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INTRODUCTION

What makes a great direct mail letter? The most obvious answer is one that produces maximum response. But lots of less-than-great letters produce excellent response thanks to superior lists, a great product, an outstanding offer, or other factors over which the writer has little or no control.

Some letters win contests; however, inferior letters have won contests just because the competition was weak. Other letters win the praise of the copywriter's peers — often just because they are clever.

To be truly great, however, a sales letter must have more than one dimension. Of course, it must achieve its objectives. Most often it will have won some contest and likely will have won special applause from peers. It must also stand the test of time and be the kind of letter others will turn to time and again to get inspiration and think, "Gee, I wish I had written that."

This is a book of such letters. Leading direct marketers from all over America provided samples of what they considered to be the all-time top direct mail letters and passed along the names of today's best direct response copywriters. Interestingly, I received a relatively small handful of names that were repeated time and again as today's top direct mail copywriters. Almost all are leading free-lance writers who have created the "control." Most of these "top names" responded to my request for letter samples; you'll find many of their letters throughout this book. And when they were asked to name those whom they considered today's best direct mail sales letter writers, the same names were repeated once again.

All the copywriters were invited to submit samples of their favorite letters — not just those they had written, but also letters written by others they considered truly great. To these were added some selected letters from my personal files. I've been saving samples of direct mail — the good and the bad — since I became involved in the field over 50 years ago and have one of the largest private collections of representative direct mail in the world. Interestingly, however, nearly every letter I culled from my files turned up on the lists of letters recommended by others.

When the collection of letters was assembled, there were more than 2,000 examples from which to select "The Greatest Direct Mail Sales Letters of All Time." That created the most difficult task in creating this book. All were excellent letters and each contained some element that could prove useful at that all too present moment when a letter has to be written and the right words remain elusive. But all 2,000 letters, of course, couldn't be included. So I read and reread each of the letters to select the very best. In the end, the selection was strictly personal. The real test was when I caught myself thinking, "Gee, I wish I had written that."

At this point, a unique problem presented itself. A high percentage of the truly great direct mail letters turned out to be from just two fields. The first was publishing. This could have been anticipated since a lot of the leading writers naturally gravitate to the publishing field because publishers tend to pay top dollar for a winning letter.

The second field was fund-raising. Although the dollars to be earned for copywriting don't come close to those offered by publishers (and quite often the letter copy is a personal contribution of the copywriter to a cause in which he or she is deeply involved), the satisfaction comes in other ways.

But to create a volume of nothing but publishers' and fund-raisers' letters would only have duplicated many excellent books already available devoted entirely to these two fields. So once the extra special "great" letters had been selected, I tried to find representative samples of other types of direct mail letters in the interest of providing everyone involved in direct mail with a comprehensive reference file to which they could turn for ideas and inspiration when they faced their specific letter writing situations. In many cases, I'm sure, there are dozens of equally good or, perhaps, even better examples that might have been included. But if I had continued to search for the "perfect" letter to fit every situation, this book would still be in the preliminary stages.

I'm convinced, in fact, the "perfect" sales letter has yet to be written — at least in modern times. If you want a wonderful collection of the greatest sales letters of all time, I recommend the collected works of Paul the Apostle and his coworkers, which you will find in the New Testament. Now, those were the all-time great letter writers!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dick Hodgson got an early start in the direct marketing field when he began operating his own lettershop, The Gateway Advertising Agency, at age 14. Since that time he has worked as a printer, linotype operator, salesman, photographer, radio announcer and producer, reporter, editor, college instructor, public relations director, president of a publishing company, advertising agency account executive, advertising and sales promotion director, creative director, corporation executive, and consultant.

Today Hodgson is president of Sargeant House, a Westtown, Pennsylvania, company that provides direct marketing consulting and catalog development services to companies throughout the world. He is a member of the board of directors of Foster & Gallagher, Inc., a leading U. S. direct marketing firm, and was a charter member of the board of directors of QVC Network, Inc.

