

TEN TIPS FOR GETTING YOUR BUSINESS LETTERS READ

by Bill Lampton, Ph.D.

With so many of us relying heavily on E-mail for professional correspondence, business letters have become special once again. Yet your prospects won't read just any letter, especially one from an unfamiliar name.

To escape the wastebasket, your letter must offer compelling reasons to continue reading. So try these ten tips to increase the likelihood that recipients will give your letters their complete attention all the way through.

FIRST: Use simple, contemporary language.

Readers dislike a stilted approach. Eliminate outmoded words like "heretofore," "henceforth," "concomitant with," "pursuant to" and similar words dressed in tuxedos. Use the language of the water cooler, not the boardroom. Create the mood of a one-on-one friendly conversation.

As famed author James Michener pointed out, the writer's aim is not to wow people with big words. Instead, the accomplished writer uses ordinary words to achieve extraordinary results.

SECOND: Not only will you want to use short words, use short paragraphs, too.

The reader wants to see plenty of white space, not a jumble of cluttered lines. Note how this "ten tips" list offers text separations every few lines. Imagine how unattractive this page would be if there were no "rest stops" for readers.

Contrary to what your eighth grade English teacher said, you can have paragraphs that contain just one sentence. Do that occasionally when you want to spotlight a phrase, slogan, benefit, testimonial, or surprising fact.

THIRD: Address your letters by hand.

Sure, this may take longer, but the few extra minutes are worth the personal touch your handwriting brings. In 1982, John Naisbitt's book *Megatrends* popularized the phrase "high touch", which he recommended for a "high tech" society. Almost a quarter century later, the need for personal contacts in our digital society has become far more essential and warmly welcomed.

FOURTH: Time your mailing.

FOURTH: Time your mailing. Target your dates so people don't get your letters on Mondays, holidays, the week of April 15 and other sensitive periods. Be aware, too, of a crisis a company is going through, and wait until the intense phase passes, unless, of course, you offer an attractive solution to the problem that has gone public.

FIFTH: Include the words "you" or "your" as one of your first three opening words.

My veteran sales professional friend Bill Bell of Otto, North Carolina gave me this tip years ago.

SIXTH: Add a handwritten P.S.

Surveys indicate that a legible P.S. almost jumps off the page, compelling attention. Sometimes the reader will read the P.S. first, since words in ink contrast so vividly with words in type.

SEVENTH: Tell a story

As children, our ears perked up every time we heard the opener, "Once upon a time." And most of us never outgrow our love of stories. So if your letter seeks to make a sale, then tell how one or more purchasers increased profits, achieved a more balanced life style, became a dynamic leader, improved family relations, or gained national prominence after buying your product or service.

Yes, statistics carry weight with business officials, but stories pull them into your message emotionally as well as logically.

EIGHTH: Mention referrals at the outset.

Example: *"Our mutual friend, Martin Williamson, suggested that I contact you."* Bingo! Immediately you have borrowed the credibility of a respected colleague your prospect admires. The result? You, a stranger, become a credible person to the reader. Truly, the old cliché is right: we are known by the company we keep.

NINTH: Sign the letter legibly.

Nothing looks more pompous than an unreadable signature. The reader could surmise that if even your name is unclear, your business offering might be undecipherable as well. Leave it to celebrities to sign with a scrawl.

TENTH: Use quotation marks in almost every paragraph.

Why? Because quote marks indicate that people are interacting and sharing their thoughts. Remember the last time you selected a novel in a bookstore? Chances are good that you browsed until you found one with plenty of dialogue. So when you are telling a story to make your point, quote people talking in conversational language.

Rather than blandly describing how a satisfied client feels, quote the client (with permission, of course): *"Melanie Randolph stated, "Your company saved us thousands of dollars and increased our efficiency tenfold during the first year that we used your accounting system."*