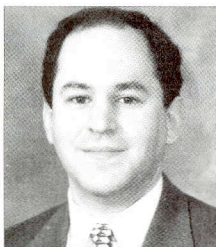


Make Your Letters Extraordinary!

By Robert Lerosé



A poorly-written letter can torpedo your message faster than a collapsing house of cards.

A well-written letter can move mountains. It can drive a donor to give money to your cause. It can change a reader into a subscriber. It can persuade a skeptic to buy from you. It can be the first step in a sales relationship that lasts years, maybe decades.

As a direct response copywriter, I analyze hundreds of letters every year. Some of them sparkle. More are average. A far greater number squander their opportunity to move the reader to positive action.

Take the letter here.

I received it from my car dealer, with whom I have established a good relationship. The purpose of the letter is to let me know of his promotion and to entice me to take advantage of two special promotions he was running.

My lifetime value to him could be worth thousands, probably tens of thousands of dollars, not to mention business I might steer his way. It was worth his time and attention to compose a *reasonably* coherent, attractive letter.

Instead I got this embarrassment. (See next page.)

Now, I don't want to pick on someone who doesn't make his living the way I do. I want to *suggest* that it's in your own best interests to be aware of things which could help you succeed in business; namely, a properly constructed communication.

Sometimes the best way to learn is to compare before-and-after examples.

I took his letter and rewrote it. (See page 39.) My point is that with care and thought, *anyone* can write a persuasive letter. To help you, here's a step-by-step guide to how to critique your sales literature, then turn it into something that gets the job done correctly.

First, the mistakes:

- The letter is typeset, not typewritten. Call me old-fashioned, but I believe that a letter should *look* like a letter, like it came from a typewriter, not a computer.
- The paragraphs are not indented. Readability studies have shown that indenting increases comprehension.
- The tone of the letter is stiff and awkward. Just because it comes from someone in business, does it follow that it should sound as impersonal as the office furniture? You're writing to a person. Try warmth!
- The letter is padded and filled with redundancies (purchase you have made in the past, previous customer, hearing from you in the future).
- The vaunted second special savings option isn't stated clearly (purchase or lease a new car, and receive any vehicle in stock for only 1 percent over dealer invoice). Does this mean I can get a car at the special price or must I buy/lease one car to get the second one for 1 percent over the invoice price?
- Misspelled word (then for than). Strictly speaking, it's not misspelled, just wrong usage.

In contrast, the revised letter speaks to the reader confidently and amiably. Note the differences:

- Typewritten format makes it seem like it came from a real person.



Oldsmobile **AURORA**

ESTABLISHED 1925



Dear Valued Customer,

PASSIVE VOICE

I would like to take this opportunity to personally thank you for the purchase you have made in the past. As a previous customer, I believe it's very important to maintain a relationship with one another.

SPLIT INFINITIVE

MISPLACED MODIFIER

STIFF CONSTRUCTION

I have recently been promoted to New Car Asst. Sales Mgr. I know that this could not have been accomplished without having satisfied customers such as yourself. To show my appreciation I am offering two special programs.

AWKWARD

WORDY

1) Refer a customer to me for either a new or used vehicle, and receive a check of gratitude for an amount of \$100. Just make sure they mention your name.

2) Purchase or lease a new car, and receive any vehicle in stock for only 1% over dealer invoice, or purchase a used vehicle and receive a \$500 discount off the already low retail price.

UNCLEAR

REDUNDANCY

I hope to be hearing from you in the future. I would like nothing more then to keep you a satisfied Customer. Please contact me, because this promotion special is only for a limited time. My phone number is . I look forward to speaking to you soon.

TYPESET COPY

MISSPELLING

Sincerely,

[Redacted signature]

NEW & USED CAR SALES
SERVICE
PARTS

E-MAIL:

Dear [NAME]:

**FRIENDLY,
PERSONAL TONE**

I'd like to share some good news with you.

On January 18th, I was made New Car Assistant Sales Manager.

**LOGICAL
SENTENCE
FLOW**

I owe my good fortune to customers like you. To show my appreciation, I've come up with three ways to make your dollars go further:

**LOOKS LIKE
A TYPEWRITTEN
LETTER**

1. Get \$100 (up to \$500) each time you refer a friend to me for a new or used vehicle. Just have them use your name.
2. Buy or lease a new vehicle in stock and pay only 1% over the dealer invoice price.
3. Buy any used vehicle on our lot and take off \$500.

**CLEARLY
ORGANIZED**

**EASY-TO-READ
LAYOUT**

I won't be able to offer these specials for very long, so please -- don't wait.

I'm here Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. If that's not convenient, just call (XXX) XXX-XXXX to arrange an appointment.

**33 FEWER
WORDS**

Thank you for helping me celebrate and for being a loyal Oldsmobile customer. I'll look for you in the showroom.

Sincerely,

- Copy is clearly organized in an easy-to-read layout.
- Short paragraphs and abundant white space make for quicker comprehension.
- The tone is friendly and personal, trading off the established relationship.
- Thoughts flow more logically, leading the reader to the heart of the sales message.
- Letter ends on a graceful note. "I'll look for you in the showroom" is a color-

ful way of making a final contact with the reader.

- Best of all, the letter contains 33 fewer words. As Strunk and White observe in *The Elements of Style*, "Omit needless words."

Clients and prospects judge us on how we write. Before you send another sales piece—stop. Take a closer look. Try again.

As critic John Simon wrote: "There is nothing much wrong with being average, but there is considerably *less* wrong

with being above average, and still less with being outstanding."

May all your letters shine like diamonds. ■

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