

Special Report

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WORLD'S BEST-KEPT COPYWRITING SECRETS

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Section 1

How to Prepare for a Copywriting Assignment

Business-to-business copy persuades readers by giving them useful information about the products being advertised. The more facts you include in your copy, the better.

When you have a file full of facts at your fingertips, writing good copy is easy. You simply select the most relevant facts and describe them in a clear, concise, direct fashion.

But when copywriters don't bother to dig for facts, they fall back on fancy phrases and puffed-up expressions to fill the empty space on the page. The words sound nice, but they don't sell because the copy doesn't inform.

Here's a four-step procedure I use to get the information I need to write persuasive, fact-filled copy for my clients. This technique should be helpful to copywriters, account executives, and ad managers alike.

Step #1: Get all previously published material on the product.

For an existing product, there's a mountain of literature you can send to the copywriter as background information. This material includes:

- Tear-sheets of previous ads
- Brochures
- Catalogs
- Article reprints
- Technical papers
- Copies of speeches
- Audio-visual scripts
- Press kits

- Swipe files of competitors' ads and literature

Did I hear someone say they can't send me printed material because their product is new? Nonsense. The birth of every new product is accompanied by mounds of paperwork you can give the copywriter. These papers include:

- Internal memos
- Letters of technical information
- Product specifications
- Engineering drawings
- Business and marketing plans
- Reports
- Proposals

By studying this material, the copywriter should have 80 percent of the information he needs to write the copy. And he can get the other 20 percent by picking up the phone and asking questions. Steps #2-4 outline the questions he should ask about the product, the audience, and the objective of the copy.

Step #2: Ask questions about the product.

- What are its features and benefits? (Make a complete list.)
- Which benefit is the most important?
- How is the product different from the competition's? (Which features are exclusive? Which are better than the competition's?)
- If the product isn't different, what attributes can be stressed that haven't been stressed by the competition?
- What technologies does the product compete against?
- What are the applications of the product?
- What industries can use the product?
- What problems does the product solve in the marketplace?
- How is the product positioned in the marketplace?

- How does the product work?
- How reliable is the product?
- How efficient?
- How economical?
- Who has bought the product and what do they say about it?
- What materials, sizes and models is it available in?
- How quickly does the manufacturer deliver the product?
- What service and support does the manufacturer offer?
- Is the product guaranteed?

Step #3: Ask questions about your audience.

- Who will buy the product? (What markets is it sold to?)
- What is the customer's main concern? (Price, delivery, performance, reliability, service maintenance, quality, efficiency)
- What is the character of the buyer?
- What motivates the buyer?
- How many different buying influences must the copy appeal to?

Two tips on getting to know your audience:

- If you are writing an ad, read issues of the magazine in which the ad will appear.
- If you are writing direct mail, find out what mailing lists will be used and study the list descriptions.

Step #4: Determine the objective of your copy.

This objective may be one or more of the following:

- To generate inquiries
- To generate sales
- To answer inquiries
- To qualify prospects

- To transmit product information
- To build brand recognition and preference
- To build company image

Before you write copy, study the product - its features, benefits, past performance, applications, and markets. Digging for the facts will pay off, because in business-to-business advertising, specifics sell.

Section 2

The Fundamentals of Persuasive Writing

What are the characteristics that make copy effective? Why does one ad make a lasting impression and sell merchandise, while another falls flat and doesn't generate enough revenue to pay its own cost?

Virtually all persuasive copy contains the eight elements described in this article.

The successful ad:

1. Gains attention
2. Focuses on the customer
3. Stresses benefits
4. Differentiates you from the competition
5. Proves its case
6. Establishes credibility
7. Builds value
8. Closes with a call to action

All ads do not have all eight characteristics in equal proportions. Depending on the product, some of these elements will be dominant in your ad; others subordinate.

Let's take telephone service as an example. If you are AT&T, MCI, or Sprint, you have a long track record of success and a well-established reputation. Therefore, you will be naturally strong in elements five and six (proving your case and establishing your credibility).

A new telephone services provider, on the other hand, does not have a track record or reputation; therefore, these two elements will not be the dominant themes in the copy. Instead, the strongest element might be number three (benefits the service offers customers) or perhaps number four (differentiation in service resulting from superior technology).

Each product or service has natural strengths and weaknesses. The strengths are emphasized and the weaknesses de-emphasized. But all eight elements must be present to some degree, or the ad won't work.

Here are the eight elements of persuasion discussed in a bit more detail, with examples of how to achieve each in your copy.

Element #1: Gain attention.

If an ad fails to gain attention, it fails totally. Unless you gain the prospect's attention, he or she won't read any of your copy. And if the prospect doesn't read your copy, he or she won't receive the persuasive message you've so carefully crafted.

There are numerous ways to gain attention. Sex certainly is one of them. Look at the number of products – abdominal exercises, health clubs, cars, Club Med, clothes, beer, soft drinks, chewing gum – that feature attractive bodies in their ads and commercials. It may be sexist or base, but it works.

Similarly, you can use visuals to get prospects to pay attention. Parents (and almost everyone else) are attracted to pictures of babies and young children. Puppies and kittens also strike a chord in our hearts. Appealing visuals can get your ad noticed.

Since so much advertising is vague and general, being specific in your copy sets it apart from other ads and creates interest. A letter promoting collection services to dental practices begins as follows:

“How we collected over \$20 million in unpaid bills over the past 2 years for thousands of dentists nationwide”

Dear Dentist:

It's true.

In the past 2 years alone, IC Systems has collected more than \$20 million in outstanding debt for dental practices nationwide.

That's \$20 million these dentists might not otherwise have seen if they had not hired IC Systems to collect their past-due bills for them.

What gains your attention is the specific figure of \$20 million dollars. Every collection agency promises to collect money. But saying that you have gotten \$20 million in results is specific, credible, and memorable.

Featuring an offer that is free, low in price, or unusually attractive is also an effective attention-getter. A full-page newspaper ad from Guaranteed Term Life Insurance announces, “NOW ... \$1 a week buys Guaranteed Term Life Insurance for New Yorkers over 50.” Not only does the \$1 offer draw you in, but the headline also gains attention by targeting a specific group of buyers (New Yorkers over 50).

You know that in public speaking, you can gain attention by shouting or talking loudly. This direct approach can work in copy, especially in retail advertising. An ad for Lord & Taylor department store proclaims in large, bold type: STARTS TODAY ... ADDITIONAL 40% OFF WINTER FASHIONS.” Not clever or fancy, but of interest to shoppers looking to save money.

Another method of engaging the prospect's attention is to ask a provocative question. *Bits & Pieces*, a management magazine, begins its subscription mailing

with this headline: “What do Japanese managers have that American managers sometimes lack?” Don’t you want to at least read the next sentence to find the answer.

A mailing for a book club has this headline on the outer envelope:

Why is the McGraw-Hill Chemical Engineers’ Book Club giving away practically for **FREE** – this special 50th Anniversary Edition of PERRY’S CHEMICAL ENGINEERS’ HANDBOOK?

To chemical engineers, who know that Perry’s costs about \$125 per copy, the fact that someone would give it away is indeed a curiosity – and engineers, being curious people, want to get the answer.

Injecting news into copy, or announcing something that is new or improved, is also a proven technique for getting attention. A mailing offering subscriptions to the newsletter Dr. Atkins’s Health Revelations has this headline on the cover:

“Here Are Astonishing Nutritional Therapies and Alternative Treatments You’ll *Never* Hear About From the Medical Establishment, the FDA, Drug Companies or Even Your Doctor ...”

3 decades of medical research breakthroughs from the Atkins Center for Complementary Medicine ... revealed at last!

The traditional Madison Avenue approach to copy – subtle word play and cleverness – often fails to get attention because many people reading the ad either don’t get it, or if they do get it, they don’t think it’s that funny (or they think it’s funny but that doesn’t compel them to read the ad or buy the product).

