



How to write more powerful brochures, leaflets and catalogues

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Probably **the most interesting thing about brochures and leaflets is that they're seldom read in what we've come to know as the right order** – as you would read a book. Rather in the same way that many people read magazines in dentists' waiting rooms, they will flick through brochures and leaflets and stop to take a longer look at bits that grab their attention. Alternatively they'll flick all the way through and then go back to bits they've noticed and that have interested them. They're just as likely to flick through from back to front as they are from front to back.

What all this teaches us is that despite seeming logical, writing for brochures and leaflets in the form of a story that starts at the beginning, goes through the middle and finishes at the end, is not necessarily the best way forward. Obviously you can't make every page stand alone with a message on it that says "in case you're flicking through backwards or only want to read this page, here's a summary of our corporate profile again." But there are some tricks you can use to get this random reading pattern to work a bit more effectively for you, rather than against you.

A lot depends on the type and style of brochure or leaflet you want to write, of course. In my experience, **generally speaking the more specific the purpose of a brochure or leaflet the more likely readers are to read it properly and thoroughly**. If a leaflet contains assembly instructions, or a brochure contains technical specifications of equipment, there's a good chance that readers will start at least near the beginning and then work through towards the end.

Once again, that's because readers will only get their full value from the leaflet or brochure – the "what's in it for them" – by reading it properly. Where you get the worst random grasshopper reading, however, is with the less specific documents like "welcome" leaflets or "corporate" brochures. So let's look at how we can minimize the problems with those.

Organize your content

Despite all of the above, **often it is still worthwhile to organize your content in a reasonably logical order**. Many people do absorb brochures in the usual order, and even if they don't they still expect to find the introduction at the beginning, the substantiations in the middle and the conclusion at the end. This approach is useful for the moderately subject-specific document, like a leaflet about a new service or a brochure about a new line of garden furniture.

The trick here is to **put the main points in as crossheadings (some people call them sub-headings) in bold type, so that someone scanning the document will get the gist of your message even if they don't have time to read the body text**. You should also ensure that the crossheadings make sense in their own right and that understanding them is not wholly dependent on their being read in any particular order. Body text should support and expand on each crossheading and lead the reader towards the next one, but without creating a "cliffhanger" (in case the reader is going in the wrong order).

For the more general subject matter – the most likely to be skimmed, scanned, flicked through, read upside down or otherwise not absorbed properly at all – here's some advice from US writer John Butman (<http://www.butmancompany.com>) from "Writing Words That Sell" which he and I co-authored some years back. This is what John calls "chunking":

"Chunking means that the story you are writing is not, in fact, a story at all ... it doesn't have a sequential flow. It's a string of tiny stories, each with its own message. Each chunk is relatively separate and each page or page-spread is also reasonably separate. This approach means that you need to be careful about antecedents – you can't refer to something mentioned on page one, because the reader may have started reading on page twelve."

I find that John's **"chunking" approach works particularly well when there is a lot of visual material, with the "chunks" of text acting almost like expanded captions to illustrations**. With "chunking" you may also use crossheadings, but their importance in telling the story by themselves is not as critical. Crossheadings here, then, can be more cryptic or abstract provided that they are relevant.

And a quick word about style, particularly if you are writing a "corporate" brochure or leaflet: **this medium, equalled only (perhaps) by the "corporate" website is the most prone to suffer**

from the curse of "corporate speak." Sadly it would be very easy for me to illustrate what I mean just by including excerpts here from corporate brochures I could find in the offices of both small and large companies based in the city where I live. The curse of "corporate speak" lurks everywhere regardless of the environment, rather like cold viruses or headlice.

Catalogues

Many people fail to realize that catalogues should be written. Often their objective in creating a catalogue is to cram in as many products as they can with descriptive copy kept to a few mis-spelled words in tiny type squashed into a corner. These people are the on-paper equivalent of the "stack 'em high, sell 'em cheap" species you encounter in retailing.

However in a retail environment customers can usually pick up the products, have a good look at them, read the on-pack copy and find out all they need to know, so the fact that they're in a no-frills environment doesn't matter too much. **When a product is pictured in the small, two-dimensional environment of the printed page it's not only no-frills but also very lonely,** unless the product has the support of some well-chosen words to inform readers and encourage them to buy it.

Considering that for many businesses and other organizations their catalogue is their only shop window – or at least represents, potentially, a very significant revenue stream – you would think that everyone's attention and skill would be focused on its written content as much as its other elements. But no. **All too often catalogues look as though their copy has been written by a well-meaning secondary/high school pupil who can look forward to a glorious future as a street sweeper.**

Yes, of course some products that get sold via a catalogue do not need a lot of description and the only words you need to include are choice of colours/sizes/quantities etc. But what about the "how to order" messages? I don't know about you, but if I'm thinking of buying something from a catalogue **there's nothing that puts me off faster than having to spend a lot of time figuring out how to fill out the form,** who to make the cheque out to and where to mail it, etc. The same applies if I have to hunt around for website details.