Before establishing his consulting business in 1975, Hodgson was vice president of The Franklin Mint, which he joined as creative director in 1972. Before joining The Franklin Mint, he was division director of the Creative Graphics Division, R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company. He originally joined Donnelley in 1962 as advertising and sales promotion manager. Previously he was president of American Marketing Services, a Boston publishing company. Prior to moving to Boston, he was executive editor of *Advertising Requirements* and *Industrial Marketing* magazines.

A 25-year veteran of both active and reserve service in the U.S. Marine Corps, Hodgson retired as a lieutenant colonel. He served as a Marine Corps combat correspondent in North China, and provided on-the-spot radio and press coverage of four atomic bomb tests, including the famed Operation Crossroads tests at Bikini in 1946. He later served as radio-TV chief for the Marine Corps; shows that he produced for network presentation were honored with the Peabody Award.

Between periods of Marine Corps active duty, Hodgson taught journalism and advertising at North Dakota State School of Science and magazine editing and magazine design at the University of Chicago. Today he is a frequent visiting lecturer at colleges and universities throughout the United States, and more than 100 schools and many catalog companies utilize the "Basics of Direct Marketing" multimedia teaching program and other videotapes he produced and donated to the Direct Marketing Educational Foundation.

Hodgson is a prolific author on direct marketing subjects. His "Direct Mail & Mail Order Handbook," published by Dartnell, is the most widely circulated book in the field, and he has written more than a dozen other books, including "Complete Guide to Catalog Marketing," "Successful Catalog Marketing," "The Greatest Direct Mail Sales Letters of All Time," "Direct Mail in the Political Process," "Direct Mail Showmanship," "How to Work With Mailing Lists," "How to Promote Meeting Attendance," and "Encyclopedia of Direct Mail." He has also written hundreds of magazine articles on direct marketing.

Hodgson has received numerous honors, including the prestigious Ed Mayer Award in recognition of his outstanding contribution to direct marketing education; the Jesse H. Neale Editorial Achievement Award; the Dartnell Gold Medal for excellence in business letter writing; Direct Marketer of the Year, presented by the Philadelphia Direct Marketing Association; Sales Promotion Man of the Year, and International Marketing Communicator of the Year. His direct mail campaigns and catalogs have won numerous awards, including the Direct Marketing Association's Gold Mailbox.

Long active in organizations serving advertising and marketing fields, Hodgson helped found the Chicago Association of Direct Marketing and served as one of its early presidents. He also served as international president of the Sales Promotion Executives Association and served four terms on the board of directors of the Direct Marketing Association and two terms on the board of directors of the Direct Marketing Educational Foundation. An active Rotarian, he is a past president of the Rotary Club of Westtown-Goshen.

A native of Breckenridge, Minnesota, Hodgson is a graduate of the North Dakota State School of Science and has attended Gustavus Adolphus College, Western Michigan College, and Northwestern University. He and his wife, Lois, live in Chester County, Pennsylvania, and he commutes daily to his office "across the driveway."

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

If you're like me, you'll find many of the letters in this book great reading. But that's not the primary purpose of the book. Although I'd never recommend simply adapting any of the letters in the book to serve your sales letter needs, I'm reminded of a comment that I usually attribute to Oliver Wendell Holmes:

- To take someone else's idea and claim it for your own is stealing. But to take ideas from two or more sources and combine them — that's creativity.

Whatever direct mail assignment you face, you'll find examples of how today's leading writers tackled the task of writing letters for a similar assignment. Although you won't duplicate their exact words, a study of their approach should provide a strong starting point and help stir up your own creative juices.

This book, then, is best used as an idea source that shows how leading writers handled difficult writing assignments. Undoubtedly you'll find words and phrases that you can integrate into your own writing. Beware of trying to fit others' words and phrases into your sentences unless they truly fit. Good copy has a cohesive flow that can be interrupted by ill-fitting words and phrases no matter how great they may have been in their original environment.

