

Fear and Greed: Two Overrated Emotions

How to Become a Smarter and More Powerful Copywriter

By Michael Masterson

Way back when I was learning how to write advertising copy, it was commonly believed that the way to get high response rates was to appeal to our prospects' greed and fears.

I don't know who first made this pronouncement, but it was practically a commandment of direct marketing in those days.

All the "experts" I listened to espoused it. All the copywriters I admired seemed to do it. On the surface, it seemed to be a good, practical rule. One I should follow.

But I thought it was stupid.

I didn't need a degree in psychology to know that reducing human motivation to two, very obvious, emotions was wrong.

I knew in my bones — based on 30 years of experience (first with my mother, then with my teachers and eventually my colleagues, wife, and children) — that there were better ways to be persuasive than by stirring up fear and greed.

Sure, using fear sometimes seemed necessary — to keep the kids from riding their bikes in the dark without headlights, for example. But mostly it paralyzed the person I wanted to motivate. I found it to be both heavy-handed and clumsy. There were many other emotions and desires I could stimulate that would get the job done.

And greed? I grew up in a household where greed was considered a deadly sin — "the devil's instrument." I had no desire to use it as my own.

I wanted to build my career by working with, and selling to, people who, like me, were subject to greed and fear but wanted to rise above those base impulses.

I wasn't being altruistic. Not really. I didn't want to associate myself with greedy, fearful people because I knew I couldn't trust them. I couldn't trust them as friends. I couldn't trust them as business partners. And I couldn't trust them as customers either.

So even before I got into marketing in a serious way, I knew something about persuasion that most of the experts writing books and giving lectures did not seem to know.

And I had enough common sense to recognize that just because something is often said and generally believed doesn't make it so.

I'm happy to say that the myth about fear and greed has been eroding. I believe Bill Bonner had something to do with that. The great promotions he wrote in the early 1970s relied on other emotions and instincts to sell his products. Gary Bencivenga and Clayton Makepeace, too, wrote copy that helped disprove this lie.

The biggest move forward came, ironically, from a man whose intention was to warn consumers *against* marketing. In his book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Robert Cialdini, a professor of social psychology at Arizona State University, analyzed dozens of very successful promotions. He didn't choose the ones that relied on greed and fear. Instead, he focused attention on those that used more subtle, clever approaches.

The consumers he was hoping to enlighten hardly read the book. But it became a great hit with a lot of marketers who applied Cialdini's insights on the psychology of persuasion to their promotions.

Among Cialdini's insights were these:

- We instinctively try to reciprocate when someone does something for us.
- Once we've made a commitment to do something, we strive to be consistent with that decision.
- We tend to look to others to determine what our decision should be in any given situation.
- We prefer to say yes to the requests of people we know and like.

Cialdini eventually crossed the river and became an authority on marketing. His later books and seminars taught how to do the kind of subtle marketing he had despised. Good for him. Good for us. (I say "good for us" because I believe this kind of marketing is not only more effective, it is more honest. But that's another subject for another essay.)

As I said, the idiotic "rule" about fear and greed has been eroding — but it's never going to completely disappear.

Why? Because many marketers still believe that fear and greed are the most motivating of all the emotions. And there is some evidence to support this.

Let's begin with fear.

Fear is a primal emotion — one that was inherent in man at a very early stage of human evolution. It is also an essential emotion, one that is necessary for survival.

Neurobiologists tell us that our primal emotions are rooted deeply in our "reptilian" brains and are instinctive. Because they are instinctive, they can be very strong and very difficult to overcome.

And there is no doubt that fear is effective in selling all sorts of products — from burglar alarms to baby monitors to almost every form of insurance.

But just because an emotion is strong doesn't mean it should be used to market everything.

The reason is simple. Human beings have three "primal" responses to fear: to fight, to flee, or to be paralyzed into inactivity. And a copywriter doesn't want his prospects to do any of those things.

In selling investment advice (something I've done a good deal of), fear has sometimes been useful. But I've noticed that if you crank up the fear, you reduce the responsiveness to your ad. A little fear can go a long way when you are trying to motivate people to worry about their savings or their job security, for instance. But you must quickly follow that fear with hope of some kind.

And that brings us to greed.

Proponents of the fear-and-greed approach often argue that the smart thing to do is to follow a fear-based lead with an appeal to the prospect's greed.

But I have found that if you do that, you wind up attracting the kind of customer you don't want: someone who is gullible and greedy.

You can't build a business by selling to the gullible and greedy. You can make scores, sometimes big scores. But you will never have a sustainably profitable business.

About six months ago, I had a conversation with a copywriter who'd had amazing success with several fear-and-greed promotions. In fact, his commissions on all the sales from those campaigns should have come to more than a million dollars. I say "should have," because his clients discovered that many of the buyers brought in by his fear-and-greed promotions asked for refunds. And those that stayed were not good buyers of their other products.

So he made out temporarily, but eventually lost most of his clients.

I suggested that he learn to appeal to other emotions. He wasn't interested. He just kept on using his credentials to snare new clients ... until they, too, experienced the same disappointing results. And now I hear through the grapevine that he's finding it harder and harder to find anyone who will buy his copy. (By the way, he sent me an e-mail this morning. I haven't read it yet. I wonder if he's "seen the light.")

Greed doesn't work because good customers, the kind that will stick with you and continue to buy from you year after year, don't think of themselves as greedy. They want to be successful. They want to make more money. But they don't want to be greedy.

Here's what I want you to take away from this:

Use fear as a primary emotion to sell insurance products (which include such things as burglar alarms, baby monitors, etc.). For other products, you can try a little fear ... but don't go too far with it. Then concentrate on giving your prospects hope. Hope is far and away a much stronger selling proposition than fear.

And never use greed. Greed-based promotions will only attract customers who will ruin your business.

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