

15 DEADLY COPY MISTAKES YOU CAN **EASILY** AVOID

A Copywriters' Roundtable Special Report



The Ultimate Troubleshooting Checklist For When You're Absolutely, Positively Unsure About Why Your Copy Isn't Making Sales

by John Forde, *founder and editor of [The Copywriters Roundtable](#)*

You know your copy isn't working. Now you want to know why. What to do? Where to look? Lots of things can go wrong. *But these 15 "sand-trap" spots are where you can look first... **just follow this easy 15-point "copy-trouble checklist" inside.***

"To make no mistakes is not in the power of man."

- Plutarch

15 DEADLY COPY MISTAKES YOU CAN EASILY AVOID

A TROUBLESHOOTING CHECKLIST FOR COPYWRITERS

**Brought to you by silent e productions, John Forde,
and "The Copywriters' Roundtable"**

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MARKETERS and LIST OWNERS: Please Feel welcome to share this report with your own readers as a free gift. Just make sure you include the invitation for your readers to sign up free for the Copywriters' Roundtable, called "the single best e-newsletter on copywriting." See [here](#) or page eleven of this report for more details.



A Copywriter's Confession: "My Secret Shame..."

by 16-year Direct Response Industry veteran, John Forde

Before we do anything, I'd better come clean... I make mistakes. Lots of them. And often. More than I'd like to admit.

How is that possible, after sixteen years in this business? All I can say is

that not only is it possible, it's probable. And not just for me, but for everybody.

Tight deadlines, tough product challenges, fast-moving markets. All combine to make it easy to overlook even some of the most basic sales letter building blocks. Even when we're supposed to know better.

The good news is, what makes you a good writer isn't that you *never* make the mistakes... it's that you know *how* to spot them and fix them, when you do. That's why I've put together the following simple checklist.

Does it cover every single possible copy mistake you could make? No, not at all. And it doesn't need to. Why?

Because fixing the core mistakes most writers make will not only make *any* sales piece stronger... it will also help you expose those other little things that might be holding up your copy in the mail.

When you take a look at the list that follows, you'll see for yourself. Included are *15 risks, blunders, and sales letter "sand-traps"* you'll want to pay attention to. My promise is simple: Fix these and you'll transform many a mediocre letter into a million-dollar breakthrough.

And this doesn't just have to be a tool you use to fix what's broken. Print it out and use it before you get started. Use it to build your sales letter outline. Use it after you've just put the polish on your first full draft. It can work for you at any stage.

Enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Forde". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

15 Deadly Sales Letter Mistakes You Never Have to Make Again...

courtesy of *silent e productions* and "*The Copywriters Roundtable*"

X 1. What's your story?

One of the simplest mistakes many copywriters make happens long before they sit down to write: in short, they fail to nail down the *one powerful "story" behind the product or service they want to sell.*

No, not literally a "once upon a time" story, though for some products it can and does start out that way. Rather, the one unifying message nobody else is telling.

Ask yourself, in a phrase of 10 words or less, what is your promise/promo position/message really about? If you had five seconds to sum it all up, in a rising elevator where you had to sell your passengers before you got to the top, what would you say?

When you can answer that question so well, that the statement itself could make the sale, you know you're finally ready to sit down and write.



X 2. Right product, wrong audience?

This next one isn't always under your control, but every good direct response copywriter needs to ask these questions and have this conversation with clients at some point.

Having it before you write is better than afterward. Because it's always easier to craft your one unique message when you know as much as possible about the audience you're writing to.

But even if that's not possible, ultimately you're going to want to know -- did the sales copy go to the right audience? Where does your list come from? And even if you're reaching the right people, are you reaching enough of them? New copywriters rarely know to ask about the list copy mails to. Seasoned copywriters wouldn't think of moving forward without talking about it.

X 3. Right audience, wrong problem?

Let's assume, at this step, you've got the right readers on the mailing list. And you've got enough of them to write to that you'll achieve some kind of critical mass.

But still, the copy fails. What now?

