

**Persuading on Paper: The Complete Guide to Writing
Copy That Pulls in Business**

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Chapter 21 Collecting Compelling Testimonials

When you brag about yourself, many people look at you askance. But when you include attributed third-party quotes in your marketing materials, your trust quotient soars. “Every client I’ve ever had is afraid to ask for endorsements,” says George Berman. “But when they finally go about it, the client usually gives higher praise than the person expected.” Consider the impact of this testimonial, received from an attorney by a title agent Berman worked with, after the agent got up the gumption to ask: “Without _____, I would be out of business.”

Having a file of great quotes gives you strong ammunition for brochures, flyers, catalogs, ads, press releases and direct mail. In order to use testimonials to best advantage, however, you need to know not only how to gather them but also how to tell a forceful endorsement from one that fizzles. Let’s start there, with a quiz that lets you rate the quotes offered by two prominent businesses.

Evaluate These Endorsements

Imagine that you’re mulling over attending a business seminar. You don’t want to be bored and you want to learn something that will make you more effective in your work. Which of these quotes, appearing on the brochures of Fred Pryor Seminars and National Seminars Group, would propel you to register? Rate these six, all originally followed by at least a name and job title, either “weak,” “stronger” or “incredibly powerful.”

1. “National Seminars, Inc. is super! The Powerful Business Writing Seminar has so much to offer.”
2. “Many very useful ideas were presented. They will be useful to me at work and home.”
3. “Invaluable seminar! This will help a lot!”
4. “This was the most informative and entertaining writing class I’ve ever attended. I have learned new methods to achieve a better style of business writing.”
5. “I feel this seminar will definitely make a difference in the way I communicate with people in every phase of my life.”
6. “I have attended several seminars on different subjects (by different companies) and came away from them believing they were a waste of time. This seminar has reaffirmed my faith that they are not a waste of time and money.”

Putting myself in the place of a prospective seminar attendee, I found all of them weak, except one. Numbers 1 and 3 convey enthusiasm but nothing about what made the seminar valuable for these people. Number 2 is irredeemably vague, and would have impressed more had it said how the endorser expected to use the ideas. Number 5 says, in effect, “I feel the seminar will have results”—not very convincing. Number 6 offers praise so feeble that it almost qualifies as condemnation: “not a waste” (but not necessarily very valuable, either). Only number 4 seems stronger than the rest, offering three specific points about the seminar that might help erase some doubts about attending. If you rated any of the above as “incredibly powerful,” compare these:

7. “The data I obtained has already landed me two nice fat consulting contracts.”
[from a North Shore Scholars seminar brochure]

8. “After taking your course I was able to convince my boss to go with a new design that ultimately saved the company over \$2 million and created a better designed product. Prior to taking this course I would have estimated my chances of success at about 30%. [from Management Resources’ brochure]

In numbers 7 and 8, we encounter quantified, actual results instead of just enthusiasm or a projected outcome. Do you agree with me that their persuasiveness could hardly be improved upon? In contrast to numbers 1 through 6, apparently gathered the day of the seminar, numbers 7 and 8 obviously came in some time later—again bolstering these companies’ credibility, since that indicates a stronger relationship with participants. Most businesspeople would rather spend money on a seminar that brings benefits afterward than one which merely makes them feel excited and hopeful at the end of the day. I wonder if the national seminar companies tried to get comments from participants later in addition to soliciting feedback at the seminar. They could have called people to find out how they were applying what they’d learned or offered a discount on another seminar for sending in postseminar result-reporting tributes. Your situation is probably more conducive to blurb-gathering than theirs, however. If you have ongoing relationships with clients and customers, gathering praise with the power of examples 7 and 8 requires only a modicum of intelligent effort.

Great Testimonials Can Be Easier to Find

Many people think a testimonial should be a complete letter on the stationery of the person offering praise. A few businesspeople do succeed in collecting these, but I believe that’s the cloudy route. You’re asking a lot to ask someone to write one of those, or hoping a lot to wish some come in phrased freshly, persuasively and with acceptable grammar. The sunnier route involves looking for pithy quotes and using them where a complete letter would not fit.

Here are five ways to collect compelling nuggets of praise:

1. Unsolicited comments. These might arrive in a thank-you letter, while meeting face-to-face with a customer or during a telephone chat. You must seek permission—preferably in writing—for using these or any other unpublished remarks in your own marketing or you might be liable for, in legal jargon, “misappropriation.” Stick written comments in a file, and jot down fleeting praise immediately, asking, “May I quote you on that?”

2. Feedback forms. A book publisher can stick a postage-paid postcard asking for comments into books before they’re mailed. A car repair shop could hand out feedback cards along with receipts. A kayak builder could send after-sale letters to buyers asking how satisfied they were with their boat. You get the best quotes when you guide people with germane questions, such as:

- How did your child like our stories?
- What results would you attribute to having used our interpreters?
- Based on your experience, would you recommend our video service to other companies? Why or why not?
- What would you tell other parents who are considering using our scholarship

information service?

The best questions come across as if you genuinely want to know how you're doing, and are not just fishing for accolades. As a bonus, they help cement your relationship with happy customers and help you learn from those who offer suggestions and complaints. Use open-ended questions rather than yes-no ones or circle-a-rating scales.

