

Creative or Commercial?

You don't have to
choose!



The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.

– Albert Einstein



**Engage Your
Customers:
Tell A Story**

Introduction

Engage Your Customers— Tell a Story

You know how most speakers open up their presentation—no matter the gravity or slant of their subject—with a joke? They know that loosening up their audience (and maybe themselves) is a communication cornerstone. Humor, a message arrow, can hit a target much faster than fact. Dissolve the wall between your message and your audience, overcome their initial defenses of skepticism or doubt, and you've taking a major step in the tango of message seller and message buyer. This essay will demonstrate how the dance of promoting a commercial or business message needn't sidestep a creative turn—on the contrary, it *demands* it.

Businesses often have a perception problem: the public looks at them as soulless boxes. When people think of a General Motors or an IBM or even smaller businesses, they rarely consider them to be dynamic, thriving hives of activity, where dramas (or comedies) unfold. Business writers need to deliver the revelation that businesses are actually *people*, not inflexible edifices. Your client's customers (your readers) all have malleable minds that can be pulled with a proper pitch: the *human* angle. Substance can be melded with style in a way to sway your reader. We'll look at how some hooks of creative writing— drama, humor, mystery, surprise—can be a compelling part of good business writing.

Make Your Public Face a Pretty One

After the small businessperson is comfortable with setting up their website, email and ecommerce systems, and has familiarity with the fundamentals of the online world and its marketplace potentials, they must consider their public face. How a business presents itself to the world (and continues the exchange after the presentation) is as critical as the products that are offered.

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Dissolve the Wall

There is an artificial bind that constrains many corporate writers, and the people that oversee them, whether in-house or out. Precedent has roped all into believing that their commercial writing has to be dry, fact-filled, and buzzword-compliant, the mealy mouth of corporate-speak. Rather than inviting customers in, such writing builds a wall between message and recipient. Creative commercial writing can dissolve the wall between your message and your audience and overcome their initial defenses of skepticism or doubt.

Whether you are an outside writer hired to deliver a pitch, or you are an internal copywriter or editor, the big picture of brand identity and its nuances of tone and slant should creatively reflect the business mission, practices and indeed, the business core. The way to engage your customers is to tell your story.

Substance, Style and Good, Old “Bob”

Substance can be melded with style in a way to sway your reader. Let's look at how some hooks of creative writing— drama, humor, mystery, surprise—can be a compelling part of good business writing.

Before we begin, one caveat: occasionally, formal, to-the-point writing is what the client and situation calls for; heed that call of bullet list and crisp sentences. But here, we'll look at illustrations from my own business writing, where a turn of phrase might be just as important as a double discount. All of the examples are from actual product pieces, mostly from technology markets. To protect the guilty, every product name here has been changed to “Bob.” (Marketing writing hint: be friendly! “Bob” is friendly.)

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When I am working on a problem I never think about beauty. I only think about how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.
– Buckminster Fuller



The Persuasive
Power of Story:
Move the Mind
by Way of the
Heart

Persuasion

The Persuasive Power of Story—Move the Mind by Way of the Heart

The Telling of Tales

Storytelling, an ancient art, still opens the ears of your modern listeners. If the writing permits, throw a tale towards your audience, and see them lean in, lured by narrative interest.

Here's my introduction for a manual for a popular computer game:

Romance. Violence. Sex. Intrigue. You might think it's just a typical day in our nation's capital. No, it's much more interesting than that. It's another world entirely, and quite a vivid one. Welcome to the world of Bob.

This next is excerpted from a radio ad for an Internet storage company (the “Dragnet” theme played in the background; imagine Joe Friday’s deadpan-yet-dramatic tone):

There are a thousand broken dreams in the naked city. Here's one: A crowded freeway, 7:43am.

Lana Trueheart had spent half the night at home working on her presentation to show this morning to the company big shots. Her gamble might make or break her career.

She glances over at the disk on the seat—disaster!

Here's another story, from the introduction to a book on computer safety I wrote, that works the fear-factor angle:

If the writing permits, throw a tale towards your audience, and see them lean in, lured by narrative interest.

Computer viruses that send your machine to its knocking knees. Online credit card thefts only discovered after your account statement comes back with its balance tripled. File corruption on a document you'd spent months preparing—and it's your only copy. Aching back, arms and wrists from too many hours of keyboarding. Horror stories unlikely to ever affect you personally? Perhaps. But perhaps you've only been lucky to this point.

The Power of Three

Believe it or not, structural aspects of writing lend themselves to creative expression. For instance, a sentence with a rolling rhythm is much more effective than a sentence that trips and falls. Take a look:

Blah: “Employ Bob on your network and rest assured you're secure.”

