

Reinventing a Powerful Marketing Tool: The Humble Letter

Technology has leveled the playing field in many ways for small businesses. From full-color marketing materials to online stores, small companies can now compete with the big boys when it comes to selling their products and services. At the same time, access to new marketing tools may be distracting small businesses from using one of the most powerful tools ever invented: the humble letter.

For small businesses in particular, the letter offers an intimate, personal way to build or strengthen a relationship in a way that large companies cannot. What customer, prospect or vendor doesn't appreciate a personalized message? A letter is inexpensive, quick, easily customized and can be used to:

- Introduce your company
- Follow up a first meeting
- Inform a customer about new products, sales and specials
- Share useful information

A letter can be sent via mail or email. What matters most is the content, not the form of delivery. A letter is not a line or two stating that the order is enclosed. Nor is it a series of pseudo acronyms saying that, "BTW looking forward to seeing you ASAP. And FYI we have DKNY on special including XXLs."

What happened to creating a letter on a sheet of letterhead? Use print or electronic versions of a letter as long as you use real letterhead containing: company name, a tagline or descriptors that tell what you do and set your company apart, address, Web address, email and phone. This information – often lacking from the quick emails we send – makes it easy for customers to get back in touch.

To take advantage of the letter as a communication tool, remember the following:

1. Make it personal.

Connect one-on-one with your recipient. A letter is not the same as a brochure, sales piece or website. Your tone should be conversational and personal, but also respect your current relationship with the recipient. If you know the customer well, you might use humor or a more casual tone. For prospects you are just getting to know, be warm but not overly familiar.

2. Make it purposeful.

Too often, communication with customers and prospects is generic and fails to entice a response. This "one size fits all" approach does little to connect with the recipient. While this is not a time to be pushy or presumptuous, avoid being vague. Know your customer or prospect and be specific about what your product or service can do for them. Does your product or service:

- Provide a more cost-effective alternative to existing suppliers?
- Offer a way to increase store traffic?

- Streamline a process?
- Reduce waste or defects?

3. Build rapport.

Once you have your recipient's attention, make it clear why they should consider your company's products or services. Again, what is important to this particular recipient? Look for common bonds and similarities between your company and theirs. What do you have in common? Perhaps:

- Family-owned business
- Business longevity
- Experience in a particular industry
- Support of local charities

4. Offer an incentive.

Each day that passes after receipt reduces the likelihood that the recipient will act. Make it enticing for the reader to respond. If possible, give them a reason to act now by including a time-limited offer, like:

- A special incentive or discount
- Delayed billing
- Smaller order quantities
- Point-of-purchase support
- Quick turnaround

5. Include a call to action.

Finally, propose a next step. Remember your goal is to build or strengthen a relationship, not just make a quick sale. So, instead of asking for a meeting, ask if you can start the relationship by delivering some form of immediate value, such as:

- A free sample of your product
- A free review or analysis
- Questions to see if your company can assist them with a current need
- Helpful information

In this world of text messaging, voicemail and social networking, a letter may sound a bit old-fashioned. In reality, a well-written letter continues to be one of our most powerful communications tools.