



Deadly Dozen: Twelve Common Pitfalls That Kill the Impact of Commercial Copy (And How You Can Avoid Them)

If you work in sales or marketing, this paper is for you. It addresses stumbling blocks you are likely to encounter when you write or review commercial copy. Take these observations to heart and put them into practice. Your messages will become more persuasive...and your customers more responsive. Don't your professional efforts deserve as much?



1

Over-complication cripples the sales proposition. So does a lack of specificity.

Early in my career, I gained a valuable lesson in a sales training class. The product was a sophisticated piece of photo processing equipment. The instructor posed this question: “What do you say when the customer asks how it works?” I answered with a detailed, somewhat lengthy explanation of the machine’s complex technical operation. Another associate, a top producer, offered an entirely different response: “I tell them it works great.”

Sales propositions flounder when they drift into complexity. The copywriter’s job is to simplify and clarify, so the prospect’s job—making a buying decision—is easy. Sometimes the message can be as simple as “it works.” (A well-known analgesic built a compelling campaign around this idea in the early 1990s.) However, economy in words should not come at the expense of facts that strengthen claims and quash doubt. For example, consider this attempt to convey a depth of knowledge:

Industry-leading engineering talent resides at all manufacturing facilities, with the added benefit of a combined 100 years of experience available through a corporate engineering technology council.

I know I am supposed to be awed by a century of experience. But my inner skeptic wants to know how many brainiacs are on the council. The UN Security Council seats 15 members. I can imagine other councils with 20 or more. Had the copy specified the number of council members, their combined years might have impressed me. Without that fact, the benefit eludes me. Here’s how I would rewrite:

Looking for engineering know-how? Top talent is ready to answer your toughest questions at each of our six plants. What’s more, our membership in an engineering technology council opens your door to some of the industry’s most experienced minds.

My revision increased the word count from 27 to 39. Does the added bulk help? Yes. Which begs the question: How long should a message be?

Keep it simple. But don’t let simplicity override the inclusion of specifics that build agreement for your selling proposition.



2

Internet, direct mail, and collateral print messages written to fit a predetermined length are usually inadequate or overblown.

When asked how long a man's legs should be, Lincoln answered: "Long enough to reach the ground." Similarly, a commercial message should be long enough to make the sale.

Obviously, TV and radio spots must fit within prescribed allotments (e.g., 15, 30, 60 seconds). Likewise, placements in newspapers and magazines are subject to space limitations (a function of the advertiser's finite media budget).

But brochures, web copy and letters are not bound by such restrictions. A common misconception is that a sales letter should fit neatly on one page. Yet, some of the most compelling appeals span four or more pages. Likewise, some believe a web movie must not exceed 60 seconds or viewers will abandon. (A visit to YouTube quickly dispels this myth).

Rather than second-guess how many words or minutes will fit your prospect's attention span, arm yourself with a simple checklist (AIDA). Does the message:

[√] Grab *Attention*? [√] Hold *Interest*? [√] Create *Desire*? [√] Prompt *Action*?

Preconceptions about message size can undermine results. Rather than word count or running time, let AIDA be your litmus test for length.

3

Jargon, obscure words, and overused words are barriers to agreement.

There's a story about a group of people who regale one another repeatedly with the same jokes. To save time, they assign each joke a number. "Twenty-seven," one says, and they all laugh. "Eighty-five," declares another, and howls ensue. "Sixteen," states a third—and no one lets out so much as a chuckle. Then a soft voice breaks the silence: "He never could tell a joke."

It can be tempting to communicate with those outside our corporate sanctum or professional circle using terms we bandy with colleagues. But acronyms, buzz words and abbreviations are likely to confuse—and confusion undermines agreement. A prospect can't nod his head if he's shaking it.

The same advice applies for obscure words. Prefer the familiar choice to the less familiar. Consider this correspondence between a customer and manufacturer.

Dear Sirs:

In case my area gets another hard freeze this winter, I would like to know if I could use my Magnum 500 torch to thaw the copper water pipes in the crawl space under my house.

Mr. J. McDuggan

McDuggan received this obliquely worded reply:

Dear Mr. McDuggan:

Regarding your query about the possible utilization of the Magnum 500 torch for thawing water pipes, our engineers advise their perspective is limited to a paucity of research for the application you cite. They question the sagacity of using the device where the potential exists for inadvertent consequences, such as the conflagration of your domicile.

Customer Service Department

He wrote back with a follow-up question:

Dear Sirs:

Thank you for your reply. I have one more question: When I use my Magnum 500 to thaw pipes, which heat setting should I use?