A newspaper ad for New Jersey hospital, promoting its facilities for treating kidney stones without surgery (ultrasonic sound waves are used to painlessly break up and dissolve the stone), carried this headline:

The End of the Stone Age.

Clever? Yes. But as former kidney stone patients, we can tell you that having kidney stones is not a fun, playful subject, and this headline misses the mark. The kidney stone sufferer wants to know he can go to his local hospital, get fast treatment, avoid an operation and a hospital stay, have the procedure be painless, and get rid of the kidney stones that are causing his current discomfort. Therefore, the headline,

Get Rid of Painless Kidney Stones – Without Surgery!

While less clever, is more direct, and works better with this topic and this audience.

Element #2: Focus on the customer.

When writing copy, start with the prospect, not with the product. Your prospects are interested primarily in themselves – their goals, their problems, their needs, their hopes, their fears, their dreams and aspirations. Your product or service is of secondary importance, the degree of concern being determined by the potential for the product or service to address one of the prospect’s wants or needs, or solve one of their problems.

Effective copy speaks directly to a specific audience and identifies their preferences, quirks, behaviors, attitudes, needs, or requirements. A recruitment brochure for a computer consultant firm, for example, has this headline on the cover:

Introducing a unique career opportunity only a few dozen computer professionals in the country will be able to take advantage of this year....

The headline is effective because it focuses on the prospects (Information Systems professionals) and one of their main concerns in life (their career), rather than the consulting firm and its history, as most such brochures do.

Write from the customer’s point of view – e.g., not “our,” “Introducing our Guarda-Health Employee Benefit Program” but “At last you can combat the huge

health insurance premiums threatening to put your small business out of business.”

WEKA Publishing, in a direct mail package promoting the *Electronics Repair Manual*, a do-it-yourself guide for hobbyists and others who want to repair their own home and office electronics, uses copy that speaks directly to the personality type of the potential buyer:

If you're handy ... fascinated by electronics and the world of high-tech ... are happiest with a tool in your hand ... and respond to household problems and broken appliances with a defiant, "I'll do it myself" ...

... then fun, excitement, the thrill of discovery, time and money saved, and the satisfaction of a job well done await you when you preview our newly updated *Electronics Repair Manual* at no risk for a full 30 days.

A good way to ensure that you are focusing on the prospects, and not yourself or your product or your company, is to address the prospect directly in the copy as "you." For example:

Dear Health Care Administrator:

You know how tough it is to make a decent profit margin in today's world of managed care ... and how the HMOs and other plans are putting even more of a squeeze on your margins to fill their own already-swelling coffers.

But what you may not be aware of is the techniques health care providers nationwide are using to fight back ... and get paid every dollar they deserve for the important work they do.

This direct mail copy, which successfully launched a new publication, works because it focuses on the prospects and their problems (making money from their health care business), and not on the publication, its editors, or its features or columns.

Copy that fails to focus on the prospect often does so because the copywriter does not understand the prospect. If you are writing to metal shop managers, attend a metalworking trade show, read a few issues of the trade publications they subscribe to, and interview some of these prospects in person or over the phone. Study focus group transcripts, attend live focus group sessions, or even accompany salespeople on sales calls to these prospects. The better you understand your target audience, the more you have a feel for the way they think and what they think about, the more effectively you can target copy that speaks to those concerns.

Element #3: Stress benefits.

Although, depending on your audience, your prospects may be interested both in the features and the benefits of your product or service, it is almost never sufficient to discuss features only.

Virtually all successful copy discusses benefits. Copy aimed at a lay audience would primarily stress benefits, mentioning features mainly to convince the prospects that the product can in fact deliver the benefits promised in the ad.

Copy aimed at specialists often gives equal play to features and benefits, or may even primarily stress features. But whenever a feature is described, it must be linked to a customer benefit it provides. Buyers not only want to know what the product is and what it does; they want to know how it can help them achieve the benefits they want – such as saving money, saving time, making money, being happier, looking better, or feeling fitter.

In copy for technical products, clearly explaining the feature makes the benefit more believable. Don't just say a product has greater capacity; explain what feature of the product allows it to deliver this increased capacity. A brochure for Lucent Technologies wireless CDMA technology explains:

“CDMA gives you up to 10 times the capacity of analog cellular with more efficient use of spectrum. Use of a wideband block of radio frequency (RF) spectrum for transmission (1.25 MHz) enables CDMA to support up to 60 or more simultaneous conversations on a given frequency allocation.”

A brochure for a computer consulting firm tells corporate Information Systems (IS) managers how working with outside consultants can be more cost-effective than hiring staff, thus saving money:

When you augment your IS department with our staff consultants, you pay our staff consultants only when they work for you. If the need ends tomorrow, so does the billing. In addition, various studies estimate the cost of hiring a new staff member at 30 to 60 percent or more of the annual salary (an executive search firm’s fee alone can be 30 percent of the base pay). These expenditures are 100% eliminated when you staff through EJR.

In an ad for a software package that creates letterhead using a PC and a laser printer, the copy stresses the benefits of ease, convenience, and cost savings vs. having to order stationery from a printer:

Now save thousands of dollars on stationery printing costs!

Every day, law firms struggle with the expense and inconvenience of engraved and preprinted stationery.

Now, in a sweeping trend to cut costs without sacrificing prestige, many are trading in their engraved letterhead for Instant Stationery desktop software from Design Forward Technologies.

With Instant Stationery, you can laser-print your WordPerfect documents and letterhead together on whatever grade of blank bond paper you choose. Envelopes, too. Which means you never have to suffer the cost of expensive preprinted letterhead – or the inconvenience of loading stationery into your desktop printer – ever again.

Element #4: Differentiate yourself from the competition.

Today your customer has more products and services to choose from than ever. For example, a customer walking into a supermarket can choose from more than XX different brands of cereal, XX different brands of shampoo, and XX different flavors and brands of soft drink.

Therefore, to make your product stand out in the buyer's mind, and convince him or her that it is better and different than the competition, you must differentiate it from those other products in your copy. Crispix cereal, for example, was advertised as the cereal that "stays crisp in milk." Post Raisin Bran was advertised as the only raisin bran having "two scoops of raisins" in each box of cereal. A cookie maker recently ran a campaign promoting "100 chips" in every bag of chocolate chip cookies.

Companies that make a commodity product often differentiate themselves on the basis of service, expertise, or some other intangible. BOC Gases, for example, promotes itself as a superior vendor not because their product is better (they sell oxygen, and one oxygen molecule is basically the same as another), but in their ability to use oxygen and technology to benefit the customer's business.

Here is copy from a brochure aimed at steel makers:

An oxygen supplier who knows oxygen and EAF steel-making can be the strategic partner who gives you a sustainable competitive advantage in today's metals markets. And that's where BOC Gases can help.

If your product is unique within its market niche, stress this in your copy. For example, there are dozens of stock market newsletters. But *IPO Insider* claims to be the only IPO bulletin aimed at the consumer (there are other IPO information services, but these target professional investors and money managers). In their subscription promotion the *IPO Insider* says:

IPO Insider is the only independent research and analysis service in the country designed to help the individual investor generate greater-than-average stock market profits in select recommended IPOs.

Lucent Technologies, the AT&T spin-off, competes with many other companies that manufacture telecommunications network equipment. They differentiate themselves by stressing the tested reliability of their switch, which has been documented as superior to other switches in the industry. One brochure explains:

The 5ESS-2000 Switch is one of the most reliable digital switches available for wireless systems today. According to the U.S. Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) ARMIS report, the 5ESS-2000 Switch has the least down-time of any switch used in U.S. networks, exceeding Bellcore's reliability standards by 200%. With an installed base of more than 2,300 switches, the 5ESS-2000 Switch currently serves over 72 million lines in 49 countries.

Element #5: Prove your case.