TABLE 1
100 MOTIVATIONS FOR PEOPLE TO BUY

To satisfy curiosity	To find new and uncommon things
To get a surprise	To win others' affection
To be successful	To be more beautiful
To be more comfortable	To attract the opposite sex
To make work easier	To satisfy sexual desires
To gain prestige	To bring back "The Good Old Days"
To be sociable	To be lucky
To be creative	To live longer
To be efficient	To feel important
To safeguard self and family	To gain knowledge
To protect family's future	To improve appearance
To be good parents	To gain praise from others
To be well liked and loved	To be recognized as an authority
To appear different from others	To enhance leisure
To gain popularity	To save money
To add to life's pleasures	To have security in old age
To express a personality	To overcome obstacles
To be in fashion	To do things well
To avoid embarrassment	To get a better job
To fulfill fantasies	To be your own boss
To be up-to-date	To gain social acceptance
To own attractive things	To "keep up with the Joneses"
To collect valuable possessions	To appreciate beauty
To protect or conserve possessions	To be proud of possessions
To satisfy ego	To resist domination by others
To be "first"	To emulate the admirable
To accumulate money	To relieve boredom
To preserve money already accumulated	To gain self-respect
To save time	To win acclaim
To protect reputation	To gain admiration
To satisfy appetite	To win advancement
To enjoy exotic tastes	To seek adventure
To live in a clean atmosphere	To satisfy ambition
To be strong and healthy	To be among the leaders
To renew vigor and energy	To gain confidence
To get rid of aches and pains	To escape drudgery

To gain freedom from worry	To avoid trouble
To get on the bandwagon	To emulate others
To get something for nothing	To "one-up" others
To gain self-assurance	To be in style
To escape shame	To increase enjoyment
To avoid effort	To have or hold beautiful possessions
To get more comfort	To replace the obsolete
To gain praise	To add fun or spice to life
To be popular	To work less
To have safety in buying something else	To look better
To take advantage of opportunities	To conserve natural resources
To protect reputation	To protect the environment
To be an individual	To avoid shortages
To avoid criticism	To relax

CREATING A PERSON-TO-PERSON DIRECT MAIL LETTER

One of the most difficult jobs I've had over the years is trying to teach writers from other fields how to write strong direct mail copy. A good direct mail letter — even though sent to an audience — must carry the feeling it is from one person to another person, not a message for an entire audience. Although the proper format helps, other things are also important: primarily the subtle feeling that the letter is from a specific person to a specific recipient.

To create strong personal copy, audience-oriented copywriters should prepare a list of eight to 10 people they know personally — people who are typical of the audience to whom the letter will be sent. Then, they should start out writing to just one of these people ... "Dear Joe." When the letter is complete, the names of the other people on the list should be substituted with "Dear Mary" ... "Dear Susan" ... "Dear Steve" ... and so on to see if the letter still "fits." If it doesn't, the letter should be started over, and written to one of the other names on their list. It's amazing how quickly a letter becomes "personal" to individual members of an audience, even though it was originally written to just one person. It's important, however, to write to one person at a time and not cover the entire list all at once. That's writing to an audience, and the letter quickly loses the personal touch.

Generally, a letter can't be successfully edited to build in a personal touch. A letter that doesn't "fit" multiple recipients should be started from scratch each time. Of course, many of the words are likely to be repeated again. But there's a certain flow to a good personal letter; this is often eliminated when too much editing is done. If your job is to edit letters written by others, you can apply this same technique. Create your own list of names and then insert them one at a time to decide if it's good person-to-person communication, or just a message for an audience.

municating with your audience. Those first paragraphs are often a device to get the *writer* started, not the *reader*. And more often than not, their elimination leads to more powerful selling copy.

THE COMMITTEE

Someone once observed that a camel was a horse that had been created by a committee. All too often, copy that has been subjected to the blue pencils of a committee is about as graceful as a camel when the job called for a sleek racehorse. After a committee has done its damage, it's time to send the copy back to the copywriter for a rewrite. That doesn't mean the writer can ignore the committee's no-no's and must-must's. But the writer can start from the beginning again, interweaving the changes into a smooth-flowing letter.

COIK

Someone in government came up with the acronym COIK — a way to describe copy that is difficult to understand:

Clear Only If Known This is an

acronym that should be pasted on every copywriter's wall.

