The 6 Key Differences Between Business-to-Business and Consumer Marketing

By Robert W. Bly

When asked if he could write an effective direct mail package on a complex electronic control system, a well-known direct response copywriter replied, "No problem. It doesn't matter what the product is. You are selling to *people*. And people are pretty much the same."

He's wrong.

Yes, there are similarities. But there are also differences in selling to business and professional buyers vs. the general public. In fact, here are six key factors that set business-to-business marketing apart from consumer marketing:

1. *The business buyer wants to buy*. Most consumer advertising offers people products they might enjoy but don't really need. How many subscription promotions, for example, sell publications that the reader truly could not live without? If we subscribe, we do so for pleasure – not because the information offered is essential to our day-to-day activity.

But in business-to-business marketing, the situation is different. The business buyer wants to buy. Indeed, all business enterprises must routinely buy products and services that help them stay profitable, competitive, and successful. The proof of his is the existence of the purchasing agent, whose sole function is to purchase things.

2. *The business buyer is sophisticated*. Business-to-business copy talks to a sophisticated audience. Your typical reader has a high interest in – and understanding of – your product (or at least of the problem it solves).

Importantly, the reader usually knows more about the product and its use than *you* do. It would be folly, for example, to believe that a few days spent reading about mainframe computers will educate you to the level of your target prospect – a systems analyst with six or seven years experience. (This realization makes business-to-business writers somewhat more humble than their consumer counterparts.)

The sophistication of the reader requires the business-to-business copywriter to do a tremendous amount of research and digging into the market, the product, and its application. The business audience does not respond well to slogans or oversimplification.

3. *The business buyer will read a lot of copy.* The business buyer is an information-seeker, constantly on the lookout for information and advice that can help the buyer do the job better, increase profits, or advance his career.

"Our prospects are turned off by colorful, advertising-type sales brochures," says the marketing manager of a company selling complex 'systems' software products to large IBM data centers. "They are hungry for information and respond better to letters and bulletins that explain, in fairly technical terms, what our product is and how it solves a particular data-center problem."

Don't be afraid to write long copy in mailers, ads, and fulfillment brochures. Prospects will read your message – *if* it is interesting, important, and relevant to their needs. And don't hesitate to use informational pieces as response hooks for ads and mailers. The offer of a free booklet, report, or technical guide can still pull well – despite the glut of reading matter clogging the prospect's in-basket.

4. *A multistep buying process*. In consumer direct response, copywriters' fees are geared toward producing the "package" – an elaborate mailing that does the bulk of the selling job for a publication, insurance policy, or other mail order product.

But in business-to-business direct marketing, the concept of *package* or *control* is virtually non-existent. Why? Because the purchase of most business products is a multistep buying process. A vice president of manufacturing doesn't clip a coupon and order a $35,000 machine by mail. First he asks for a brochure. Then a sales meeting. Then a demonstration. Then a 30-day trial. Then a proposal or contract.

Thus, it is not a single piece of copy that wins the contract award. Rather, it takes a series of letters, brochures, presentations, ads, and mailers – combined with the efforts of salespeople – to turn a cold lead into a paying customer.

5. *Multiple buying influences*. You don't usually consult with a team of experts when you want to buy a fast-food hamburger, a soda, bottle of shampoo, or a pair of shoes, do you? In most consumer selling situations, the purchase decision is made by an individual. But a business purchase is usually a *team* effort, with many players involved.

For this reason, a business purchase is rarely an "impulse" buy. Many people influence the decision – from the purchasing agent and company president, to technical professionals and end-users. Each of these audiences has different concerns and criteria by which they judge you. To be successful, your copy must address the needs of all parties involved with the decision. In many cases, this requires separate mailings to many different people within an organization.

6. *Business products are more complex*. Most business products – and their applications – are more complex than consumer products. (For example, clients I now serve include a commercial bank, a manufacturer of elevator control systems, a data processing training firm, a database marketing company, a mailing list broker, a general contractor, and a semiconductor manufacturer.)

Business-to-business copy cannot be superficial. Clarity is essential. You cannot sell by "fooling" the prospect or hiding the identity of your product. Half the battle is explaining, quickly and simply, what your product is, what it does, and why the reader should be interested in it. "In high-tech direct mail, the key is to educate the prospect," say Mark Toner, who manages the advertising program for Amano, a manufacturer of computerized time-clock systems. "With a product like ours, most customers don't even know of its existence."

In short, in business-to-business marketing, the rules *are* different. In the months to come, we'll explore ways to increase response and profits in this exciting and challenging marketplace.

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