Element #4, just discussed, claims product differentiation. Element #3 claims substantial benefits to product purchasers. The reason why these elements cannot stand alone is precisely that they are claims – claims made in a paid advertisement, by the advertiser. Therefore, skeptical consumers do not usually accept them at face value. If you say you are better, faster, or cheaper, and you do not back up your claims with proof, people won't believe you.

ICS convinces dentists it is qualified to handle their collections by presenting facts and statistics as follows:

The nationwide leader in dental-practice collections, IC Systems has collected past-due accounts receivables for 45,717 dental practices since 1963. Over 20 state dental associations recommend our services to their members.

IC Systems can collect more of the money your patients owe you. Our overall recovery rate for dental collections is 12.4% higher than the American Collectors' Association national average of 33.63%. (For many dental practices, we have achieved recovery rates even higher!)

BOC Gases tells customers that the gas mixtures they sell in cylinders are accurately blended, and therefore that the composition listed on the label is what the buyer will find inside the container. They make this argument credible by explaining their blending and weighing methodology:

Each mixture component is weighed into the cylinder on a high-capacity, high-sensitivity equal-arm balance having a typical precision of +10 mg at 95 percent confidence. Balance accuracy is confirmed prior to weighing by calibration with NIST-traceable Class S weights. Electronic integration of the precision balance with an automated filling system provides extremely accurate mixtures with tight blend tolerances.

Many stock market newsletters promise big winners that will make the reader rich if he or she subscribes. Since everyone says it, the statement is usually greeted with skepticism. The newsletter Gold Stocks Advisory combats this skepticism by putting their recent successes right on the outer envelope and at the top of page one of their sales letter:

A sample of Paul Sarnoff's recent high-profit gold stock picks:

Company:	Purchase Price:	Year High:	% Increase / Time frame:	Potential profit* on 10,000 shares:
Gold Canyon	C70 cents	C\$10.50	2793% in 14 months	C\$195,500
Coral Gold	C\$1.20	C\$6.45	438% in 8 months	C\$52,500
Bema Gold	C\$2.20	C\$13.05	439% in 20 months	C\$108,500
Jordex	C70 cents	C\$3.75	435% in 6 months	C\$26,300

Glamis Gold	US\$1	US\$8.88	788% in 84 months	US\$78,800
Barrick Gold	US\$4.81	US\$32.88	584% in 96 months	US\$280,700

The most powerful tool for proving your case is to demonstrate a good track record in your field, showing that your product or service is successful in delivering the benefits and other results you promise. One way to create the perception of a favorable track record is to include case histories and success stories in your copy. Testimonials from satisfied customers are another technique for convincing prospects that you can do what you say you can do. You can also impress prospects by showing them a full or partial list of your customers.

Share with readers any results your firm has achieved for an individual customer or group of customers. IC Systems, for example, impressed dentists by telling them that the company has collected \$20 million in past due bills over the past 2 years alone – a number which creates the perception of a service that works.

Element #6: Establish credibility.

In addition to the benefits you offer, the products and services you deliver that offer these benefits, and the results you have achieved, prospective buyers will ask the question, “Who are you?”

In terms of persuasion, of the three major topics you discuss in your ad—the prospect, the product, and the product vendor—the “corporate” story is usually the least important. The prospect is primarily interested in himself and his problems and needs, and interested in your product or service only as a means of solving those problems or filling those needs. The prospect is interested in your company only as it relates to your ability to reliably make, deliver, install, and service the product he buys from you.

Yet, the source of the product or service—the company—still is a factor in influencing purchase decisions. In the early days of personal computing, IBM was

the preferred brand—not because IBM necessarily made a superior computer at a better price, but because if something went wrong, IBM could be counted on for fast, reliable, effective service and support. As PCs became more of a commodity and local computer resellers and stores offered better service, the service and support reputation of IBM became less of an advantage, and their PC sales declined.

Here are some examples of copy in which the vendor gives credentials designed to make the consumer feel more comfortable in doing business with them and choosing them over other suppliers advertising similar products and services:

We guarantee the best technical service and support. I was a compressor service technician at Ingersoll Rand, and in the last 20 years have personally serviced more than 250 compressors at over 80 companies.

For nearly 100 years, BOC Gases has provided innovative gas technology solutions to meet process and production needs. We have supplied more than 20,000 different gases and gas mixtures—in purities up to 99.99999 percent—to 2 million customers worldwide.

Lion Technology is different. For nearly two decades, we have dedicated ourselves 100% to training managers, engineers, and others in environmental compliance-related subjects. Since 1989, our firm has conducted more than 1,400 workshops nationwide on these topics.

You'll find some of Paul's fundamental research in precious metals summed up in his more than 60 best-selling books including *Silver Bulls* and *Trading with Gold*. Paul's unique blending of solid research, combined with an unprecedented record of success in picking gold stocks, may have been what moved one New York Times reporter to dub him "the dean of commodities researchers."

Credentials you can list in your copy include year founded, number of years in business, number of employees, annual revenues, number of locations, number of units sold, patents and product innovations, awards, commendations, publications, membership and participation in professional societies, seals of approval, agency ratings, independent survey results, media coverage, number of customers, and in-house resources (financial, technological, and human).

Element #7: Build value.

It's not enough to convince prospects you have a great product or a superior service. You must also show them that the value of your offer far exceeds the price you are asking for it. You may have the best widget in the \$100 to \$200 price range of medium-size widgets, but why should the prospect pay \$200 for your widget when they can get another brand for half the price? One argument might be lower total cost of ownership. Although your widget costs more to buy, its greater reliability and performance save and make your firm money that, over the long run, far exceeds the difference in price between you and brand X.

Stress cost of ownership vs. cost of purchase. The purchase price is not the only cost of owning something. There is the cost of maintenance, support, repair, refurbishment, operation, and, when something wears out, replacement.

Therefore the product that costs the least to buy may not actually cost the least to own; oftentimes, it is the most expensive to own!

Example: Several companies are now selling artificial bone substitutes for orthopedic surgeons to use in bone graft operations. As of this writing, a small container of the artificial bone substitute, containing enough material for one spine surgery, can cost \$500 to \$800.

The short-sighted buyer sees this as expensive, especially since bone graft can be taken from other sites in the patient's own body, and there is no cost for this material.

But is there really no cost? Collecting bone graft from the patient's own body adds about an hour to the surgical procedure. With operating room time at about \$1,000 an hour, it makes sense to pay \$750 for bone material and eliminate this extra hour in the OR.

That's not all. Often removing the bone from a donor site causes problems that can result in an extra day's stay in the hospital. That's another \$1,000 down the tubes. And the removal of bone from the donor site can cause infection, which must be treated with costly antibiotics. Also, the removal process can cause pain; how do you measure the cost of the patient's added suffering? So while \$750 for a small vial of artificial bone may seem initially expensive, it is in fact a bargain when compared with the alternative (which, on the surface, appears to have zero cost).

Here's a simpler example. You need to buy a photocopier for your home office. Copier A costs \$900. Copier B costs \$1,200. The features are essentially the same, and the reputations of the brands are comparable. Both have an expected lifetime of 120,000 copies. Most people would say, "Everything's the same except price, so buy copier A and save \$300." Copier A compares itself feature for feature with Copier B, and runs an ad with the headline, "Copier A vs. Our Competition... We Can Do Everything They Can Do... at 25% Off the Price."

But you are the copywriter for the makers of Copier B. You ask them what it costs to make a copy. Their cost per copy is 2 cents. You investigate Copier A, and find out that the toner cartridges are more expensive, so that the cost per copy is 4 cents. You can now advertise copies at "half the cost of our competitor."

What's more, a simple calculation shows that if Copier B is 2 cents a copy cheaper, and you use the machine to make 120,000 copies, your savings over the life of the machine is \$2,400. Therefore, an investment in Copier B pays you back eight times the extra \$300 it cost to buy. This is additional ammunition you can use

in your copy to establish that purchase price is not the ultimate factor determining buying decisions, and that Copier B offers a greater overall value to the buyer.

