

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 P., an AWAI member from Michigan.



Mark Morgan Ford

"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. 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.

"Wouldn't a more effective style of copywriting be keeping the sales message to a page or two? My gut tells me 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 me — 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 sold by posted mail or email: need-to-know products and want-to-know products.

The need-to-know products 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 include just about everything Early to Rise (an e-letter I started years ago) 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 Unique Selling Proposition (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 DVD 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's always been true and it's still true today — even with email sales letters.

You base your feeling 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. 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.

When I asked three of the top copywriters working today, "How long was your best-selling sales letter?", here were their responses:

John Forde: "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. This one, I probably could have written shorter, but not by much."

Mike Palmer: "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: "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 100 — passersby won't give them the time they need to make the sale. They listen for a few seconds, 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 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.

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

Heck, I agree with Mark 100%. And I'm a newbie. My web sample (that I'm waiting for a review on) was 10 PAGES! I had the best time creating it, and I hope to do more long-copy...even LONGER...once I start getting clients.

Guest (Mark Vertreese) – over a year ago

I like short copy. However, if I run into a long sales letter and I am sold before the end of the copy, I just scroll to the bottom and sign up. I agree that having the information available to the customer who wants to know more makes a letter more convincing than having short copy without the facts.

Ben Willardson – over a year ago

I enjoyed reading this essay from Mark, it explains it so clearly. I think a lot of us new folks shy away from long copy because we don't feel we have enough to say, but reading what Mark says gives a person more hope that they can participate in this area of copywriting. Thank you for your insight and thoughts.

Guest (Kevn O) – over a year ago

I'm so glad to see this question addressed, thank you, Mark! I was thinking the same thing as I am working my way through the Accelerated Program. I was wondering if long copy would go away shortly, so why bother learning about it. I will keep plugging away on my Dog Treats sales package!

Guest (Mary Kay) – over a year ago

I was thinking, Mark, of the retail customer who already knows what he wants, buys it and leaves, and the other customer who comes into the store and shops. The former is a need to know-er, and the latter is a want to know-er.

Guest (RON) – over a year ago

I HATE long sales letters. I don't read them. I don't watch long videomercials. I've never bought anything as the result of reading (or viewing) one of these endless, boring, time-wasting pitches. They're inevitably mind-numbingly redundant and padded with meaningless testimonials and appeals to the emotions. I'm busy. I have more meaningful ways to spend my time. Just give me the information and tell me (briefly) why I should buy it. I'm smart enough to figure out if it's something I want or not.

SandiSY – over a year ago

In my limited experience I Unfortunately have to agree with Mark. Fortunately I'm new to copywriting so I only do what the man say's. Thank you Mark.

Guest (Robert G) – over a year ago

Imho, this is where the brilliant Mark Ford reveals something that I don't think fits the business objectives of most of our clients. Not mine, anyway. They don't intend "to convince someone he needs something he really doesn't need," because that is not a sustainable customer. A second thought about this is that I don't know anyone who has bought something off a long-form letter that they wouldn't bought off a shorter letter. I know, Mark, your data may differ ...

Guest (Pete) – over a year ago

best part of the whole piece: " It's about finding the one person in a hundred who will give you the time you need to sell him."

Guest (Ryan) – over a year ago

I agree that most of us are too busy to read long copy. I also see the importance of it. Usually if I'm interested in something I skip to the end to see the cost. Then go back for the details. Recently when I placed my chapter 6 ex.(Steve Slaunwhite's B2B program) it was too short. I thought that a business person wouldn't have time for long copy. After reading the feedback and some research I realized my mistakes. A business person who is about to spend thousands wants all the facts they can get.

Sarah F – over a year ago

I have prepared tax returns 43 years and have written many newsletters. Long ones do not work as well as 3 to 5 pages. I find I can get everything said in those pages and aren't as likely to find a home in the bottom of someones bird cage or a swat for flies. But, that may be for the writing talking about things pertaining to taxes. I am wide open to suggestions that might improve my delivery, but this so far, is what has worked best for me.

Guest (Shari) – over a year ago

This encourages me. I'm working on a drip campaign email series for a client and have been questioning the length of each email.

Since this is a want-to-know campaign, I realize the need to take the time to create the sense of value for those reading it.

Thank you!

Guest (Mark) – over a year ago

Thank you to Connie for asking the question.

Thank you to Mark Ford for the insight.

Distinguishing between "need" and "want" and the copywriter's aim to change a "want" to a "need" is a good lesson for the day.

Jerry Waxman – over a year ago

Thanks Will and Mark. Great content....and just the right length.

Regards, George

G Frederick White – over a year ago

I very much agree with Mark. I've loved to write since I was in first grade, and as I grew, I would write my father and mother some long letters about little things, and not only did they enjoy it, but my siblings did, too!

Becky – over a year ago

Like moving a mountain, and barring a miracle, a sales letter's done when that which is grounded in BEING can dissipate the 'now' as flight's 'forever' BECOMING.

Guest (Chris Morris) – over a year ago

Mark effectively acquits long copy. I, for one, don't have much patience, but I am more inclined to stick with the writer if he/she is informing me about something in which I have interest. If the writer "finds" me and "connects" with me, he/she will have my attention for as long as they can keep it. As a customer, I want to feel like I am in control - not being "sold," but if I am looking for information, I am ready to be sold. The distinction between need and want-to-know is key.

Kevin Thiele – over a year ago

Hello Will:

Thank you for these emails. They really do help with the process of learning to think as a copywriter. I've got some really good understanding as to this career change. And, via the information you send, a lot of the assignments I'm asked to complete are a lot less intimidating as a newbie.

