
Rene' Gnam

How to Get Positive Benefits by Incorporating Negatives and Quiet Understatements in Your Advertising Copy

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ABSTRACT

ISSM Charter Senior Fellow Rene' Gnam shows how understatement can sell your product or service. He says that just being honest and stressing realism can appeal to a prospective buyer. Here's how you can test your ad copy to see if it's helping your cause or just over-promising and scaring people away.

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Introduction

Every writer is rightfully concerned with telling future buyers all the positive benefits of his products. Benefits sell -- but wait a minute!

A business-to-business marketer wants solid, qualified leads from his publication advertising and direct mailings. A consumer marketer wants the same quality leads or direct sales.

Both promoters can benefit -- highly -- by weaving some negative aspects into their advertising copy. Here's why...

What Happens When You Do NOT Use Negatives

You may have a high rate of returns, or a product that just doesn't move. And that may be because you haven't put negatives in your promotion copy.

Readers aren't dumb. They can surmise or perceive, for example, the woes of assembling a rolling table from 26 tiny parts in your KD kit. Those perceived frustrations may lose sales or increase returns.

One way to overcome that perception is to marry the negative to at least one positive.

EXAMPLE:

"Using just one screwdriver, you can put all 26 parts together in about 38 minutes, and then you'll have the great joy of rolling your serving table anywhere you want, at any time. And because you assemble the table yourself, you save money compared to retail store prices."

In those two sentences, we have:

- 1--Overcome a negative feeling by incorporating the ultimate benefit,
- 2--Given the prospect joy for his labor,
- 3--Told him it's easy to put the table together, and

4--Complimented him on his savvy in saving money.

So the negative has now been turned into a positive. That increases sales and reduces returns.

But...

Notice Something Remarkable

I'm not afraid to mention negatives. Mentioning them is telling the truth. If your reader feels you're honest, you have a better shot at his money.

Let's stick with products for a few paragraphs, and then I'll discuss the same technique for sales leads.

You sell an electronic or electrical device. It plugs in the wall. Your reader may prefer batteries. You are aware of that negative. Turn it into a positive.

EXAMPLE:

"Because this travel iron operates on standard electric current, you'll never run the risk of having batteries die when pressing your evening dress five minutes before you put it on."

Now, switch the situation. The iron works only with batteries. Your reader may prefer a cord. You are aware of that negative. Turn it into a positive.

EXAMPLE:

"Because this travel iron operates on standard AA batteries, you can take it everywhere -- even to Europe -- and be certain it will work when pressing your evening dress five minutes before you put it on."

If the iron works on the buyer's choice of electric current or batteries, a negative reference still may help.

EXAMPLE:

"This iron is one-quarter of a pound heavier than most travel irons. But that extra quarter-pound gives you the convenience of using batteries or standard electric current."

Notice that in all examples, I've been highly specific. Specificity reinforces a feeling of honesty. And, specificity is essential when using guarantees, reports Irv Magram, president of Lew Magram, Inc., formerly known as "shirtmaker to the stars." The Magrams found that a specific guarantee pulled 25% better than a bland, nonspecific guarantee.

Are we learning something here? Yes, we are. We're discovering that people will honor you with their money if you honor them with honesty.

How to Use Negatives In Soliciting Sales Leads

Every business-to-business marketer is tired of sales leads that don't pan out. They don't convert because they weren't highly qualified by the copy in the ad that brought their names. Negative references can help because they "screen out" leads you don't want. There are several ways to use negatives in sales lead ads, and here are five you can adapt:

1--State that the product or service is only valuable for a particular group of people, design engineers for instance. Then comptrollers won't respond.

2--State that the product or service is only valuable for a particular subgroup, perhaps, design engineers who work with potentiometers. Then designers of tensiometers won't respond.

Of course, with both of those two techniques, you will be sure to change the specificity when you change titles.

3--Tell me I need something else to make your product work. For instance, I must have 220 current. That eliminates all the 110 people.

4--Talk to me in measurement terms that aren't easy for me to grasp. This is a difficult concept, and one which goes against the standard guideline of always writing copy that's understandable at first reading. But it does wonders in producing only the hottest sales leads.

For example, you sell steel storage buildings to farmers. They measure in terms of feet, yards, acres, miles, bushels and barrels, but not in terms of square feet. So tell them your minimum size is 16,000 square feet and you'll frighten away those who are insufficiently interested to find out what 16,000 square feet means.

Sounds terrible as an ad technique, doesn't it.

