

Creating an Effective Sales Letter

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Like a firm handshake or good eye contact, a solid sales letter makes a great first impression. In fact, the letter is a tried-and-true vehicle for introducing your product or service to your prospect—without the costs associated with flashy brochures and slick direct mail campaigns.

And, if done right, a sales letter is a powerful tool to get attention in a world cluttered with ineffective communication. It positions you as a credible, professional salesperson. It's also your key to differentiating yourself from the competition, while you have a captive audience.

Consider your sales letter an integral part of the entire sales package—just as important as a face-to-face meeting or a phone conversation. Your letter serves to set up a solution for your customer and position your company as the right partner for your prospect's business.

First Things First—General Writing Rules

Do:

- **Get the reader's attention in the first paragraph and get to the point.** "With effective customer-focused training, you can see a more motivated workforce and more satisfied customers. We'll show you how." OR "I want to tell about a proven way to boost your sales force's cold call success, and your organization's bottom line."
- **Demonstrate a benefit for your prospect's organization or for the prospect's personal agenda.** Or as it's known to your prospect, "What's in it for me? (WIIFM)" "Our internal customer training program will help you reduce costly recruiting and turnover."
- **Ask for further action.** "For a free consultation about our training program, call me directly at 402-555-1212."

Don't:

- **Try to be too sales-y**—it's a turnoff. If the fit is right, your offering's benefits and features will sell themselves.
- **Drone on about your company.** Remember, the purpose of your letter is to show that you have a solution for your prospect.
- **Overwhelm your reader** with information about your product or service solution. Save the pertinent details for a future meeting or phone call.

A quote in red text on a blurred background of green, blue, and red. The text reads: "A sales letter is a powerful tool to get attention in a world cluttered with ineffective communication."

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9 Quick Tips for Effective Sales Letters:

1. **Personalize, personalize, personalize.** Anyone can send a canned letter to a prospect; and any prospect will probably toss it in the circular file. Treat your customer as an individual with individual requirements. For the same reasons, never, never use a pre-printed sales letter.
2. **Customize your salutation.** Don't send a sales letter to a prospect as "Dear Sir." Chances are, your letter will be seen as junk mail, no matter how personalized the body copy.
3. **Use "you" and "your."** Write as though you are having a conversation with your prospect about your solution across a meeting table. When you're done, read it out loud.
4. **Talk about your customer, not your company.** This is the place to address the wants and needs of your prospect—not the place to tell how long you've been in business.
5. **Use supporting information to sell.** This may include attachments such as testimonials, technical data or a separate sales brochure. Provide these kinds of documents in a format that's appropriate to the prospect's style. For example, a CFO would be more oriented to numbers—consequently, present data that demonstrate the value of your solution in tangible results (and double-check your math). But don't "dump the bucket" and send your prospect every piece of sales literature you have. If it's not relevant, there will be no reason for the prospect to read it, or for her to want to talk with you again.
6. **Say what you'll do next—then do it.** Every effective cover letter includes a call to action ("I'll follow up with you early next week to set up a time to meet.") and a follow-up that shows you're as good as your word. Literally.
7. **Looks count.** Keep your letter neat and clean, with ample white space, quality paper stock and no smudges. And if you can't state your case in one page, you're saying too much.
8. **Confirm the details.** Make sure you've got the latest information for your contact—including title and address—and watch the spelling.
9. **Proof it before you mail it.** Even one typo has the potential to squash an otherwise effective letter. Don't rely on spell-check exclusively. Carefully proofread your letter or have a colleague look at it before you send it off.

Different Letters for Different Agendas

Where you are in the sales cycle requires different types of letters:

1. **The pre-approach**—an introductory letter showing what you and your organization can do for your prospect and her organization.

2. **The phone-call follow-up**—a letter that further qualifies you to get a meeting with your prospect. Here, you confirm what you discussed by phone and flesh out how you can help the prospect's organization based on your conversation.
3. **The client meeting follow-up**—a formal thank-you for the meeting. This confirms the customer needs you identified during the meeting and introduces a solution.

Timing is Everything

Before you mail that letter, consider timing its arrival. Mail your message so it arrives at your prospect's office on "low volume" days—traditionally Tuesday through Thursday. Then plan your follow-up call and stick to it. Don't send 25 letters unless you can make the 25 phone calls as promised. Think people won't notice that you haven't followed up? They will.

When Is E-Communication Appropriate?

How do e-mail and faxes fit into your written communication strategy? They've certainly become the norm for how we exchange information. And while it's becoming more acceptable to use these vehicles as an alternative to a traditional letter, keep in mind these caveats:

E-mail is a personal medium. Never send an unsolicited selling e-mail unless you have the prospect's permission—or it can be perceived as pure spam. A "cold call" e-mail only positions you as a vendor, rather than a potential partner, and probably will end up on the receiving end of the prospect's delete key.

Faxes are best used to confirm appointments or to get attention. If you feel that a fax is the best tool, the same rules apply to a traditional letter: keep the format and tone professional, the message succinct.

P.S.

Despite the plethora of e-mail and fax messages, there's still nothing more powerful than a traditional letter. And in the context of a sales letter, your words can be powerful and effective tools to get your prospect's attention, state your purpose and pitch a solution—keeping in mind that less is more. In time, you may even come to think of a well-crafted letter as your own mini-sales force!



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