Persuade Readers to Take Your Desired Action

Step 5

Overview

Energize your text with compelling language and powerful openers.

Address your reader’s WIIFM (What’s in it for me?).

Back your arguments with evidence.

Don’t just say it—show it!

If you want to convince a reader to purchase your product, hire you for a job or business project, or embrace your idea, the first step is to grab that person’s attention. That’s not always easy, given that the typical working professional is exposed to many thousands of messages a day—emails, text messages, social media posts, online news stories, mobile ads, and many more.

Communication theorists call this phenomenon information overload, which will only continue to increase as we find new ways to produce and consume information. So how do you break through the clutter and get through to people?

Start by recognizing how impatient most people are. Few are willing to slog through sentence after sentence to figure out what you’re trying to say. Readers want text that’s explicit and concise, with a clear action step. And they want you to get to the point immediately. Otherwise, they’ll ignore your message and move on to the next one.

You can employ several strategies to stop readers and grab their attention, some of which are detailed in other steps in the book. These include bottom-line opening sentences, clear lead-ins to bulleted and numbered text, and explicit subheads (step 4) as well as compelling subject lines (step 8). Additional strategies will be described later in this step.

Another prerequisite for persuading the reader is an engaging writing style, which will enliven your text and subtly communicate to the reader that you mean business. Plus, it will enable you to quickly convey your influential points. For more on style, see step 3.

Enliven Dull Text With Compelling Words

Let’s face it: Most of what we write at work isn’t thrilling—unless management reviews, mobile analytics, and corrective action reports excite you. The dry-as-toast verbiage of business writing pales in comparison to the wonderfully descriptive language of novels, memoirs, and poems. But we can’t use flowery words to strengthen business text. Don’t try recapping a meeting by writing that the chief technology officer wore an exquisite orange paisley tie that complemented his finely tailored, single-breasted black suit or that the glistening sun lit the pudgy cheeks of the audit manager. Save that for personal emails and texts—or your next novel.

Still, you can enliven your text—not with extravagant or stuffy language—but with gripping language that engages the reader. Journalists use this technique every day to capture attention. See this one-sentence article summary from the Wall Street Journal:

A surge in online shopping is reshaping New Jersey’s industrial real-estate markets, fueling higher prices and sparking development away from the usual hot spots along some of the state’s main roadways.

Notice how the powerful words surge, reshaping, and fueling invigorate the sentence.

Pointer

Use active verbs to pump up the energy in your text.<end>

Here are a couple of business-world examples where dynamic words energize the information:

The division head inspired the sales managers at today’s meeting, challenging them to build relationships with prospects and address their long-term goals.

In just three years as human resource director, Priya has fostered a positive working environment, which has helped boost productivity by 35 percent.

Sometimes, changing a single word can make a huge difference. Here are two examples of sentences instantly improved by compelling words (in these cases, metaphors):

OK: The new five-year plan will enable our firm to achieve new heights.

More compelling: The new five-year plan will propel our firm to new heights.

OK: XZ Partners’ targeted online marketing is helping it achieve unprecedented revenue growth.

More compelling: XZ Partners’ innovative marketing is fueling unprecedented revenue growth.

Selecting words that enliven your text takes thought and practice. Use the thesaurus feature in Microsoft Word (Shift F7) or find one online, and pay attention to how journalists attract readers, especially in their opening sentences. See Tool 5-1 for more examples that you’ll find useful for your business text.

Tool 5-1

Bring Dull Language to Life

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Dull Language | Compelling Language |
| Large amounts | Huge sums |
| Means the workforce is changing | Signals a shift in the workforce |
| Do better than competitors | Outshine competitors |
| Could result in more sales | Could spur sales |
| Help them find everything in the employee manual | Help them navigate the employee manual |
| Is a result of her 15 years of experience | Stems from her 15 years of experience |
| Objectives that will result in higher performance | Objectives to drive higher performance |
| Make up for the higher costs | Offset higher costs |
| Get customers interested in our other products | Get customers clamoring for our other products |
| We want employees to like using the new software | We want employees to embrace the new software |
| Introduce a new training initiative | Launch a new training initiative |

Grab Your Readers’ Attention

Getting decision makers to pay attention to your email is a challenge, especially given the amount of information they’re deluged with every day. Order your text so key points jump out at readers. (See more on organizing in step 4).

The following email, which I sent to a partner in a public relations agency, led to a new business meeting. The first sentence addresses a critical trigger point for a typical PR executive—that substandard writing hurts productivity. Then the three bulleted statements focus on other trigger points: sparking media interest, breaking through clutter, and generating favorable publicity.

