

Five Ways to Show Empathy in Direct Mail

By Peter J. Fogel

David Ogilvy has said the headline is the most important part of your sales letter. And he's right. If your headline is doing its job, your prospect is now piqued with interest (realizing what's in it for him) and is now onto the second most important part of your letter, your lead. This is where you have to get him hooked, start hitting his buttons and make this prospect your ally up front, so in the end he will respond to your call to action. One excellent way to accomplish this is with empathy.

To practice empathy is not to feel for another person, but to actually be another person. When you effectively use empathy in a sales letter, you have created a kinship, a bond or a connection with your prospect. If your product or service is what the customer wants, then he probably wants to do business with you. But, you have to prove you're trustworthy and present him with strong evidence that your product will solve his problem. Remember: People buy for emotional reasons and justify their purchase with logic.

Here are five ways to use empathy in direct mail:

#1—The Story

Stories have been around since the dawn of time. They draw us to the person weaving the tale, inviting us to put ourselves in the protagonist's shoes.

An excellent example is the classic "Two Young Men" letter for *The Wall Street Journal*. Since it began running in 1974, it has produced more than \$1 billion in sales. It starts:

Dear Reader,

On a beautiful late spring afternoon, twenty-five years ago, two young men graduated from the same college. They were very much alike, these two young men...

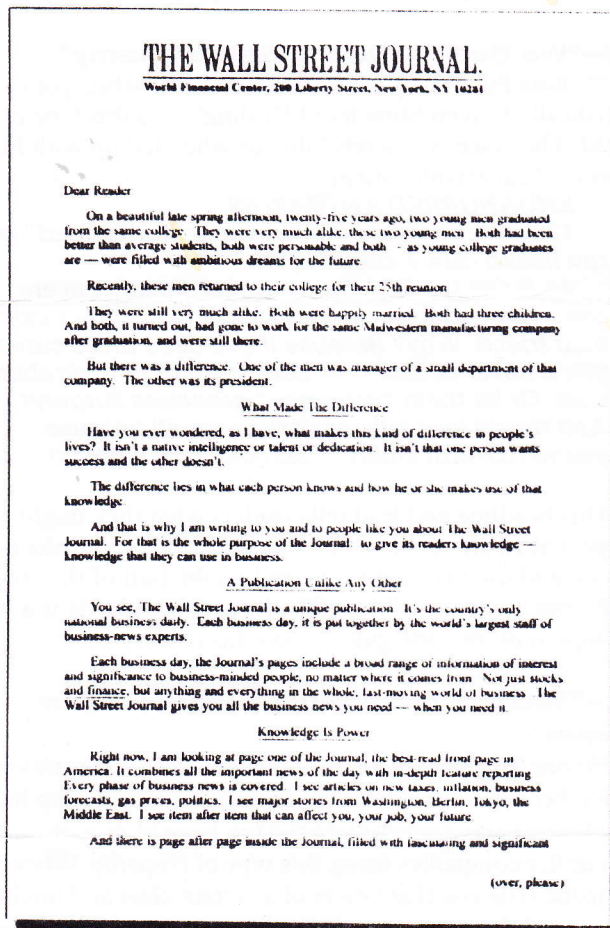
The copywriter, Martin Conroy, goes on to tell how these two young men, childhood friends, started out on their journey through life on similar paths. But something happened that changed their destinations. Both landed at the same company. One friend ran a small department at this company. His buddy ended up president of the company.

How did two men with the same backgrounds end up so differently? For the copywriter, and thus the reader, it's simple. The friend who became the president subscribed to *The*

Empathy:

Imaginative projection of one's own consciousness into another being.

—Webster's New International Dictionary, second edition, 1934



#1: A story approach allows the reader to identify with both characters in the letter, and assume the successful one reads *The Wall Street Journal*.

Wall Street Journal (although the letter never says so directly). And since everyone craves success, this strategy builds empathy for the less successful friend along with the hope of becoming the more successful man.

#2—"I Am Just Like You" or the "Achilles Heel"

The copy voice is in the first person and uses insecurity or minor weaknesses. It's used all the time for self-improvement courses, weight-reduction and home-based business offers.

I used it in a home study course that went on to beat a five-year control. The voice was of a man who was telling the reader how he found wealth and self worth from his new career, but it wasn't always like that for him. You see, before that he was stuck in a dead-end business:

I was 'existing' as a cabinet-maker. It was a grind. I was inhaling fumes and chemicals, and my back was killing me. Last year in the business-I made \$12,245.00.

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The "I'm just like you" empathy shows that the letter's author is a real human being with problems and insecurities—ones just like the reader might be experiencing, too. It also puts the prospect in a superior position. The author has opened up, and the prospect now feels closer to him.