3. Solicited comments. In a more personalized version of method #2, you can call or write regular clients and ask them for something you can quote on a brochure. Make it as easy as possible for them to help you. Flattery helps, as in, "I'd like to feature you as one of my success stories." If someone says, "Go ahead and write something for me to sign," make up something specific, colorful and concise.

4. Writing them for others' signature. If you feel sure this won't backfire with customers you know well, write something and call them up and say, "Would you be willing to say something like this in a press release for my new show?" Offer to adjust the wording so it sounds like them, since you don't want all your quotes to use the same vocabulary and style.

5. Published comments. You don't need permission to cite printed statements from reviews or media coverage. Since people view these as impartial, positive media quotations have phenomenal impact. Even negative mentions benefit you if you say, "As seen in Newt Breeders' News."

6. A contest. John Caples, a coffee drinker, once got handed the job of persuading Americans to drink tea at breakfast. He ran an ad offering small cash prizes for the best letters on "Why I drink tea at breakfast." This approach, which brought him dozens of promising ideas, can bring you authentic, believable product endorsements. Caution: It can affect your credibility if you pay, however indirectly, for endorsements.

Finding Them Isn't Enough

Whether unsolicited testimonials pour in or you have to put effort into soliciting them, receiving them represents just the first step in using them well. Next you must examine each endorsement critically to make sure it meets these tests:

- Is it attributable? The most convincing quotes include the praiser's name, position and city and state. Anonymous quotes or those from people who won't let you use their name provoke suspicion that you made them up.
- Is it specific? General adjectives like "wonderful" or "most beneficial" can't hold a candle to a precise, explicit description of what the product or service did for the praising person.
- Is it brief? If a blurb goes on for more than three sentences, you must select the strongest portion and cut the rest. You want nuggets, not blobs of praise.
- Is it positive? "Not a waste of time and money" fell down on this count. Repeating backhanded compliments can do you more harm than good.
- Is it clear? Often people leave out of blurbs the background that you know and they know but that others need to know too in order to understand a comment. At other times the intended meaning gets lost in muddled phrasing.

When a blurb furnished by an ongoing client or customer falls down on one or more of the above counts, you should figure out what it needs to work persuasively on your behalf and ask your commender for approval of the revised version. Do this diplomatically, as in “Lynne, I’m really grateful for what you wrote about our pet store. Would it be OK if we cut the sentence about the cute puppies and added the fact that you’re a city planner in Midtown after your name?”

Here’s an example of a testimonial from a brochure for Computer Business Services Incorporated in Sheridan, Indiana, that badly needs editing:

BEFORE: Prior to learning about CBSI, I was disabled and unemployed with back problems. I now have people helping me and I expect my income to double.”
—M.B.

This blurb suffers from four problems: (1) The phrase “now have people helping me” could mean either “now have people taking care of me because of my back problem” or “now have people voluntarily helping me run my business,” neither of which attests to the power of the CBSI program. (2) “I expect my income to double” is extremely weak. I’ve always expected my income to double over the previous year, but does that mean it has? (3) Even though “George and Jeanie” say they have this letter from an actual person on file, just “M.B.” is flimsy. (4) This quote sits to the right of a color photo of a man and a woman, different from the CBSI owners pictured elsewhere. Is one of them supposed to be “M.B.”? The following version would give CBSI a greater boost:

AFTER: “Prior to working with CBSI, I was disabled and unemployed with back problems. My husband and I now employ three people in a business that grosses \$9,600 a month.” —Marilyn Baxter, Hometown, Kansas

Once you polish each quote, decide how you want to arrange them and use them. Generally the strongest blurbs on a brochure, flyer or ad should catch the reader’s eye first and last. A professional designer can sprinkle quotes around on a piece effectively, but it’s safest to group testimonials together on one panel, in a separate column or in a box if you’re designing something yourself. Those who assemble pieces of paper in a folder should create something called a quote sheet. Terri Lonier, author of *Working Solo*, heads hers with her logo and the line, “Everyone is talking about Working Solo and Terri Lonier” (a bit of an exaggeration, by the way). Then there’s a quote from Jay Conrad Levinson, author of *Guerrilla Marketing*, followed by four quotes from readers, three from the press and three from radio hosts. Lonier’s quote sheet makes an excellent impression, but I recall seeing one years ago that took my breath away. It featured an avalanche of two dozen testimonials crowded together in 8-point type, each linked to a name, a company affiliation and a telephone number. The phone numbers astounded me, since they made the statement merely by their presence, “Not only are we glad to praise this person, we’d be glad to take the time to talk about our experiences further.” I imagine few people called, but what a credibility boost came from those numbers!

Be conscious of the collective impact of the quotes you select. If four of your five quotes come from lawyers, readers will conclude you do business primarily with lawyers. Recently I received a fancily designed brochure for a free presentation by someone I’d

never heard of named Justin Joseph. The blurb on the front page, from someone named Roy Elkins, immediately put me on my guard: “Justin is to presenting what Joe Montana is to football.” Now I know my ignorance of football makes me an untypical American, but this says nothing to me except that perhaps here’s a guy who’s going to bore me with football metaphors. The brochure included four other quotes, all from men. Several female friends agreed that this pattern of quotes indicated to them a man who is insensitive to his impact on women. If that conclusion misrepresents Justin Joseph, then he’d better make sure his blurbs reflect his values and who he is.