Too often we write copy that is only fully understood if our audience knows as much about our subject as we do — and this is seldom the case. The old saying, "you should write for the 12-year-old mentality" is dangerous today. Twelve-year-olds know more than ever before. Instead, it's better to write for the college freshman — eventually the chairman of the board will be able to figure it out! Seriously, it is important to keep the knowledge level of your audience clearly in mind as you write. A good rule to follow is:

*Don't overestimate the knowledge of your audience ...
..but don't underestimate their intelligence.*

In other words, don't write "down" to your readers; make a special effort to remember just how much knowledge they are likely to have about your subject.

THE FIVE "MUSTS" OF DIRECT MAIL WRITING

Throughout this book, you'll find a wide variety of checklists for writing better direct mail letters. Before you consider any other factors, however, it is crucial to keep in mind the five "musts" of good direct mail writing:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| ? <i>Is it clear?</i> | ■ <i>Is it believable?</i> |
| ? <i>Is it interesting?</i> | ■ <i>Is it friendly?</i> |
| ? <i>Is it concise?*</i> | |

** When it comes to writing direct mail letters, concise doesn't necessarily mean short. A letter should be as long as it takes to answer all the questions readers may have. But it's important to stop when you've answered those questions.*

1. **Does the lead sentence get in step with the reader at once?** Do this by talking in terms of things that interest your reader — not in vague generalities or of things *you* want. Put yourself in *his* place! I can't think of a better way to say it than this: Get in step with your reader.
2. **Is your lead sentence more than two lines long?** But if it takes three lines or four lines or even more to get in step with your reader, use them.
3. **Do your opening paragraphs promise a benefit to the reader?** Lead with your best foot forward — your most important benefit. If you have trouble with your opening paragraph, try writing your lead at least six different ways. Then when you get six down on paper, you are quite likely to have at least one pretty good lead somewhere among them.
4. **Have you fired your biggest gun first?** Sometimes it's easy to get confused in trying to pick out the most important sales point to feature in your lead. But here is one way to tell: Years ago Richard Manville developed a technique that has been of great help. When you are pondering over leads, ask yourself if the reader wants more *x* or *y*?
5. **Is there a big idea behind your letter?** You may wonder what the difference is between firing your biggest gun and this big idea. In one case, for example, the big gun may be the introductory offer on an insurance policy, but the big idea behind the letter is a company that makes insurance available to the senior citizens. The big idea is important. My guess is that the lack of a big idea is why letters fail.
6. **Are your thoughts arranged in a logical order?** In other words, have you got the cart before the horse? It is a fundamental copywriting truth that your reader anticipates what you are going to say. So it may help to think of your reader as a passenger in a motorcycle sidecar — and you are the driver. You can take him or her straight to the destination, surely and swiftly and smoothly. Or you can dawdle along the way, over side roads, bumps, and curves, sometimes making such short turns that he or she may shoot off down the road without you. Unless you follow a charted course and make the ride as pleasant as possible, too often your "passenger" will say, "I'm tired. Let me off." This is another good reason for having a checklist to follow.
7. **Is what you say believable?** Here is a chance to offer proof and testimony to back up what you have said in your letter. (Notice I didn't say "true" instead of "believable." What you say may be true, but not necessarily believable.)
8. **Is it clear how the reader is to order, and did you ask for the order?** You would be surprised how easy it is to write a letter without asking for the order.
9. **Does the copy tie in with the order form, and have you directed attention to the order form in the letter?**
10. **Does the letter have the "you" attitude all the way through?**
11. **Does the letter have a conversational tone?**
12. **Have you formed a "bucket brigade" through your copy?** If you study the works of master letter writers, you will notice that all these letters have swing and movement — a joining together of paragraphs through the use of connecting links. Some of these connecting

links are little sentences like, "But that is not all"... "So that is why"... "Now, here is the next step" . . . "But there is one thing more." You can find dozens of ways to join your thoughts like this — in short, to take your reader by the hand and lead him through your copy — and avoid what I call "island paragraphs" that stand alone and are usually as dull as they look to the reader.

