Are Your Business Letters Effective?

Wall and Ceiling Contractors Often Don’t Like Writing Any More Than Others, But Good Business Letters Are Like Money in the Bank

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Today’s modern communication systems permits wall and ceiling contractors to do business throughout the entire country, and to reach prospects and customers far removed from the contacts of their own staff. Small wonder, then, that business letters play so important a role in projecting a firm’s image.

Business letter-writing consultants claim that cliches are the culprits responsible for so many of today’s poorly written letters. There can be no better illustration than the secretary of a funeral parlor who closed letters to the families of the bereaved with “We hope to serve you again in the future—and often.” In other words, “Many happy funerals to you!”

The trouble here was that a new and eager office worker resorted to standard terminology so often used in business letter writing. But, it can be pretty silly at times, even downright insulting.

One of the greatest dangers of old-fashioned, hackneyed phrases is that we use them carelessly, without thinking. Unfortunately, not one person in ten who writes business letters—including college graduates—has had adequate training in the technique and psychology of doing it. It’s more than a matter of the ability to express ideas. The clearest, most lucid letter ever
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written may leave a reader indifferent, sometimes furious.

Most business correspondents simply mimic the style of the person who preceded them. And their predecessors mimicked those before them.

It it any wonder that so many business letters sound like something dug out of an attic truck? Some are so stuffy, formal and frigid that they might have been written by a robot.

A positive step in producing more efficient business letters is to go through your correspondence files and review carbon copies (or photocopies, as is being done today) of letters recently mailed. Imperfections and downright silly expressions as illustrated in our second paragraph will stand out. You’ll see ways of improving your future letters and avoid glaring mistakes.

Here are some tips on how to make your business letters more effective:

Keep it Simple . . .

• Give extra care to wording the opening sentence. Your subject should start on the right track; use it as your guide.
• Pretend you’re facing the recipient and don’t use any long words or fancy phrases you wouldn’t employ in face to face conversation. Can you imagine your saying to him, “I wish to call your attention . . .” or “Please be advised that . . .”? If you wouldn’t talk that way, don’t write it that way. Avoid the stereotype phrases. Listed are some of the more common ones, and bracketed are some of the thoughts they might evoke in the recipients.

Hereafter and henceforth . . . . . .
(How repetitious can you get?)
Kindly command me . . . . . . .
(Are you kidding?)
In due course of time . . . . . . .
(After the usual buck passing)
I wish to state . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
(Why wish? Just say it!)
Permit me to say . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
(Go away you stuffed shirt)
As you know . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
(If not, I’m stupid, eh?)
We note your request for . . . . . . .
(Condescending of you)
Due to the fact that . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
(You mean because?)

- Know your subject so well that you can discuss it naturally and confidently throughout the letter.
- Use short sentences . . . short paragraphs. Be compact. And don’t separate closely related parts of sentences.
- Tie your thoughts together so your letter can follow you from one to another without getting lost. This is especially important when you are explaining a recent price increase.

Keep it Short . . .

- Don’t repeat phrases from the letter you are answering. The sender knows what was said.
- Avoid needless words and information. Don’t volunteer information not relative to the subject at hand.
- Beware of roundabout prepositional phrases, such as “with regard to” and “in reference to.”
- Don’t qualify your statement with irrelevant ifs.
- Be careful with your closing sentence. Its echo lasts.

Keep it Sincere . . .

- Before beginning, put yourself in the shoes of the other person. Be sure your letter shows awareness of position and needs of the recipient. Then strive to express yourself in a friendly way and with simple dignity.
- Be a human being, not an office machine. Use the personal pronoun you, he, she, we, etc. Use the first as well as the last name of any persons you mention in the letter.
- Admit mistakes openly and sincerely. Don’t hide them behind meaningless phrases as the truth will surface.

Select Your Letterhead Carefully:

- Since the basic function of the business letterhead is to give identity to your company, be sure you clearly understand what your company stands for, and what kind of “face” you want it to represent to the general public.
- If your firm has a trade mark or symbol extensively used in advertising, be sure it is included in the letterhead.
- Use a clean, contemporary design. For example, the name of your firm may be placed at the top of the letterhead, on the bottom or used vertically on either side.
- Remember that the ultimate effectiveness of your letterhead depends upon the quality of the printing, and the feel, weight and color of the paper used. Make sure the paper itself has a good curl resistance and erasability, (or other correctible).

Use a Simplified Letter-Form:

- Did you ever stop to realize that the business letters you write will cost, according to various studies made by different business consultants, as being in the $4 to $8 range? This is an added reason for simplicity.
- Form as suggested by the National Office Management Association is as follows:
  1. The date is at the left, you are starting where the typewriter starts.
  2. The full address is at the left, ready for a window envelope and as a permanent reference on your carbon or photocopy.
  3. The subject is at the left. A provocative opening is suggested with the elimination of the usual “Dear Sir,” “Dear Mrs. Smith,” etc. You start the letter (optional) without a salutation by starting with the subject, “Your order form, Mr. Jones, has been processed and . . .”
  4. Paragraphs are not indented, they all start at the left margin. Tabular delay is eliminated.
  5. The typewritten signature is again at the left, followed by the enclosure or “cc” information.
  6. The result is a reduction of typing time, easier filing, and quicker, convenient reference in a single sweeping glance down the left side of the page.
  7. If a female correspondent didn’t indicate marital status you are permitted in today’s era to omit any use of Miss or Mrs. Or if preferred you can address all females as Ms.

To conclude: Effective business letter writing adds to the image of your business firm and is a step forward in the proper direction for more effective communications and efficient office management.