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A sales letter strategy that can't lose

There are countless ways of writing a good sales letter and sometime it's hard to decide on an approach. Fortunately, many years ago, a DM guru named Robert Stone devised a simple, virtually foolproof 7-step formula for writing a sales letter:

1. Begin with your strongest benefit
2. Expand on the most important benefit
3. Tell exactly and in detail what they are going to get, including all features and benefits
4. Back up your statements with support copy
5. Tell them what they'll lose if they don't act
6. Sum up the most important benefits
7. Make your call to action. Tell them to "Reply now" and give a good, logical reason why they should

You can't go wrong with this straightforward classic approach. It's simple, easy and it works. If you want to try other approaches or strategies or add to or vary the classic, here are a few ideas:

- You can write in a conversational tone – use lots of "I" and "you" in the copy
- Build your letter around customer testimonials
- Write the letter in the voice of a third party endorser
- Set up a problem situation and show how your product will solve it
- Use a narrative approach and tell a story
- Set up a 'yes' trap. Create a situation where the reader has to agree with what you're saying.
- Use a memo format. If copy is short this can be effective when writing to executives.

How to make your letter work even when it doesn't get fully read

Do you read a sales letter from beginning to end right off the bat? Probably not. What you probably do is spend 5 or 10 seconds just looking the letter over – scanning it – to find out what it's all about. You're trying to find out if it's worth your time to read it in detail. Your trying to determine if it's relevant.

60 Tips on Copy and Design for Direct Mailers

1. An offer usually works better when it has a time limit. This adds an element of urgency.
2. Finding the right lists should be the first thing you do when planning a prospect mailing. Create a profile of your best customer and look for lists of people like them.
3. Responder lists (proven direct mail buyers) usually work better than compiled lists (phonebooks, industry directories, etc.)
4. Mail to your customers more often. They are gold. Whenever you mail to a customer, always let them know that you know they are a customer.
5. Newsletters that give useful, helpful information are good ways to add value to a customer relationship.
6. Individualization vs Personalization. On your sales letter, unless you can get the name "right", it's better to individualize - Dear Golfer, Dear Gardener, Dear Colleague, Dear MacIntosh Owner . . . than to personalize with "Dear Mr. J.W. Jones". Personalize the order form and individualize the letter.
7. People don't buy products. They buy benefits. Benefits are ways your life will improve as a result of product features. People buy things or respond to offers because of a principle called WIIFM - What's In It For Me! Each benefit is a reason to respond. Find all the benefits of your product or offer. You can't include too many benefits in your message.
8. Two approaches to getting the envelope opened.
 - Use a #10 closed faced envelope, ink-jet/laser addressed, metered, with no "teaser" copy and nothing to identify who it's from. It's hard for anyone to throw this away unopened.
 - Use copy on the envelope that describes some kind of benefit that will appeal to your prospect.
9. When mailing to someone who has asked for information, always use 1st class postage, and always have something like: "Here is the information you requested" on the envelope.
10. The secret of a successful sales letter - everyone who reads it should feel like you wrote it just to them. A good letter has the feel of one-on-one communication. Always be thinking this as you're writing. It's critical.