Humor in Sales Copy â€“ Yes or No?

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A debate has been burning up the bits and bytes on one of the popular marketing forums. The topic of heated discussion: Whether or not to include humor in sales copy.

Some of the members argue that humor can be a disarming and refreshing alternative to the caveman approach to copywriting â€“ i.e., bludgeoning the reader into shock and submission with forceful declarations and exclamation points.

Drop the hard sell and take a more friendly and convivial approach, they say. Be sociable, be charming, be funny!

Makes sense. In this declining economy, in this embarrassing political environment who doesnâ€™t need a good laugh?

Others go further. Sales copy must have personality. And right they are, too!

But me thinks they may confuse personality with humor. Having a personality doesnâ€™t automatically equate with being funny.

David Ogilvy, John Caples, Claude Hopkins, all had distinctive, no-nonsense, cut-to-the quick personalities and imbued their sales copy with plenty of the same to great remunerative effect, yet I donâ€™t think anyone could accuse them, or their copy, of being funny.

Then comes this refrain: sales letters all sound the same these days â€¦ hackneyed. Then they site letters that lead with an over-the-top benefit, an unbelievable offer, or a rags-to-riches, failure-to-hero story.

And the point theyâ€™re making is valid. The marketer, through the copywriter, must differentiate himself and his product.

But do you do that by making â€˜em laugh?

Hereâ€™s the problemâ€¦

Laughter is serious business!

How many times have you gone to a comedy club, or watched a late night or primetime comedian fall flat on his face when delivering a punch line?

Humor is an art form thatâ€™s extremely difficult to master.

It takes years of developing and practicing timing, rhythm, phrasing â€“ and even then, when the curtain finally goes up, thereâ€™s no guarantee youâ€™ll make â€˜em laugh.

So, if youâ€™re planning on using humor in your sales copy at least answer this question first:

What makes you think youâ€™re funny?

Maybe in person, yes, at the dinner table, in the bar, in the locker room; and maybe youâ€™ve penned

something in a blog post, article, or in a spec script you mailed to Columbia Pictures that struck a few funny bones once or twice or thrice.

But funny in a sales letter, hmn?

Recognize, the first and foremost goal of a sales letter is, what? To make a sale!

So, using all the necessary elements required for salesmanship in print, you develop a rhythm, a voice, a tone â€“ a slippery slope by any other name â€“ that keeps the reader interested, excited â€“ scrolling or flipping pages, ultimately bringing your reader to the letterâ€™s real punch line: the submit button, or the BRC (the Business Response Card in a direct mail promotion).

Now, what do you think will happen to the trance-like momentum youâ€™ve labored so artfully to create if, all of a sudden, you slip in a joke, a bit of humor, thatâ€™s perceived by the reader to be inappropriate, distracting, and worst of all: not funny?

The bubble bursts! Having worked so hard to suspend â€œcritical disbelief,â€• you abruptly downshift into Conan Oâ€™brien or Larry the Cable Guy riff, leaving your reader in blinking disbelief and confusion.

All right, letâ€™s say your delivery is a bit smoother; youâ€™re able to manage the transition from Caples Conan with a bit more aplomb. The question you then have to answer is this:

Is adding humor necessary to close the sale?

As any copywriter worthy of a keystroke knows, in a sales letter you should only include what is absolutely essential to make the sale.

Or, as more commonly phrased, a sales letter should only be as long as it needs to be in order to get the reader to say, â€œYes, Iâ€™ll buy!â€•

Which reminds me of a story about Abraham Lincoln. For a rather long stretch of time during the Civil War, his chief of the Army, General McClellan, had chosen not to engage the enemy in battle. So, President Lincoln wrote the good general a short, polite letter:

â€œMy dear McClellan,

If you donâ€™t want to use the army, I should like to borrow it for a while.

Yours respectfully,

A. Lincoln"

Anyway, the point I was making: write anymore, or less, than is necessary to conclude the sale, and you risk killing the sale.

So, whether or not you can effortlessly slip in a bit of humor now becomes a question of whether it helps you or not.

If itâ€™s gratuitous humor, and only included to showcase your personality, I sayâ€¦

Better to be smart than funny

Weigh the odds.

As it is, only a small, very small, percentage of readers are going to respond to even the best written sales letter â€“ even if it was written by the current reigning, albeit retired, godhead of all copywriters: Gary Bencivenga.

So why take the risk of lowering your conversion rate even further by including what some might perceive as amateurish, sophomoric, or just unnecessary humor.

And yet, on the other handâ€¦

What if you really are funny â€¦ most of the time?

Well then, if your readers know you, love you and expect you to be funny, or at least come closeâ€¦

By not including a bit of humor in your pitches, youâ€™ll distract them from your marketing message as they begin to wonder why youâ€™ve switched gears and become so serious (boring).

In other words, if humor is part of your copywriting or marketing persona, donâ€™t change it without fair warning and good reason.

But, if youâ€™re writing to a cold list, one who doesnâ€™t know you, doesnâ€™t care about you, and bas finds your sales letter an intrusion, robbing them of their precious, irreplaceable time â€¦ then I think cracking a joke at the beginning, or in the middle, or at the end of your sales letter â€“ or whenever you ask them to send you money â€“ is not something I would recommend.

Which brings me to my last point:

If you think separating someone from his or her hard-earned money can be funnyâ€¦

Look no further than your next credit card bill for the answer. Does reading your statement put you in stitches?

No? Well, how about if they inserted a truly funny bit of humor next to the line that reads â€œminimum balance dueâ€•?

Would you be rolling in the aisles and eager to pay your bill then?

Didnâ€™t think so.

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