The key to great inquiry fulfillment

Suppose you had responded to an advertisement from a manufacturer of forged steel valves and requested more information. How would you react to this reply?

Dear Sir:

Chemical Equipment magazine has informed us of your interest in our line of valves for the chemical process industry.

Enclosed please find the literature you requested. We will await with interest your specific inquiry.

Sincerely,

Joe Jones,
Sales Manger XYZ Valve Corporation

That letter doesn't call for action, build trust in the letter writer or tell the reader why he should want to buy valves from XYZ. There's no salesmanship in it, just a blunt acknowledgment that an inquiry has been made fulfillment package that should help move the sale along will not.

The tragedy is most letters mailed to fulfill business/industrial inquiries are just about as bad. Too many marketers treat a cover letter as an afterthought, once the pros at the ad agency have written the "important" elements of the communications program — ads, brochures, and catalogues.

That's a big mistake. As creative consultant Sig Rosenblum aptly puts it, "Ads go through a long process of rough, comps, and finished art. But those are just devices to put ideas into the reader's mind. Your simple letters can carry powerful ideas just as easily as your complex ads."

Do they? Circle some bingo card numbers and see for yourself. The responses you receive will include weak, dreary cover letters that rely on hackneyed expressions like "enclose please find," "pursuant to your request," and the ever-boring " as per your inquiry." That's not selling. Which clichés substitute for copy that expresses a company's desire to help prospects solve problems, hot leads can quickly turn cold.

Part of the problem is that nonwriters such as product mangers and engineers often write cover letters. Management reasons that the copywriter's time is better spent on ads and collateral. Yet the letter provides the toughest writing challenge. It must sell on words alone, without the embellishment of color, photos, or artwork.

Seven Letters Tips

The key to successful cover letters? Be friendly, courteous, and helpful. Tell the reader how you will help him solve his problem better, faster, or cheaper than the competition. Here are seven letter writing tips:

1. Thank the prospect for the lead. "Thanks for your interest" is a common opener. It may be becoming a

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cliche. But it's still a necessary courtesy.

2. Highlight key sales points. Don't try to summarize your sales literature, but instead pick one or two of the important sales points and emphasize them in your letter. Letters are handy supplements to literature because they can include any recent developments that a color brochure, with its longer life, may not reflect. Your letter can focus on a recent case history, a new application, a product improvement, or an addition to your manufacturing facility.

   If you must include more than two or three sales points, you can use "bullets" or numbers to set them apart (as this article does). Here's a sample from the Spartan Co.:

   Dear Mr. Guterl:

   Thanks for your interest in our Dry S02 Scrubbing Systems for industrial and utility air pollution control.

   Unlike conventional "wet" Dry Scrubbing removes chemical and particulate waste products as a free-flowing dry powder that is easy to handle and safe to dispose of. The system produces no sludge — so you don't need expensive thickeners, clarifies, or other wastewater treatment equipment.

   In addition to eliminating the sludge problem, Dry Scrubbing give you these advantages:

   - Less energy consumption
   - Lower operating and capital costs
   - High system reliability; less maintenance
   - No reheat required

   The enclosed brochure provides a fairly complete description of how the system works. Our representative in your area, listed on the "Spartan Reps" sheet, will be happy to answer your questions.

   Sincerely,
   Gary Blake, Product Manger
   Dry Scrubbing Systems

   Notice how the writer structured the letter to give one feature ("no sludge") top billing, while still touching lightly upon other important advantages of the system. The letter makes some sales points and whets the reader's interest in the literature he requested.

3. Tell the reader about the next step in the buying process. Make it easy for him or her. A portion of a good cover letter illustrates the point. The writer suggests a course of action (sending in a material sample for evaluation) that can solve the customer's problem and result in the sale of a mineral pelletizer:

   The key question, of course, is the cost of equipment to handle the volume required at your plant. Because the capacity of our Pelletizers will vary slightly with the particulates involved, well be glad to take a look at a random five gallon sample of your material. We'll evaluate it and get back to you with our equipment recommendation. If you will note with your sample the size pellets you prefer and the volume you wish to handle, we can give you an estimate of the cost involved.

   From this point on we can do an exploratory pelletizing test, a full day's test run or will rent you a production machine with an option to purchase. You can see f or yourself how efficiently it works and how easy it is to use. Of course the equipment can be purchased outright too.

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4. Write in a conversational tone. Your sales letter is communication from one human being to another — not from one corporate entity to the next. Warmth, humor, understanding, and an eagerness to be helpful are what make you the super salesperson you are.

   Why not endow your letters with those same positive qualities?

   Note how the letter above uses a casual almost folksy tone to win the reader's confidence and attention.