The next thing you have to ask is if you've got your finger on your reader's pulse. Are you really writing to the thing he or she cares about most? Or are you just writing to the things your clients *think* the prospect should care about? Surprisingly, those two considerations are not always aligned.

If you think this might be a trouble spot, the next step is to go where those prospects congregate and listen. Ask questions. Take notes. What online forums do they read and what do they write in about? What other products do your prospects use, and in response to what sales pitches?

What grabs their attention in the headlines? What do they whisper about at cocktail parties and around the cooler? When they lie awake at night, what do they worry about?

15 Deadly Sales Letter Mistakes You Never Have to Make Again... (cont.)

X 4. Right problem, wrong promise?

Emotionally, you're right in line with your target audience. Yet still they don't respond. Not to worry, because knowing how your customers think is already half the battle. But now you need to work out the other half of the proposition -- the solution they'll respond to.

The first thing you know is that it has to be somehow better, stronger, or entirely different than whatever solution everyone else is offering. How do you figure that out?

It starts with studying the competition. Ask your client for as many competing controls as possible. Of course, you'll also want to study the control promotions that worked for the *same* product in the past. Because these promises are already tested and proven effective.

In both cases, you're getting a feel for the solutions that hit the prospect closest to the core. Good copy solves. It offers hope. That much is academic. But there are more relevant problems and lesser ones.

So you're also going to have to know your prospect inside and out. Go back to those sources where you went to find out more about your audience. Look again and take note of their problems. What is it your product does or *could* do to give them the solutions they want most?

And once you find that solution, how could you turn it around and state it as a positive, tantalizing promise... the carrot you'll dangle to get your target reader to stick with your copy until he gets to the sales device?

X 5. Right promise, wrong timing?

Copywriting great Gene Schwartz called it the "mass tide of desire." Bestselling author Malcolm Gladwell called it the "tipping point." One of the things so many marketers fail to take into consideration is how well timed their promotional campaigns are with what's happening in the marketplace. This can be especially true if you're selling information products. But it applies across the board in selling.

The bottom line is that markets move fast and armies of prospective customers march on. What worked yesterday or even this morning may not work tomorrow.

This is one reason why some of the best marketers and copywriters happen to be experts in the field that surrounds the product they're selling. Because a lot of their success comes from knowing what's going on. Or even better, in being plugged in enough to know what's *likely* to go on in the near future.

Did you write a great sales piece and just miss your window? It's entirely possible. There's only one way to make sure you haven't fallen behind. And that's to be so totally immersed in the market for what you're selling, you can feel the turning of the tide.

Subscribe to the magazines your customers read. Use blog-tracking services online to see what the "super-users" and most passionate customers for your product are talking about. Set up a Google news alert related to what you're selling (you can find out how just by following the "news" link in the upper left corner of google.com).

X 6. No urgency?

In most cases, of course, it's just common courtesy not to rush people. But that's a courtesy you can't afford when you're trying to close a sale. Why? Because of the marketer's greatest enemy... inertia.

15 Deadly Sales Letter Mistakes You Never Have to Make Again... (cont.)

If you can't give your prospect a push to "act now," you're only inviting him to shelve the offer until later. Translation: never. It's not a question of politeness, it's a question of marketing survival.

Go back and look more closely at your sales letter. Start with the offer and work backward. Is there a deadline for any special deal you're offering? Is there a bonus for a speedy reply?

If you can work it into the deal, do so. But then move back through the letter itself and find places you can repeat the deadline date. Make it as specific as possible. Midnight on a certain date, just weeks from your mailing. Or maybe a website countdown. Or limited number of orders allowed.

After upping the ante in your invitation, then go back and look at the subheads and your headline. If the pitch is tied to the news cycle or an impending prediction, highlight that somehow.

A sidebar. A quote. A date-stamp. If it's an online sales letter, talk to your page designer and work in a live digital countdown. Even the P.S. of your sales letter is a great place to re-emphasize a diminishing opportunity.

