

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

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Chapter 4 Choosing an Appropriate Voice

Whenever you write, your style says as much about you as does your content. Key word choices, sentence structures, even favorite punctuation make as much of an impact as the ostensible content of each piece. One person comes across as a stuffy fussbudget, another as a perky cheerleader and yet another as a finger-pointing, thundering autocrat. Compare these three openers from business letters, for instance:

1. I don't get it. I sent you a letter recently on the deal of the century and you didn't call!
2. Like all business owners, you are undoubtedly concerned about maintaining a competitive position in a problematical economy. Would you appreciate a complimentary opportunity to review a program that will keep you apprised of important economic developments?
3. At least seven new ideas about how to run your business: that's my promise if you attend next month's advanced entrepreneurship seminar at the Colonial Heights Hotel.

From the vocabulary and exclamatory sentence as much as the content of the message, writer #1 strikes me as a huckster who probably thinks he'd be the next Donald Trump except for the stupidity of the people he's trying to sell to. The longwinded, wandering style of writer #2, on the other hand, gives me the impression of a windbag who doesn't know how to get to the point. Since neither is a kind of person I enjoy spending time with, I doubt I would read either letter any further. Writer #3, though, by using a slightly unusual sentence structure and packing a lot of specific information into a compact space, suggests someone with professional attitudes and experience and a dash of promotional flair. So long as nothing else in the letter conflicted with this image, I'd feel comfortable that this writer would either deliver on the pledge or honor the money-back guarantee. That's how powerfully writing style can destroy or inspire trust.

Or compare these pitches, taken from ads for therapists:

1. Dr. S. seeks to provide a safe, nurturing environment in which each client may awaken and engage her or his own spiritual resources. Becoming fully ourselves is a life-long journey. Becoming fully present to our unique place on that journey is a continuing challenge.
2. Come discover who you really are, who you really are not, and how to keep them separate. You'll think better, feel better, look better, perform better. Your nervous system will relax. Your immune system will strengthen. Your negative emotions and habits will loosen their grip on you.

From the writing style, I imagine Dr. S's therapy as soothing and slow, and the second therapist's work as a cool, refreshing splash of reality that quickly wakes one up. Note that Dr. S. refers to the client and himself in the third person ("he/she") and uses "our" instead of "your" in a manner that may recall your teachers from grammar school. (It also implies that though you may have spiritual difficulties, you are not alone.) The second therapist addresses the prospect directly and consistently as "you" and uses shorter, snappier sentences. These impressions might be wrong, but the dreamy distance of the first ad would attract very different clients than would the crisp promises of the second.

Writing voices come in as many varieties as human personalities. You need to consciously choose and control your style, since a voice that clashes with the character of your product or service will win you confused, dissatisfied customers, prospects you don't want or none at all. It's easier than you might expect to choose a writing voice that matches your offerings, however. Just decide on the personality you want to convey, follow my tips in your writing and editing, and solicit candid feedback on the extent to which your chosen tone actually does come across. Below are suggestions on voices you might consider for business materials.

Pointers on Personality

Friendly vs. aloof

Business communication experts agree that in the 1990s, friendly makes a much better impression on North Americans than does aloof. As business horizons have expanded, so that we do more and more business with people we've never met, we favor a person-to-person approach in which doing business together involves becoming colleagues, if not friends.

For a friendly stance, address customers as "you" and refer to yourself as "we" or, even better, "I." If you do business on your own, it's stuffy and self-important to use "we," while if you carry on business as a group, an "I" that comes from a named individual helps humanize the company. In contrast, an aloof firm always refers to both itself and its clientele in a descriptive, detached manner. ("Capitol Savings has served discerning investors since 1989. Its investors trust it to keep their money safe.")

Along with direct, personal address, you establish a friendly tone by writing with the words and sentence constructions you would use when you speak one-on-one with someone you know moderately well. Compare, for instance, these two sentences that might come from innkeepers:

1. Caring as we do about all the quandaries that transpire during traveling, we are pleased to be at your service.
2. We're always glad to help you find your way around our island or get through to the baby-sitter back home.