Order the order

It's not difficult to get the process right. Simply **work out the steps you want customers to take, write them down simply, rough out the order form itself, and then try it out on your mother, your brother, your neighbour, the milkman, or anyone else - provided they are not involved with your organization.** That's a cheap and fast way of discovering any flaws in the system, especially small goofs that can get overlooked so easily if you're too familiar with them.

And here's another one. **How many times have you looked at a catalogue only to find that crucial information you should keep (like contact details for ordering, delivery information etc) is placed either on the order form itself or on the back of the page the order form is on?** The result is when you mail off your completed order form you're obliged to mail that important information away with it. Stupid, huh.

Your shop window

There is no mystery about creating good catalogues – only common sense. It's perfectly okay in my view to keep your writing crisp and concise because it helps to use the space more efficiently. But whatever you do, **never lose sight of the fact that the way a catalogue is written and designed says a lot more about your organization than you think.** If it is cluttered, unclear and illogical, customers will think your company is too. If it is busy but accessible, clear and easy to understand and logically planned, well – need I say more?

Retailers spend fortunes on the design, layout and flow of their instore displays. Supermarkets can increase or decrease their turnover by thousands, simply by moving the fresh produce from the back wall to the side wall or by putting the bakery beyond the delicatessen or by increasing the aisle width by a few centimetres. **Think of your catalogue as a paper-based store or supermarket,** and you'll find it easier to give it the consideration and respect it deserves.

Instruction leaflets and manuals

A few years ago I bought a new computer, printer, keyboard and monitor all at the same time. I heaved all the boxes into my office at home and unpacked each piece enthusiastically. There was metal and plastic and cabling and cardboard and polystyrene and bubble wrap all over the floor. My two dogs picked their way through it, sniffing suspiciously as if all these items were chickens lying dead and headless after a fox attack.

I sat cross-legged in the middle, leafing anxiously through the instruction booklets, desperately trying to find the English language pages. When I did, I couldn't understand a word, largely because

the instructions a) had been compiled by technical people who assumed substantial prior knowledge even though it was a "home" computer and b) whoever had written the UK version must have been taught English by Donald Duck.

And do you think the manufacturer might have supplied a simple instruction sheet telling me how to bolt it all together? No. Every piece had its own awful instructions but as far as the manufacturer was concerned, each item was on its own. So I phoned my dear computer guru Jason and booked him to come over the next day and sort it out, despite him telling me it was easy and I could do it myself.

"Just read the instructions," he said.

"I can't understand the ****ing instructions," I shouted back down the phone. "You come and do it, I'll watch what you do, then I'll write it down and send the text to the manufacturers with an invoice for my time. At least that way poor so-and-sos who buy this kit in the future will find out how to get it working without having a nervous breakdown."

There's one very strong point that emerges from this true story. **When people read, listen to or watch a set of instructions, they often do it in fairly stressful circumstances, in uncomfortable surroundings, in poor light, etc.** Accessibility, simplicity, visibility, and clarity are vital.

People who buy products that require instructions, need to know how to use the product as easily as possible. And because many people are technodorks like me, instructions need to be understood by the lowest common denominator. Logically then, you might think, the best person to write instructions for technodorks like me is someone who knows every last detail about the product, how it was made, how it works, what it does, and what its inside leg measurement is. In other words, an expert. This could not be further from the truth.

Stay away from experts

Instructions should never be written by experts, because they know too much. What this means is that they are very prone to making the mistake of assuming the reader knows a little bit about the subject matter already. To an expert, the fact that before you begin assembling the bookcase you need to align sections A, B and C with each other may be so blindingly obvious it's not even worth mentioning. To someone like me it's not just worth mentioning, it's absolutely essential if I'm not to spend the next three hours wondering why on earth I can't find any bolt holes that line up.

Wherever practical, **instructions should be written by someone who knows as much as, but no more than, the audience.** For any form of instructions to be followed by non-technical users, the writer should assume zero prior knowledge and the best way to ensure s/he does that, is if s/he doesn't have any prior knowledge her/himself. Provided that the writer has a logical mind and the ability to write clearly and simply, s/he can't fail to work out and then write good, usable instructions - because if s/he understands them so will everyone else.

Equally, **instructions should not be written by the sales people, the marketing executives, the guys in the lab, the production staff, or anyone else – even you – if there's a risk they might have become familiar with the subject matter.** Familiarity can breed if not contempt, at least wrongful assumptions about the audience's existing knowledge.

For any product to be used by ordinary folks in the street, try to get the instructions written by someone from a totally unrelated department or even from outside your organization. Failing that, get them tested by one or more typical users who have no prior knowledge of the product, and edit them carefully on the strength of the feedback you get.

There is nothing that will blacken the name of your product and your company faster than a customer like me not being able to put your product together easily. Although customers like me will get over it after taking a cold shower and asking the brainy next-door neighbour to interpret the instructions, we'll probably remember all those bad things next time we're shopping for the sort of products you sell. And we'll buy your competitor's.

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