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Doing the “Write” Thing

Most sales people are terrific verbal communicators. This is what we do, we talk to people, we convince people with our words. There is nothing as effective as a face-to-face call with a customer to close a sale. Unfortunately, we don't always have the opportunity to meet with a prospect. Sometimes we have to work with customers in distant locations or with clients whose schedule makes a meeting or even phone calls impractical. In these situations, we need to fall back on an e-mail or a letter, so it is important that you are able to write clearly and persuasively.

Few technologies have affected our day-to-day lives more than e-mail. It is the “killer app” that chains us to our computers and Internet enabled cell phones. Using e-mail is critical to your sales success in the 21st century. E-mail is fast, accurate and easy to use. It has the added advantage that the reader can access it when their schedule allows. That customer who is always too busy to talk may read your e-mail at 5 am or 10 pm. Always make a point of getting an e-mail address whenever you make a new business contact. Even in this digital age there is a place for “snail mail.” In fact, I believe the popularity of e-mail has heightened the power of the hand written note or card. The ease of sending e-mails and the sheer number of messages diminishes their impact. Randy Pausch, in his best selling book *The Last Lecture*, tells a story of a young woman who was awarded a coveted graduate school slot because she was the only candidate who wrote a hand written thank you. This made her stand out from the crowd. Think about the last time you received a personal letter or note in the mail, getting mail is an event, getting an e-mail is just one more message you have to deal with.

Here are some thoughts on the art of written communication:

Grab the reader by the eyeballs – An e-mail or letter is useless if the reader doesn't open it and read it. Never leave the subject line in an e-mail blank and avoid generic taglines. Use personalized (“Follow up on our meeting”, “Information you asked for” etc.) or value oriented (“limited time promotional offer”, “proven advertising ideas”) taglines. I like to use taglines that pique the customer's curiosity (“10 ideas to save money on your advertising”). When sending a letter, I address it by hand and usually write my “tagline” (“Information you wanted to see enclosed”) in the bottom left hand corner of the envelope. Because I hate to waste any space I often write an interesting quote or fact on the back of the envelope over the flap. This practice elicits

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many comments from my customers and differentiates me from my competitors. Think of the tagline and the envelope like a headline in an ad.

Be brief – Thomas Jefferson said “the most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.” This advice makes even more sense today than it did in Jefferson’s day, as modern attention spans are much shorter. Think about what you want to communicate and limit yourself to that subject. State your purpose in the introduction. Use short sentences and paragraphs to hold the readers attention. Edit your writing, reread your draft and chop out every word that isn’t absolutely necessary. Make every word count.

Help the reader know what is important – You don’t speak in a monotone, so don’t write in one either. Use **bold** or *italicized* print, underlining or a different font to highlight critical items. Put key thoughts in bullet points. Often busy readers will skim through a communication and actually read only the highlighted sections. Make the points you want your reader to remember **POP** off the page. One word of warning – don’t over do it, if you bold every other word, none of them will stand out. If you try to say too much, your message will be lost, limit yourself to one or two important points and make sure they jump off the page.

Make it personal – People always pay attention when you address them directly. Wherever you use “you” instead of “I” or “we” you are strengthening your letter’s appeal. Instead of saying “We reach more readers,” say, “You will reach more of your customers.” Even better, use the customer’s name. I often start an important paragraph with the customer’s name to increase the odds of it being read, “Mr. Jones, it is important to remember...” Never use a customer’s first name until you have established a close relationship with them.

Don’t go overboard – This is without a doubt, absolutely, positively the most important thing you will ever read in your entire life! Do you believe the previous sentence? If you did, I have some shore front property for you in Arizona. Avoid using too many superlatives, it damages your credibility and calls everything in your message into question. Use positive language to support your points, but don’t go over the top.

Use testimonials and stories to make your point – Nothing communicates a point better than a good story. Instead of saying “I’m sure we will get you a great response,” say “I have two customers in businesses like yours and they told me that their ads brought in several thousand dollars of business over the

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first weekend.” This story is much more convincing. It is specific and helps the reader visualize what they have to gain; in contrast, “great response” is vague. Using a direct testimonial, “John Smith plumbing received 127 calls from his ad” is even stronger. A third party story is always more credible than a sales person. They know we’re trying to make a sale, so everything we say or write is questioned. Put the words in someone else’s mouth and they will have more impact.

Proof, Pruf, Proof and then Proof again – When a customer reads something you have written, they form an opinion of you. If you have a typo or a misspelling in your document it tells the reader that you are careless or sloppy. If they see that you can’t get a simple note right, why should they trust you to get their ad right? When you read the typo at the head of this paragraph did it slow you down? Did you stop and think about it for a second? Mistakes in print distract the reader from your message. Many people think the rules of grammar don’t apply to e-mails, I disagree. If you want to project a professional image, your writing should project a professional image. Take the time to check and double check all correspondence that goes out over your name. Whenever possible have someone else read what you’ve written. Ask them to proof it for you and tell you if they think it clearly communicates the message. It is difficult to send perfect correspondence from the tiny keyboard of a phone. Insert a line such as “Sent from my mobile phone” into your electronic signature on these devices.

Many scholars believe that the development of written communication was the greatest invention in human history. Writing allows us to share our thoughts across great distances and through time. When we write something down, the reader can receive the message at their own pace and can review it at will. Our writing should not only communicate what we want to say but also who we are. Sales people are professional communicators; the more skilled you become at all forms of communication, the more successful we will be. I’ll close with this quote from Anthony Robbins: “The way we communicate with others and with ourselves ultimately determines the quality of our lives.”

“This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver”

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