Both sentences use "we" and "you," but can you imagine someone talking about "quandaries" that "transpire" in a normal business conversation? Structurally, sentence #1 isn't conversational, either. Because of the contraction in #2 ("we're" instead of "we are") as well as the subject-then-object structure, it sounds more natural than #1. If you want the cordial, unaffected tone of #2, test your copy by reading it out loud and asking yourself, Might someone say this on the phone or face to face?

Friendly doesn't necessarily mean chummy or intimate, however. In business correspondence with strangers, don't jump immediately to first names or include personal details like "Since I'm still recovering from gall-bladder surgery..." Someone sent me a letter he'd written as a Canadian business owner to newly elected Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, which included lines of protest like, "Jean, I voted for you!" To me that came across as overly familiar, schoolboyish whining, and destroyed his professional credibility.

Precise vs. general.

The following sentences, from ads in *Entrepreneur*, illustrate contrary possibilities:

1. Earn an incredible income by offering parents the highest level of child protection available.
2. Our well-structured, extensively researched commercial cleaning program has proven successful in every area in which we have expanded.
3. You can make \$201 profit on a \$249 sale, \$294 profit on a \$447 sale.
4. Bob Carter of Newark, NJ, ran his first small mail order ad in *House Beautiful* magazine—offering an auto clothes rack. *Business Week* reported that his ad brought in \$5,000 in orders. By the end of his first year in mail order, he had grossed over \$100,000!

Overall, specific numbers and names, as in #3 and #4, produce more credibility than the vagueness of #1 and #2. But whether that translates into more sales depends on your audience, the character of your business and the nature of your service or product. Advertising that your office park has 23.5 percent bigger office suites than the city average may win over bottom-line watchers, while an ad reporting that wearers had 23.5 percent more dates after wearing a certain perfume would have to be taken as a joke. Remember that the abundant statistics and specifications that feed an engineer's appetite will cause a nonspecialist's eyes to glaze over. Similarly, "Save \$201.50" might go over big with a middle-income audience while wealthy buyers might find "Once-a-year savings" in better taste.

Colorful vs. matter-of-fact

Here (minus some grammar and punctuation errors) is the beginning of the brochure of Trans World Auto Consultants in Schenectady, New York:

Why, Why, Why?

Why put up with the frenzy of shopping for a new car at a dealership?

Why have some aggressive salesperson try to slam you into a car you don't want?

Why should you have to haggle over a price of a new auto and not know if you got a good deal?

Until now there was no other way to buy a new auto.

With the repetition of "Why?" and the choice of loaded words like "frenzy," "slam" and "haggle" (instead of the plainer "bargain"), Trans World puts its money on an emotional appeal to car buyers. And notice the lively personality that comes across in this brochure opener from Stevenson Industries of Winston-Salem, North Carolina:

What would we do without family get-togethers? The last time you and your relatives gathered you had a great time... right? Well, maybe you had some minor disagreements, but that can always happen, even in the best of families. The main thing is that you knew who was who and your correct relationship with your relatives... right? Oh no! You say that you disagreed with Aunt Matilda on whether you and her daughter's child Amy were second cousins once removed?

This relationship guide should answer your questions once and for all.

This effective lead sets an at-home, storytelling tone while conveying vividly the problem that the product solves.

Compared with the colorful style in those two excerpts, this brochure from the Boston Computer Society opens more straightforwardly:

The fastest way to become a satisfied computer user: Join the BCS today.

Sooner or later, you will have questions about your computer. It doesn't matter what kind of computer you use or whether you're a beginner or advanced programmer—questions will arise.

Fortunately, all you need do to get answers to your questions is become a member of The Boston Computer Society. At the BCS, there's no question that is too easy or too hard.

Appropriately, the BCS style does not call attention to itself. This organization would alienate many potential members if it projected an emotional or overly playful image. The same goes for most business-to-business services or products. Notice, though, that matter-of-fact doesn't have to mean sacrificing the personal touch to become distant or dull.

Timid—assertive—aggressive

See if you can guess which is which in these three pitches for nutritional supplements:

1. I think you might find yourself in better health after trying AZ-EZ supplements.
2. You'll like the way you feel after using AZ-EZ supplements.
3. You're throwing away your health unless you rely on AZ-EZ supplements.