If there's one thing that drives people more than the promise of getting something, it's the fear of missing out. In short, if there's no urgency, find some. And make sure you build that tension, the closer you take your reader to the button or page labeled "order now."



X 7. Is your copy too SHORT?

Brevity, they say, is intelligence. Keep it simple. Keep it short. Hit them hard and move on. In a lot of ways, this is very good advice. Maybe even the best advice one could give a writer.

But when is "short" a liability?

In sales copy, a lot more often than you might think. That may be hard to swallow, in this world of minimalist billboards and magazine ads. And that might also explain why the impulse for a novice marketer is to write short, not long.

Thing is, while short copy works fine for products a prospect can immediately "get" -- like a gallon of milk, a pack of chewing gum, or a pair of running shoes -- it works less well for complex products.

You wouldn't try to sell a house, for instance, with a single five-word catchy tag line. Even more, now that so many businesses sell services and information products or niche goods with special qualities not instantly obvious to the consumer, longer copy really might be the better way to go.

If you're someone who leans toward writing short, are you sure you've given your product message enough room to breathe in your pitch? Go back and look. Have you covered all the features your prospect will want to know about? And have you translated each of those into some kind of promise?

If there's an ongoing relationship with your customer, say for a subscription-based service, there's a good chance you'll need more copy rather than less to make that sale.

15 Deadly Sales Letter Mistakes You Never Have to Make Again... (cont.)

X 8. Is your copy too long (winded)?

On the other hand, while writing too "short" is an issue, writing long isn't an excuse to write boring. You've got two things to watch for here. First, you've got to make sure you've said only enough to make the sale and no more. Use Hemingway's rule for writing fiction: when in doubt, cut it out.

Look for the what some call the "golden thread" that pulls the copy together. Pull it taut by eliminating excess examples, repetition, or irrelevant points or stories.

Second, there's the style question.

Even long sales letters use short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs. Try reading the copy out loud. Does anything you read feel stilted, awkward, or make you uncomfortable?

Copywriters don't need to be poets. Some of the best are former salesmen who never took a literature or writing class a day in their lives. Still, the best sales copy is written to get out of the way of the message.

To make that happen, your copy needs to flow.

X 9. Failure to prove?

No sale is ever made based on the rational alone. The way to get attention is with emotion. That said, once you've hooked a reader emotionally, you've got to give him reason to believe.

This is the part of your sales letter that starts after the emotional-commitment turning point in your lead. And what follows, the proof section, often makes up the largest physical part of your promo.

Have you fleshed it out as much as you needed to, to support the position you've taken and the promises you've made? Credibility-building charts and statistics, relevant stories, strong testimonials, track record, expert testimony, reassuring credentials.

They all add up to support the prospects original emotional commitment. Go back and look at your charts and pictures to make sure they all have captions. If there are numbers you need to make your case, make sure the charts or lists that show them are clear and easy to read.

If you've got testimonials, make sure they're as naturally presented as possible. Don't use stock photos. Use pictures of the real customer. If you can use full names, do. If you've got experts who recommend your product, mention them.

If you're reading third-party sources that support your claims, name them. And use quotes just long enough to show that the credible experts agree. Don't just say your results are great. Show what happens when you get great results. Thinner customers. A nicer car. A bank statement. A healthy, happy couple. And so on. Anything to put an image into the imaginations of your future customers.

X 10. Failure to funnel?

When you're selling something complicated enough to demand long copy, it's rare that you'll start your sales pitch by mentioning the product, the price, or the deal.

More often, you need to start with the reader, start with the problem you're solving, or start with a promise that isn't physically tied to the product you intend to sell. At least at the start.

15 Deadly Sales Letter Mistakes You Never Have to Make Again... (cont.)

Instead work slowly toward the product details. It's a gradual process, like watching a plot unfold or a belly dancer drop each of her seven veils. "Funneling" your reader is about sustaining the dream -- and the tension -- until you're close enough to the sale that you can reveal the deal.

Print out your sales letter. Get a yellow highlighter. Then go back and highlight each of the instances where you mention your product. How early do the product mentions start?

