



Powerful Prose

13 proven strategies to create high-performing copy

Whether you're using online or offline media channels to drive your direct marketing, copy significantly impacts your results. Direct is about getting prospects to read your message and respond right now. While you strive to build and support your brand using high-impact formats and images, you also must deliver copy that touches the heart and head of your prospects. Here's a checklist of 13 essential points to help you create high-performance copy.

1 Be specific. Words are the writer's paintbrush. Your words should paint a picture that is vivid in detail. Instead of "How many times are you going to fix your accounting software problems?" Try: "You shouldn't have to spend five minutes trying to determine your accounts receivable from your accounting software when you can do it in 13 seconds."

2 Relieve their pain. It's basic human nature for people to seek pleasure after experiencing pain. Pain drives change. Your goal as the direct marketer is to position your offer and product as their salvation. To accomplish this, look beyond the functional benefits of your product or service, and address specific consumer needs, wants and desires. Instead of: "With TiVo, you can record, play and pause live television programs." Try: "TiVo lets you watch your favorite television programs on your time."

3 Write in the active tense. Respond now. Discover today. Go online. See for yourself. Direct is

about motivating immediate behavior. Avoid headlines that are classic brand builders, such as, "It's the ultimate driving machine." Make sure all your copy drives the reader to action. Try: "Find out for yourself why BMW is the ultimate driving machine." Your goal is to get just one more reader to click, visit or call. If a passive voice worked in direct, we'd all be brand marketers.

4 Engage their emotions. Anger, greed, fear, hope, dreams, safety, security, wisdom, exclusivity—emotion and the drama around it are what make good movies, and great copy, too. Don't be afraid to hit your reader hard—in the heart, because you can be sure he's heard all the other marketing hype in your category for years. Here's one of my favorites from e-marketing visionary Seth Godin, written in a webinar invite letter: "I hate wasting time, and therefore, I hate conferences and trade shows. So that's why I'm writing you today." One of the best-performing teasers my firm created was directed at high-risk investors in the late 1990s for a venture capital fund. It read, "90% of your portfolio should be horrified at how the other 10% is invested."

5 Create curiosity. What's the prize inside? Business people—human beings—are kids at heart. We love to be surprised and delighted. And our curiosity about what's inside is a powerful motivator that drives behavior. So when you're looking at your teaser lines, or e-mail subject lines, ask yourself, what have you done to create curiosity to read

more? Sometimes, when your brand is well-known, less is more. A blind, white outer envelope with just your brand name can contribute to creating a control winner. On the other hand, if you're going to use a teaser message, then make it so compelling that a reader has to find out more.

Some creative online subject lines: "15 minutes could save you 20%," "Three ways to beat your competition to market," or "Double your return in five minutes."

Check out this offline teaser line: "It's won more awards than anything in its class, and we've reserved one in your name—free."

6 Sell the benefits of response. As I've written in prior articles, direct marketing is an offer delivery vehicle. And in B-to-B marketing, you need to generate an inquiry to start your dialogue. So, before you start selling your product benefits, start selling the benefits of responding. Tell your readers what they're going to gain, discover, learn, uncover, understand, find out, take away when they request your offer. Be specific in your benefits. For example: "Call now and receive our free, helpful guide, 'The True Costs and Benefits of Small Business Health Plans,' to find out how to increase worker productivity, lower employee turnover and be more successful at recruiting new employees."

7 Write your letters so readers slide into the response pool. Joe Sugarman, the founder of the

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famous JS&A tech gadget mail-order company, shared a critical insight about letter copy. He said, "The only job of the first sentence is to get the reader to continue to read the second sentence. The job of the second sentence is to get the reader to continue on to the third sentence, until ultimately, they've read every sentence in your letter and are overwhelmed with facts and emotions and compelled to take action immediately."

Look at your letters as you put them through this evaluation filter. Sugarman believed that short, pithy, curiosity-provoking first sentences helped to start the reader down the slide of his copy. Here are some examples from his book:

**Losing weight is not easy.
It's you against a computer.
It's easy.
It had to happen.
Hats off to IBM.**

8 Write in a personal one-to-one manner. You to me. Direct marketing requires you to write to thousands of individuals who will read your copy one at a time. So, before you sit down at the keyboard to talk to them, make sure you know who they are and what they want. What are they afraid of? What wakes them up at 2 a.m.? What is driving them forward? What is holding them back? To find out, turn to the trade publications. They broadcast the emotional concerns of the industry by having dozens of reporters in the field speaking to the market. Want to know what CIOs are interested in? Read what they read! If you're marketing to mothers, read parenting books. If you're marketing to hunters, read hunting magazines. You get the idea.

9 Write like you talk. Brand promises don't drive response behavior. Direct marketing allows you to have an intimate communication. The tone of voice is one-to-one, not blasting your brand from the rafters. You talk to friends in a conversational tone. You sell in a conversational man-

ner. Direct response is salesmanship in print. So write the way you talk. Tell prospects friend-to-friend why they should consider your offer. Ignore internally generated brand or design standards when they get in the way of your ability to engage one-to-one. Remember, the "brand essence book" was written by a design firm and an advertising agency—neither ever having had direct responsibility to sell anything. As direct marketing professionals, we don't have that luxury. We either produce or get fired.

10 Don't be afraid to provide devices that help the reader grab important copy points. A hard truth of direct marketing that just irritates CMOs of big brands is that neatness rejects engagement. If all copy is justified and all design lines up, like rows of soldiers, nothing is grabbing the eye. While your creative might win an ECHO, you have made it really difficult for the reader to get engaged. Once again, readers don't immediately read start to finish. They scan, they jump around and they pick up bits of information you've presented to help convince them they should invest more time in your message. So when everything is tidy and neat, you're making them do more work than they want. Tasteful call outs, interrupters, bold type and underlines can all be used in a way that support your brand and make it easy for the reader to understand your message.

11 Use words that sell—avoid words that scare.
Words that sell include:
new, free, now, love, sex, romance, hope, desire, dream, dare, compare, see, smell, touch, passion, rich, money, fun, fancy, fantasy, glimmer, play, children, vacation.

Words that scare:
cost, pay, contract, sign, try, worry, loss, lose, hurt, buy, death, bad, sell, price, decision, hard, difficult, obligation, liability, fail, complex.

One of my favorite resource books for copy is "Words That Sell" by Richard Bayan.

12 Don't over-edit. Let me let you in on a little-known secret: Direct marketing, particularly letter copy, does not survive editing well. People try to smooth it—ragged copy usually works better. People try to get it to make more sense—rationality is often boring, and boring reduces response. In many cases, the writer had an original idea about how to manipulate the recipient to action. By the time the concept gets through editing, the big, exciting, bright-red idea becomes muted to dull gray. Leave it alone. Tell your writer her career is on the line with every word she writes, and then watch response rates go up.

13 Don't forget the instructions. Tell recipients exactly what to do. Don't assume readers know what action to take. Tell them to print their names clearly and make address corrections above. Instruct them to answer all questions below, then place the return card in the postage-paid envelope—and to get answers quickly, go online and log on with their customer ID numbers. Calls to action include phrases like: "There are four easy ways to receive your free guide: call, fax, visit or mail." Even in the Internet age, response comes from all reply channels based on the time and mind-set of your prospects. Be sure they understand what you want them to do. Don't make them figure it out. ■

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