J. McDuggan

McDuggan then received a reply he could understand:

Dear Mr. McDuggan:

Don't use your Magnum 500 or any other torch to thaw frozen pipes. You could burn down your house.

Customer Service Department



The trendy word or phrase is another obstacle to comprehension. How such expressions gain celebrity is a bit mysterious. Perhaps it starts with an elegant usage in a newspaper or magazine. Other writers emulate. The process repeats until, it seems, the word is everywhere—and about as potent as a ten-cent packet of powdered drink mix stirred into Lake Michigan.

There are many more offenders than the few listed here. Keep these and similarly mind-numbing expressions safely locked up and away from your copy. Let one out only in an emergency, such as when no other word or phrase will work (which is almost never).

alignment
benchmarking
carbon footprint
cutting-edge
empower
functionality

global
interface
metrics
needs
paradigm
passion

proactive
solution
seamless
state-of-the-art
synergy
utilize

Avoid lingo, big words, and words weakened by overuse. Choose words that make your ideas easy to understand.

4

Features without benefits fail to engage. Prospects respond: “So what?”

You may remember the name *Abraham Maslow*. He’s the psychologist who postulated a hierarchy of needs to explain human motivation. Students of marketing ponder Maslow’s theory for perspective on buyer behavior. Without going into detail, suffice it to say consumers make purchases to satisfy various needs. (I am compelled here to issue a warning: Refrain from using the word *needs* in commercial copy. E.g., “Visit Trixie’s Salon for all your hair care *needs*.” Such usages do nothing to position a brand for competitive advantage.)

Copy must answer the question foremost on every would-be buyer's mind: *What's in it for me?* In other words, how will this purchase I am considering... *Make my life easier? Save me money? Make me more attractive? Help me feel better? Make people like me? Help me provide for my loved ones? Give me a better future? Let me help others? Make the world a better place?*

The answers to these and similar concerns are the benefits. Statements of benefit are the proteins that build persuasive muscle in copy. They do the heavy lifting, raising the prospect's awareness up to the level of desire.

FEATURE	BENEFIT
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Patented Genie bi-radial audio speaker system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• gives you a listening experience so real you'll think the performers are in the room with you.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 480-Horsepower Dynaluxe engine	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• delivers power enough to pull a 5,000-pound cargo trailer or a 15-foot pontoon.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fans and misters throughout the fairgrounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide refreshing, cool relief for you on warmer days.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ninety-three cents of every dollar we take in goes directly to the mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• so your gift has the greatest impact on feeding and educating those who need help the most.

When you write about the features of what you are selling, get in the habit of asking: "So what?" The answers are statements of benefit, and they are essential if you expect customers to part with their hard-earned greenbacks.

Without benefit statements, a marketing message is dead on arrival. Copy must answer the consumer's ever-present concern: What's in it for me?



5

Failure to speak directly to your prospect will likely result in a failure to be heard.

Remember that annoying kid back in grade school who bragged all the time? He liked to talk about himself, his cool stuff, and how great his life was in general. He grew up to become a copywriter. Here's a recent sample of his work touting a client's social responsibility.

We are committed to the environment and take extra steps to ensure the eco-friendliness of our processes. Our state-of-the-art production technology and proven techniques for reducing waste have earned us recognition by leading environmental organizations.

I suppose one could argue that concern for the environment is a given nowadays. But the message does nothing to acknowledge this important fact. Why not use the common ground to start bonding?

Are you concerned about the environment? Here's good news. The Regional Resource Recovery Group and the Alliance for Energy Conservation give favorable ratings to our production processes.

We warmed the tone by changing the construction from first to second person (you). We brought specificity to *leading environmental organizations*. And we struck the limp descriptor, *state-of-the-art*.

A marketing guru once told me every customer reacts to his own name as if it were the most beautiful word in the world. (I confess—my name in the subject line of an e-mail message makes me pause, even if the message is spam.) Although e-mail and snail mail allow such personalization, other channels do not. When you can't address your prospect by name, "you" is the best choice. Should your prospect see "we" and "our" again and again, you may come off like an annoying kid bragging about his new bicycle.

"De-we" your message and write in the second person. Prospects feel more connected to you and your sales proposition when you address them directly.

6

The passive voice is an invitation to snooze.

Writing in the passive voice is like giving your prospect a sleeping pill while he's behind the wheel. Your sales proposition is destined to crash.

The passive voice usually appears as a form of the verb “to be” (*is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being*) along with a past participle (verb form that typically ends in *-ed*).

Our chess pie was awarded the 2009 Gold Rolling Pin, the highest honor of the International Bakers Consortium. (*Passive*)

To change to the active voice, let's cast the actor as the subject. (Tip: Some word processing programs can help you find and change passive constructions. In *Microsoft Word*, for example, choose *Spelling and Grammar* from the *Tools* menu.)

