

Marketing Communication Skills: Writing That Sells

The term *marketing communications*, sometimes abbreviated as *marcom*, describes messages used to communicate with a market. Marketing communications focus on the products or services of a business or organization rather than on the company or organization itself, and are used to create demand or position a company's product or service.

The task of generating marketing communications often is the responsibility of the business owner, sales manager or development professional. Once written, marcom can be used to create a variety of sales collateral material – flyers and brochures, direct mail marketing packages, newsletters, press releases – and can also be used on company web pages.

Think of marketing communications as salesmanship in print. And just as you carefully prepare and plan for a sales call, prepare and plan for salesmanship in print.

Who are your potential buyers?

Regardless of your specific type of business or industry, your potential buyers will fit into one of five categories:

- those who are dissatisfied with their current provider and are ready to switch now;
- those who are open to switching but haven't yet made the decision to do so;
- those who haven't yet thought about switching, but could be persuaded;
- those who satisfied with their current provider and therefore are not now interested; and
- those who, for whatever reason, will never be interested.

Your task when writing marketing communications is to find a way to communicate effectively with potential buyers in the first four categories. In addition, the specific individuals within each buyer category can react differently to the sales message based on their need for lesser or greater amounts of information prior to making the decision to buy.

To guide your writing, remember the acronym AIDA – Attention, Interest, Desire, Action. This model, developed perhaps as early as 1898, describes the steps of a selling cycle:

- Attract the attention of the buyer
- Create interest in your product or service by demonstrating features, advantages and benefits
- Convince buyers that they want the product or service because it will satisfy their needs
- Tell buyers the next step to take to either purchase or lead to purchase.

Attracting attention

The single most compelling way to attract the buyer's attention is to use a headline. In his 1985 book *Ogilvy on Advertising*, advertising legend David Ogilvy states, "On average, five times as many people read the headlines as read the body copy. It follows that unless your headline sells your product, you have wasted 90 per cent of your money."

Headlines that work best are those that promise a benefit or are newsworthy. They will answer the unspoken question of the reader: "What's in it for me? Why should I spend any more time on this?"

Compelling headlines incorporate powerful, action oriented words that appeal to the reader's emotion. Examples include *announcing*, *secrets*, *quick*, *proven*, *easy*, *at last* and *sale*. Most headlines will fit into one of several categories: *guarantee* (states a benefit, then guarantees it); *discount* (describes savings then provides a reason to act); *benefit* (describes a benefit in which the reader is interested); and *how to* (a variation on the benefit headline; describes *faster*, *better*, *cheaper*, *easier*.)

Creating interest

Attracting the interest of a buyer is based on appealing to emotion – to wants, not needs. We all need a vehicle to get to work, but we want different kinds of vehicles. Therefore marketing communications need to address the buyer's wants.

Note that this is counterintuitive to the idea that a business is selling a product or service. There is a natural tendency for marketing communications to focus on the business offering the product or service – who the business is, what it does, its corporate philosophy and history, its mission statement and corporate objectives.

However, in the initial stages of marketing communication, the buyer is not interested in the company. Instead, the buyer continues to ask, "What's in it for me? How will I benefit from doing business with this company versus its competitors (including my current vendor)?" If you can devise a meaningful answer to this question, you will have developed *empathy* with your buyer.

Convincing the buyer

Only after attracting the buyer's attention and gaining his interest will you be ready to move on to convincing the buyer that your product or service is the right one to meet their needs and satisfy their wants. Present facts, statistics and other objective information that the buyer will notice and remember. Or provide case studies, success stories, testimonials and consequence stories (*i.e.*, what happened to those who failed to use your product or service).

Part of the process of convincing the buyer is to move the buyer from needing your product or service to wanting it. This requires showing the buyer how using your product or service will be of benefit. The features of your product demonstrate how it meets the buyer's needs, but it is how the features translate to benefits that show how it satisfies his wants.

To help translate features into benefits, make a list of features. Read the feature, then answer the question, "What this means to you is . . ." to develop the benefit. Keep in mind that benefits must be real and of importance to the buyer. This is another step in developing empathy with the buyer.

Finally, write as if you were having a face-to-face discussion with the buyer. Use *you*

and *your* and rewrite sentences to change the emphasis from your company to the buyer. For example, the sentence "We provide world-class customer service" is focused on the selling company. To focus on the buyer, change the sentence to "You deserve world-class customer service." The first sentence is a claim that the buyer may or may not believe; the second is a statement that the buyer is very likely to agree with.

Taking action

No matter how carefully you have written your marketing communications to attract attention, create interest and promote desire, if you don't motivate your buyer to take immediate action, your marketing communication has not fulfilled its purpose.

To motivate buyers to act now, you must provide a *sense of urgency* in the copy. Typically this is done with a limit – either time or availability. *The first 50 respondents will receive . . .* is an example of availability; *offer expires on December 31* is an example of time. The shorter the time period or the smaller the quantity, the greater the sense of urgency that is created.

When coupled with a special offer, a sense of urgency should provoke a good response from your buyers. Some examples

of special offers are a discount or credit toward purchase or something for free. Depending on who the target audience is, the special offer could be called introductory (targeting new customers) or appreciation (targeting current or past customers). Just be certain that the offer has true value for the buyer, or else it won't act as a motivator.

