

Five Deadly Sales Letter Mistakes

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To be effective your sales letter must be opened, read, believed and acted upon. In order to do this it must attract attention, warm the interest of the reader, create a desire for your product or service and cause your prospect to take positive action.

An effective sales letter, not surprisingly, achieves the same objectives as an effective salesperson and just as there are certain mistakes a salesperson wants to be sure to avoid in the selling process, the same holds true for the writer of *sales letters*.

So today I present Five Deadly Sales Letter Mistakes. Eliminate one or more of the common blunders described here and it's a good bet your response rates will improve.

Deadly Sales Letter Mistake # 1 -- *Writing Your Letter For the Hundreds or Thousands of People You Will Be Mailing It To Instead of One Special Person.* One sure way to generate an apathetic response to your sales letter is to write for the group or list of people you will be mailing it to.

Approaching your letter with a "crowd mentality" instead of focusing in on a single, real, living, breathing prospect will greatly impair the ability of your letter to *make a genuine connection* with the reader.

The sales letter is the most personal, one-to-one form of advertising there is. As is often said, it's the only form of advertising that begins with the word "dear." So it should read like *one person* sitting down writing to *one other person*. And here's a crystal clear example of exactly what I mean by that statement. It's from a letter by the brilliant copywriter and non-pareil advertising man, Maxwell Sackheim:

"Thank you very much for having written to me for my latest catalog. A copy is being sent to you in another envelope and should reach you in a day or two.

"When my catalogue arrives I hope you will give it as friendly a welcome as if I were visiting you myself. I've tried to put into it just the words I would say to you if you were to come here personally, or if I were to come to your home and spend an evening with you."

Deadly Sales Letter Mistake # 2 -- *Thinking that Your Prospect Won't Read a Long Letter.* The key question is, what makes for a long letter? To which the answer is, any letter that is uninteresting is a long letter! Even the one-page letter that many salespeople and amateur marketers arbitrarily limit themselves to can seem long.

For example, a number of years ago Kevin Costner made an interminably boring and bloated movie entitled *Waterworld* that the critics panned and audiences ignored. On the other hand, Stephen Spielberg's inspiring and unflinching film about the Holocaust, *Schindler's List*, was more than three hours long and it was a huge critical and financial success.

Here's my point: People read long books, take long trips, and watch long movies and plays. And evidence abounds that people read long letters. But people won't read boring letters, dull letters, obviously self-serving I-me-we-product-oriented letters.

Offer the right product or service at the right price to the right audience and if you have enough to say and say it interestingly enough...you can make a five-page letter pull a better response than a two page letter.

Deadly Sales Letter Mistake # 3 -- *Being a Slave to the Formal Rules of Correct Grammar.* When you were in school, teachers and professors were paid to read your work and they dutifully corrected your writing according to the formal rules of grammar.

In the real world it's a different story. When writing a sales letter you want your work to have a conversational readability to it. And in most instances that means writing in an informal style. Because that's how the vast majority of buyers and sellers communicate with one another.

As a result, you'll break a number of formal grammatical rules. You'll start sentences with "and" or "but." Instead of complete sentences you'll sometimes use a sentence fragment. But that's OK. And every now and then you'll dangle a participle or end a sentence with a preposition.

If all of this seems totally against the grain consider this true story. Winston Churchill, a Nobel Prize Winner for literature, was corrected by one of his proofreaders for ending a sentence in a preposition. To which Mr. Churchill replied, "*That is the type of nonsense up with which I will not put!*"

Your objective is to generate a lead or advance or close the sale. Not one of your prospects is getting paid to read your letter. This time your "grade" will be determined by how well people respond.

Deadly Sales Letter Mistake # 4 -- *Giving The Reader a Reason For Not Reading.* Beware of the "so what" reaction of your typical prospect. Simply stated, they don't care about you, they don't care about your product or service and they don't care about your company.

Indifference is the order of the day. So you must grab hold of your prospect's mind with a startling statement, a provocative question; some volley of words that will stir them from their apathy and make them pay attention to your letter.

But capturing the prospect's attention will do you no good unless you hold onto it. And you do this by focusing your copy on one or more of the fundamental urges which motivate people -- fear, exclusivity, greed, guilt, the desire for love, beauty, health, salvation and so on.

Among these you must find or create the symptom or symptoms which your product or service cures. If your letter does not clearly and convincingly articulate your "cure" you have given your prospect an excellent reason for not reading it.

Deadly Sales Letter Mistake # 5 -- *Not Offering Proof That Your Product or Service Does What You Say It Will Do.* Not only is your typical prospect indifferent, in the vast majority of situations he is also highly sceptical. That's why you always want to offer the reader proof that your product or service will do what you say it will do. This will serve to validate your claims and minimize your prospect's scepticism. Most important, it will establish your salesperson -- the sales letter -- as a more credible and believable source of information.

The proof you offer up in your sales letter can take several different forms. Here are two forms of proof that I have found to be very effective:

1. Customer Testimonials -- A testimonial from a satisfied customer with a well-known, well-respected company is some of the most valuable proof you can offer. But make sure that the testimonial copy speaks to specific and relevant issues and concerns your typical prospect is likely to have.

For example, you sell training services and you know that one of the biggest concerns your prospect has is whether or not the training will produce meaningful, measurable results. So you go through

your thick packet of glowing testimonials and find a statement that speaks directly to the prospect's concern. This is what it says:

"When you compare 6 month's of results prior to your training with the 6 months after, we have improved our market share by \$2,261,000 and have established numerous new dealer relationships. Thanks to you, we are the only district in our region to experience any type of retail growth."

2. Tell A Success Story -- As a salesperson you know that stories sell. That's because, as sceptical as the typical prospect may be, she knows that few people will stoop so low as to fabricate a story.

Like any good story yours has to have some drama to it. And of course the hero of the story is you, your company and your product and/or service. Here's an example of what I mean. It's from a letter I wrote for a broker at a commercial real estate firm and this is exactly how the letter opens:

"They had accepted our purchase price. But when the building inspection revealed many small details that needed repair their response was, 'No way, this is an as-is purchase.'

"My clients just did not have the time to "lock horns" on this issue. Fortunately, they didn't have to. As their representative it was my job to get them what they wanted.

"I persisted. In phone call...after phone call ...after phone call. In meeting...after meeting...after meeting. I met with the broker. The property manager. The corporate ownership's management. Their attorneys (ugh!). I persisted. And, I negotiated.

"The bottom line? My clients got everything they wanted; every repair they asked for. Some \$40,000 worth!"

Stories sell, in person and on paper. They sell because they offer the prospect believable and credible proof that your product or service will do what you say it will do.

Your sales letter is the pen-and-ink embodiment of YOU, the professional marketer or salesperson. So when writing your sales letter think of yourself first and foremost as a salesperson, not a writer. And that means communicating with the prospect in much the same way and selling to him or her using many of the same tools as you would in a face-to-face meeting.