

## Persuasive Writing

by Jack E. Appleman, CBC



**T**hough you're not a salesperson, you're always selling—your talents, track record, recommendations and a lot more. Getting someone to embrace your ideas takes more than just stating how wonderful they are. It takes a strategic approach and a skillful blend of the right words.

Start by focusing on the most important person in the persuasive process: the reader.

Whether you're trying to convince your manager to invest in a new software program or encouraging the staff to enroll in time management training, you need to analyze the situation from the reader's perspective.

Also, determine if this individual is generally on your side. If yes, your tone can be friendlier and more conversational. If no, then take a businesslike approach and stress the hard facts. Plus, consider how much he or she knows about the subject. For people with little knowledge about the topic, include relevant facts such as the problem that led you to recommend the purchase of a particular software program. But don't bore readers with extraneous details.

### What's In It For Them?

If you can't put yourself in the readers' shoes and answer "What's in it for me?" then you'll have little chance to win them over, whether they're executives, supervisors or peers. Some people's WIIFMs may be obvious, like a chief financial officer's commitment to control costs and look good to upper management. With others, you'll need to probe deeper and weigh factors like their previous experiences and potential bias with a particular issue.

### Invest In New Software

Once you identify the reader's WIIFM, connect it directly to your solution or suggestion. For example, if you're seeking approval of a \$10,000 investment for a new expense-tracking software, your message should directly address your manager's WIIFM—saving money

by eliminating needless charges and by tracking expenses accurately.

Don't wait until the second or third paragraph to make this point or you'll quickly lose the manager's interest. Make that critical connection immediately:

*Through this new expense-tracking software, we can save \$20,000 in needless expenses and significantly improve reporting accuracy.*

### Customer Complaints Up/ Recommend In-House Training

For readers unfamiliar with the specific issue, you'll need to educate them before addressing their WIIFMs. Let's say you've observed a 15 percent increase in customer complaints over the past six months, which you attribute to service representatives' lack of understanding about the company's products. And you

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know that better customer relations is a key WIIFM for your manager. If you're convinced that a three-day, in-house product training is the solution, your message could open like this:

*Customer complaints have risen 15 percent over the past six months due to inadequate product knowledge by the reps. A three-day in-house product training could cut the number of complaints in half and enhance customer relations.*

Sometimes the WIIFM isn't a tangible result like working more efficiently or saving money, but tied to basic human nature. Say you're asking the entire staff to donate money or volunteer on behalf of the company's favorite charity. The best approach would be to appeal to their emotions, in this case their sense of giving back to the community and feeling good. Your e-mail could begin like this:

*This holiday season, we're giving you the opportunity to warm your*

*hearts with the gift of giving so you can make a difference in someone else's life.*

### Choose A Persuasive Tone

Don't overpower readers with contrived guarantees like the "killer idea" or "can't miss strategy" which are sure to turn them off. Plus, you can never guarantee a specific result, and you'll look foolish if your suggestion fails to live up to your promises. Keep your tone professional and craft a message that exudes confidence rather than uncertainty, especially when trying to win over a superior. Compare the two attempts at persuasion below:

#### *Wordy, Full Of Doubt*

*We've had a 20 percent decline in*

*our service rating in the first quarter. I feel that the best recommendation is a two-day training with a bit of a different focus, this time on phone skills instead of product knowledge. Our hope is that the rating would see an increase of 15% as a result.*

Words like "feel" and "hope" sabotage the persuasive process.

#### *Concise, Convincing*

*Given the 20 percent drop in the service rating in the first quarter, I recommend a two-day training focusing on phone skills, a move that should boost the rating by 20 percent.*

### Get Results

In this age of distraction and skepticism, convincing others to buy into your ideas is tougher than ever. You need to grab their attention and use compelling language to explain how your solution directly addresses their WIIFM. Do this effectively and you'll stand apart from other would-be persuaders and have a much better shot at achieving the desired outcomes.

#### About the author:

Jack E. Appleman, CBC, writing instructor and coach, is author of *10 Steps to Successful Business Writing* (ASTD Press), a top seller in its category. His corporate writing workshops have consistently earned outstanding evaluations. Subscribe to Jack's free writing tips newsletter and contact him at [jack@successfulbusinesswriting.com](mailto:jack@successfulbusinesswriting.com), 845-782-2419 or [www.twitter.com/writecoachJack](http://www.twitter.com/writecoachJack).

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