

A guide to a Successful Sales Letter

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35 ways to make sales letters work harder for you

INTRODUCTION

We can all write a successful sales letter or direct mail letter once we know the rules and are prepared to practise our skills and test the results. If you are bored reading your letter back, the chances are that your reader will be bored too.

Direct mail is a great way to test new products or services to new or existing clients. Direct Solutions always recommend that you test out your central idea for a brochure on a direct mail campaign to see if the idea works

You only have a few seconds to interest somebody in your letter so you must grab their attention straight away with a strong headline. If you are bored reading your letter back, the chances are, your reader will be bored too. Follow these simple rules and you will increase the response to your sales letter.

HEADLINES

Always give every letter you write a headline – A good headline will increase the readership of any piece of communication.

- 1 Headlines should be no more than 17 words long. Avoid 3 or 4 word headlines, as it's usually difficult to make a statement in so short a sentence.
- 2 Study newspapers to see how they entice readers into a story with a good headline. Often they are 'sensational' in nature but a good headline will always find a way of revealing the central truth of a story.
- 3 In your headlines avoid being clever or using puns.
- 4 Instead spell out the facts in a compelling way. When it comes to headline writing, let your motto be "The Truth Well Told" . Find a short and punchy way of putting across your message so the central benefit is quickly absorbed.
- 5 Be specific. If you can save a prospect 23%, tell them that figure – 23%. It's more convincing and real than 'over 20%'.
- 6 Never over hype in a headline.
- 7 Don't worry about excluding some people from your headline. If your letter is targeting stationery buyers, then by all means use a headline that appeals directly to this market.
- 8 Headlines can be in a different typeface to your main body copy. Just use a clear typeface.
- 9 The headline is the easiest part of your letter to test. You may find that if you mail two letters with the same content but different headlines, the response can vary by over 200%.

THE MAIN BODY OF YOUR LETTER

- 10 Use short sentences. You want to make your letter as easy as possible for your reader to understand. Don't make the reader work too hard.
- 11 Break up your letter with sub-headings between paragraphs. These are often just a few words, such as 'Save money today' '100% money-back guarantee' which are a preview of the paragraph that is to follow.
- 12 They say that a direct mail letter can't be too long – only too boring. Try to keep your letter to one side.
- 13 Make your letter about your customer and what you can do for them, NOT about you.
- 14 For every 'we' 'us' or 'I' you use in direct mail you should use 'you' or 'your' at least five times (see the above sentence as an example of how this works).
- 15 Remember that reading your letter is not a priority for your customer so make it easy to read. A trick here is to read your letter aloud after you have written it. Are there any bits that you stumble over, misread or sound confusing? If they do to you at this stage then they will do to your customer, so reword these parts to make them as clear as possible.
- 16 If you have the time, after having written your letter, set it aside for a week then re-read it. If you don't have the time to do this ask somebody else to read through it for you. They will spot mistakes you have missed and point out elements that are confusing. Does it still make sense? Does it still excite? If not, you still have the opportunity to do something about it before it is sent out.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- 17 Research shows that readers will scan your headline, your 'PS' and then your sub-heading within a matter of seconds before deciding to read your letter. You have less than four seconds to use the right words to catch their eye.
- 18 Don't over design your letter. Direct Solutions always advise against justifying text on a sales letter so it is aligned to both the left and right hand margins; a letter should always look like a letter, not a sales brochure.
- 19 Never send out a brochure, catalogue or quote without a simple letter.
- 20 Always sign a letter, never pp it.
- 21 Never sign a letter in a black pen; always use a blue pen. Black makes your letter look as though your signature has been printed.
- 22 The best day for most people to receive a business letter is a Tuesday or a Wednesday. Use common sense to work out the best day to send your crucial letters so they arrive on one of these days.
- 23 Avoid sending letters with address labels on them. If you can't handwrite the address on the front of the envelope, then type the address or use a window envelope.
- 24 C5 envelopes make it easier for you to fold your letters and seem to generate a good response.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- 25 Study the mistakes and strengths of others. The next time you receive a letter from a credit card company or the Readers Digest that catches your attention - don't bin it. Read through it; examine the wording of the headline, the layout of the letter and the offer that they are making. Keep hold of the good ones and make a note of what you didn't like about the bad ones.
- 26 Test, test & test again. The one part of your letter that will increase or decrease response levels more than anything else is your headline.
- 27 In fact you can test any component of your letter as well as your headline – your offer, your closing date, your response form, typeface, body copy, style of writing, using photographs from 'the author' you name it, you can test it to see what difference the changes will make.
- 28 Content should always be strong. Don't insult people by writing to them to tell them that you have just employed a new member of staff or that you have redecorated your hairdressing salon. What is the benefit to them in hearing about that? Always write to people with a clear benefit, something that will make a difference to them.
- 29 Always promote an offer. You are looking for a response, so make sure that you give your reader something to respond to – a coupon to bring in to your store, a report to send off for or a simple way to request more information.
- 30 Spend time on making your order form or information request form eye-catching. If you are writing to people within a business environment, always include a fax-back form, E-mail address or website address. This should briefly re-state the main benefits of your offer just in case the two documents become separated.
- 31 Remember, at all times your message should be believable. This means using terms that your customers are familiar with as well as making the appearance of your letter reflect the product that you are offering them.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER (cont.)

- 32 Avoid clutter. Don't frighten away potential readers by cluttering up your letter and making it look too dense. Sell the benefits!
- 33 Make your intention clear. Time is precious to your potential customers. Poin out a main benefit to them and then clarify its importance. Don't waste their time by telling them about your company's history or by giving them a host of irrelevant stories about your product. Tell them the single key reason that they should find out more and then make it very clear to them what they need to do next.
- 34 Make it easy for the prospect to contact you. Never leave just a phone number. Always include your address, e-mail, fax number, as well as a central phone number.
- 35 PS. Don't forget your PS. Whilst most people realise the importance of a strong headline, many will forget to include a sales letter postscript. This is considered to be the second most read part of the letter. A strong PS stating an additional benefit to the headline could be the difference between a response or your letter going into the bin.

We hope you have found this guide useful, however if you require further information, guidance or advice, please contact:

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