G you deal consistently with the partners, knowledgeable experts who always return phone calls within 48 hours."

* Have you addressed and disarmed the most common fear, misgiving or concern prospects might have about buying from you? There's always a natural uncertainty about buying from a stranger. Guarantees help, as do testimonials from satisfied customers and lists of large organizations that you've served. These don't always have to appear in the letter itself, as in: "If this sounds too good to be true, I'll happily supply you with the names and telephone numbers of dealers in your state who have secured their future with our plan."

* Do you use a "P.S." to provide a compelling reason for the reader to act now? Studies show that a postscript gets read more often than any other portion of a letter. Word your "P.S." so that it makes sense if it's read first, and include an incentive for acting fast, as in, "Remember, we have only thirty-one of these slightly damaged, fully functional metronomes left at 80 percent off, so place your order today!"

For additional do's and don'ts, collect and study especially impressive or awful letters that come in your mail. My "sample sales letter" file measures almost three inches thick!

Marcia Yudkin marcia@yudkin.com rewrites Web sites and postal sales letters so that they generate results. For her

manual of before-and-after sales letter makeovers, "Turn Any Sales Letter Into an Irresistible Concoction," see <http://www.yudkin.com/scourse.htm> .

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