

How Long Should a Sales Letter Be?

By Mark Morgan Ford

Sales letters – how long should they be? In this age of multitasking and the Internet, isn't it more sensible for marketers to send short ones to prospective customers?

That's the question posed by Connie Prin, an AWAI member from Grand Rapids, MI.

"As a decently educated busy parent and community volunteer trying to build a new career, I cannot, do not, and would not invest the amount of time in reading sales letters that often come to resemble written 'infomercials,' whether via Internet or direct mail. Only for this copywriting program do I suffer through as many as I do. MORE and more people must share this same perspective in dealing with increasing competition for our attention in this era of the 'information availability' explosion.

"Even Tim Ferris, author of The 4-Hour Workweek, whose writing you featured a while back in ETR, advocates nixing newspapers and uninvited e-mail completely in order to take control of productively scheduling your time.

"Wouldn't a more effective style of copywriting concise the sales message to a page or two? Unless your intention is that more people base a letter's credibility (and thus, their order) on the amount of content rather than actually having to read the whole thing.

"My gut tells me in order for people to read through them, effective letters will have to be shortened in the overall picture. You and your successful team know far more than I – but I can't be that wrong about this ... or can I?"

The answer, dear Connie, in a word, is yes, you are wrong. At least when it comes to want-to-know information products.

Let me explain.

There are two kinds of information products that can be sold by mail (posted mail or e-mail): need-to-know products and want-to-know products. The need-to-know products would include information about food, clothing, fertilizer (for gardeners), auto parts (for mechanics), labor law case analyses (for labor law lawyers), etc. The want-to-know products would include just about everything Early to Rise sells: how-to information on becoming healthier, wealthier and wiser.

Do you see the difference?

Need-to-know products don't need long copy because the customer *needs* them. In order to sell a need-to-know product, the copywriter has to do two things: establish the product's USP and make the offer irresistible. You can do those two things relatively quickly – usually in two pages or less. That's why need-to-know products are so often sold by catalog and by space ads – two direct-marketing methods that don't give the copywriter much room.

To sell want-to-know products, you need more length. That's because you have to do something you don't have to do with need-to-know products: you have to stir up a desire for the product where none existed. People don't actually need another book, newsletter, or CD collection on negotiating or investing. But, when a good copywriter gets finished talking to them (via a long sales letter), they *think* they do.

It's counterintuitive, but it's true: When it comes to want-to-know products, longer letters usually work better than shorter ones. That has always been true, and it's still true today – even with e-mail sales letters.

The feeling you have is based on logic and your own experience as a consumer. You are very busy. You don't have time to read long letters. You throw most of them in the trash or delete them. Like Tim Ferris, you are annoyed by all this long copy. So, if you hate long copy so much, doesn't everybody?

Well, yes! Everybody hates long copy. At least that's what everybody says. But the truth is that, though we think we don't like long copy, we respond to it. If you have bought any want-to-know products in the past, Connie, you probably responded to a long sales letter – even though you don't like them. (AWAI's "Retire This Year" promo is 32 pages!)

I used to do focus groups with my clients' customers. I would ask those people which they preferred: short sales letters or longer ones. They all said they preferred shorter sales letters. Yet, they had all become our customers by responding to the longer ones my clients were sending out!

I have personally overseen at least a hundred long copy vs. shorter copy tests. When the leads were the same, the long copy always did better.

I had Jason Holland, my research assistant, contact three of the top copywriters working today and ask them, "How long was your best-selling sales letter?"

John Forde said: "My most successful promo this year, measured in subscriptions sold, clocked in at 32 pages. And this, by the way, is a promo I actually wrote seven years ago and have been revising and updating ever since. It's added thousands of readers to a resource-investing newsletter, and it's made me a pile of cash. I have a 24-pager that's done about \$1.3 million since the start of 2008. This one, I probably could have written shorter, but not by much."

Mike Palmer said: "The best package I wrote in the past year was a 52-page bookalog, which translates to at least a 25-page letter. You know, I hear this all the time from new copywriters – 'Why can't we write shorter copy?' One important reason, I tell them, is because good copy must 'startle' your reader with an idea he's never heard before. That's the only way to have a breakthrough promotion. And, an idea that truly startles your reader takes a lot of explaining ... proof ... answering objections. You simply need a lot of space to get your point across."

Paul Hollingshead said: "My best mailing recently was a financial package that ran about 22 pages. In fact, when I look back at most of the financial packages I've written, they typically fall within the 20- to 24-page range. The main reason, I think, is because that's how long it takes to get in all the needed elements of a strong financial sales letter – your promise, your credibility, the track record, the offer, bonuses, and whatnot. Also, I tend to write in a more conversational 'chatty' tone, which can lengthen a letter. And, I make an effort to keep paragraphs very short, so there's a lot of 'white space' in my copy for easier reading."

You see, direct-response marketing is not about fitting your sales pitch into the small amount of space most people will read. It's about finding the one person in a hundred who will give you the time you need to sell him.

Have you ever walked down a city street and seen people canvassing for some charitable, political, or religious cause? What do they do? They say something – a short, catchy sentence – to get you to stop and listen to their pitch. In most cases – perhaps 99 out of a hundred – passersby won't give them the time they need to make the sale. They listen for a few seconds and then shake their heads and go on. But those canvassers are pros. They don't worry about the people who don't have time for them. They focus on the ones who do stop and listen, because those are their prime prospects.

Imagine if, instead, they tried to fit their entire sales pitch into the 10 or 15 seconds they could get by following a prospect partway down the block. What chance would that strategy have?

It all boils down to this fact: the Internet has changed the world, but it has not changed human psychology. If you are going to convince someone that he needs something he really doesn't need – you need time to do it.

So, Connie, don't resist this part of the copywriting program. Go with it. Later, after you've proven yourself as a master of long copy, you can try shorter copy and see if it works.

By the way, you should know that copywriters who can write long copy (i.e., want-to-know copywriters) make about twice or three times the money that need-to-know copywriters make.

Mark Ford is one of the founders of AWAI. He's the inspiration behind AWAI and the Accelerated Program for Six-Figure Copywriting. Paul Hollingshead and Don Mahoney, as well as a dozen more A-level copywriters, credit their success to his mentorship. Mark's written a dozen books on copywriting, entrepreneurship, personal productivity, and wealth building, three of which were New York Times and Wall Street Journal bestsellers.

Since 1993, he has been the chief growth strategist for Agora, Inc., international publisher of newsletters and books with revenues of over \$300 million annually.

You can learn more from Mark by reading his newsletter Creating Wealth, published by Palm Beach Research Group.

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2 Responses to "How Long Should a Sales Letter Be?"

I too must say that I have agreed with Connie, as I find it hard to believe that people in this day of e-mail and text-messaging will read such lengthy copy. I recall that, when taking the Six-Figure program, one of the promotions we studied was 40+ pages long. I found that unbelievable. I could not imagine that I could write one, this in large part because I could not imagine anyone would ever read it. I have since learned that this is quiet typical. Given the length of the copy and the research that goes into them, I can see why copywriters are paid so much to write them.

Guest (Nora King) – over a year ago

This is all very interesting. I wrote a page sales letter that gets the gist of it all in 2 pages. It appeared too long and felt it should be at most 1-1/2 pages long because similarly, 'who will read through all this?' So, as I tried to shorten it, it actually got longer. I also found that short doesn't provide enough content to make a decision. Being stuck with two opposing mindsets, I quickly searched online and found my internal instincts were right! Amazing! I will not fight facts. Thanks!

Guest (Marc) – over a year ago

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