In most situations, the confident assertiveness of #2 gets the best results. Timidity, as in #1, rarely sells. Just as low self-esteem can unintentionally come across in bad posture, I've seen a lot of people unknowingly communicate self-doubt in their writing. Get rid of any apologies ("Although I don't work with Fortune 500 companies...") and any qualifiers like "probably" or "it seems" that are not necessary to protect you legally. In proposals and sales letters, the present tense ("This program brings you...") conveys more confidence than the future ("This program will bring you...") or the conditional ("This program would [or should] bring you...") In the three numbered examples above, the verb "using" shows more self-assurance than "trying," and "rely on" shows more confidence still. One writer sent out a flyer inviting people to an event publicizing her newly published book, with this printed along the bottom: "Please come and spare me any further embarrassment." It made me cringe and imagine an ordeal rather than a celebration, and I didn't go.

At the other extreme lie threats, heavy-handed guilt tripping, insults and bullying. Some marketers believe people don't act unless you hold a hammer over their heads. Jeffrey Lant, the author of *No More Cold Calls and Money Making Marketing*, has no patience for pussyfooting. He writes these sorts of harshly worded admonitions to his readers and prospective clients: "Stop this stupidity right now!" "It sickens me just how many marketing communications are on the wrong track" and "If you're not doing this,

you've apparently decided to slice your wrists and quietly bleed to death." While in person Lant is amiable and considerate, I find his persona in print frightening. But as with a lawyer I know who tells people in trouble that they've been "a horse's ass," such tough talk seems to gratify or amuse as many people as it appalls. I know that if I suddenly adopted either Lant's or the lawyer's tone, I would drive away clients who enjoy my equally honest but supportive approach. And I would feel uncomfortable with clients who take verbal abuse in stride.

Serious–light–humorous

In the early spring of 1994, I received an envelope in the mail bearing this message:

Q: What are the five most frightening words in American politics today?

A: United States Senator Oliver North.

While I didn't save the contents of the envelope, from the Democratic National Committee, I'm quite sure that the whole mailing continued in a tone of foreboding. Anything that caused the slightest smile would dissolve the solemn spell intended to induce me to reach for my checkbook. Stick to a serious tone if you're selling children's bicycle helmets, disability insurance or bankruptcy prevention counseling. Paint as vivid and terrible a picture as possible of the catastrophe your product or service forestalls. Avoid any words associated with pleasure, and try injecting drama with short, one-sentence paragraphs.

Like this.

If you don't depend on fear to motivate customers, you may be able to afford a lighter tone. For example, I received what looked like a greeting card from an address I didn't recognize. In a flowery script on a purple background, the text read:

[Front] What we had was so special. When we were together, the world seemed like a wonderful place. Now that you're gone, it just seems cold and lonely.

Sure, things were difficult at times. But our relationship means everything. And even though we're apart, we can still work it out... together.

[Inside] Please accept this graphic user interface front-end disk, and \$50 worth of free services your first month, as a token of our affection.

We miss you... We need you... And we want you to come back today.

OK, have we grovelled enough yet?

Love, GENie

I had abandoned my free trial membership with this on-line service, and this insouciant missive did indeed warm me up to the idea of trying again. But for those businesses that need a rock-solid image, like banks, any levity—much less GENie's snuggly wit—might be too much. Would you patronize a bank whose advertisements made you smile? I wouldn't.

Humor reaches further for yucks than lightness and represents a risk in marketing—even when laugh production fits your business image. Readers who miss the joke can get annoyed. Others, despite your innocent intentions, can get offended. I remember waiting

for some copies in a newly opened private mailing center and picking up a flyer about its business services. Turning it over, I saw what looked like a horoscope and searched for my sign. For Cancer, it said, “You are a very patient person. You can fall asleep waiting for things to happen. You have a keen memory and often recite boring, obscure things to your few friends. Cancers are easily influenced and many have actually drowned when told to go jump in the lake.” Confused, I read some of the equally insulting comments about other horoscope signs and left the shop wondering about the business judgment of the owner, who obviously thought this vein of witticism would win him customers.