#3—"We Both Have the Same Enemy"

Phillip's Publishing's alternative medicine white paper "Medically Proven Miracles of Healing" uses this type of empathy. The voice is of a rebel doctor who's fed up with his own medical establishment:

ENDANGERED ANTIDOTES

129 safe, clinically proven cures "threatened" by the health care establishment

As far as the FDA and organized medicine are concerned, these near-miraculous cures don't exist, dear friend. Why? Because if you used these cures, you'd never poison your body with their toxic chemicals. Or let them "prescribe" senseless surgery! And they'd lose billions of dollars—all because you're too darn smart ... and too darn healthy!

This headline and lead tells readers what they might have suspected all along: Some doctors use surgery to make big bucks, and the FDA continues to kiss the butt of the "big bad wolf drug companies." Not this doctor, though. He is a true champion of the little guy ... you, his reader.

#4—"You're Cordially Invited to Join Our Clique"

No one wants to be an outsider, and everyone wants to be a member of a club. American Express ("membership has its privileges") and Agora's Oxford Club have built multi-million dollar companies using this type of empathy. When someone tells you that you're of a certain class and intelligence, and that not everyone is allowed to get "their" card or be a member of the club, you want to join.

An example can be found in a direct mail effort for *Fly Fisherman* magazine:

TROUT SPOKEN HERE.

Also Bass. Salmon. And Bonefish.

Dear Fellow Angler,

There's bait casting. There's fishing. And then there's fly fishing ... what Robert Traver (author of *Anatomy of a Murder* but best known to fishermen for his love affair with trout) called "one of the more amiable forms incurable madness ... I'm the editor of FLY FISHERMAN. Like Robert Traver, I fish because...

Right off the bat, the writer lures the prospect in with "his" language. If you're an angler, you're thinking, "This guy knows there's nothing on earth that compares to catchin' some trout. He's okay in my book." Like bait, this writer dangles "fly fisherman" benefits throughout the copy that work beautifully.

#5—Humor

Humor is tricky in direct mail. It's usually frowned upon, because it doesn't always get a good response. But there are exceptions to every rule. Humor shouldn't be used to show

Red Cooper?
Your Orange Sweet grapefruit are spawning on the tree! Offer the sticker to the people you care most about today and they'll be on the way!

Yes, Red, I accept!

Good Morning!

If you'll give me the next 3 1/2 minutes, in return I'll give you a treat that'll open up an unbelievable new world of eating pleasure for you. Fair enough?

A little background:

My family has been in the citrus fruit business just about forever. We've become slightly famous down here because our fruit is so much bigger and sweeter than the citrus you find in the store. When people have a special occasion, in they come to get some Red Cooper grapefruit.

Until a couple of years ago, we were perfectly content with our grapefruit. So was everybody else, and it sold like crazy. Ours always has been the biggest, sweetest, prettiest grapefruit in the neighborhood ... some say the whole country.

But then that big freeze came along. You read about it in the paper: We'd never had a bitter cold spell like that, down here where the climate is "grapefruit perfect." That freeze wiped out almost every darned grapefruit tree in South Texas. Our own gorgeous trees were frozen solid. That meant, literally, starting all over again.

What we did:

Even before the freeze we'd been experimenting with grapefruit. Now, we figured, since we were starting over, why not carry those experiments as far as we could go?

I'll tell you what the experiments were:

#4: Copywriter Herschell Gordon Lewis combines both exclusivity and a story approach to create a rapport with prospects who read this letter for Red Cooper grapefruit.

how witty a copywriter can be (leave that for Madison Ave. agencies and their failures). Instead, a good use of humor is one where you grab your prospect's attention while at the same time focusing on his needs.

Marketer Jeff Paul used humor very well in his sales piece found in the back of many business opportunity magazines. The ad's headline was:

How I Earn \$4,000 a Day Sitting at My Kitchen Table in My Underwear!

The headline stops you with its funny word picture. But it goes deeper. You want to know more about how this guy makes \$4,000 a day, while never leaving home. This version of the "Lazy Man's Way to Riches" headline targets its blue-collar audience perfectly.

Paul also placed strategic sarcastic remarks about his former employer (something everyone thinks about, but Paul says it for them) in the copy. Remember: Always fit the right humor to the right product or service.

Know your customers' core beliefs so you can mix and match different types of empathy for the most effective message.

As master marketer Denny Hatch recently said in an interview in this very newsletter, "Copywriters are scared to be emotional. I used to love emotional efforts. Now they are rational."

So there you have it. Use passion and emotion in dealing with your prospect, solve his problems and you'll always create high-response direct mail campaigns. ■

Peter J. Fogel is a high-response direct mail copywriter, who resides in Richmond Hill, NY. To get his article, "How to Make Your Headline Jump Off the Page and Grab Your Prospect By the Lapels," e-mail him at compellingcopy@aol.com. He can be reached at (718) 847-0647.