The International Bakers Consortium awarded its highest honor, the 2009 Gold Rolling Pin, to our chess pie. (*Active*)

The active voice has invigorated the idea. To take it a step further, let's try a word substitution and make our pie the hero:

Our chess pie earned the 2009 Gold Rolling Pin—the highest honor of the International Bakers Consortium.

The word *earned* implies a shade more worthiness than *awarded*, adding value to both our pie and its award. We can gain further traction with choice descriptors:

Our *buttery-smooth* chess pie, a *highly guarded* recipe, earned the 2009 Gold Rolling Pin—the highest honor of the International Bakers Consortium.

Not only is the pie good enough to earn an award, you won't find it anywhere but here because no one else has the recipe (although others, apparently, would like to get their hands on it). Let's add a little more spice to make the fantasy real, then go for the close:

Our buttery-smooth chess pie, a highly guarded recipe, earned the 2009 Gold Rolling Pin—the highest honor of the International Bakers Consortium. But what's more important is what *you'll* think when *you* taste it. Why not take one home today?



A passive construction isn't always taboo. For instance, it can emphasize an object or serve when the writer doesn't know (or wishes not to reveal) the actor.

Ten percent of our profits each year are donated to arthritis research.
More diabetics were treated for retinal neuropathy last year than in any previous year.

However, the passive voice is usually a downer for commercial copy. Avoid it like you would the swine flu, and your message is more likely to get the healthy result you want.

The passive voice drains life from commercial copy. Write in the active voice to put energy in your message.

7

Needless words water down the message and sink the chances for the sale.

William Strunk Jr. (1869-1946), professor of English at Cornell University and author of *The Elements of Style*, gave writers this simple admonition: *Omit needless words*. He explained it thus: "A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts."

With Strunk's advice in mind, let's examine this sentence. (It is, ironically, from the web site of a machine shop.)

We look forward to the opportunity of serving you in the near future.

Any punch this sentence might have packed is limping under excess baggage. Let's whittle.

We look forward to serving you in the near future.
We look forward to serving you soon.
Let us serve you soon.

We've gained economy by shedding 8 words. But customers don't respond to what we want; they follow their own interests. Let's recast the invitation in the second person and add an unmistakable call to action.

You're in for great service. Call us.

In the quest to forgo needless words, beware of the potential for collateral damage. Trolling the same web site, I found this:

Because of our extensive network, we can offer our customers a completely finished part.

I know what this means because I have written for clients who have networks. In this instance, however, I think the writer makes too big a leap from network to finished part. I also object to the mushy modifier, “extensive.” I would reword this way:

You get a part finished perfectly to your specifications, thanks to our network that spans all aspects of production.

Instead of asking the reader to grasp the implied workings of an “extensive network,” we’ve spelled it out so there can be no confusion. We’ve also substituted *perfectly* for *completely*, understanding that machined parts are considered “perfect” when they meet specifications. Most importantly, we’re now talking directly to our customer (*you get/your specifications*) rather than about customers in general.

French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal captured the spirit of Strunk’s advice elegantly: “I have made this letter longer than usual, only because I have not had the time to make it shorter.” From first to final draft, copywriting is a process of review and revision that strips away the husk to reveal a luscious kernel. Concise copy takes effort. But it pays for itself and more.

Cut the fluff and get to the point. As Strunk taught: “Omit needless words.”

8

Failure to identify the most important idea diminishes clarity and weakens the selling proposition.

A commercial message is most compelling when it reinforces a primary idea. It might be “Why hackers hate this software,” or “How the Bumper-Chute Umbrella took Seattle by storm.” Behind the main idea stands an array of supporting ideas, or *copy points*. These reinforce the primary idea, like harmonies to a melody.



Before you draft your next message, try a simple exercise. Write down and complete this sentence: *The single, most important idea I want to communicate is _____*. If you encounter difficulty, list all the copy points that come to mind. As you think about everything you wish to include, look for a unifier to emerge, one framework for them all.

A creative friend of mine refers to this as the “rule of Alfalfa,” named for the character in the *Our Gang* films whose coif sported a single, well-waxed spike. Marketers ignore this rule at their own peril; precious little of what they try to convey is apt to stick.

Build your message around a single, unifying idea. Support the idea with copy points; the way harmonies enhance a melody.

9

Omitting a specific call to action is like buying the diamond ring and failing to pop the question.