CLUMSY FAVORITES

One way to achieve an easy, natural style is to eliminate "whiskers" from your writing — those hackneyed expressions that drain the life and personality from sales letters. Antiquated phrases from the vocabulary of the bureaucrat make a person (and his company) come across as a stuffed shirt.

Here are 10 hackneyed expressions to avoid:

- *Enclosed please find...*

The reader can find it on his own. Just say "I'm enclosing" or "Here is."

- *When time permits...*

Poetic, but inaccurate. Time doesn't permit; people do.

- *Please don't hesitate to call.*

You really mean "feel free to call."

- *We are this date in receipt of...*

Say instead, "Today we received."

- *As per your request...*
- *Of even date...*

Translation: "today."

- *Pursuant to your orders...*

That's too formal. Just say, "As you requested," or "Following your instructions."

- *Whereas. . .*

Use "where" or "while."

- *Kindly advise...*

As opposed to "unkindly"? It's unnecessary.

- *Hitherto, whereby, thereby, herein, therein, thereof, heretofore...*

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Avoid those archaic, stilted words.

5. Have a “you orientation.” Good letters writers know that the word “you” may well be the most important word in their vocabulary. A “you” orientation means thinking about what the reader needs, wants, and desires. It means not tooting your own horn. It means translating the technical features of a product into benefits that help the reader do his job, serve his customers, and please his boss. And, it means addressing the reader directly as “you.” Remember, a sales letter is a personal communication, not a cold recitation of scientific technicalities.

6. Be concise. Use small words and short sentences. And break the writing up into many short paragraphs. Brevity makes writing easy to read. Run-on sentences and long chunks of unbroken text bore and intimidate readers.

   It’s best to get to the point in the fewest words possible. Here’s how the Acme Slide Rule Co. gets its message across in just two tightly written paragraphs:

   Dear Ms. Sherman:

   Thanks for your interest in the Acme Slide Rule. It has been used by thousands of scientists, technicians, and engineers throughout the world. We feel that you, too, will find it a handy reference tool in your work.

   The Slide Rules are $10.00 each in quantities of under 100, or $8.00 in lots of 100 or more. If you’d like to obtain one or more of the Slide Rules, just send your check or money order for the number you desire. We will see to it that your order is handled promptly.

   Cordially,
   S.D. Jameson
   Customer Service Representative

7. Make it look professional. Type the letter on a good electric typewriter. Proofread to eliminate errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and content. Or reproduce the letter on your stationery using a high-quality offset press.

A WORD ON BOUNCE-BACK

In addition to the literature and cover letter, a fulfillment package should contain a reply element. It can be a specification sheet, an order form or a questionnaire known as the bounce-back card.

Bounce-backs are postage-paid postcards addressed to the advertiser. They ask the prospect to qualify himself by answering a few questions. Typically, a bounce-back question-naire asks the prospect’s phone number, name, and address, the name and size of his company, whether he specifies or recommends a particular type of product, current buying plans, applications, the names of others in the company involved in the buying decision, whether the prospect currently uses the advertiser’s products or those of a competitor, whether the prospect wants a salesperson to call and whether the inquiry is for an immediate need, a future need, or reference information only.

Bounce-back postcards may be separate from the rest of the package, or they may be printed as tear-out inserts in brochures and catalogs. Some companies comb combine the bounce-back questionnaire, cover letter copy and catalog information on a single sheet.

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Most industrial marketing experts agree that the bounce-back is an integral part of the fulfillment package. “If you’re not contacting the respondent personally, you should have a bounce-back card,” says Robert L. Sieghardt, president of Professional Sales Support, a company that screens sales leads by telephone. Mr. Sieghardt says the 55% of prospects will respond with a bounce-back card after a series of three mailings in addition to the initial mailing.

Some advertisers respond to inquiries by mailing a bounce-back card without an accompanying piece of literature. They hope to avoid sending expensive sales brochures to students, competitors, brochure collectors, and other nonprospects. But other firms criticize the practice because it delays getting information to respondents by creating an additional and unnecessary step in the sales sequence.

“I think you’re trying to kill response by not sending a brochure,” says Larry Whisehant, advertising manger of Koch Engineering, a manufacturer of chemical equipment. “The proper literature — what the respondent is asking for — is the most important of the package.”

Mr. Sieghardt agrees: “By trying to screen leads with the bounce-back, manufacturers are asking prospects to do some of their work for them.”

No two marketers agree on what makes the perfect fulfillment package. But one thing is clear: the advertiser who casually tosses a brochure in the mail with a hastily dictated cover note is wasting sales opportunities.

The entire package must be designed to generate action that leads to a sale. And to accomplish that, you need three things: a clear, crisp cover letter that motivates prospects; a brochure that informs them; and a bounce-back or other reply element that makes it easy for them to respond.

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