Dear Ms. Ronan:

Even some of the top PR pros today don’t write as well as they should—and that can hurt productivity. If this is the case at ZZX Agency, I can help. I’m a 20-year PR veteran, corporate writing instructor, and professor. Having spoken recently on “Breakthrough Writing for PR Professionals” at the PR Institute, I know I can enhance the quality of your agency in the following ways:

As a PR writing instructor, I can teach your staff to write more concisely, convey news value in just a few words, and write copy that sparks media interest.

As an award-winning PR writer, I can get those releases, social media posts, pitches, and new business proposals to break through the clutter.

As a PR strategist, I can give your clients the edge over their competitors by crafting innovative story angles that generate favorable publicity in traditional and social media before their target audiences.

To learn more, please access this information:

Website

Bio

Articles on PR writing

Satisfy Readers’ WIIFM

Most working professionals fail miserably at persuading others to take a certain action or embrace an idea because they view the subject from their own perspective and neglect the reader’s point of view. To win over one person or a group of people, you must answer the question What’s in it for me (WIIFM)? when me is the reader.

Pointer

Focus on the readers’ trigger points to spur them to act.<end>

For example, as the director of information technology, you want the staff to start using a new customized delivery management software application, and you send this email:

We’re introducing a new delivery management software program that will enable the leadership team to better track results. It will be available November 1. An online training module is now available.

If I’m one of the employees reading this email, here’s how I would probably react in my head: Are you kidding me? I just figured out the current software. I’ve got no time now to learn this new system!

You haven’t given employees one good reason to switch to the new software. Why should they spend their time helping the leadership team track results? What about their needs? What do they get out of it? Let’s try again by immediately addressing the staff’s WIIFM:

To help you reduce your administrative time by 25 percent, we’ve developed customized account management software, which will be available November 1. An online training module is now available.

The first sentence opens with a direct reference to a WIIFM common to all employees—reduce your administrative time by 25 percent—giving them a compelling reason to learn the new software.

Tailor Your Message to the Target Audience

The better you can identify readers’ WIIFM, as well as their previous experiences, biases, and other factors, the more likely you’ll win them over. For example, if you want your supervisor—who values productivity—to allow your team to work flexible schedules, then address this point in the first sentence of your email:

We can increase our division’s productivity by as much as 20 percent with flexible schedules.

Follow this with an explanation of how this flexibility would increase productivity, perhaps with additional facts and a spreadsheet.

While you can’t know what makes every reader tick, you can usually determine at least one WIIFM based on their role:

CEO (WIIFM: profitability): If we open two new distribution centers, profits can climb by 10 percent.

Operations manager (WIIFM: productivity): By hiring five new directors, we can surpass our productivity goals for next year.

HR director (WIIFM: morale): To boost our sagging morale, I suggest inviting the staff and their significant others to a social event every quarter.

Market a Product or Service by Appealing to Readers’ Needs

Small employers can use this same principle to predict what’s important to potential customers. Yet many businesspeople who know their prospect’s WIIFM fail to address it in their emails. For example, a cybersecurity consulting firm that identifies a target company’s primary WIIFM as protection against cyber breaches may send an email pitch with this opening paragraph:

As a top cybersecurity consulting firm, YB Associates brings 10 years’ experience providing top-quality protection against cyber breaches for all types of organizations. We would be happy to put together a program for you. Let’s schedule a call.

In this opening, YB is doing little more than bragging about its services, giving the prospect little reason to continue reading. Here’s a better approach:

Your company’s assets are too valuable to let cyber breaches get in the way. With 10 years’ experience helping organizations like yours prevent cyber breaches, YB Associates can tailor a program to maximize protection for your assets. We would be happy to schedule a call and discuss your needs and potential solutions.

This version speaks from the prospect’s perspective, opening with a strong statement about what the reader cares about: protecting the company’s assets.

By speaking directly to readers’ WIIFMs, you can overcome their objections, bridging the gap between what you want and what they needs. See Example 5-1 for an additional way to address WIIFMs.

Example 5-1

Overcome Resistance by Satisfying Readers’ WIIFM

Your ability to persuade readers may also depend on whether you can overcome their strong objections to certain positions, actions, or procedures. Consider this scenario:

As a corporate trainer specializing in customer communication over the phone, you’ve been asked by the client’s vice president of human resources to teach its reps to better engage customers, thereby increasing retention. In your initial meeting, she was adamant that no rep should miss more than two hours of phone duty each week for training. But to be effective and produce measurable results, your learning program will require the reps to attend four hours of classes per week for two consecutive weeks. To persuade your client, you need to bridge the gap between your two positions. First, acknowledge her opposition to this additional time. Then explain that the additional training time will produce the desired outcome of higher customer retention—her most important WIIFM.