If your product costs slightly more up front but actually saves money in the long run, stress this in your sales talk. Everyone knows that the cheapest product is not automatically the best buy; corporate buyers are becoming especially concerned with this cost of ownership concept. Only government business, which is awarded based on sealed proposals and bids, seems to still focus solely on the lowest price. And even that is slowly changing.

The key to establishing value is to convince the prospects that the price you ask is “a drop in the bucket” compared with the money your product will make or save them, or the other benefits it delivers. Some examples:

What would you do if the EPA assessed a \$685,000 fine against your company for noncompliance with environmental regulations you *weren't even aware existed*?

Now get the special 50th Anniversary Edition of
PERRY'S CHEMICAL ENGINEERS' HANDBOOK...

... for only \$4.97 (list price: \$129.50)

with your No-Risk Trial Membership in McGraw-Hill's

Chemical Engineers' Book Club

Another way to establish value is to compare the cost of your product with more expensive products or services that address the same basic need:

The cost of *The Novell Companion*, including the 800+ page reference binder and NetWare utilities on diskette, is normally \$89 plus \$6.50 for shipping and handling. This is less than a NetWare consultant would charge to advise you for just one hour... yet *The Novell Companion* is there to help you administer and manage your network, year after year.

If your product or service is used over a period of time, as most are, you can reduce the “sticker shock” that comes with quoting a high up-front price by showing the cost over the extended usage period. For instance, a life insurance policy with an annual premium of \$200 “gives your loved ones protection for just 55 cents a day.” The latter seems more affordable, although the two prices are equivalent.

Element #8: Close with a call to action.

Copy is written to bring about a change—that is, to cause prospects to change their opinion, attitude, beliefs, purchasing plans, brand preferences, or immediate buying actions.

To effect this change, your copy must be specific about the action the prospect should take if they are interested in what you’ve said and how to take advantage of your offer or at least find out more. Tell them to clip and mail the coupon, call the toll free phone number, visit your Web site, come to your store, request a free estimate, or whatever. Specify the next step directly in your copy, or else few people will take it. Some examples:

When you call, be sure to ask how you can get a FREE copy of our new audio cassette, “*How to Get Better Results From Your Collection Efforts.*” In just 7 minutes listening time, you’ll discover at least half a dozen of the techniques IC Systems uses—and you can use, too—to get more people to pay what they owe you.

For a complementary copy of the SECRETS OF BUILDING A WORLD-CLASS WEB SITE audio cassette, complete and mail the survey enclosed or fax it today to 1 888 FAX 2IBM (1 888 329 2426).

Put BOC’s quality gas solutions to work in your plant—starting today.

Think it’s time to talk with a gas supplier that really knows your business and has

real solutions to your problems? Call your BOC Gases representative today. Or visit our Web site at <http://www.boc.com>.

Section 3

Features before Benefits

Perhaps the oldest – and most widely embraced – rule for writing direct response copy is, “Stress benefits, not features.” But even this sacred commandment doesn’t always hold true.

“As a direct response copywriter, I do my best to write copy that focuses on benefits,” says freelancer Connie Clark in a letter to this magazine (February 1987). “But sometimes – in admittedly rare circumstances – a different approach can work as well or better.”

Specifically, I can think of five selling situations in which features should be given equal (if not top) billing over benefits and promise-oriented copy.

1. Selling to experts. As a new homeowner, I know beans about insulation. So I need to be sold on the benefits: How much will the insulation reduce my winter fuel bills? What’s the benefit of insulating my attic floor vs. the roof? Why is an “R value” of 11 better than 9? Will my house actually become warmer and less drafty?

But could you imagine repeating this discussion in a mailing aimed at insulation contractors and installers? Of course not, because these contractors are experts in insulation. They already know what insulation can do and why it is important. So copy should stress the features of insulation – R values, price, volume discounts, types of materials available, installation techniques.

These “insulation experts” are interested in only one thing: Do you have the products they need to help them do their job correctly and at a good profit? A discussion of features and pricing will give these knowledgeable pros the information they need to make a decision.

2. Enthusiasts. In my business-to-business copywriting course at New York University, I picked a Porsche ad out of a magazine and held it up for ridicule.

“Listen to this,” I said as I began to read the copy. “The 944 has a new 2.5-liter, 4-cylinder, aluminum-silicon alloy Porsche engine – designed at Weissach, and built at Zuffenhausen.” “It achieves maximum torque of 137.2 ft-lbs as early as 3,000 rpm, and produces 143 hp at 5,500 rpm.” “The 944 also has the Porsche transaxle design, Porsche aerodynamics and Porsche handling.”

I finished my critique by saying, “This is a textbook example of a classic copywriting mistake: stressing features instead of benefits. This ad is nothing more than a spec sheet of engineering statistics, and does a poor job of selling the benefits of owning a Porsche.”

A student raised his hand. “I’m sorry to disagree with you, but it’s obvious you don’t know or care much about cars. I’m a car nut – I own a Corvette and a Jag – and that ad gets me drooling to try the 944 on the road. When I hear 143 hp at 5,500 rpm, I can feel that aluminum-silicon alloy engine humming under the hood!”

Looking back, I think he was right. I’m the type who could care less about cars or which one I drive ... but then again, I’m probably not the kind of buyer Porsche is after. If the Porsche ad was aimed at automobile *enthusiasts*, then perhaps its feature-oriented approach was just right for tickling their fancy.

Remember, enthusiasts and hobbyists have a love for their obsession that is quite alien to the rest of us. But very real to them.

For instance, a discussion of woofers and tweeters may be boring to the vast majority of people who buy stereos. But the hi-fi nut wants to know. In the same way, a hacker has a fascination for bits and bytes the average computer user does not share.

Moral: When writing to enthusiasts, *think* like an enthusiast. Don't assume that the hobbyist shares your lack of interest in the nuts-and-bolts aspects of whatever it is you are selling.

3. Engineers and scientists. Vivian Sudhalter, director of marketing for Macmillan Software, is responsible for selling expensive software to scientists who use computers to analyze complex laboratory data. I asked Vivian what works for her in direct mail – and what doesn't.

“Despite what tradition tells you, the engineering and scientific market does not respond to promise or benefit-oriented copy,” she says. “They respond to features. Your copy must tell them exactly what they are getting and what your product can do. Scientists and engineers are put off by copy that sounds like advertising jargon. They resent it if you talk down to them. When writing copy, don't try to be clever, just give information about the product.”

Sudhalter's lead-generating self-mailer for Macmillan's Asyst and Asystant software follows this model. The copy has a scientist-to-scientist tone and talks about such arcane matters as Hermitian matrices, spectral slicing and QR factorization. Yet, it is successful, having generated a 4 percent response with Macmillan's in-house prospect list. Vivian tells me that she has conducted many tests of feature-oriented vs. benefit-oriented mailings, and the feature-oriented mailings win every time.

4. Equipment. Copy that sells equipment and systems must not only stress the benefits, but it must also describe how the product works and what

it can do. And it must list complete specifications – so the buyer can make an intelligent decision.

If I buy a newsletter, I subscribe because of how I'll benefit from the information it contains. Features, such as whether it is 8 or 12 pages long, or whether the editor reads 287 publications instead of 240, are secondary. Either the information is useful to me, or it isn't.

But the situation is different with tangible items. I recently received a catalog that sells computer furniture through the mail. I was thinking of buying, but the catalog didn't provide the information I needed. For example, the drawing failed to show dimensions, so I couldn't tell whether my printer would fit on the printer shelf – or even whether the desk would fit through my front door.

Moral: Benefits may generate initial interest in a product. But with many customers, you make or lose the sale based on whether you mention a particular feature. Copy that doesn't highlight *all* the key features can cost you sales.

5. Practicality. Is your product sold on glitz and glamour, hopes and dreams? Or is it bought for more practical reasons? Products with practical appeal must be supported by feature-oriented copy that gives your prospect the assurance that he's buying a good solution to his problems.