Do they start before the customer has heard your promise at least two or three times? Do you reveal just a few details at a time, building in intensity as you get closer to the back of your promo? And as you move forward to the close, have you gradually eliminated or discredited other claims and other options?

By the time the reader gets to your sales device, you want them to feel yours is (a) the best manifestation of the promise you've made all throughout and (b) pretty much the only worthwhile deal in town.



X 11. Failure to close?

Who would write a sales letter, expending all that effort to lead up to the reply coupon, and then in the end forget to ask for the actual sale? It sounds impossible. The truth is, it probably doesn't happen often. But it does happen. Not out of neglect, but more often out of shyness or an inflated sense of caution.

The "close" of a sales letter seems so simple, compared to the proof and even the lead and headline. But don't let that fool you. All your work could be wasted if you don't ask for the sale in the right way.

What's the "right way?" A good sales close has many elements. But maybe it's easier to remember them all once you recognize that *all* those different parts of a close are really only designed to do one thing: remove any remaining *risk* your prospect might feel when he thinks about taking you up on your offer.

For instance, one of the things most closes do immediately is sum up what you're going to give the customer. But it's not just an easy way to transition into the end of the sales letter. What you're doing, as you review every product feature and tie it into a benefit, is telling the fence sitter, "look at all this stuff you're going to get if you take the leap and do what I'm about to invite you to do." You're overwhelming his hesitation with the wave of goodness about to flow his way.

Soon thereafter, of course, you'll need to tell the prospect how much the product costs. Ouch. You could just blurt it out. And some pitches do just that. More often, though, it's safer to ease your reader toward it -- by showing that the benefits you've just illuminated have a very high value. Much higher than the price you're about to name. How to do that?

Start with the costs of a higher, comparable product and work your way down. Or if you have a high price, go the other way and show why it's justified, thanks to higher quality or some kind of exclusivity built into the deal. Here, you want your reader to know the number. But you also want them to feel, no matter what the cost, they're getting a very good return on their time and their money.

Around about here, you'll also want to help the fence-sitters by offering them an airtight guarantee. Make it as strong as your client allows. It should feel like a "money where your mouth is" statement. An escape clause if your promises fail to live up to the deal. Make it even more powerful by tying the guarantee

15 Deadly Sales Letter Mistakes You Never Have to Make Again... (cont.)

promise back to the claim in your promo headline. Put a real signature under the guarantee where possible. Add a person's photo. And put it in a certificate border, if you can.

Last, you want to sum up the core story or message of the rest of the sales piece. Use it as a way to transition into a line where you call for the reader to take action. And then tell them exactly what action to take, in the simplest terms possible. "Just be sure to turn to page 12 and fill out the form" ... "just click the button below to get started" ... and so on.

X 12. Showing cost not price?

This is so important, it's worth repeating again. New copywriters often have the wrong idea about the pricing of the products they sell. That is, they look at it as a cost their reader never wanted to have. It can be that. But it doesn't have to be.

See, cost is what you spend on a deal. But price, that's a shade different. Price is where you and your target reader will explore together to find the true value of a deal. And this is where you'll really want to focus.

Always, even if you're selling high-end quality goods, the price for an offer should feel *lower* than the true value of whatever it is you're selling. Go back and look again to the first time you mentioned what the customer would need to pay to get started. Does it compare well with other products in the same field? If it does (and even if it doesn't), do you have a strong supporting rationale for why it costs that much... or that little?

Go back too and see if you've sold not just the product, but the greater results and greater lifestyle your target audience could have if they *used* your product.

The more you can make the benefits feel real, personal, and close to home... the more you take the reader's focus off the features of the product itself and toward more lofty images and ideals. And usually, the more worthwhile the product starts to feel.

Accomplish that and you can start setting the price much higher than you might have thought when you felt like you were just selling an item with a price tag looped through the handle.

X 13. No "extra bonus?"

You don't need free gifts or bonus reports with *everything* you sell. But for a lot of products -- again, especially information products -- throwing a free anything in with every order can be a great idea. Especially if the perceived value of that bonus runs high.