See how the opening of an email might help win over the client:

While I appreciate your need to minimize the reps’ time away from the phones, my two-week, eight-hour learning program has proven to boost customer retention by an average of 25 percent. I’m confident that, in your case, we can increase customer retention by at least 35 percent within six months.

You would then include more information, including a detailed description of the training.

Don’t Say It—Show It!

Telling the reader that something is so isn’t usually enough. After all, if you saw a restaurant’s billboard ad along the highway that said, “Best Italian food in Vermont,” would you be convinced? Probably not. When writing persuasive messages, you need to demonstrate your point rather than just saying it. Compare these two emails from management trying to convince employees that their feedback is valued:

After researching several expense-tracking software programs, we’re installing the EX-TK system, so please start using it by November 10. Your feedback is welcomed.

Simply stating, “Your feedback is welcomed,” won’t convince most employees that it’s true. Many of them may view such a statement as the standard company line—mere management lip service.

Here’s a more effective approach:

After researching several expense-tracking software programs, we believe the EX-TK system will reduce your time entering expense data by 25 percent or more. Please start using it by November 10, and let us know of any difficulties you experience in implementation (email the HR department with “EX-TK” in the subject line). This way, we can make periodic tweaks if necessary and help ensure that future software implementations suit your needs.

This version addresses an important employee WIIFM—saving time on administrative tasks—and explains the company’s effort in finding a software program that best accomplishes this goal. Plus, the language offers employees a clear path (“email the HR department”) for providing feedback, which will be incorporated into future software purchasing decisions.

Back Your Position With Evidence

Whenever possible, lend support to your argument with whatever evidence is available. See the following examples:

Previous success

To improve our marketing return on investment (ROI) in Q2, we should launch social media campaigns in cities with rising populations. In Q2 last year, following a social media campaign in Austin—an emerging metropolis—ROI rose 25 percent.

Third-party facts

We suggest the purchase of InfraSup, a leading management software that monitors infrastructure, identifies the root cause of information technology problems, and reduces the number of redundancies.

According to an independent study by Management Technology Magazine, InfraSup has a 91 percent client satisfaction level, the highest in its category.

Valued opinions

Our division should switch to the new cybersecurity protocol by February 1 so we protect our networks, computers, and programs from mounting threats. Christina Kovatory, president of the Southwest division, said the new protocol dramatically reduced the number of unauthorized access attempts in her offices since it was implemented six months ago.

Be Confident—Not Arrogant

Nothing turns off readers and lessens the likelihood that they will accept your idea than coming across as arrogant and promising the moon. Plus, you may lose some credibility in the process. Compare these two versions of an email from a first-line manager to a supervisor:

If we allow the staff to work from home one day a week, they will love us and their productivity will go through the roof!

Don’t hold your breath for the supervisor’s approval. Let’s try again with less hype and more evidence:

I suggest that we allow employees to work at home once a week. Based on interviews with them about preferences and studies citing productivity gains with work-at-home options, this policy should raise morale and significantly increase production.

That’s more like it—a confident and professional tone offering evidence that the work-at-home arrangement will produce better outcomes. Even though the second example uses more words to make the point, it’s written in a way that is more likely to appeal to the supervisor.

Your Turn

Getting readers to see things your way requires a combination of strategies. To get you started, try these exercises:

1. Find a recent article from a newspaper or online news site and identify at least three compelling words that help bring the text to life.

2. Revise this email to get employees to embrace the upcoming changes by focusing on their WIIFMs:

Employees’ WIIFMs (What’s in it for me?)

Increase personal productivity

Improve job satisfaction

An organization sometimes needs to make changes critical to its long-term success. Effective December 1, this division will be restructuring. That means many of you will need to learn new roles quickly. The company sees this as an essential move to streamline operations. We’re confident that you’ll all make the required adjustments and become comfortable with the new processes.

3. Ask a friend to identify a TV series they’ve never watched. Then research the show and ask your friend a few questions about their TV-viewing habits and preferences. From this information, write the first paragraph of an email designed to get your friend to watch an episode of the program.

The Next Step

Compelling and persuasive text is critical to get others to embrace your message and buy into your ideas. In many cases, you’ll also need to convey the appropriate tone to ensure that readers tune in to what you have to say and don’t get offended. That’s coming in step 6 (Choose the right tone.)