For example, the dozens of "How-to-Get-Rich-Quick" books sold through mail order ads are appealing to the buyer's dreams rather than hard reality. (How many of the people who buy such books actually become rich?) And so the copy - quite appropriately – concentrates 100 percent on the promise of riches beyond the dreams of avarice, without revealing the actual *features* of the plan ... which would only be a disappointment.

On the other hand, if the same person needed a new gas furnace for his home, he would look at your product with much more attention to detail. Here, copy would have to concentrate on explaining technical features, and on building

confidence in the performance of the product and the reliability of the manufacturer. Features would likely have equal billing with benefits in your brochure or mail package.

OK. Let's say you want to include some features and technical specifications in your next piece of copy. Here are some of the methods I use for integrating technical information into a sales-oriented piece.

- **FEATURES/BENEFITS TABLE.** This is simply a two-column table or checklist. The left-hand column lists all the features of your product, while the right-hand column describes the *benefits* the customer gets as a result of each feature.

Many copywriting books and courses suggest that you make such a list as preparation for writing any piece of copy. I'm suggesting you go one step further and actually reprint the features/benefits list as a page in your brochure.

- **TWO-PART "CAUSE-AND-EFFECT" STATEMENTS.** With this technique, used in headlines and body copy, you first describe a feature of your brochure, then talk about the benefits that result from this feature. You are saying: "Because our product has Feature X, you get Benefit Y." Some examples:

Because the system uses L-band frequency and improved MTI (moving target indication), it can detect targets up to 50 times farther away than S-band automobile radars.

No mechanical systems or moving parts are required. Which means Hydro-Circ consumes less energy and takes less space than conventional sump pumps.

The geometric shape of the seal ring amplifies the force against the disc. As the pressure grows, so does the valve's performance.

- **SPEC BOX.** A spec box is a separate box presenting all technical specifications and features of a product in list form. A good place for the spec box is the back page of your flier or brochure.

Have your artist put a border around the spec box to separate it from the main text. Another technique for visually separating your spec box from the rest of the body copy is to print the specs over a light tint.

- **VISUALS.** Use tables, graphs, charts, diagrams, illustrations, photos and other visuals to highlight features and technical information. Save body copy for a discussion of benefits.

Section 4

How to Write a Good Advertisement

To define what constitutes good print advertising, we begin with what a good print ad is not:

- It is not creative for the sake of being creative.
- It is not designed to please copywriters, art directors, agency presidents or even clients.
- Its main purpose is not to entertain, win awards or shout at the readers, “I am an ad. Don’t you admire my fine writing, bold graphics and clever concept?”

In other words, ignore most of what you would learn as a student in any basic advertising class or as a trainee in one of the big Madison Avenue consumer ad agencies.

Okay. So that's what an ad shouldn't be. As for what an ad should be, here are some characteristics shared by successful direct response print ads:

- They stress a benefit. The main selling proposition is not cleverly hidden but is made immediately clear. Example: "How to Win Friends and Influence People."
- They arouse curiosity and invite readership. The key here is not to be outrageous but to address the strongest interests and concerns of your target audience. Example: "Do you Make These Mistakes in English?" appeals to the reader's desire to avoid embarrassment and write and speak properly.
- They provide information. The headline "How to Stop Emission Problems – at Half the Cost of Conventional Air Pollution Control Devices" lures the reader because it promises useful information. Prospects today seek specific, usable information on highly specialized topics. Ads that provide information the reader wants get higher readership and better response.
- They talk to the reader. Why are so many successful control ads written by direct response entrepreneurs rather than top freelance copywriters and direct response agencies?

My theory is that when people see a non-direct response ad, they know it's just a reminder-type ad and figure they don't have to read it.

Because, although these entrepreneurs may not be professional writers, they know their product, their audience and what holds their audiences' interest. And that is far more important than copywriting technique or style.

- They are knowledgeable. Successful ad copy reflects a high level of knowledge and understanding of the product and the problem it solves. An effective technique is to tell the reader something he already knows,

proving that you, the advertiser, are well-versed in his industry, application or requirement.

An opposite style, ineffectively used by many “professional” agency copywriters, is to reduce everything to the simplest common denominator and assume the reader is completely ignorant. But this can insult the reader’s intelligence and destroy your credibility with him.

- They have a strong free offer. Good ads contain a stronger offer. They tell the reader the next step in the buying process and encourage him to take it NOW.

All ads should have an offer, because the offer generates immediate response and business from prospects that are ready to buy now or at least thinking about buying. Without an offer, these “urgent” prospects are not encouraged to reach out to you, and you lose many potential customers.

In addition, strong offers increase readership, because people like ads that offer them something – especially if it is free and has high perceived value.

Writers of image advertising may object, “But doesn’t making an offer cheapen the ad, destroy our image? After all, we want awareness, not response.” But how does offering a free booklet weaken the rest of the ad? It doesn’t, of course. The entire notion that you cannot simultaneously elicit a response and communicate a message is absurd and without foundation.

- They are designed to emphasize the offer.

Graphic techniques such as “kickers” or eyebrows (copy lines above the headline), bold headlines, liberal use of subheads, bulleted or numbered copy points, coupons, sketch of a telephone, toll-free numbers set in large type, pictures of response booklets and brochures, dashed borders, asterisks, and marginal notes make your ads more eye-catching and response-oriented, increasing readership.

Why? My theory is that when people see a non-direct response ad, they know it's just a reminder-type ad and figure they don't have to read it. But when they see response-type graphic devices, these visuals say to the reader, "Stop! This is a response ad! Read it so you can find out what we are offering. And mail the coupon – so you can get it NOW!"

- They are clearly illustrated. Good advertising does not use abstract art or concepts that force the reader to puzzle out what is being sold. Ideally, you should be able to understand exactly what the advertiser's proposition is within five seconds of looking at the ad. As John Caples observed a long time ago, the best visual for an ad for a record club is probably a picture of records.

At about this point, someone from DDB will stand up and object: "Wait a minute. You said these are the characteristics of a successful direct response ad. But isn't general advertising different?"

Maybe. But one of the ways to make your general advertising more effective is to write and design it as a direct response ad. Applying all the stock-in-trade techniques of the direct marketer (coupons, toll-free numbers, free booklets, reason-why copy, benefit-headlines, informative subheads) virtually guarantees that your advertisement will be better read – and get more response – than the average "image" ad.

I agree with Howard Ruff when he says that everything a marketer does should be direct response. I think the general advertising people who claim that a coupon or free booklet offer "ruins" their lyrical copy or stark, dramatic layout are ineffectual artists more interested in appearance and portfolios than results.

7 ways to create business publication advertising that gets results

How do you create an industrial or trade ad that gets attention, wins high readership scores, and generates a steady flow of valuable inquiries that convert easily to sales?

Here are some ideas, based on study (conducted to gather material for my book, *Ads That Sell*) of some advertisements that have proven successful in the marketplace:

1. Put a benefit in the headline.

The most successful ad I ever wrote (which was the number one inquiry producer in four consecutive insertions) had the headlines:

HOW TO SOLVE YOUR EMISSIONS PROBLEMS...

... at half the energy cost on conventional venturi scrubbers.

The headline combines a powerful benefit (“half the energy cost”) with the promise of useful information (“how to”) addressed directly at the reader’s specific problem (“solve your emissions problems”).

2. Ask a provocative question.

My friend Bob Pallace wrote an ad that generated an immediate \$1 million increase in billings for his ad agency in Silver Spring, Maryland. The headline was:

ARE YOU TIRED OF WORKING FOR
YOUR AD AGENCY?

The ad ran only one time in each of three magazines (*High-Tech Marketing*, *Business Marketing, Inc.*) and immediately brought in five new clients.

3. Be direct.

An ad agency asked me to write an ad to generate sales leads for a client that repairs and restores old surgical tables. When they sent me their literature, I used the headline on their brochure as the headline for the ad.