Chatty vs. all-business

On the outskirts of Bozeman, Montana, sculptors Harvey Rattey and Pamela Harr publish a semiannual newsletter to keep in touch with almost eighteen thousand people who have expressed interest in their bronzes over the years. This excerpt should give you a sense of the chatty tone of the message that accompanies photographs of their new work and an order form:

We’re still chuckling over the recollection of our stay in Brigham City. After making a dash from the motel pool to our room, we found that Grandma had locked us out when she threw the chain latch off its track and couldn’t get it unhooked. We stood at the door in our swimsuits reassuring each other that 30 degrees really wasn’t all that cold, while Grandma in a tizzy was trying to beat the latch off the door with a plastic bottle of mayonnaise. Fortunately Harvey found a screwdriver in the van and squeezed it through the gap in the door so she could remove the screws and release the latch.

Besides the personal stories that would be out of place in the usual business newsletter, the down-home-on-the-range voice comes across in distinctive word choices like “when the snow flies this winter,” “sculptures in the works,” “a grand display” and “when you’re out our way.” Harr adopted this tone thinking of the family Christmas letter as a model, and the newsletter keeps them in touch with a huge extended family likely to recommend their artwork to others even if they don’t buy themselves.

At the other extreme, an all-business voice not only shuns amusing anecdotes, it incorporates words and phrases common in the corporate world. This sample comes from the self-description in Boston copywriter Paul Wesel’s brochure: “His strategic marketing approach focuses on customer needs-based solutions and he has a proven track record in transforming complex subject matter into powerful and effective marketing communications.” Except for “customer needs-based solutions,” which verges on jargon (see Chapter 13), this nicely and clearly weaves together phrases that signal to executives and managers that he’s part of their world.

Commanding vs. beckoning

Literally, sales literature can’t command; the seller lacks authority over the buyer. But an advertisement or sales letter can adopt the attitude of a taskmaster firing out orders: “Buy now! Don’t let this opportunity slip away!” Or it can assume the side-by-side demeanor of a polite request, as in a letter I received from an accountant: “I would like to assist you in these ever-changing times... If you or your company is in need of an accountant, please feel free to contact me.” In another form of beckoning, the copy extends the offer as an opportunity, almost as a favor from the seller to the buyer. For

instance, a letter which sold every last place on a 1968 around-the-world expedition began:

As Chairman of the Admiral Richard E. Byrd Polar Center, it is my privilege to invite you to become a member of an expedition which is destined to make both news and history. It will cost you \$10,000 and about 26 days of your time. Frankly, you will endure some discomfort and may even face some danger.

On the other hand, you will have the rare privilege of taking part in a mission of great importance for the United States and the entire world. A mission, incidentally, which has never before been attempted by man.

Take special care when using the word “invite,” since it invokes a host-guest relationship in which the host—the inviter—pays for the event. The global expedition letter didn’t cause any confusion because it stated the price up front, but when I received a letter from a friend “inviting” me to attend her new workshop, I reread and re-reread the letter: Did she mean I should come as her guest? While the brochure mentioned a price, the letter did not. I debated calling her for clarification, but decided it would be too embarrassing if she hadn’t meant me to come free. If we hadn’t discussed her ideas so often I would have known this was just another way to make the sale, but when she wrote in the letter, “Your insight and contributions will greatly enhance the learning, and I would very much like to share the work with you,” she could have meant this as overriding the stated price—or not.

Note that whether you’re beckoning or commanding doesn’t simply depend on whether you use imperative verbs. The brochure of a Maine ferry company ends, “Come aboard Casco Bay Lines and discover what Maine people have been keeping to themselves all these years!” which comes across as an invitation, despite the direct address of “come” and the exclamation mark. The following envelope copy also has that gentle tone: “Get a free pint of Ben & Jerry’s and 60 free minutes from the phone company that speaks for you. Open fast, it’s melting.” Appealing words like “discover” and “free” override the grammatical format of a command.