13. **Does the letter score between 70 and 80 one-syllable words for every 100 words you write?**
14. **Are there any sentences that begin with an article (a, an, the) where you might have avoided it?**
15. **Are there any places where you have strung together too many prepositional phrases?**
16. **Have you kept out "wandering" verbs?** You can often make sentences easier to read by rearranging them so that verbs are closer to their subjects.
17. **Have you used action verbs instead of noun construction?** You gain interest when you do this. Instead of saying, "This letter is of vital concern to . . ." say, "This letter vitally concerns . . ."
18. **Are there any "thats" you don't need?** Using too many "thats" is another strength-robber. Eliminate as many as you can, but be careful. Read your copy aloud to make sure you haven't trimmed out so many that your copy will slow down the reader
19. **How does the copy rate on such letter-craftsmanship points as (a) using active voice instead of passive, (b) periodic sentences instead of loose, (c) too many participles, (d) splitting infinitives, and (e) repeating your company name too many times?** Moderation in copy is a great virtue.
20. **Does your letter look the way you want it to?**

Finally, from the wisdom of Guy L. Yolton, an outstanding copywriter, come seven guidelines for editing direct mail copy:

1. **Edit for warm-up.** This is first because it occurs at the beginning of a letter. It's the general type of statement that is perfectly obvious to your reader. It's usually just the copy writer's warm-up to her subject, explaining to herself what this is all about. Statements like, "As an American businesswoman, you know that managing people is a difficult job ..." The reader already knows that. If there's a personal message for her, or some interesting ideas coming later, she won't wait around for them. She wants to know: "Why am I getting this letter on this subject?" Or, "What have you got to say to me that's new?"
2. **Edit for stoppers.** These often show up when you read your draft copy back to yourself, or when you read it to someone else. Stoppers are words and phrases that are awkward, contrived, and out of the ordinary. They hold up your reader and interrupt the rhythm of a piece that otherwise flows smoothly from one idea to another. Stoppers sometimes get into the copy because the writer didn't.
3. **Edit for author's pride.** The well-turned phrase is fine if it adds a unique and powerful twist to a sales point and keeps the copy moving. But if you've come up with a catchy

SECTION II

CLASSIC DIRECT MAIL LETTERS

From the thousands of excellent letters collected for this book, there are a few that stand out as truly exceptional. Most were mailed to large audiences, and are often the toughest of all letters to write since large audiences are usually diverse. Creating a "personal" letter to the majority of recipients is difficult, but the letters included in this section accomplished this difficult task. Some letters are directed to highly-defined audiences. The writing may be easier than large-audience letters, but the ones included here are real gems.

All the letters in this section are equally great, and (although they don't appear here) there are hundreds of other excellent letters that didn't get noticed by enough direct marketers to win the applause they deserved. For example, the most successful direct mail letter of this century wasn't written by a professional copywriter. It was written by London's city engineer, and accompanied 2,000 brochures that were distributed to try to sell — of all things — the London Bridge! Christian Brann, one of England's premiere direct marketers, wrote about it:*

■ Harold King, the City Engineer and no great salesman, was given the unenviable task of conducting this unique selling operation.

He went to a little graphic design studio around the corner and told them to produce a brochure. It consisted of 24 pages of pictures and descriptions about the history of London and its bridges, all ending with the specification of [The London Bridge] and, like all good direct mail packages, it contained the conditions of the sale.

The Corporation of London would be responsible for the costs of numbering and taking down all granite and other materials available for sale and for transporting these to a store site. The purchaser, on the other hand, would be responsible for crating, loading and transporting the materials to his new site.

The Corporation would supply plans and photographs, in duplicate, illustrating the numbered stones and their position free of cost and a deposit of 10 percent would be payable on completion of a contract of sale. No price was mentioned in this direct mail package. Instead, the bridge was offered for sale by tender and here is what amounts to be the order form:

We, the undersigned, hereby offer to purchase and remove materials resulting from the demolition of London Bridge, etc.

In short order, London's historic bridge was sold to the McCulloch Corporation for \$2,460,000. It was moved to the middle of the Arizona desert and became the distinctive landmark of Lake Havasu City. The mailing only pulled a response of 0.05 percent, but as all good direct marketers learn, it's the bottom line that is important. The mailing cost \$1,230, and produced \$2,460,000 in sales — or \$2,000 per dollar of promotion. Quite a bottom line!