Upon graduating from college, I took a job in sales. Armed with my business degree and an Irishman’s gift of gab, I was primed to set records. However, I soon discovered how little I knew about the psychology of selling. (The good news is I eventually learned, mostly by studying the successful pros around me.)

The final, critical piece of the sales process is the close. Unless you consummate the transfer of your product or service, i.e., “get the order,” the cash register doesn’t ring. The close isn’t just the icing; it’s the entire cake. That’s why the best sales people are always testing the water for the close. When the time is right—bingo. They book the business.

The call to action is the copywriter’s close. It’s the answer to the question: *What do I want the prospect to do?* A clear, direct call to action is essential.

We hope you never need flood insurance. But why take the chance? Return the postage-paid card today to receive a free, no-obligation quote. It’s your first step toward peace of mind.

Sometimes a call to action becomes so intrinsic to a product that it defines the brand’s identity: *Have it your way* (Burger King). Or it becomes a campaign jingle: *Pick up the phone; the call is free* (Safe Auto). The U.S. Army’s call to recruits is one of my favorites: *Be all that you can be*.

Some advertisers of luxury goods believe snob appeal coupled with a phone number or web address is sufficient to spur consumers. They might be wise to take a page from the Lexus playbook. Every Lexus ad includes a graceful call to action in sync with the brand's elegant character. Without it, we would see far fewer Lexus automobiles on the road.

The call to action is key to productivity. Make sure your selling message provides the clear direction your prospect needs to become your customer.

10

A footnote tells the reader: your loss is imminent.

Advertisers who impede access to information only fuel skepticism. When the prospect sees an asterisk, he knows instinctively a hand is reaching for his pocketbook. As songwriter Tom Waits observed: *The big print giveth and the small print taketh away.* (Ads by automobile dealers are prime examples of this woeful practice, with streams of mice type whispering the truth about the low, low price.)

When you are tempted to minimize details by setting them in six-point type at the bottom of the page, recall this line from *The Godfather*: "Mr. Corleone is a man who insists on hearing bad news immediately." I and every other consumer I know share Corleone's view. Instead of requiring us to squint at disclaimers, advertisers should put the bad news where it is obvious. Treating it thus removes the connotation of double-dealing. It builds credibility for the advertiser and his message.

I look forward to the day when consumers won't have to reach for a magnifying glass to read the circulars in the Sunday newspaper. Perhaps GM, now rising from the ashes to reinvent itself, will provide the catalyst for this needed change. We can hope.

Abstain from footnotes and mice type. Put the disclaimer in the body of your message where the prospect can readily factor it into the purchase decision.



11

To neglect the power of star words is to leave low-hanging fruit unpicked.

Every successful marketer knows certain words wield more clout than others. I call these powerhouse performers star words, because they are the “A-list” for commercial copy.

cash
discover
easy
free

fresh
guarantee
health
love

new
proven
safety
save

For example, would you rather *learn* how to shed unwanted fat...or *discover* how to shed unwanted fat? For taking part in a telephone survey, would you rather receive a *gift*...or a *free gift*? (I realize grammarians object to the redundancy of *free gift*. But consumers aren't so picky; *free gift* will out-pull *gift* in every instance except, perhaps, when you market textbooks to English teachers.)

The next time you evaluate a selling message, check it for star words. See if you can work more star power into it. Compare its appeal with and without. You'll soon discover why these words appear so frequently in commercial copy. They work.

Use “star words” in your copy. They bring proven power for results.

12

**Without emotion, a marketing message is merely noise.
It won't connect with your prospect.**

In 1925, novice copywriter John Caples penned a classic example of great advertising. The ad began with this powerful headline:

"They laughed when I sat down at the piano, but when I started to play..."

Many copywriters believe this to be the best ad ever written. There's no denying the emotional appeal. It pulls you into the performer's shoes, where you feel your anxiety channeled into music that amazes your peers.

How do you put emotion in a commercial message? The words themselves need not be particularly eloquent. But they should be honest and sincere. Even more importantly, they must ring true; consumer attitudes in this post-Enron era range from decidedly skeptical to downright cynical.

Too, it is essential to believe in the product or service you are selling. Without genuine enthusiasm, writing to convince others is a schizophrenic exercise. If you can't endorse wholeheartedly what you ask others to consider, you owe it to yourself (and to those who do believe in the product) to apply your talents elsewhere.

Every transaction is, ultimately, an interaction between people. Copy with emotion is like the sound of a friendly voice. It makes a fundamentally human connection that predisposes the listener to say "yes." Copy without emotion is akin to life without love; it is "like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." It may make noise, but it produces nothing of value.

Put emotion into your message to connect with your prospect on a fundamentally human level. Your words should be honest, sincere, and carry the ring of truth.

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