Veiled vs. candid

You’ve undoubtedly read cagey ads that take the attitude. “Here’s an opportunity to become a millionaire, like me. I can’t tell you everything about it here, but it’s not this or that or the other method. Send \$49.95 and you’ll receive complete money-back-guaranteed details.” These only work if they use every trick in the book to win credibility and induce action. Compare that close-to-the-chest approach with the cards-on-the-table attitude in this letter opener, written by Mark A. Small of the U.S. Note & Mortgage Company, Inc. in Saratoga Springs, New York:

Dr. Referral asked me to contact you regarding our investments. However, we recognize we are not for everybody.

If you are seeking volatile investments with tremendous profit (and loss) potential, we’re not for you.

If you favor government guaranteed, 100 percent liquid investments with the associated low rates of return, again we’re not for you.

But if you are seeking investments that perform predictably and reliably with moderate yield and relatively small risk, your search may be over. You can expect U.S. Note & Mortgage Company, Inc. investments to have these qualities...

“We sell to wealthy individuals and small corporate pension plans,” says Small. “Even though our investment is truly superior, no one pays attention if we present it in the typical overinflated ‘salesly’ manner. The almost standoffish approach we use in both our negotiating and our literature distinguishes us. Does it work for us? You bet.”

Recently I read a masterful ad in the veiled genre from a guy named Jeff Paul. He’d managed to crowd about 2,500 words onto one magazine page, and I read every one of them—four times. He divulged very few details about the mail order system he had devised, so what was it that snagged me? I think it was how he managed to be confessional and evasive at the same time. Some excerpts:

With my book, “How You Can Make \$4,000.00 a Day Sitting At Your Kitchen Table in Your Underwear,” you are PROTECTED BY MY SIMPLE GUARANTEE. And I would be an idiot to risk ruining my \$200,000.00-a-month business to steal pocket change from you. Wouldn’t that be incredibly stupid? By the way, Peggy HATES the title I’ve put on this book. She says that it’s bad enough that I do sit around the house in my underwear, why tell anybody about it? I embarrass her. I’m a little “unpolished.” Well, I guess I just want you to understand that I’m just a plain, ordinary guy. EVERYTHING I’ve done to go from dead-broke to making over 2 million dollars from home in 3 years, YOU can do too.

This ad parted me from \$19.95 plus shipping, even though I already enjoy sitting around the house in my bathrobe whenever I feel like it.

Folksy vs. sophisticated

In contrast to the folksiness of the in-your-underwear and in-a-tizzy voices, some materials appeal to readers with the cosmopolitan composure of a man lounging around in tails. In *The Atlantic Monthly*, a fairly highbrow magazine, I found an ad for a product that included some words and phrases only highly educated, rich people use. “If you’ve ever had occasion to...” “marvelous,” “the substantial drawback,” “awfully high” and “even after hardest and longest use” all put me in mind of characters in a British drawing-room film. Since the product in question was a \$39.95 ceramic pen, such word choices made sense. In marketing to sophisticates you might even get away with using semicolons, which signal abstruse stuffiness in most other contexts.

I haven’t exhausted the personalities possible to express in your marketing materials, but the above should give you plenty to think about. Before or while writing, settle into a chosen personality the way an actor would, and as long as the personality fits you, appropriate words should flow. Follow the suggestions for feedback and polishing in Chapters 13 and 14, and take special care to adjust anything that might break the spell.

Promotional Protocol: The Facts-to-Hype Continuum

Besides choosing a personality to express throughout your materials, you need to match how promotional or sales-oriented your voice becomes to the purpose and format of each piece. In a 1992 survey of 139 editors of newspapers ranging from large metropolitan dailies to community business journals, Kay Borden found the greatest

complaint about the publicity-seeking mail they received to be “reads like advertising.” If you’re producing advertising, however, the language that pleases journalists may lack the oomph necessary to get people to act. For each marketing piece you create, decide where the language should fall along the five points of a continuum from an objective, disinterested orientation to a subjective, self-interested sales pitch.

