

4 Secrets for Writing Compelling Catalog Copy

By Will Newman

According to the DMA, sales from catalogs (mailed and online) are projected to top \$176 BILLION in 2008. This makes the catalog copywriting niche one of the most lucrative in direct marketing ... as well as one of the most popular with our members.

And it's not just because you can get paid well for your work. Writing for the catalog niche is also personally satisfying for those of us who prefer "short" copy to long. Plus, writing about a variety of products keeps you stimulated ... it taps into your creativity ... and you learn a lot while doing it.

Steve Leveen – co-founder (with his wife Lori) of catalog giant Levenger – is one of the true masters of catalog copy. Here are 4 key secrets for success in this niche that he shared with us in a recent interview:

CATALOG SECRET #1: Look for the frustration

Steve and Lori backed into the catalog business in 1987. They began by selling only one product: a halogen reading lamp.

It all started because they liked to read in bed – and had a heck of a time finding a good lamp for the purpose. Once they did, they figured there were lots of serious readers out there who were just as frustrated as they once were ... and those are the people who became the target market for their fledgling business.

The Leveens' happy customers not only thanked them for this solution to their lighting problem, but also asked about other high-quality reading accessories that they were looking for. Steve and Lori paid attention to the requests they were getting from their customers ... and slowly expanded their product line. They also came up with their USP for Levenger: "Tools for Serious Readers."

"Look for frustration – your own and that of other people," says Steve. "Where you find people who are frustrated, there lies opportunity."

And that is Steve's first core secret of writing catalog copy: Zero in on the problem or frustration that the product can eliminate.

An example from the Levenger catalog: They sell something called a Folding Editor's Desk. When open, it's about the same size and shape as a tabletop lectern – a combination bookstand and a slanted surface to write on.

What problems/frustrations does this product eliminate?

First: It's awkward to refer to a book while you're writing if the book is lying flat on your desk. Solution: Raise the book.

Second: Writing on a flat surface encourages you to slump forward, and can be uncomfortable. Solution: Slant the writing surface.

You'll see in the secrets that follow how the copywriters at Levenger identified their prospects frustrations and offered compelling solutions for them.

CATALOG SECRET #2: Captions are all about BENEFITS.

The captions for the illustrations are the most important words you write in catalog copy, because those 5 or 10 short words are the ones your prospect reads first. So, since it's the product's benefits that solve the prospect's problems and make the sale, don't waste precious caption space on features.

The caption for the Folding Editor's Desk reads, "Proven to be the best angle for productive work." The benefit? Productivity ... along with implied comfort.

CATALOG SECRET #3: Make the description count.

With catalog copy, you've got a limited amount of space for each product description – which means you have to make every word count. Eliminate everything that's unnecessary. Use mostly nouns and verbs, with as few adjectives as possible. Focus on benefits, but also describe the features that relate to those benefits. If there are possible objections, anticipate them, bring them up, and answer them.

Here's a portion of the description of Levenger's Folding Editor's Desk. Notice how concise (but inviting) it is:

"Writing, reading and studying are more comfortable on a slope, so you accomplish more.... This inclined work surface helps anyone who wants to work more productively and be less fatigued. The back ledge saves you reaching for reference books and holds them so you can read hands-free." [The Benefits: comfort, productivity, convenience]

CATALOG SECRET #4: "LLTL" your copy.

Because you're using so few words in catalog copy, you have to make sure they make a lasting impression. So, says Steve, at the very end of the description, you "LLTL" the copy – you write a "last line that lingers." The prospect carries this last line in his head when he turns the page. It leaves an impression ... and eventually brings him back.

The LLTL for the Folding Editor's Desk: "Scribes used inclined surfaces like this centuries ago. Our design is so solid, it's good for at least a century itself."

Referring to scribes resonates with serious readers (the prospect universe for Levenger). This last line also answers the possible objection "Will it last?" clearly and succinctly.

A quick exercise for improving your catalog-writing skills... From AWAI New Product Developer Helen Buttery:

1. Go to the Levenger website at www.levenger.com (or use any catalog you have at home).
2. Choose a product that appeals to you.
3. Think about what frustrations that product solves.
4. Then write a description that presents those "problems" concisely and offers a benefit-oriented, compelling "solution" to your prospect. (Your product!)
5. Repeat this exercise 3 times a week.

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