Thank you again ...

Sincerely,

Monica P

P.S. I'm sending a second comment, because I want to respond to Mr. Ford's essay.

Guest (Monica P) – over a year ago

To Mr. Ford:

The example you gave about the street pitch, and the fact that they don't focus on the people who don't have time, or listen a little while then shake their heads and continue on; I've experienced that myself, but I hadn't made the connection that applies to copywriting, or just writing in general. This was an "AH HA!" moment for me...

Thank you for taking the time to share ...

Sincerely,

Monica P

Guest (Monica P) – over a year ago

That is a very good point - it works for the 1% of people who are already interested.

When I visit a long sales letter, the pre-sell has already got me interested, so I go to the end (Ctrl+End) and cursor up to the price. If the price is not obvious I hit a buy now button and find the price on the next page. Then I make my decision without having seen the long sales letter.

I'm deaf so when I get a video sales letter I hit the back button and tell the pop-up that I want to keep reading.

I dislike the AWAI courses because they are all videos. Surely they could pay for someone to transcribe the videos for people like me who are hard of hearing.

Escritor – over a year ago

Very interesting essay! You have made a believer out of me.

I would like to learn how to do that very well.

Eddix – over a year ago

I developed a product & a service for an integrated marketing communication class, based on the high number of computers that were stolen from students at a local college campus. My portfolio involved convincing college students & the campus to buy my product & service at a competitive rate. The in-depth detail I found was mind boggling so I kept digging. The better the product sounds to a customer the more likely they'll want it. The length was a necessity. Loved the class-earned an A.

Martha Schleuder – over a year ago

Great explanation, thanks Mark. As a consumer, I'd always wondered why some copy was so long. While I usually skip past most of it when I'm not buying, now I think about it, I do usually read most of it when I do buy!

Tracey – over a year ago

What a gem of an article. It has lit a match, and welled up in me the confidence, to attempt to write the BIG one of direct response copywriting.

Guest (Teejay) – over a year ago

I have yet to begin pursuing a copywriting career, but I've been a student of it for nearly two decades. Mark is obviously right - first because he is Mark, aka Michael Masterson (!), but second, because yes! (Do you like the funky grammar?) Long copy gets my attention. I recycle short copy all the time! Long letters on investment or health, I read! Because I want to know! Mark is right! Believe him!

ASM – over a year ago

Here's another great piece of advice that's going into my copywriting toolkit: Need-to-know copy can be shorter and want-to-know copy benefits from being longer ...

Hook prospects with great leads that make them curious to see where you're going. Then, warm them up--slowly--with longer copy until they're ready to buy in.

How true! Shorter copy won't build the relationship you need for 'want-to-know' subject matter. Thanks for the excellent advice!

Cara Flett – over a year ago

I hate to admit it, but you're right.

Aprille – over a year ago

I very much enjoyed this article, and it enhanced my thinking as to "need" as opposed to "want," and the differences inherent in the need to change one's writing style based upon these factors. Thank you.

Guest (Adelle Carson) – over a year ago

Copywriters... here's the brutal truth. It doesn't mean a rat's tail if you think shorter copy is superior to long copy. It matters even less which you like.

The fact you get paid six figures (or more) to write long copy DOES matter.

And some of the hottest advice I've gotten in a long time comes from Will Newman. Make sure you digest every single word.

Guest (Kevin Dawson) – over a year ago

Interesting discussion - thank you.

I get that long letters work, but WHY, is the smouldering question that I wrestle with.

What Mark didn't quite touch on, is that we all seem to have a longing for something a little more, a little better. And when a headline makes us believe this might be it, we read on.

Like many, I don't read sales letters like a book. I skip and skim looking for answers and to see if the details support the headline. If it satisfies, and I can afford it, I may buy.

Cecelia – over a year ago

Thank you, Mark, for your article. It will definitely go into my files. Here's the thing, I am one of those people who LOVE LOVE LOVE the long sales copy & infomercials. I learn so much, even if I don't buy in the end. In fact, the fact that the first email I got from AWAI was so long made me realize I was quite possibly home and I was right. It was very interesting to read all the comments. Yes, I read the article and the comments. Last word - follow Mark's advice. He knows what he's saying.

Sandra K Lynne – over a year ago

It's so helpful to present the difference between long vs. short copy as 'want to know' vs. 'need to know' copy.

I am one of the newbies who's shied away from long copy in large part because I've felt I had too little to say about xy or z.

But this concise piece of Mark Ford wisdom inspires me to want to challenge myself now with a long-copy project. I'm off to search for a spec!!!

Guest (Lee Nourse) – over a year ago

I'd expect nothing less from one of the best in the business. Thanks, Mr. Ford, for clearly explaining where long copy makes sense.

Teri Weber - Enchanted Copy – over a year ago

Need and want concept is very helpful. Reading the other comments leads me to ask 1)Shouldn't we know and address our audience's desires? i.e. I notice our comments here are limited to 500 words or they may be trimmed. 2)How many words comprise "long", "medium" or "short" copy?

Guest (Larry Paz) – over a year ago

Great to finally know why long copy torments me so. Thanks for providing the distinction and delineation on these two forms of copy.

Lil Acorn – over a year ago

Thanks Mr. Ford for clarifying the reasons for long vs. short copy. I accept the basic premise, but some long copy still seems awfully long. 20-24 pages? Wow. I read a lot of these and obviously, some are better done than others. the fact that most of the responders would prefer shorter copy, questions but doesn't change your excellent reasons. Again. thank you.

rastus – over a year ago

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