- 1 Strictly slanted: No sell
- 2 Slanted: Soft sell
- 3 Mildly promotional: Medium Sell
- 4 Strongly promotional: Hard Sell
- 5 Hype: Oversell

With a goal of sales, you’ll find very few situations that call for stance #1—as objective as a highly professional news reporter. Rigorously impersonal and nonjudgmental, this kind of writing sticks to verifiable information and includes no calls to action and no opinions except those attributed to named parties. It’s hard to sell when you’re this ruthlessly objective, since even the tiniest bit of favoritism toward your own company would send the piece skidding toward the right on the continuum. Still, in some competitive situations you win over skeptics by dispassionately laying out all the facts like any disciplined news gatherer. See Chapter 9 for a discussion of situations that merit “white papers.”

Slanted writing, at point #2 of the continuum, uses journalistic style less strictly, for self-interested goals. Remember the last résumé you composed? You probably labored valiantly to put the most positive, grand spin on ordinary achievements, calling yourself a “front-line customer service representative and problem solver.” The objective, no-sell label that would appear in the newspaper, though, would be “receptionist.” Slanted writing does not address the reader as a buyer and avoids “you” except as a magazine article might use it. Publicity releases to the media—always in third person—and promotional newsletters—in either first or third person—usually contain slanted writing. Only a sharp eye and journalistic questioning can separate soft-sell writing in third person from its no-sell cousin. First-person soft sell, appropriate for some letters and newsletters, contains only facts—presented neutrally but selected for their impact. “Two of my books, *Smart Speaking* and *He and She Talk*, were recently featured on Oprah” would count as soft sell.

Certain telltale words and writing techniques automatically kick your marketing piece farther right along the continuum, so for slanted writing, beware of including any of the following:

- Any offer or invitation extended directly to the reader. (“Send \$29.00 to...”; “Come join us on Thursday evening...”)
- Superlatives without any specific, mentioned basis or source. You can say, for instance, “Frances Treat, named Best Gymnastics Coach in the East by the Eastern Sports Association” but not simply “Frances Treat, the best gymnastics coach in the East.”
- Opinions or judgments, unless set inside quotation marks and attributed to a specific person. For example, “Top-quality services offered range from data entry to

database management.” Top quality says who? Compare ““Their top-quality service is sure to satisfy the most finicky office manager,” says Timothy Kuow, president of Top Drawer Furniture Systems.”

- Adjectives commonly used in sales situations, like “unique,” “fascinating” or “only,” as in “only \$9.95.”
- Any strings of all-capital letters or any exclamation points.

While the soft sell suits materials such as publicity, newsletters and letters designed to sell without appearing to do so, materials that are obviously selling pieces, like brochures, ads and direct mail, belong in the #3-to-#4 range. Unlike the quasi-descriptive writing of the soft sell, medium-sell to hard-sell writing frankly speaks directly to the reader about what he or she will get on buying and urges the reader to act. The difference between levels #3 and #4 consists primarily of how repeatedly and emphatically a piece makes its solicitation. Medium-sell writing gets your attention, develops a point, asks you to do something and then takes a bow and vanishes. Hard-sell writing pounds its points and asks for action again and again and—whoops, one more time, like the nag who just won’t quit—again.

Here are medium-sell lines occurring toward the end of three ads, after copy that presents a problem and explains how a company or product solves it:

- If we sound like a firm you’d like to work with, give us a call.
- So make a mental note to do one more thing today. Give us a ring at (800) XXX-XXXX, and we’ll send you our Office Info Kit. Then ask around or, better yet, drop by your nearest computer store and check it out. They’ll probably let you play with it right there.
- For more information about both domestic and international connections, call your AT&T Account Executive or 1-800-XXX-XXXX.

Instead of gracefully letting you make up your mind, the hard sell takes on the role of a barker, shouting the same message in different words over and over again. In one insistent ad for Yves Rocher face cream, I counted twenty exclamation points. (Three of them were: “Guaranteed to make you look younger... feel better... or your money back! Don’t wait! Try it today!”) Another full-page ad for a weight-loss device called Acu-Stop 2000 used only two exclamation points, but came across as a hard sell because it spent most of its words hammering home claims that Acu-Stop works and its guarantee and just two sentences explaining what it is. Similarly, a four-page letter I received selling a guide to saving money on Yellow Pages advertising spent three-quarters of its space urging me to buy it now, and only one-quarter on what the guide contained. The more sophisticated your audience, the more hard-sell tactics backfire. The less you have to say about the benefits of the product, however, the more you’ll be tempted to escalate to a hard sell. Interestingly, the \$10,000 polar expedition direct-mail letter, excerpted earlier in this chapter, worked its magic without ever exhorting or goading the reader. It concentrated on the trip itself and remained quietly and firmly in the groove of a medium sell even as it asked for the order:

But first of all, you must decide about this trip. If you have a sense of adventure, a

certain pioneering spirit, and if the prospect of taking part in a mission of worldwide significance and historical importance appeals to you, perhaps you should consider joining the expedition. It is doubtful that you will ever have another chance like this To reserve your place in the expedition, just drop me a note on your letterhead or personal stationery, with your deposit check for \$2,500, made out to the United States Trust Company... I hope we may hear from you soon—and that we will welcome you to the expedition.

The hard sell becomes objectionable when it bears the signs of “hype,” a word that appears to date back to the early 1900s, when it was used as a verb meaning to trick, deceive or shortchange people. Of seven current meanings listed in the 1987 Random House Dictionary, most carry the negative connotation of exaggeration, trickery or questionable methods. With hype you’re attracting interest with a vivid balloon that upon being pricked deflates to nothing. Hype oversells by going beyond the genuine attractions of a service or product. Since as P.T. Barnum was supposed to have said (but didn’t), “There’s a sucker born every minute,” hype can stimulate impulse buys. But it rarely attracts lasting customers or clients. Use it with great caution, and avoid it entirely for trying to persuade journalists, educated consumers or “I’m from Missouri—show me” folks.

What belongs in slot #5?

- Promises that sound impossible and aren’t made credible. “Buy a Vim Van franchise and make a fortune!” “No more bad hair days, ever!” “The three-minute phone call that could save your marriage.” As the cliché goes, if you believe these, I have a bridge I’d love to sell you.
- Irrelevant but enticing information. A direct-mail piece for Writer’s Digest’s novel-writing correspondence course details the multimillion-dollar successes of first novelists John Grisham, Robert James Waller, Donna Tartt and Amy Tan, without any indication that any of the four participated in any novel-writing courses, much less the Writer’s Digest program. So what are these superstars doing in this sales letter? Someone bet that aspiring writers would ignore the logical gap and jump for the money.
- Unsubstantiated, self-serving boasts. This headline on a full-page ad got my attention: “Women business owners: If you attend only one conference in 1994, this should be the ONE!” All right, I thought, why? Only one-ninth of the page contained any information even tangentially related to that claim, with a generic, uninteresting list of topics. The rest of the space trumpeted the sponsors and how to sign up. This ad definitely flunked the “So what?” test.
- Puffery—exaggerations. Consider this come-on: “Imagine selling a product that everyone wants.” Now what could that be? Money? Sex? Nope, cruises. Sorry, you lost me there. I can think of plenty of people who wouldn’t go near even the QE II if you paid them. Similarly, my suspicions always get activated at the label “best-seller” applied to a book I’ve never seen on any recognized best-seller list. Here’s one more ridiculous hoo-ha, accompanying a photo of a sleeping baby: “Believe it or not, there are business people experiencing the same kind of peace”—for a furniture rental place. Hey, come on, who really loses sleep over furniture? When you reach too far to be clever, you mock the genuine need for your product.

To sum up, here's the same service—Mr. Willy's haircuts—presented through each of the five approaches along the facts-to-hype continuum.

1. No sell: Mr. Willy's salon, at 45 Lockerbee St., caters to a young, fashion-conscious crowd.
2. Soft sell: Mr. Willy trained with Sansome Gidale. His clientele has included such TV and film stars as Nora Heller and Debra Langer.
3. Medium sell: For the "Hollywood Look," call 555-6622 for an appointment with Mr. Willy.
4. Hard sell: Call now for your once-in-a-lifetime chance for that glamorous "Hollywood Look." Remember, after June 15 Mr. Willy closes his appointment book to new clients, so call 555-6622 today!
5. Hype: Now you can look like a movie star, too! Only Mr. Willy gives you the look that causes heads to turn and people to whisper, "Didn't I see her on What's-that-show?"