Wrong. It increased conversions from space ad leads from 10% to over 25%, and the direct mail conversion rate went from 20% to 35%, when I used this for Wonder Steel Manufacturing, a Canadian manufacturer of those steel storage buildings.

5--Limit your phone hours. If your ad states that you take calls only between certain hours, those who are only mildly curious will not bother to call you. But those who are hot for what you've got will call at the right time.

Negatives Can Create Strong Desire

Remember when you were tiny. Mother said you couldn't have a cookie, so you wanted one twice as much. And you invented lots of reasons why you should have a cookie, immediately. In fact, suddenly you didn't want just one cookie. You wanted a handful. The same is true with consumer adults and businessfolk.

Tell your audience there's a reason why your product or service should not be bought, and they'll concoct all sorts of reasons why they should have it. You're worried about the negative aspects of your product, but if you state them, your prospects will overcome the negatives for you.

I'm not kidding. Read the old automobile ads. Many of them cautioned the reader that the engine was so powerful that you had to use extreme care or you might find yourself going 20 or 30 miles an hour and possibly lose control.

In those days (before Rene Gnam), the reader's mind argued that he could surmount that negative. Now, think about adapting that negative technique and you'll win additional sales.

Three More Proven Negatives You Can Use Frequently

Marketers to business and consumer audiences also can use the ages-old technique of tying a negative to a price saving.

EXAMPLE:

"You can buy a newer version for more money, but you save \$23.45 with this older, stable and very reliable model. It may not look as modern to some folks, but it does the same job and lets you save money."

Sometimes you can tap an entirely new market by selling old products at steep price reductions.

EXAMPLE:

Two years after a \$299.95 software graphics program was first released, you can buy it for just \$69.95 from Surplus Software which buys old versions in bulk and steeply discounts them. Folks who never thought they could afford high-end design software or word processing programs suddenly find them within reach. Okay, they're getting version 2.1 instead of 4.3, but it works and now it's affordable.

And, all marketers can use the not-so-subtle technique of telling the reader that he may not want the product. Do this after reams of copy telling him why the product is the greatest.

EXAMPLE:

"There are many other books on direct marketing, so you should think carefully before purchasing this one, because you don't want another book you won't read."

Instantly, the reader argues with you. Ah hah, you've sold him.

Are you a doubting Thomas? Well, remember that Joe Sugarman, of JS&A Sales, has made millions by telling readers what his products will not do.

Makes you think, doesn't it?

Why Understatement Can Produce Higher Response for You

Your readers want to believe your promotion copy. That may not sound true at first reading, but it is.

Think this way: I read your headline and look at your photo. I'm interested in your product or service, so I start reading your body copy. My mood is favorable toward what you sell. Now it's up to you to convince me.

This is where beginning copywriters often goof, by trying everything they can muster to impress the reader. Wrong. This is where your reader wants to find out if he can believe your claims. He wants to continue reading in the same open mind with which he explored your headline and your photo. Sometimes, your eagerness to impress turns off readers, turns their mental openness to disbelief, by going too far with product or service claims, even if they are true.

Tone It Down and Get The Sale

If your copy tells me everything about your data system is wonderful, I begin to disbelieve. So you must muster the technique of using understatement, to permit the reader to imagine even more wonderfulness. How? Here are some examples with copy first, then possible reader reactions, then a rewrite...

"Suzie's Data System is the best." No, it isn't. Best is a subjective word. Best for me?

For my applications? Who says it's best? Why is it best?

REWRITES:

"Suzie's Data System is one of the best."

"Suzie's Data System...is a good way to..."

"Suzie's Data System...lets you..."

"Suzie's Data System...is perhaps the best method of..."

"ComputerWorld says Suzie's Data System is best."

"You'll make \$100,000.00 in cash." No, I won't. I never have. That's beyond me.

REWRITES:

"You'll make up to \$100,000.00 in cash."

"You'll make the kind of money movie stars make."

"You'll make the extra money you'll need for..."

"Just like Bill Jones, a plumber, you'll make extra money -- perhaps \$100,000.00 in cash. He did."

Is Your Opportunity Within My Reach?

When I was a much younger writer, my chest swelled when I was able to pile up promises to the reader. I felt that the greater the promise, the greater the response. I was in for a rude shock.

Often, the milder promise pulled better. Which leads us to understatement. But, first...

I needed to realize that some people don't have Olympic dreams, soaring aspirations, trends to set, mountains to climb, or records to attain. They can be happy snoozing in the sun or knitting instead of spending every minute advancing their careers.

And some don't feel that they can challenge, or lead, or reach the top.

