

# ***HOW TO PUT PSYCHOLOGY TO WORK FOR YOU & YOUR ADVERTISING***

When you're writing copy to promote your business, you search for the right words that will encourage customers to buy from you. You know the power of words, but you might not know the psychology of words. The next time you sit down to write, think about How to Put Psychology to Work for You.

Some of the easiest rules of communication are rules of psychology (psychology + communication = salesmanship). We stumble upon these rules by asking ourselves, "Why did I react that way?" and then chipping away personal prejudices and other impurities. What's left is a shining, valuable rule that benefits communicators by letting us play virtuoso cadenzas on the psychological strings of our targets.

While writing a direct-mail offer, I decided to strengthen the money-back guarantee by changing the risk-free inspection period from 30 days to one month. Then, like Archimedes in the bathtub, I yelled "Eureka!" as the reason for the change hit me — the Generic Determination Rule: The generic determines reaction more than the number.

## **The Generic Determination Rule**

And what, you ask, does that mean? You can feel relief when you see how what appears to be a pedantic rule is instead one of the most useful weapons in your arsenal.

One month is a longer time than 30 days. Oh, not really; perceived time is the psychological key that can unlock the door of buyer receptivity. What the rule means is that something generic (in this case, month and day) exercises greater control over human reaction than the number associated with it (in this case, one and 30).

Does it work? You bet. Half an hour is a "longer" time than 30 minutes. The generics are hours and minutes. The numbers are one and 30: One half-hour . . . 30 minutes. The rule says generics determine reaction more than numbers. That being true, 60 minutes seems to be less time than one hour. (If the television show 60 Minutes were named One Hour, ratings would plummet.)

Similarly, 60 seconds seems to be a shorter span of time than one minute. Twenty-four hours appears to be a shorter span of time than one day. We pay attention to the generic unit — seconds, minutes, hours or days — not to the number.

This piece of information is not trivial. You can control the reader's reaction without changing the facts.

If you want to suggest that you process claims in a shorter time, you write "48 hours;" if you want the time to seem longer, you write "two days." A seemingly shorter distance is "5,280 feet;" a longer distance is "one mile." A seemingly smaller quantity is "one pint;" a larger quantity is "half a quart." There seems to be less weight in "eight ounces;" there seems to be more weight in "half a pound."

## **The Chronology Rule**

Let's move up to the second level: Which of these slogans seems to imply a longer period of time: "Established 1981" or "More Than 20 Years at This Location"?

Let's expand the Generic Determination Rule to cover this second-level concept, the Chronology Rule: Does the experiential background of your primary targets include a date within their adult lives? Then numbers of years, months or days appear longer.

Using these two allied rules, we can widen our generic determinations in both directions. If an event is supposed to be recent, it didn't happen three months ago; it happened last April. ("Back in April" artificially pumps up the time gap). "I haven't seen you for 10 years" suggests a considerably longer gap than "I haven't seen you since 1990."

Likewise, "You've had it only since 2000," will have been less time in 2002 than "You've had it for only two years."

## ***The Psychology of Tense Selection***

What's the difference between the following two sentences?

"This sells elsewhere for \$100." (Present tense)

"This sold elsewhere for \$100." (Past tense)

There's plenty of difference between the two. Present tense has the power because right now, somebody else is selling this for \$100. Past tense loses strength because it's history, not current events.

What do you do if you can't claim a current competitive marketplace at \$100? Simple: You split the difference by moving into the present perfect tense: "This has sold elsewhere for \$100."

## **Present perfect**

This tense links the immediacy of the present with the factual comfort of the past. Don't worry about terminology or the forgotten sentence parsing of Miss Norwalk's third-grade class. Keep repeating, as I do: Copywriters are communicators, not grammarians. What matters isn't your knowledge of which tense is which; it's your knowledge of how to transform drab fact into the gold of lustrous attraction.

One exception: Use "sold," not "has sold" or "have sold," when suggesting a break with the past, especially in headline copy: "Thousands Sold at \$100!"

Why is "This has sold . . ." usually better copy than "These have sold . . .?"

- Exclusivity is one of the Five Great Motivators. Singularity suggests exclusivity; pluralizing makes both what you're selling and those to whom you sell it anonymous.

- The singular implicitly suggests quantity limitation. It's the same impulse-building syndrome that brings crowds to the door half an hour before a store opens: "Only 11 at This Price!"

(The reason for the word "usually" in the explanation: When quantity is small, pluralizing emphasizes fewness.)

When writing accomplishment copy, the present perfect tense creates an immediacy you can't achieve with past tense. As an example, here is a piece of copy about miniaturized firearms:

***Sr. Alberti created a perfect working replica . . .***

This lost the selling hook by turning Sr. Alberti's accomplishment into a historical incident. The work becomes a current event with a single word addition:

***Sr. Alberti has created a perfect working replica . . .***

Check your copy for lost timing. You can lose the reader's or listener's interest by wandering through history, and you can yank that interest back into the present by a tense change. Instead of:

***The work had a profound effect . . . .***

This doesn't have a profound effect. Because it seems to have come and gone before your target individual came onto the scene, you can write:

***The work has had a profound effect . . . .***

The profundity seems to have continued right up to the moment your words hit the paper.

"Has had" can be even more dynamic than "is having" because present tense can have a subtle overtone of incompleteness or a changeable circumstance.

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