

Writing better sales material

CHRIS GREGORY, a partner at MortonGregory, has some suggestions for IFAs as to how they can write better promotional copy.



MortonGregory's Chris Gregory – because a postscript is such a well read part of a letter it is an ideal place to restate your offer, USP or call to action.

We live in the most advertising-intensive period in history. Record amounts of money are being spent on advertising – and by record numbers of companies. It's no longer just companies which clamour for our attention. Charity sector advertising spend has never been so high. And under Labour, the government has now become the biggest single advertiser in the UK.

But the more marketing messages there are beamed at consumers, the fewer they receive. The rest they simply block out. This makes it tougher than ever for IFAs to get their message across.

And the financial services sector faces the added challenge of growing public scepticism about savings products in general. So it's more important than ever that you know not just *what* to say – but *how* to say it.

I've designed the following checklist to help IFAs achieve two objectives:

Speed up the process of letter and leaflet writing. Most IFAs are far more used to spending time on the phone, and in face to face presentations, than writing sales letters and leaflets. Use this list to raise your productivity.

Increasing your mailshot marketing success rate. A properly executed direct marketing promotion can considerably *leverage* your marketing efforts, be they prospecting or cross-selling.

It'll put your firm in front of many more clients than you could possibly contact by telephone, or meet face to face, in the same amount of time.

Read through this checklist whenever you're about to start writing, and again *after* you've finished your first draft.

You'll write more effective sales letters and leaflets – and get more business as a result.

Don't stint on the necessary research and thinking before you put pen to paper. Preparation is the key.

The time required to produce successful promotional material should be allocated as follows: 75%-80% *preparation*, and 20%-25% *writing*.

So before hitting the keyboard make sure you go through what you know about your product, your market, your competition, and why people should buy from you.

UNDERSTAND

In particular, make sure you understand both the "positive" reasons to buy (what will they gain if they do act) and the "negative" ones (what will they lose if they don't).

Not only will you write better copy, but you'll minimise the number of rewrites necessary to get to the finished product. So you'll save valuable time.

The best way to "test" your knowledge of all these points is to make it *concrete*. Write them down in question and answer form: **who is my target audience; why should they deal with me; what can I do for them; what distinguishes me/my firm from the competition; etc., etc.**

Done properly, quite a lot of this preparatory work can be cut and pasted straight into your letter or leaflet copy, with minimal rewriting.

Whatever you do, *don't* start writing until you're satisfied you know what you're going to write about. Lack of clarity is one of the main causes of "writer's block".

So spend a bit of extra time getting your facts in order, and you won't find yourself staring for hours at an empty page or blank computer screen!

As you do your preparatory research, remind yourself that people are self-interested individuals. They want to know what's in it for them – and they're instinctively on guard when they get a sales approach.

What's more, they're invariably reluctant to do anything you ask them to do in the time frame you want.

How do you get around this? Identify the most *compelling* reason why the reader should respond promptly and positively to your approach.

Is it a specially negotiated discount on a fund application? Or perhaps an attractive new opportunity to invest in an EIS – but one which expires in just six weeks?

Whatever your offer, make it attractive – and get it right up front in your letter, so it gets your reader's attention right away.

Understand that there are always three groups of people in every marketing mailing, no matter how targeted your approach is: (1) "Yes, I'm keen"; **(2)** "No, I'm not – and there's nothing you can do to change my mind"; and **(3)** "Perhaps I'll buy, but you need to convince me first".

Your focus should be solely on category (3). Your primary objective is to turn as many "perhapses" as possible into "yeses".

So identify all the likely reasons that your reader might not respond positively to what you're offering him. Then preempt his concerns in your copy, dealing with them one by one.

Perhaps do a FAQ-style list of questions and answers in your mail piece.

Visualise your ideal prospect in your mind's eye before you start writing. This is particularly the case when writing a sales letter.

The best letter copy is written by you to another individual, not to a mass of people on a list. That's why many people don't like the "Christmas letters" they get at the end of each year.

They're aware that everyone else on your list got the same letter from you – and so the letter's all about you and not your reader. So get personal!

Who is your prospect? What does she do? What are her principal needs and motivations? Why should she purchase your product? What do you need to say to convince her? Always write one-to-one.