It read:

SURGICAL TABLES REBUILT

Free Loaners Available

The ad was successful, and demonstrates that when you are the only one advertising a particular product or service, or when the nature of your offer is hard to grasp, direct headlines can be extremely effective. Another direct headline I like appeared in an ad running in Network World:

LINK 8 PCS TO YOUR MAINFRAME

ONLY \$2,395

Donald Reddy, president of the firm, said the ad was extremely effective in generating a small but steady flow of highly qualified sales leads.

4. Give the reader useful information.

One way to increase readership is to promise the reader useful information in your headline, then deliver it in your ad copy.

For an ad offering business people a book on how to collect overdue bills, Milt Pierce wrote this headline:

7 WAYS TO COLLECT YOUR
UNPAID BILLS.

New from Dow Jones-Irwin...

A Successful and Proven Way
to Get Your Bills Paid Faster.

The information-type ad is highly effective in business-to-business advertising. Why? Because the reason business people read trade journals is for information, not entertainment, and such ads contribute to that valuable store of data.

5. Offer a free booklet, brochure, or information kit.

Offering something tangible – a brochure, booklet, information kit, videotape, audiocassette, research report, checklist, or other material the reader can send for – has never failed to increase response for me in nearly a decade of ad writing.

At the end of your ad, put in a subhead offering the material (for example: “Get the facts - FREE!”). Then describe your brochure or booklet, show a picture of it, and explain what the reader must do to get it.

If you can add something to a sales brochure to make it of lasting value, so much the better. More people will request your piece and more people will keep it.

6. Use a coupon.

Coupons visually identify your ad as “direct response,” causing more people to stop and read it (because they know that coupon ads usually offer free things of value). If the ad is one-third page or less, put a dashed border around the entire ad to create the feel and appearance of a coupon. Copy then instructs the reader. “For more information, clip this ad and mail with your business card to {company name, address}.”

7. Use a headline with multiple parts:

A headline does not have to contain just one sentence or phrase set in one uniform type size. Often, you can create a more eye catching and effective headline using what is essentially a three-part headline.

The first part, or kicker, is an “eyebrow or short line that goes in the upper left corner of the ad, either straight or at a slant. One good use of the kicker is to select a specific type of reader for the ad (e.g., “Attention COBOL Programmers”). Another effective technique is to let the reader know you are offering something free (“Special Free Offer - See Coupon Below”).

Next, set in larger type, comes your mail headline, which states your central benefit or makes a powerful promise. Then, in the subhead, you expand on the benefit or reveal the specific nature of the promise. Examples:

\$500 A DAY WRITER'S UTOPIA

Here's the breakthrough offer that opens up a whole new world for writers or those who hope to become writers:

FOR HIGH SPEED HIGH PERFORMANCE

DATA INTEGRATION, LOOK INTO MAGIC

MIRROR. Now you can move data instantly from one program to another right from your PC screen.

If your headline is designed to arouse curiosity or grab attention and does so at the expense of clarity, then be sure to make the nature of your proposition immediately clear in a subhead or within the first sentence. Otherwise you will lose the interest of the reader whose attention you worked so hard to gain.

Section 5

The Magic of False Logic

False logic, a term coined by my friend, master copywriter Michael Masterson, is copy that manipulates (but does not lie about or misrepresent), through skillful writing, existing facts. The objective: to help readers come to conclusions that those facts, presented without the twists of the copywriter's pen, might not otherwise support.

A catalog for Harry & David says of its pears, “Not one person in 1,000 has ever tasted them.” The statistic, as presented by the catalog writer, makes the product sound rare and exclusive – and that’s how the average reader interprets it, just as the copywriter intended.

But a logician analyzing that statement might say that it simply indicates that the pears are not very popular – almost no one buys them.

It’s possible to argue that some false logic borders on deception, but the marketer has to make that call for himself.

A metals broker advertised “95% of orders shipped from stock” to indicate ready availability. But he ran his business out of an office and had no warehouse. How could he claim he shipped from stock?

“We do ship 95% of orders from stock,” the marketer explains. “But not from *our* stock – from the *metal supplier’s stock*”. We are just a broker. But we do not advertise that, since being a broker is perceived as a negative.”

A promotion selling a stock market newsletter to consumers compares the \$99 subscription price with the \$2,000 the editor would charge if he were managing your money for you, based on a 2% fee and a minimum investment of \$100,000.

The reader thinks he is getting Mr. Editor to give him \$2,000 worth of money management services for \$99, and quickly glosses over the fact that the newsletter is not precisely the same as a managed account.

A similar example is the promotion done by my friend Don Hauptman for *American Speaker*, a loose-leaf service for executives on how to give good speeches. In his promotion, he points out that this product can help you with your speeches all year long (it has periodic supplements) vs. the \$5,000 it costs to have a professional speechwriter write just one speech. But of course, *American Speaker* is not actually writing your speech for you.

There is an ongoing debate about whether people buy for emotional or logical reasons, but most successful marketers know that the former is more dominant as a buying motive than the latter. It is commonly said, "People buy based on emotion, then rationalize the purchase decision with logic."

Because they have made the buying decision based on strong feelings and ingrained beliefs, they are in essence looking for justification and support for what they already want to do.

Therefore, as long as the logical argument seems credible and sensible, they will accept it. They do not probe into it as scientifically or deeply as would, say, Ralph Nader or an investigative reporter for *Consumer Reports*.

Some critics view direct marketing as a step below general marketing in respectability, ethics, and honesty. And perhaps they might reason that my advocating the use of false logic adds fuel to their argument.

But in fact, false logic is not just the purview of direct marketers; general marketers use it routinely, some with great success.

For years, McDonald's advertised "billions sold" to promote their hamburger – leading customers to the false conclusion that just because something is popular, it is necessarily good. Publishers use similar logic when they trumpet a book as "a *New York Times* best-seller."

Is all this unethical? You can draw your own conclusion, but in my opinion, no.

A copywriter, like a lawyer, is an advocate for the client (or his employer). Just as the lawyer uses all the arguments at his disposal to win the case, so does the copywriter use all the facts at his disposal to win the consumer over to the product.

Certainly, we should market no products that are illegal, dangerous, or immoral, though one man's *Victoria Secrets* catalog is another man's soft porn.

But to not use all the tools at our disposal (including false logic) to persuade the buyer is either incompetence, failure to discharge fiduciary duties, or both.

Section 6

How to Write Subject Lines That Get Your E-mail Opened and Read

When prospects get your e-mail marketing message, they make a quick decision, usually in a couple of seconds, to open or delete it based largely on the subject line. But given the glut of promotional e-mail today, how can you convince a busy prospect – in just a few words – that your message is worthy of attention?

The “4 U’s” copywriting formula – which stands for urgent, unique, ultra-specific, and useful – can help.

Originally developed by my colleague Michael Masterson for writing more powerful headlines, the 4 U’s formula works especially well with e-mail subject lines. I’ll share it with you now.

According to this formula, strong subject lines are:

- *Urgent.* Urgency gives the reader a reason to act now instead of later. You can create a sense of urgency in your subject line by incorporating a time element. For instance, “Make \$100,000 working from home this year” has a greater sense of urgency than “Make \$100,000 working from home.” A sense of urgency can also be created with a time-limited special offer, such as a discount or premium if you order by a certain date.
- *Unique.* The powerful subject line either says something new, or if it says something the reader has heard before, says it in a new and fresh way. For example, “Why Japanese women have beautiful skin” was the subject line

in an e-mail promoting a Japanese bath kit. This is different than the typical “Save 10% on Japanese Bath Kits.”

- *Ultra-specific.* Boardroom is the absolute master of ultra-specific bullets, known as “fascinations,” that tease the reader into reading further and ordering the product. Examples: “What never to eat on an airplane,” “Bills it’s okay to pay late,” and “Best time to file for a tax refund.” They use such fascinations in direct mail as envelope teasers and in e-mail as subject lines.
- *Useful.* The strong subject line appeals to the reader’s self-interest by offering a benefit. In the subject line “An Invitation to Ski & Save,” the benefit is saving money.

