

Writing Sales Copy that Wins Customers

By Debra L. Butterfield © 2006

Only three seconds. That's how much time you have to captivate and convince your reader to continue reading your sales letter. Don't expect it to get longer in the years to come. In 2004, it was five seconds.

What are the secrets to writing dynamic ad copy that will help you accomplish this task? To find some answers, I interviewed copywriter Carol Hubbard, an associate creative director for Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Ms. Hubbard is an Addy Award-winning writer who has been writing for over 20 years and writes much of Focus on the Family's direct mail.

The Unique Selling Proposition (or USP)

A realtor's mantra is location, location, location; for the copywriter, it is benefit, benefit, benefit. The USP is a proposition to the customer that says "Buy and you'll get this benefit." Every business, including home-based businesses, should have a USP; it's what makes that business distinct from its competitors. Do you patronize businesses that are just there or ones that offer guaranteed low prices or the best selection in town or high-demand items always in stock? The USP establishes a consumer's perceived image of the business. Example: Wal-Mart's USP is "always low prices," and its advertising states that via rollback prices.

"Clearly conveying the USP through both your marketing and your business performance will make your business great and success inevitable," states Jay Abraham in his article "How to Create a Unique Selling Proposition." Without a unique selling proposition, a business lacks the appeal to attract new customers. Even if she has to drive farther, the consumer on a strict budget will be swayed to buy at Wal-Mart over the grocer down the block who lacks a USP because she knows Wal-Mart promises to have the lowest prices.

Is It Advertising or Direct Marketing?

Advertising creates awareness and reinforces a brand. Direct marketing (a sales letter) always asks for a response (buy this, donate money, call your senator, etc.). And, yes, the techniques for direct marketing differ from advertising. "Good direct marketing uses active language, emphasizes benefits, tells the consumer exactly what you want them to do (without hesitation, apologies or subtlety) and gives them all the information they need to respond," states Ms. Hubbard.

Before you put your fingers to the keyboard to write that compelling sales letter, there are questions that demand answers.

- Who is the target audience?

- What are his or her needs and wants?
- How does the service or product solve his or her problems?

This information should be provided by the company who has hired you to write copy, but it often isn't as detailed as it needs to be. Research the product, the audience and their lifestyle. The inside secret to great sales copy, Ms. Hubbard advises, is to "Get inside the head of the potential reader. Have his or her needs and wants clearly in view." How much research is enough? I recommend Robert Bly's rule: "Collect at least twice as much information as you need—preferably three times as much. Then you have the luxury of selecting only the best facts, instead of trying desperately to find enough information to fill up the page."

Your reader wants to know how this product or service is going to meet the needs in his life, otherwise he'll stop reading. Armed with your research you can "write benefit-driven (not features-driven) copy that promises solutions to those problems." You must "have the end result—an attitude, a feeling, a call to action—clearly in mind and write to that," says Ms. Hubbard.

Make Your Point—Quickly and Clearly

In our fast-paced, instant culture, advertising bombards us from all sides—without end. Readers have no time to waste on rambling sales copy. "Unless they're reading about something totally unfamiliar to them, they want you to get to the point quickly. And they'll make a decision in about three seconds about whether to keep reading."

A benefit-driven headline is essential. Write and rewrite as many times as you need to create a powerful headline that will grab your reader and draw him into the body copy. At all costs, avoid "cutesy" ads and hucksterism (to sell or promote in an aggressive and flashy manner).

There are also tools of yesteryear that are still appropriate and affective today: Avoid clichés; be clear; use active, not passive, verbs.

How Can I Improve My Skills?

Educate yourself. Ms. Hubbard highly recommends reading copywriting books by Herschell Gordon Lewis and Robert Bly. Pay attention to print, Web, radio and TV ads. Review popular consumer magazines. Analyze the different kinds of direct mail that show up in your mailbox (no matter how tempted you are to toss them immediately into the trash.) What motivates you to respond? What doesn't? To keep your pulse on today's consumer, stay up-to-date on cultural trends, news headlines and consumer trends.

A Final Word

Good direct marketing commands your reader's attention through active verbs and concise communication. Great direct marketing combines this with the unique selling

proposition for killer copy that will elicit a response.

Now, with these tools in your pocket, get back to your keyboard!