Define your USP (unique selling point) or key benefit and get it in up front – in a headline if you can, together with your offer. Differentiate and position yourself as clearly as possible.

If you don't arouse interest at this point, you could end up in the wastepaper bin sooner than you think. That's why professional copywriters often leave the headline to last.

They write the rest of the pitch first, then review it to identify the most compelling reason why the reader should respond positively. That reason often turns out to make the best headline.

Understand how people read direct mail, be it letters or leaflets. Most people read in three stages: first they glance, then skim, then they get into the detail – assuming they've decided it's worth reading at all!

So consciously structure your layout with this in mind. One trick is to use subheadings which, when they are skim read one by one, convey the essence of the letter or leaflet.

It often helps to repeat or restate critical points, using different language to avoid the appearance of repetition.

You could also underline, italicise or embolden particularly important words or points.

Make sure you use the word "you" as frequently as possible, particularly when writing a sales letter. Indeed, this is one good way to verify that your material is being written from the reader's point of view.

If it has more uses of "we", "me" and "us" than it does of "you", then rethink

your approach. Aim to use "you" in every paragraph at least once, and preferably several times.

I frequently come across sales letters which seem more interested in telling the client about the company, than telling the client what's in it for them.

Remember: a letter is supposed to be from one individual to another. So keep it one-to-one.

Write in a conversational style, just as you would if you were speaking out loud to the person concerned. That's why copywriters refer to direct mail pieces as "silent salesmen" – with the ability to make their pitch to tens, even hundreds of thousands of people on the same day, depending on the size of the mailing list.

Infuse your copy with genuine enthusiasm, the kind that rests on a real belief in the product. The tone of your copy should be lively, engaging, action-orientated.

After all, if you're not sold on the product, why should your reader be interested?

When you've finished your first draft, test your copy for fluency and readability by reading it out loud a couple of times. If parts of it don't sound right to your ears, rewrite them until they do.

SHORT

As a rule, keep your sentences short. This speeds up the pace of the writing and makes the text easier to follow.

The occasional longer sentence is fine, if it fits the line of argument and is broken up by a subclause. And the occasional very short sentence keeps the reader on their toes. Just like this one.

The same rule applies to paragraphs. Keep them mostly short, but have a little bit of variety. It makes the letter appear to be a more inviting and easier read.

Aim for some visual interest in both letters and leaflets: e.g. bullet points, italics, underlined words, indented paragraphs – but don't overdo it.

Use italics and underlining *sparingly*, where emphasis is needed to make the point. Ensure your letter looks inviting, or many recipients won't bother to read it.

When writing a letter, use a PS. Direct marketers know from years of experience, testing letters with a PS

against letters which lack one, that a PS is a valuable piece of "real estate" on the page.

Focus group research suggests that it's the second or third most read part of the letter (after the beginning and the signature). So it's an ideal place to restate your offer, USP or call to action.

When you write a sales letter to people for the first time, have it signed by someone of equal or greater status than the prospects on the list. But never someone who is obviously sales-driven.

So use the partner, managing director or director's name, but not the sales manager or sales executive.

Top management have more credibility, and a letter from them is likely to flatter the recipient.

Of course this rule doesn't apply when you're writing to an individual with whom you have had previous dealings. You already have a relationship with them.

When you've written your first draft, spoken it out loud and made any changes, put it on one side for 24-36 hours. No longer than that. Then read it again, both to yourself and out loud, and make any further changes.

Finally, get someone else's opinion on it, someone who'll be frank with their comments – but constructive.

Perhaps give them these advisory points at the same time, so they know what to look out for.

From the outset, allow yourself sufficient time to be able to accomplish all of the above without having to rush. This is arguably the most fundamental point of the lot. Even practiced writers cannot turn out their very best work in a hurry.

Much of the marketing material I see has been executed in a hurry because of the pressure of work or poor planning.

Either way, poorly written sales material can undermine both your immediate sales and your firm's image longer term.

Try using these techniques the next time you sit down to write sales copy. You should write more effective leaflets and sales letters – and get them done faster, too.

If you still find writing copy difficult, or simply a chore, then you're probably better off employing a professional. After all, isn't that the rationale of *your* line of work?