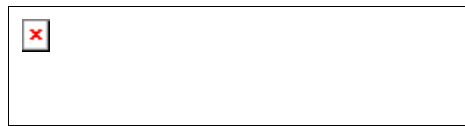




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Tuesday, September 19, 2000

### Use the Language of Your Targets

By: [Michael Lovas, The PeoplePractice](#)

Fifteen years ago, I began looking closely at how psychology can be used to make mail programs more successful. The root of the solution was in Noam Chomsky's 1957 doctoral dissertation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "Transformational Grammar."

Chomsky, a linguistics guru, opened the door between language and behavior. The essence is mind-boggling in its ramifications. People with similar behavior patterns have similar language patterns. That means all we have to do is figure out what language patterns our target market use and we can predict and motivate their behavior.

Before I write any marketing program now, I develop a psychological/language profile of the target market. For those of you who rely on ZIP codes or income to determine your mailing list and message, you're wasting almost all of your efforts.

With a psychological/language profile, I know what specific language patterns to include in the letters. I know whether to include testimonials. I know whether to use action words or passive words. I know whether to give a step-by-step procedure or list the options available. As you can see, some of the traditional thinking about letters is wrong.

Let me give you a case study. One of my clients sells term life insurance. You probably know that's a crowded, competitive market. How will direct mail work? Traditionally, you would find ZIP codes where middle-income people lived and send them a self-mailer built around guilt or estate tax avoidance. What's wrong with that? No psychology.

In this case, I wrote an oversize postcard. The most important element was the psychology I built into the message. I knew that these people were interested in



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price — nearly everyone is who inquires about term life insurance. I also knew they already owned a term policy. I knew that they would be skeptical of my offer unless I persuaded them to trust me. And I knew they would want a step-by-step procedure to follow.

First, I told them several things that were true. It didn't matter what I told them, only that the statements were obviously true. Building a truth frame gets people leaning toward trusting you. Then, I used specific language patterns to appeal to their hopes of saving money. Finally, I repeated my hot points three times. That's the number of times most people need to see information before they're persuaded to trust it. This postcard got a 5 percent return overall. That's huge in the term life market.

Considering that it was targeting only the proactive segment of the total population, the real response rate is probably about 20 percent. It generated 1,000 responses and represented a gross potential of \$1.5 million in commissions. It was successful because:

- I spoke in the language of the reader — not my own language.
- I appealed to their expectations — not what I thought they needed to know.
- I based the message on a psychological profile — not on bare demographics.
- I used specific motivational language.
- I also did a great deal of sophisticated formatting with typefaces to ensure anyone picking up the postcard got my message.
- I limited my message to one major point.
- I also established a visual identity that I can use when we mail to that list again.

If you know your product and target market, you probably also know who represents your "A" clients.

Just develop a profile of those people. What do they have in common? Can you see the difference between this and traditional direct marketing? If you understand whom you want to attract, you can write a letter to attract exactly those people. If you don't know whom you want to attract, you have to commit one of direct marketing's mortal sins — scatter-shooting. If you don't aim, how do you know when you hit something good?

Michael Lovas is a direct response writer and chief marketing and communication officer at The PeoplePractice, Dallas. He is also co-founder of AboutPeople.com, Dallas. His e-mail address is

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