

"I Have Nothing To Say, But Don't Quote Me."

By Herschell Gordon Lewis

Maybe it's an apocryphal story, but it has to do with Calvin Coolidge, one of our less quotable U.S. presidents. So it's possible.

Coolidge agreed to interviews with reporters. This was before the Woodward/Bernstein era.

Q.: Mr. President, what's your opinion of the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact?"

A.: "I have no comment on that."

Q.: "Well, do you think Germany will re-arm?"

A.: "I don't have a comment on that."

Q.: "Are we heading for a depression?"

A.: "I really can't venture an opinion on that."

When the exasperated reporters were leaving, Coolidge raised his voice just a trifle, to warn them: "Now, don't quote me."

How have times changed? Politicians still give us no comment ... but they deliver "No comment" by saying nothing at all in as many words as they can string together. What they gain in blah-blah rhetoric they lose in credibility. And in this, an election year, political commentators are outdoing candidates in blah-blah-ing. What triumphs of negative copywriting!

Hey, marketers, don't join their unholy ranks.

If you're a member of what we arrogantly call our "profession," then like me you may have observed, with mixed exhilaration and alarm, sessions at conferences and Webinars in which the caliber of information ranged from superb to useless.

Telling someone what he or she already knows is a venerable sales technique, designed to enhance rapport. But when we're supposed to be gurus who transmit a fragment of our hard-earned knowledge, experience, and valid techniques, we parallel Coolidge, not Nostradamus.

And in marketing publications, you may share my exasperation as we're subjected to truisms masquerading as revelations. Repeat: We're subjected to truisms masquerading as revelations.

Invariably, the transmitter of useless information is an individual whose intention has been to demonstrate "How clever I am" rather than "Here's what you should do." Each of these negative experiences reminds me of the old (and sorely missed) Montreux Direct Marketing Symposium, where the late great Walter Schmid would analyze every presentation in advance. Walter would reject those he felt were of more use to the speaker than to the attendees, regardless of the potential speaker's strutting, posing, and (most often) exalted corporate position within the tight fraternity we label "direct marketing."

Did you write this? Admit and apologize, please.

What brought this comparison leaping into the forefront of what's left of my brain is a column in a marketing publication. The supposed informational intention: five rules to boost direct mail response rates, in this brutal era that has made the professional laying on of hands a mandatory move to prevent total failure.

Now, get this. These are the five rules, only slightly condensed:

1. Get a list broker.
2. Test multiple lists.
3. Hook the reader.
4. Focus on offer, not brand.
5. Show how your product is better than the competition.
6. I'll offer a parallel. Here are five rules for telemarketing:
7. Use a telephone.
8. Call someone who also has a telephone.
9. Explain why you are calling.
10. Take the order.
11. Ship the merchandise.

See the parallel? Anyone can claim the mantle of "guru" by stating the obvious. That such blather appears in print not only is a reflection of creative insufficiency and editorial sloppiness; it's damaging to all of us because the unique combination of factors that justifies our claim of professionalism isn't part of the mix.

(One out of five isn't bad: The columnist's fourth point – "Focus on offer, not brand" – has seeds of validity, if explained. That's why sales volume at Zappos and Amazon have leaped past any conventional brand-name retailer.)

The Great Separator

Just what is the unique combination of dynamics that put genuine salesmanship on a plateau far above the far-more-common blather? It's why AWAI exists: the ability to isolate and exploit key selling factors, blended with an understanding of who our logical targets are. And that's why, in these tough times, direct response isn't experiencing the suffering and falling business volume "brands" are experiencing.

A key is one of the Great Laws of force-communication: *Tell your target-individual what to do.*

What could be more simple, more elegantly direct? Yet many, many of our competitors who value the blurry quasi-asset "image" over the clear and dynamic authentic asset "salesmanship" wonder why their cash register doesn't ring as consistently as ours.

We don't wonder.

Nothing to say ... in how many words

One of the glories of direct response is that we have ammunition for scorekeeping. We can tell, quickly and with the certainty produced by response or lack of response, whether our words have not just generated agreement but have generated that magical and profitable super-ingredient, *response*.

Have you tested "maybe" versus "perhaps"? "Immediately" versus "right now"? "Ends" versus "expires"? "3" versus "three"? "Can you ..." versus "Will you ..."?

Those who swim (and may drown) in their pools of sophistication pay little attention to these bits and pieces. But we who toil in the creative dungeons of targeted creativity have witnessed enough examples of response increase or decrease based on minor word-changes to be unsurprised by another example.

Which brings greater response, a long letter or a short letter? Which brings greater response, dynamic envelope copy or no envelope copy? Which brings greater response, an e-mail subject line that begins with the recipient's name or an e-mail subject line that ends with the subject's name? Which brings greater response, "next day" or "24 hours"?

The answer to each of these: Yes.

Individual circumstances dictate individual results. And those within our ranks whose arrogance trumps the reality of ongoing testing shouldn't publicly be reciting truisms, as though they were the result of investigation or deliberate testing.

So it goes. That's one benefit of exposure to revelations we've long since recognized ... and it's a pleasant massage for our own egos, isn't it?

Published: September 6, 2010

Related Content:

- [The Power of One — One Big Idea](#)
- [3 Quick-and-Easy Tips for Writing "Chatty" Copy](#)
- [The Ultimate Headline Secret](#)
- [What Gives? Is Copywriting Dream-Easy Or Head-Scratching Hard?](#)
- More by [Herschell Gordon Lewis](#)
- More from [The Golden Thread](#)

1 Response to "I Have Nothing To Say, But Don't Quote Me"

I really like the way you isolated the "Key" to what a copywriter does, especially your "isolate and exploit key selling factors"

Well done.

Jean — over a year ago

Copyright © American Writers & Artists Institute(www.awai.com)

American Writers & Artists Institute

220 George Bush Blvd, Suite D

Delray Beach, FL 33444

(561) 278-5557 or (866) 879-2924