The power-of-three zing: “Bob surrounds your network with a pirana-filled moat, drops a steel door on hackers, and strangles computer intruders without fail.”

Get those rhythmic sentences get into customers' heads, and they are more inclined to absorb the message. See how “the power of three”—the use of informational phrasings in pulses of three—works to wiggle into audience ears:

Interested in seeing how meetings don't have to be nightmares of missed flights, lost papers and shattered schedules? Want to know how you can demo software, host a training session, and share sales documents and presentations—with an unlimited, interactive audience of colleagues or customers—and all from the comfort of your browser? Do you suspect that meetings really can be stimulating, collaborative and productive, but you haven't seen the tools to make that possible?

Here's an extension of the “power of three”: You set up the three phrases to lead into a customer benefit, and a benefit with a bang, because it concludes the sentence:

Dear [Name],

You have a tremendous opportunity to participate in a premiere fundraising program that is simple, easy to use, productive, and best of all—it costs you nothing.

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Tilt Your Slants: Develop Your Themes

Creativity comes from trust. Trust your instincts. And never hope more than you work.
– Rita Mae Brown

Themes

Tilt Your Slants: Develop Your Themes

Working a Theme

Once you've determined the slant of a piece, exploring its theme is a means both to write expressively and persuasively; you put supporting beams under the roof of your metaphor. Here are some excerpted phrases from a marketing postcard that implied that the product had powers bordering on the magical:

Behold! It's So Easy It's Like Magic!

Nothing up our sleeves here,

There are many rabbits in the Bob hat:

Conjure this: Bob is the kind of hocus-pocus that saves businesses plenty of time and money, and that's no sleight of hand—that's just good business sense.

Metaphors for the Mixing

Speaking of metaphors, they are also a business writer's friend. Literal recitation of facts can be fine, but more often it's the wording that puts a picture in a reader's head that grabs attention. Here's from the "About" link on a website:

There's a lot to be said for working lean, being able to move quickly from high concept to polished result, and to be driven—while enjoying every stop on the tour. The Bob team knows the ropes, but they aren't bound by them.

Cliché or not, cars can still stimulate a persuasive passion:

Let's envision your IT investment as a refined sports car—say, a Porsche Boxster. That car—your investment—is an amalgam of integrated components that must smoothly mesh to get peak performance. If that car is missing one of its relatively inexpensive components, for instance, its dashboard, you have no chance of peak performance. You're driving blind.

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Get a Head (and Subheads Too)

Your headlines and their related subheads let a reader get a picture of the product at a glance, and in context, can be both creative and commercially compelling. Here are some alternate heads and subheads from a sell sheet for a digital camera that did voice recording (old hat now, but fresh at the time of writing):

A Camera That Demands To Be Seen—And Heard

The End to Silent Pictures

A Picture is Worth A Thousand Words (or at least a hundred or two)

A Sound Choice for Your Vision

On the subject of heads and subheads, it's a big plus to give your client multiple headings choices in your drafts. Since most business writing is a process or editing and iterations, clients start from a bigger canvas and cut it down. Here are a few heads/subheads for a brochure for a business software development company that wanted a medical metaphor; they discarded some and happily chose the others.

Clear Your System Clogs So Your Data Flows Freely

Emergency Surgery for Stuck System Pipes

A Healthy System Is One Where Data Moves Unobstructed

Survival of the Corporate Body: Clean System Flow

Open Your System's Arteries So Your Data Blood Flows

The Doctor Is In: Call Us

Let Us Be Your System Physicians

We've Got the Medicine Your Systems Need

We're On Call to Bring Your System Up to Optimal Health

Your headlines and their related subheads let a reader get a picture of the product at a glance, and in context, can be both creative and commercially compelling.

*There's a fine line between genius and insanity. I have erased
this line.*
– Oscar Levant



**End Your Work
on a Ringing
Note: Nail It!**

Conclusion

End Your Work on a Ringing Note: Nail It!

Bald Conclusions

Even after several creative turns, sometimes it's a succinct, declaratory sentence that delivers your point. Concluding statements, whether for a paragraph or summary sentence, should drive the nail home with one hammer blow:

Bob makes cross-platform development easy, powerful and profitable.

In essence, Bob means that the benefits of high-bandwidth access to the Internet don't have to come at the price of peace of mind.

Bob can slash HR costs and put high-octane fuel in your recruiting engine.

Find out how the powerful productivity enhancements of Bob can positively impact your business.

It IS Rocket Science!

Language You Can Believe In

Whatever the words you choose to convey a commercial proposition, make them creative words. Use language you can believe in, and your clients and their customers will believe too. (And even if you end up selling Joe, not Bob, you can still spin your speech to put his best face forward.)

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Thanks, Tom Bentley

(And may your sentences always be stirring, not shaking.)

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