*Cost-Effective Direct Marketing, *Christian Brann, Collectors' Books Ltd., Cirencester, Glos. (England), 1984.*

In this section, more than 100 great direct mail letters are presented in their entirety because (1) they represent successful approaches to different kinds of selling situations and (2) they contain ideas that may help writers handle difficult copy problems. Wherever possible, credit has been given to the writer of each letter. In some cases, the letters represent the work of a staff of creative people rather than a single writer.

NEWSWEEK "IF THE LIST UPON WHICH I FOUND YOUR NAME" LETTER

Probably nothing in the annals of direct mail has been more widely copied than the lead paragraph of a letter used by *Newsweek* magazine for nearly 15 years:

If the list upon which I found your name is any indication, this is not the first — nor will it be the last — subscription letter you receive. Quite frankly, your education and income set you apart from the general population and make you a highly-rated prospect for everything from magazines to mutual funds.

This was the first letter Ed McLean wrote for S. Arthur "Red" Dembner at *Newsweek* magazine in 1960. Ed describes the experience:

■ Red's senior copywriters thought the copy approach was infantile and amateurish. Red insisted upon testing the new approach — which he dubbed the "sincere" letter — and a five-way copy test that fall proved him right.

I brought the opening paragraph and the five remaining paragraphs of page one to the copy test meeting — along with 17 other ideas and openings. The reaction from the other copywriters in the room — all the old-timers — was negative. But Red liked the approach and told me to develop it further

That turned out to be anything but easy. The personal approach of the opening might get me to look at the letter, I was sure. But what would get me to send away the order form?

When I had sold pots and pans door-to-door in Brooklyn, I learned quickly that I sold more when I did not stray from two key subjects:

1. The prospect's needs and wants
2. The product's benefits

I decided to focus most of the letter on the reader's self-interest and tell how he or she would benefit from a trial subscription to *Newsweek*.

This is called the "you" orientation of a letter. And this letter has it in spades. The words "you" and "your" appear 55 times in the copy — perhaps an all-time record. But they aren't just tossed in for effect: They fit logically into the flow of the copy. Through test after test, this "sincere" letter remained *Newsweek's* control for nearly 15 years: Nothing else could beat it. And even today,

the idea expressed in the opening paragraph — and often the exact words themselves — is copied over and over in one way or another, making it the starting point for more direct mail letters than any approach ever developed. Ed McLean's comments are interesting:

- I stopped collecting adaptations and outright swipes of the sincere letter opening years ago. It is interesting that few, if any, of these "take-offs" were successful. I am convinced, now, that the mailers who used the sincere opening should not have stopped there. They should have also swiped the "you'll get" litany of any goodies on pages two and three.

Newsweek

NEWSWEEK • 117 EAST THIRD STREET • DAYTON 2, OHIO

Dear Reader:

If the list upon which I found your name is any indication, this is not the first -- nor will it be the last -- subscription letter you receive. Quite frankly, your education and income set you apart from the general population and make you a highly-rated prospect for everything from magazines to mutual funds.

You've undoubtedly 'heard everything' by now in the way of promises and premiums. I won't try to top any of them.

Nor will I insult your intelligence.

If you subscribe to Newsweek, you won't get rich quick. You won't bowl over friends and business associates with clever remarks and sage comments after your first copy of Newsweek arrives. (Your conversation will benefit from a better understanding of the events and forces of our era, but that's all. Wit and wisdom are gifts no magazine can bestow.) And should you attain further professional or business success during the term of your subscription, you'll have your own native ability and good luck to thank for it -- not Newsweek.

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The answer depends upon what type of person you happen to be. If you are not curious about what's going on outside your own immediate daily range of concern...if you are quickly bored when the topic of conversation shifts from your house, your car, your ambitions...if you couldn't care less about what's happening in Washington or Wall Street, in London or Moscow...then forget Newsweek. It can't do a thing for you.

If, on the other hand, you are the kind of individual who

would like to keep up with national and international affairs, space and nuclear science, the arts -- but cannot spend hours at it...if you're genuinely interested in what's going on with other members of the human race...if you recognize the big stake you have in decisions made in Washington and Wall Street, in London and Moscow...

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S. Arthur Dembner
Circulation Director

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