

Clayton Makepeace on the Astonishing Power of Fear

By Clayton Makepeace

Have you ever been tempted to squeeze an irresistibly cute bottom? Tell the judge where he can stick that speeding ticket?

Claim a tax deduction you don't really deserve? Drink and drive?

So why didn't you?

What's that you say? You don't do those things because you're a moral person?

Well, while your application for sainthood is being processed, consider the rest of us – imperfect folks who are sorely tempted to do all of those things and still don't – simply because we fear the consequences.

In a word, "jail."

It's a rational fear. Fact is, here in America – "the land of the free" – one out of every 98 adults is behind bars. More than 2.3 million of the 225 million adults in the U.S. woke up this morning in a federal or state prison or a local jail. Almost as many people who live in Chicago live behind bars today.

That leaves about 222.7 million of us grownups outside the prison walls – including former prisoners, folks on the lam, folks who probably should be on the lam (presidential candidates, Congress, most bureaucrats, whole-life insurance reps, every lawyer but mine, etc.), and of course, the rest of us.

And to one degree or another, every one of us has tempered our behavior – or even refused to do something we probably should have done – because we fear winding up in the pokie.

But fear does more than keeping us from doing things we want to do. It also compels us to do things that we would never do voluntarily.

Slightly more than 145 million of us labor all year for the privilege of handing over the lion's share of our income to politicians and bureaucrats – in federal and state income taxes, sales taxes, property taxes, automobile licensing taxes, excise taxes, taxes imbedded in the price of every product we buy, the inflation tax and other government taxes and fees.

Because if we didn't, we could lose everything we own – or maybe wind up in jail.

Fear.

As we pay our bills, we'll spend billions on all kinds of insurance to protect ourselves and our families from something that will probably never happen.

Fear.

Millions of Americans vote for Democrats because they fear global warming.

Millions more vote for Republicans because they fear Democrats.

I vote Libertarian because I'm terrified of both parties.

Fear.

What are your prospects afraid of?

Read most books about copywriting, and you'll read a ton of stuff about how to appeal to your prospects' desires by fully dimensionalizing your product's benefits.

Now benefits are in the business of fulfilling desires – like the desire for greater wealth, better health, more fulfilling and more enduring relationships, the respect or even the envy of peers, and much more.

But every benefit is just one side of a coin; the other side is a fear.

Because while prospects desire all these things, they also fear NOT having them in their lives. They fear poverty and dependence ... illness and pain ... being abandoned and left alone, and being thought little of.

And so sales copy that promises to deliver a much-desired benefit and alleviate a nagging fear can be twice as effective as copy that focuses on benefits alone.

But activating your prospects' fear in promotional copy can be a tricky proposition – and so I thought it might be a good idea to give you a few guidelines I use ...

Five Blunders Copywriters Make When Using Fear in Sales Copy

1. Attempting to give prospects a fear they don't already have:

The last thing your prospects need at the end of an emotionally exhausting day is to pick up a magazine, open a direct-mail package or land on a Web page in which you introduce them to a new problem or a new fear.

Regaling them with a new problem or a new situation they should fear is a sure way to get your sales message ignored – or worse: leave prospects vowing to never read anything else you ever send them again.

Moral: If you're going to invoke fear in your sales copy, make sure it's a fear that's already waking your prospects at 2:30 AM in a cold sweat.

2. Playing on prospects' fears of distant events:

We all know that retirement is heading for us like a runaway freight train – but very few of us get serious about saving for retirement until it's too late.

We all know that smoking can kill us – someday in the distant future – and yet millions of us still smoke.

And of course, we all know that Double Whoppers and Double Quarter-Pounders with Cheese will eventually clog our arteries and doom us to a heart attack or stroke – and yet McDonalds and Burger King sell billions of dollars worth of this toxic (but mouth-watering) food every year.

So why doesn't the fear of a poverty-stricken retirement or lung cancer or a heart attack or stroke motivate us to change our behavior?

Simple: The pleasure we get from spending our money ... or chowing down on a thick, greasy burger ... or savoring an after-dinner smoke ... is immediate. The price we pay won't be exacted for years or even decades.

Put simply the distance of the negative event in time neutralizes its power to change our behavior.

Physical distance is also a factor when considering fear as a motivator in sales copy. Recently, when I was talking with Joe Sugarman about ads he wrote for his Midex burglar alarm system, I asked him why he began his copy reminding prospects of rising crime statistics and the likelihood that they would become victims of crime.

Joe's answer was spot-on: "They know all that," Joe said. "But it's not until their next-neighbor has an intruder in his house that the fear becomes strong enough to move them to action. And when that happens, if I've done my job well, they'll remember my ads and buy a burglar alarm from me."