When you have written your subject line, ask yourself how strong it is in each of these 4 U’s. Use a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = weak, 4 = strong) to rank it in each category.

Rarely will a subject line rate a 3 or 4 on all four U’s. But if your subject line doesn’t rate a 3 or 4 on at least *three* of the U’s, it’s probably not as strong as it could be – and can benefit from some rewriting.

A common mistake is to defend a weak subject line by pointing to a good response. A better way to think is as follows: If the e-mail generated a profitable response despite a weak subject line, imagine how much more money you could have made by applying the 4 U’s.

A software marketer wrote to tell me he had sent out a successful e-mail marketing campaign with the subject line “Free White Paper.” How does this stack up against the 4 U’s?

- *Urgent.* There is no urgency or sense of timeliness. On a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being the highest rating, “Free White Paper” is a 1.
- *Unique.* Not every software marketer offers a free white paper, but a lot of them do. So “Free White Paper” rates only a 2 in terms of uniqueness.

- *Ultra-specific.* Could the marketer have been less specific than “Free White Paper”? Yes, he could have just said “free bonus gift.” So we rate “Free White Paper” a 2 instead of a 1.
- *Useful.* I suppose the reader is smart enough to figure the white paper contains some helpful information he can use. On the other hand, the usefulness is in the specific information contained in the paper, which isn’t even hinted at in the headline. And does the recipient, who already has too much to read, really need yet another “Free White Paper”? I rate it a 2. Specifying the topic would help, e.g., “Free White Paper shows how to cut training costs up to 90% with e-learning.”

I urge you to go through this exercise with every e-mail subject line you write. You can also apply the formula to other copy, both online and offline, including direct mail envelope teasers, ad headlines, letter leads, Web page headlines, subheads, and bullets.

Rate the line you’ve written in all four U’s. Then rewrite it so you can upgrade your rating on at least 2 and preferably 3 or 4 of the categories by at least 1. This simple exercise may increase readership and response rates substantially for very little effort.

Section 7

Reach Your Prospects on a Deeper Level: The BFD Formula for Uncovering Your Customer’s Core Buying Complex

How well do you really know your customers?

Reading the list data cards is a good way to find out something about the

folks you are mailing to, but it's not enough. Knowing that you are writing to farmers, Information Technology (IT) professionals, or plumbers is just the start. You have to dig deeper. But how?

To write powerful copy, you have to go beyond the demographics to understand what really motivates these people: who they are, what they want, how they feel, and what their biggest problems and concerns are that your product can help solve.

One direct marketer told me, "We want to reach prospects on three levels – intellectual, emotional, and personal."

Intellectual is the first level and, while effective, not as strong as the other two. An intellectual appeal is based on logic – e.g., "Buy the stocks we recommend in our investment newsletter and you will beat the market by 50 to 100 percent."

More powerful is to reach the prospect on an *emotional* level. Emotions that can be tapped include fear, greed, love, vanity, and, for fundraising, benevolence. Going back to our example of a stock market newsletter, the emotional appeal might be, "Our advice can help you cut your losses and make much more money, so you become much wealthier than your friends and neighbors. You'll be able to pay cash for your next car – a Lexus, BMW, or any luxury automobile you care to own – and you'll sleep better at night."

The most powerfully you can reach people is on a *personal* level. Again, from our example of a stock market newsletter: "Did you lose a small fortune in the April 2000 tech stock meltdown? So much that it put your dreams of retirement or financial independence on hold? Now you can gain back everything you lost, rebuild your net worth, and make your dream of early retirement or financial independence come true. A lot sooner than you think."

To reach your prospects on all three levels – intellectual, emotional, and personal – you must understand what copywriter Michael Masterson calls the

buyer's "Core Complex." These are the emotions, attitudes, and aspirations that drive them, as represented by the formula BFD – beliefs, feelings, and desires:

- *Beliefs.* What does your audience believe? What is their attitude toward your product and the problems or issues it addresses?
- *Feelings.* How do they feel? Are they confident and brash? Nervous and fearful? What do they feel about the major issues in their lives, businesses, or industries?
- *Desires.* What do they want? What are their goals? What change do they want in their lives that your product can help them achieve?

For instance, we did this exercise with IT people, for a company that gives seminars in communication and interpersonal skills for IT professionals. Here's what we came up with in a group meeting:

- *Beliefs.* IT people think they are smarter than other people, technology is the most important thing in the world, users are stupid, and management doesn't appreciate them enough.
- *Feelings.* IT people often have an adversarial relationship with management and users, both of whom they service. They feel others dislike them, look down upon them, and do not understand what they do.
- *Desires.* IT people want to be appreciated and recognized. They also prefer to deal with computers and avoid people whenever possible. And they want bigger budgets.

Based on this analysis, particularly the feelings, the company created a direct mail letter that was its most successful ever to promote a seminar; "Interpersonal Skills for IT Professionals." The rather unusual headline: "Important news for every systems professional who has ever felt like telling a user, 'Go to hell.'"

Before writing copy, write out in narrative form the BFD of your target market. Share these with your team and come to an agreement on them. Then write copy based on the agreed BFD.

Occasionally insights into the prospect's desires and concerns can be gleaned through formal market research. For instance, a copywriter working on a cooking oil account was reading a focus group transcript and came across this comment from a user: "I fried chicken in the oil and then poured the oil back into a measuring cup. All the oil was there except one teaspoon."

This comment, buried in the appendix of a focus group report, became the basis of a successful TV campaign dramatizing the selling point that food did not absorb the oil and therefore was not greasy when cooked in it.

Veteran ad man Joe Sacco once had an assignment to write a campaign for a new needle used by diabetics to inject insulin. What was the key selling point?

The diabetics Sacco talked to all praised the needle because it was sharp. A non-user would probably view being sharp as a negative. But if you have ever given yourself or anyone else an injection, you know that sharper needles go in smoother, with no pain. And Sacco wrote a successful ad campaign based on the claim that these needles were sharp, therefore enabling easier, pain-free insulin injection.

Copywriter Don Hauptman advises, "Start with the prospect, not the product." With BFD, you can quickly gain a deeper understanding of your prospects before you attempt to sell them something. Stronger marketing campaigns usually follow.

Section 8

Tips on Using Testimonials

Whenever a customer sends a letter with positive comments about your company or product, immediately seek permission to use this testimonial in your ads, brochures, direct mail, and other promotions.

The easiest way to do this is to send a “release letter” to the client (along with a photocopy of the testimonial letter, with the passages you want to reprint highlighted in yellow).

Your release letter can follow this basic format:

Mr. Mike Jones
Advertising Manager
World Enterprises
Anytown, USA

Dear Mike:

Thanks for your letter of 12/12/87 (copy attached). I’m glad you’re pleased with our product!

I’d like to quote from your letter in the ads, brochures, direct mail, and other promotions we use to market our product – with your permission, of course.

If this is OK with you, would you please sign the bottom of this letter and send it back to me in the envelope enclosed.

The second copy is for your files.

Many thanks, Mike.

Regards,
Jane Smith

YES, YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION TO QUOTE FROM THE ATTACHED LETTER IN ADS, BROCHURES, MAIL AND OTHER PROMOTIONS USED TO MARKET YOUR PRODUCT.

Signed _____ Date _____

I always enclose a self-addressed stamped reply envelope plus a second copy of the permission letter (for the recipient's files).

Soliciting Testimonials

If your customers don't send you letters of praise (and many won't), then you can *ask* them to give you a testimonial. How? Simply send a letter to clients and customers who are happy with your product or service and ask for their comments. Here's a letter I use (feel free to copy or adapt it):

Mr. Alex Samuels
Product Supervisor
XYZ Corporation
Anyplace, USA

Dear Alex:

I have a favor to ask of you.

I'm in the process of putting together a booklet of testimonials – a collection of comments about my services, from satisfied clients like you.

Would you please take a few minutes to give me your opinion of my consulting services?