Dr. Peter G. Fernandez taught me that. He's the genius chiropractor who has nurtured and trained, taught and pushed hundreds of young doctors to become giant successes in the highly-competitive chiropractic field. Pete taught me that many doctors didn't believe him when his ads and mailings trumpeted "You can have a million dollar practice."

One million dollars in billings in a single year was beyond the imagination of the young D.C. So Pete changed his headlines to say "You can build a practice that bills \$25,000, \$50,000, or even \$100,000 a month." Suddenly, his response shot up as doctors could relate to lower numbers. But how many \$100,000 months do you need for a million dollar practice? Oh, you mean I could earn less than that in July and August, and still get to a million? Yes, Dr. Pete's new headlines meant that it was okay if every month wasn't a bell ringer. He allowed you to be human. Being human, you responded to the headline you felt was more honest.

Understatement Forces You To Relate to Your Reader

Often our enthusiasm for a product or service, or our level of education, leads us to employ the strongest words, the most powerful claims.

Your reader doesn't have that enthusiasm yet, and may lack your education, and may not believe those strong words or powerful claims.

So you must relate to his interests, his education, his search for unbelievability in your response ads.

Achieve Those Goals By NOT Being Astounding

No Cal doesn't sell as well as Diet Pepsi and Coke. Is it because No Cal says it has no calories, while the others claim one, or less than one? Yes, said Lori Benishek, marketing director for Coca-Cola, USA, at one of my seminars. Why? Because none is astounding, less believable than one. You may have the perfect data system, soft drink, or trinket...but you can't say it's all that perfect because few readers will believe it.

What a challenge you face! You must tell me it's super. But not TOO super.

Let's go back to our examples...

"Suzie's Data System, the most cost-effective data retrieval system, has never failed to operate." I can't believe that. Who says it's the most cost-effective? Suzie? Never fails? Impossible!

REWRITE:

"Suzie's Data System is used by 29,560 computer service bureaus. Only one experienced failure, so Suzie immediately replaced the entire system. Four found minor access flaws, but instantly corrected them with Suzie's backup disk -- given Free to every purchaser. That's why Computer Economics Report says SDS is the most cost-effective retrieval system you can use."

Ask yourself which copy version YOU believe.

Understatement Leads To Powerful Copy

When you understate, be sure to include highly specific references, as in the above Suzie example. This makes your copy far more persuasive because:

- 1--You cite numbers, and numbers are believable.
- 2--You cite alternatives, also believable.
- 3--You use longer copy, still tight, which tends to persuade far more effectively than short copy.
- 4--You reduce your astounding claims to believable levels.
- 5--You then support those claims.
- 6--You allow the reader to draw his own conclusions about the perfection of your product, the suitability of your service.
- 7--You back up the reader's conclusions with evidence that sells.

How YOU Can Start Using Understatement

Examine your advertising copy. Use a fat marker to circle the following:

- * superlatives
- * bombastic claims
- * unexplained points
- * meaningless -est and -er words

Rewrite them with the above guidelines. Now, how does your copy read?

-est and -er words? Here are a few:

- * bEST, fastEST, firmEST, hardEST, longEST, strongEST,
- * bettER, fastER, firmER, hardER, longER, strongER.

If you don't believe them, your reader won't.

Remember this Paragraph

Readers know your ad is meant to sell. They perceive your eagerness to present your product or service favorably, and that's perfectly okay. But when they read your ad, they search for claims they feel are untrue. You might want to engrave this concept and refer to it whenever you write -est and -er copy.

Readers tend to disbelieve -est and -er words unless you explain them fully. Replace most of them with specifics and you've won your war.

The Most Important Reason Why You Should Use Understatement

Your reader wants to dream, to imagine himself in a power position, to let himself find more rationalizations as to why your product or service is the one for him.

Understatement lets him do all those things. As an example, pick the winning headline...

"How to Manage People and Projects"

vs...

"How to Achieve Your Goals"

The first headline won, by 3-1 in response, in a split-test mailing by Career Track in Boulder, CO. It won because the second was an astounding claim, unbelievable, non-specific, and didn't let the reader dream of power.

Remember that Maidenform didn't say it made the best bra or a perfect bra.

Maidenform said, "I dreamed I went dancing in my Maidenform bra."

Specificity. Perception. Motivation. Astounding? No, daring...permitting the reader to dream and to decide about perfection.

Strive for what Maidenform performs:

Uplifting understatement.

Please direct your E-Mail comments to:
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For fastest response, send him a fax at 813-934-0416, or leave a telephone message at 813-938-1555.

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