In other words, someone near you was a victim of a violent crime in his or her home yesterday. If it was your next-door neighbor, you're many times more likely to buy a burglar alarm today than if the victim was a mile or 10 miles away.

Moral: If you're going to use fear in your copy, make sure it's an imminent fear. Something that is likely to happen in the very near future – or better yet, at virtually any moment.

3. Using fear that paralyzes:

Right now, the investing world is a very interesting place. The value of the U.S. dollar has been cratering – and foreign currencies have been soaring in value – for 9½ long years.

Since the mid-2000s the U.S. housing bust and mortgage meltdown virtually paralyzed the credit markets. Corporations and consumers alike are finding it much more difficult to get loans and even credit cards.

As this situation continued, the holiday seasons had been some of the most disappointing on record. Manufacturers and retailers lost their shirts. Their stock plunged.

And so the Fed has cranked up the printing presses – unleashing a tidal wave of unbacked, phony-baloney dollars worldwide. And since each new dollar the Fed creates devalues every other dollar in circulation, it's a good bet that the profits investors have seen in other currencies so far are about to pale compared to what's going to happen in the months ahead.

But even though the U.S. stock market reminds me of a balloon in a roomful of razorblades, I'm deliberately avoiding sales arguments that could freeze my prospects like so many deer in the headlights of an oncoming tractor-trailer.

Because, although I want my prospect concerned that his money is losing his value ... and although I definitely want him to want the huge profits being earned in the foreign currency markets ... I do not want him frozen into inaction by the fear that the entire U.S. economy could come unglued at virtually any moment.

Moral: Using a fear that paralyzes prospects won't do you any good, and it sure won't help your prospects.

4. Invoking a fear that isn't actionable:

If you're looking for something to be afraid of these days, you sure don't have to look very far!

Cable TV is replete with programs telling us how the world could end at virtually any moment.

Either global warming is going to melt the ice caps, flood our coastal cities, create worldwide famine by altering the weather and give us all a nasty sunburn ...

... Or a mega-earthquake in Yellowstone or a giant comet or meteor is going to plunge us into a new ice age.

Four years ago, I saw a show that basically said "Don't worry – it'll probably all end on December 1, 2012, anyway." That's when the Earth and the sun will align with the giant black hole at the center of the galaxy – and according to The Discovery Channel, this alignment could cause the Earth to suddenly shift on its axis, snuffing us all out.

So does any of this make you feel like buying anything?

Well, if you're selling a spaceship and a map to the nearest inhabitable planet – and if you'll let me pay you over 30 years or so – maybe. Otherwise, invoking my fear won't do you one bit of good.

Moral: Pushing your prospect's panic buttons is pointless unless you can show how your product eliminates the cause of his fear. Quickly. Cheaply. Permanently.

5. Emphasizing fear over the solution:

The other day, I critiqued a fear-based first draft by a top-notch writer. As expected, the sales copy sang and soared. It was attention-getting, lively and absolutely convinced me that the caca is about to hit the air conditioner.

But it didn't make me want to buy the product.

See, the promotion is about politics – how the bozos and bozettes in office are going to royally screw us all – and how to survive and thrive, the prospect needs the advice a particular guru is offering them.

But the writer is so passionate about this particular subject, the copy focused almost entirely on the fear our prospects should be feeling as they watch politicians preen, spin and lie their keesters off on the six-o'clock news.

While each threat to our prospect's wealth, health and liberty was presented in exquisite detail over many pages of inspired, impassioned prose, the many ways in which our client's product neutralizes those threats were presented quickly and without passion.

Moral: It's not, ultimately, about fear. It's about the solution to that fear – the benefits – that you're offering.

A little fear goes a long way. It's a powerful attention-getter. Used correctly, it can add dimension to your product's benefits and motivate prospects to order now.

But nobody buys just because they're afraid. They buy because you've proven that your product will bring tremendous practical benefits to their lives – and by doing so, will free them from the fears that torment them now.

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3 Responses to "Clayton Makepeace on the Astonishing Power of Fear"

As usual, Clayton hits a grand slam with his analysis of one of the most interesting emotions that can drive prospects to action - fear and fear of loss.

Guest (Ron Schmidt) – over a year ago

Clayton Makepeace's advice on the artful balance of fear and desire as a powerful combination marketing tool is astonishing.

Maureen Estes Flanagan – over a year ago

Clayton your article is spot on with the exception of one thing, in order to successfully use these tools, it is highly likely that your client must have experienced those emotions in past endeavors, and in all likelihood came up short in their endeavors by not applying them at the height of their PAIN. Which is the time the client is most apt to react to your suggestions.

Guest (bill danner) – over a year ago

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