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How to write an effective sales letter: 11 tips

By [Joanna L. Krotz](#)

Psssst! Want to read a really bad sales letter? Check this one out.



A DECADE OF R&D IS FINALLY PAYING OFF

I'm writing to you today to let you know about the really terrific coffeemaker I've developed. First of all, I know it's TRULY terrific because I spent years studying coffeemakers of all kinds, from drip to perk to electric. I then expanded my field of research to include the commercial coffeemakers, and I learned all the possible secrets of what makes the java flow at the big café chains. Now, SEVEN YEARS LATER, I'm ready to let you in on the fruits of all my RESEARCH. I've developed the EZ CAFÉ and, let me tell you, it will make all other coffeemakers you have ever seen pale by comparison.

This is a modified version of a real

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sales letter. What's wrong with it?
Well, just about everything.

The headline is all about the writer and does not speak to the customer. Plus, it uses some business jargon -- "R&D" for research and development -- so it has an industry insider tone, which may actually confuse some consumers. We're given absolutely no idea what the 10 years of work refers to. And we're given no reason to care, either.

Nothing in the headline or the copy mentions "WIFM," or "what's in it for me." As a potential customer, I'm lost. The headline alone bored me. The copy emphasizes all the wrong things and drones on about the years of development rather than the payoff I expect. Why should I care?

To be effective, a sales letter must JUMP out at you. It must grab your attention with a compelling promise for the reader and then deliver on it.

Besides a powerful headline, your sales letter must have an immediate clear benefit for the intended target. Then it must build a reader's trust. It should make generous use of "you" and "your" -- so it is clear the customer's needs come first, not your desire to sell something.

Be upfront and bold about promising a prize or a tangible reward in exchange for time and attention. Forget cute or clever lead-ins. Begin by simply explaining "WIFM," or "what's in it for me."

I've got more writing tips coming, but let me back up a bit and talk about your primary vehicle: direct mail.

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After a hot romance with e-mail, marketers are again gravitating toward direct mail as they figure out how to use all possible channels to send seamless messages. In addition, companies are more sophisticated now about selecting the time and the medium that works best for each product. E-mail can be extremely effective. But direct mail remains the best way to reach the most targeted list.

Before writing any sales letter, of course, you must do the homework of acquiring and analyzing appropriate lists of targeted customers (for more on renting lists, see Microsoft's Sales Leads for small businesses).

Sales letters are the most customized form of direct-mail marketing. Brochures or fliers, however glossy, tend to be impersonal and may be dismissed as "junk mail." By contrast, sales letters should address the customer by name and need. You're one step ahead.

The idea is to offer solutions that speak directly to your customer's problems and challenges, whether that's business-to-consumer or business-to-business.

To send out the right sales letter, harness these 11 tips from a cross-section of sales experts, coaches and trainers:

1. **Build trust.** Besides the benefit billed at the letter's opening, you can bolster interest and inject pizzazz by adding high-profile endorsements from associates or former clients. "I put a testimonial quote from a marquee name at the top of my letter," says Anne Miller, a New York City sales trainer who leverages compliments from such clients as Salomon Smith Barney, Estée Lauder and The New York Times.

2. Get to bona fides, quick. "You need to establish credibility and be believable by the second paragraph," says sales coach Daryl Logullo at Strategic Impact in Vero Beach, Fla. This is where you explain who you are, why you're so cool (or smart or cheap or special or useful) and what you have to offer. How you package that information, of course, varies with your targets and your products.

Some options:

- List a case study
- Describe a success story
- Outline key benefits of your product (besides the first one)
- Define a problem and how you solved it for a client (don't name names)

Avoid being long-winded or boring in this "credentials" section, cautions Bette Price, a management consultant based in Addison, Texas. "Be unique. Don't just offer some generalized statement."

3. Make it memorable. One of the advantages of a sales letter is that prospects can tuck it away for later action. "Great mailers have staying power-sometimes they will end up on a refrigerator door or a bulletin board for years," says Wilson Zehr, chief executive of LaunchPoint, a Portland, Ore., direct-mail provider. He suggests you include reasons for your customers to spend more time with the letter and therefore more time considering your offer. For example, a computer repair service might include the top 10 tips for PC maintenance.

4. Emphasize good looks. "Design your document for visual impact," says Deborah Dumaine, author of "Instant-Answer Guide to Business Writing: An A-Z Source for Today's Business Writer." "Make it easy to navigate so your reader reaches for it first-ahead of the competition's."

You can easily create professional-looking templates for your sales letter that use your company logo, branding and colors with Microsoft Publisher 2003, part of the Microsoft Office Small Business suite. Also, check out a related article, "5 tips and tricks for using Word for business," to learn how to create sales letter templates with Microsoft Word.

5. **Include a call to action.** "Inform the reader about what he or she should do next," says Joe Hage at MRA, a branding agency in Syracuse, N.Y. "An example is: 'Please call me on my cell phone (917-555-0000) before Friday, the 28th.'" Or, say you'll follow up with a phone call or more material. Then, of course, make sure you do.
6. **And include an incentive.** Always explain when, why and how customers should act, says Patti Abbate of Sunrise Public Relations in Needham, Mass. "Then, include an incentive for acting sooner, such as a discount, special offer or something free."
7. **Resist "Mail Merge."** Despite the ease and speed with which technology can "find and replace" in electronic documents, don't succumb to the temptation of form letters. "The best sales letters, especially when dealing with your own current list, are quite individualized," says Shel Horowitz, author of "Principled Profit: Marketing That Puts People First."

Tap your database for information about a customer's sales history and preferences. Then send specialized letters whenever it's appropriate. "If you notice it's been six months since a customer has been in, it might be time for a friendly 'We miss you' letter with an offer specific to that customer," suggests Horowitz.

8. **Forge connections.** Similarly, don't get caught up in pushing services or products. You want to develop a long-term relationship with the customer, not pressure him into one discounted sale. Use your letter to investigate whether you can solve customer problems or meet needs. Try to build a relationship that will last into the future.
9. **Test. Test. Test.** When you're planning a bulk mailing, in contrast to a selected best-customer target, send out a few versions of the sales letter to small groups of targets. Then see what pulls.
10. **Hit the right notes.** "Your letter should sound like you," says Annette Richmond, a career coach in Rowayton, Conn. If your style is casual and informal, you don't want to create a stiff pitch letter, filled with bizspeak and corporate jargon. Match your letter to the way you do business.

11. One last tip: Before sending out the letters, calculate the highest possible response you can handle. Make sure the volume of your mail drop correlates to that expected response. You wouldn't want to create the perfect pitch and then be unable to fulfill all the orders that come flooding in, would you?



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Joanna L. Krotz writes about small-business marketing and management issues. She is the co-author of the "[Microsoft Small Business Kit](#)" and runs [Muse2Muse Productions](#), a New York City-based custom publisher.

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