Generating trust and confidence

Strip away all the techniques for motivating prospects to respond and buy, and you will find a basis of trust and confidence between the buyer and seller. Both consumer and business buyers are now sophisticated and able to detect falsehood, hype, hyperbole and overstatement. Keep your marketing communications simple, factual and powerful and you will take the first step in convincing prospects to buy from you.

If you would like help evaluating your marketing communications, please contact **Lisa Reed** at **609-387-0030** or **lisa@burlingtonpress.com** for an appointment.



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a vocabulary of the graphic arts

BRE/BRC: business reply envelope/business reply card.

A postage paid and preaddressed envelope or card used by respondents to a direct mail marketing appeal.

Call out: a brief section of copy designed to stand apart from the main body of text. Used to highlight a point or provide additional, related information.

Cosmetic violator: a graphic element such as a starburst or button that delivery violates the design harmony of a piece. Used to draw attention to a specific benefit (*i.e.*, free to the first 100 callers) or deadline (*i.e.*, offer expires on November 30).

Dimensional: mail piece with unexpected heft or dimension, such as a box or tube containing a gift. Also known as *lumpy mail*.

Direct response marketing: marketing that aims for immediate action, response or sale from the target audience. Contrasted to *awareness marketing*.

Kicker: a line of copy just above the headline. Used to create context (*i.e.*, kick interest for the story).

Johnson Box: a box positioned at the top of a letter before the salutation that succinctly states the main message of the offer in a compelling way. The "box" can be made of lines or asterisks and may be tinted. The Johnson Box is named for direct marketer Frank Johnson who popularized the technique when he used it to improve response to offers for American Heritage magazine.

Letter fold (*also known as business letter fold, brochure fold, spiral fold, barrel fold*); a folding pattern (two or more panels of the

same width of the folded signature, folded around one panel) in which the folds are parallel. When the signature is folded twice, there are three panels on each side (six pages); when folded three times, the result is four panels on each side (eight pages).

Letter fold, type in: a double parallel fold with the copy on the front page facing inwards. The reader must open the folded piece to read the copy.

Letter fold, type out: a double parallel fold with the copy on the front page facing outward. The reader can see the copy on one page without opening the folded piece.

Nest: to place a printed piece inside a part or all of another piece, such as nesting three pages of a letter.

Perfect match: the process of matching a personalized insert to the appropriate carrier (outbound) envelope.

Postscript or P.S.: an additional message after the formal closing of a letter. Used to restate the offer and/or a key benefit. May include an appeal to urgency. Only a Johnson Box is read more than a P.S.

Suppress: to remove an address from a particular mailing without deleting it from the mail list.

C O R N E R

An effective technique for marketing communication is the use of *active voice*. *Voice* is the grammatical term for describing whether the action of a sentence is performed by the subject (active voice) or the object of the sentence (passive voice). For example:

- *Active voice:* Sally wrote a check for her purchases.
- *Passive voice:* A check was written by Sally for her purchases.

As can be seen from the example, active voice is more forceful and allows for simpler sentence construction.

It is easy to recognize passive voice because the verb phrase will include a form of *to be* (such as *am, is, was, were, are, or been*).

To change from passive to active voice, locate who or what is performing the action expressed by the verb. Make that the subject of the sentence, and change the verb accordingly.

- *Passive voice:* Our product is ordered by four out of five people who receive this brochure.
- *Change to active voice:* Four out of five people who receive this brochure order our product.

In marketing communications, passive voice can be used when the agent performing the action is obvious, unimportant or unknown, or when you don't wish to reveal the agent until the end of the sentence. In this circumstance, passive voice is effective because it highlights the action and what is acted upon rather than the agent doing the acting.

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When writing marketing communications, keep in mind that almost always you will be interrupting the reader who is engaged in some activity besides reading your sales material. For example, a direct mail marketing letter will come to your reader's attention while he or she is in the midst of opening the mail, or your reader will notice a display ad while reading a magazine article.

This fact amplifies the importance of an attention-getting device to distract the reader from whatever activity you have

interrupted, and engage their interest in your message. On an envelope, the attention-getting device is called *teaser copy*; for a display ad or sales collateral material, it is often a headline.

Good teaser copy and headlines share the same characteristics: they catch the reader's attention and keep it long enough so that the first sentence is read. And if the first few sentences clearly delineate a benefit to the reader, he or she is likely to keep on reading, all the way to the offer and response.

To write strong teaser copy and headlines, follow these tips:

- *Be descriptive but brief.* Include enough to engage the reader's interest but not enough to tell the complete story.
- *Use action words.* Encourage your reader to do something.
- *Use a question.* Well written questions work because people are drawn to find out the answer. But if you pose a provocative question, be prepared to answer it within your sales message.

Q. *Is there a difference between writing marketing communications for business-to-business and business-to-consumer selling?*

A. The fundamentals – attention, interest, desire, action – remain the same. However, business-to-business copy differs from business-to-consumer copy because the underlying sales process is different.

Consumer purchases are almost always an individual or a family decision, where one member of the family is the principal decision maker. Marketing communications for consumers will take into account demographic information (such as age, occupation, gender, income, ethnicity) and psychographics (people's interests) to write copy designed to appeal to a specific, well-defined individual.

Business-to-business selling, on the other hand, often involves both information gatherers and decision makers. The decision-making process is typically more involved, and usually takes longer. It is possible that during the sales cycle, different versions of marketing communications will have to be created for the various business decision makers.

questions and answers