There's no need to dictate a letter – just jot your comments on the back of this letter, sign below, and return to me in the enclosed envelope. (The second copy is for your files).

I look forward to learning what you *like* about my service ... but I also welcome any suggestions or criticisms, too.

Many thanks, Alex.

Regards, Bob Bly

YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION TO QUOTE FROM MY COMMENTS, AND USE THESE QUOTATIONS IN ADS, BROCHURES, MAIL AND OTHER PROMOTIONS USED TO MARKET YOUR SERVICES.

Signed _____ Date _____

Note that I am asking for an “opinion” instead of a testimonial, and that I urge Alex to give me criticisms as well as positive comments. In this way, I’m not just asking for a favor, I’m getting information that will help me serve my clients better in the future. Thus, I’m not the only one who profits; we both do.

If you solicit testimonials from your satisfied clients and customers, and you always get permission to use any unsolicited testimonials that people send you, you’ll soon build a thick testimonial file. Because you’ve gotten people to give you a “blanket release” to use their comments any way you choose, you can use these testimonials in any or all of your marketing materials – from ads and sales letters, to brochures and catalogs.

One quick and easy way to use these testimonials is simply to type them up single-spaced and reprint them on an 8½-by-11-inch sheet of paper. The headline reads: “WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT (your company or product).” If you have a lot of testimonials, you can print on the reverse side or go to a second sheet. Don’t forget to include your address and phone number at the bottom of the page. Use the testimonial sheet as a handout, as an additional enclosure in direct mail packages, or as a supplement to your sales brochure.

Always give the sheet and a duplicate of your full testimonial file to any ad agency, copywriter, or marketing consultant you hire. It will be tremendously helpful to them when they create ads, brochures, and direct mail packages for you.

On using testimonials

Using testimonials – quotations from satisfied customers and clients – is one of the simplest and most effective ways of adding punch and power to brochure, ad and direct mail copy.

But how do you get testimonials? How do you use them?

Here are some tips for using testimonials:

1. *Always use real testimonials instead of made-up ones.* Even the most skilled copywriter can rarely make up a testimonial that can match the sincerity and credibility of genuine words of praise from a real customer or client.

If you ask a customer to give you a testimonial, and he or she says, “Sure, just write something and I’ll sign it,” politely reply: “Gee, I appreciate that, but would you mind just giving me your opinions of our product – in your own words?” Fabricated or self-authored testimonials (those written by the advertiser or their copywriter) usually sound phony; genuine testimonials invariably have the ring of truth.

2. *Prefer long testimonials to short ones.* Many advertisers are hooked on using very short testimonials. For instance:

“...fabulous!...”

“truly funny...thought-provoking...”

“...excellent...wonderful...”

I believe that when people see these ultra short testimonials, they suspect that a skillful editing job has masked a comment that was not as favorable as the writer makes it appear. In my opinion, longer testimonials – say, two or three sentences versus a single word or phrase – come across as more believable.

For example:

“Frankly, I was nervous about using an outside consultant. But your excellent service has made me a believer! You can be sure that we’ll be calling on your firm to organize all our major sales conferences and other meetings for us. Thanks for a job well done!”

Sure, it’s longer, but it somehow seems more sincere than a one-word superlative. Which brings us to....

3. *Prefer specific, detailed testimonials to general or superlative testimonials.*

Upon receiving a letter of praise from a customer, our initial reaction is to read the letter and find the single sentence that directly praises our company or our product. With a blue pencil, we extract the words we think are kindest about us, producing a bland bit of puffery such as:

“We are very pleased with your product.”

Actually, most testimonials would be stronger if we included more of the specific, detailed comments our client has made about *how* our product or service helped him. After all, the prospects we are trying to sell to may have problems similar to the one our current customer solved using our product. If we let Mr. Customer tell Mr. Prospect how our company came to his rescue, he’ll be helping us make the sale. For instance:

“We have installed your new ChemiCoat system in each of our bottling lines and have already experienced a 25 percent savings in energy and material costs. Thanks to your system, we have now added an additional production line with no increase in energy costs. This has increased profits 15 percent and already paid back the investment in your product. We are very pleased with your product.”

Again, don’t try to polish the customer’s words so it sounds like professional ad copy. Testimonials are usually much more convincing when they are not edited for style.

4. *Use full attribution.* We've all opened direct mail packages that contained testimonials from "J.B. in Arizona" or "Jim S., Self-Made Millionaire." I suspect that many people laugh at such testimonials and think they are phony.

To increase the believability for your testimonials, attribute each quotation.

Include the person's name, city and state, and (if a business customer) their job title and company (e.g., "Jim K. Redding, vice president of manufacturing, Divmet Corporation, Fairfield, NJ"). People are more likely to believe this sort of full disclosure than testimonials which seem to conceal the identity of the speaker.

5. *Group your testimonials.* There are two basic ways to present testimonials: You can group them together in one area of your brochure or ad, or you can scatter them throughout the copy. A third alternative is to combine the two techniques, having many testimonials in a box or buck slip and a smattering of other testimonials throughout the rest of your copy.

I've seen both approaches work well, and the success of the presentation depends, in part, on the skill of the writer and the specific nature of the piece. But, all else being equal, I prefer the first approach: to group all your testimonials and present them as a single block of copy. This can be done in a box, on a separate page or on a separate sheet. My feeling is that when the prospect reads a half dozen or so testimonials, one right after another, they have more impact and power than when the testimonials are separated and scattered throughout the piece.

6. *Get permission.* Make sure you get permission from your customer to reprint his words before including his testimonial in your copy.

I suggest that you send a letter quoting the lines you want to reprint and ask permission to include them in ads, direct mail, brochures, and other materials used to promote your firm. Notice I'm asking for a general release that gives me permission to use the customer's quotation in all current and future promotions,

not just a specific ad or letter. This lets me get more mileage out of his favorable comment and eliminates the need to ask permission every time I want to use the quote in a new ad or letter.

About the author:

BOB BLY is an independent copywriter and consultant with more than 20 years of experience in business-to-business, high tech, industrial, and direct marketing.

Bob has written copy for over 100 clients including Network Solutions, ITT Fluid Technology, Medical Economics, Intuit, Business & Legal Reports, and Brooklyn Union Gas. Awards include a Gold Echo from the Direct Marketing Association, an IMMY from the Information Industry Association, two Southstar Awards, an American Corporate Identity Award of Excellence, and the Standard of Excellence award from the Web Marketing Association.

He is the author of more than 50 books including *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Direct Marketing* (Alpha Books) and *The Copywriter's Handbook* (Henry Holt & Co.). His articles have appeared in numerous publications such as *DM News*, *Writer's Digest*, *Amtrak Express*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Inside Direct Mail*, and *Bits & Pieces for Salespeople*.

Bob has presented marketing, sales, and writing seminars for such groups as the U.S. Army, Independent Laboratory Distributors Association, American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and the American Marketing Association.

He also taught business-to-business copywriting and technical writing at New York University.

Bob writes sales letters, direct mail packages, ads, e-mail marketing campaigns, brochures, articles, press releases, white papers, Web sites, newsletters, scripts, and other marketing materials clients need to sell their products and services to businesses. He also consults with clients on marketing strategy, mail order selling, and lead generation programs.

Prior to becoming an independent copywriter and consultant, Bob was advertising manager for Koch Engineering, a manufacturer of process equipment. He has also worked as a marketing communications writer for Westinghouse Defense. Bob Bly holds a B.S. in chemical engineering from the University of Rochester and has been trained as a Certified Novell Administrator (CNA). He is a member of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and the Business Marketing Association.

Bob has appeared as a guest on dozens of TV and radio shows including MoneyTalk 1350, The Advertising Show, Bernard Meltzer, Bill Bresnan, CNBC, Winning in Business, The Small Business Advocate and CBS Hard Copy. He has been featured in major media ranging from the LA Times and Nation's Business to the New York Post and the National Enquirer.

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