If your client already offers free gifts with every order, look to see if you can spice them up. Make them new or ask to have them updated (special reports, for instance). Come up with a free part of the offer that's well-tied to the main theme you're writing about.

And once you have the free gifts to offer, make sure you get the reader to think about how much they're worth. How they, the gifts, might even be worth as much as you pay for the product itself. Or you may even want to let an early mention of the freebies drive the sale itself.

Of course, if you're offering good "extras," this only helps to underscore the idea that you really are interested in looking out for your customers to make sure your offer covers their needs.

15 Deadly Sales Letter Mistakes You Never Have to Make Again... (cont.)

X 14. No final push?

You've done it all. The sales letter is written. You've just indicated on the page where you want the designer to drop in a signature. Now what? Straight to the order page?

Maybe not.

At the end of a sales letter, there's always an opportunity to tack on a P.S. And the P.S., studies show, happens to be one of the most read parts of any sales piece. Use that to your advantage. If you haven't written one, go back and tack one on -- summarizing the guarantee, naming an extra promise or bonus, re-emphasizing something urgent about the deal, or just telling them again what to do next.

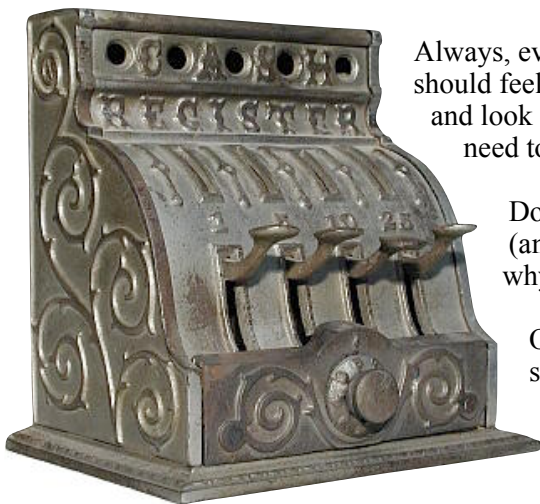
However you choose to handle it is up to you. But make sure, no matter what form this little extra step takes, you include one last repeat reminder telling the prospect what they should do, when they should do it, and how to do it... if they hope to take best advantage of your deal.

X 15. Error in the sales infrastructure?

All other things being equal, are you sure the order infrastructure is working? Are you sure the prices on the reply page are right? Or the tracking software is following results on the right URL?

When you're working with a tried-and-tested marketing team, it's easy to think they'll take care of everything. But even the best of us miss a detail once in awhile. And that detail can cost you sales, especially if it happens close to where the customer is supposed to place the order.

Try getting permission to "ghost-subscribe" to the product, via your pitch letter. Place an order and see if it goes through. See if you get the thank you letter. See how long it takes to actually start getting the product itself. It's not impossible to lose results for a whole mailing due to a dead link or a lazy letter shop, which makes it more than worthwhile for you to be plugged in to those details.



Always, even if you're selling high-end quality goods, the price for an offer should feel *lower* than the true value of whatever it is you're selling. Go back and look again to the first time you mentioned what the customer would need to pay to get started.

Does it compare well with other products in the same field? If it does (and even if it doesn't) do you have a strong supporting rationale for why it costs that much... or that little?

One more important thing: Throughout, the more you've focused on selling not just the product, but the better lifestyle your reader will enjoy when *using* the product, the easier it can be to introduce a higher price. Because now you've taken the reader beyond product features, to more lofty images and ideals.

Have a Friend Who Could Use Copywriting Secrets Like These? Anyone can sign up free for the Copywriters' Roundtable and get a copy of this report. Send them [here](#) or read the next page for details.

Share These Secrets With Your Friends and Colleagues...

Thanks again for signing up for the Copywriter's Roundtable! I hope you'll enjoy the weekly issues, the website postings, and the special opportunities I hope to bring your way.

But now that you've come on board and you've had a chance to read this special report, I'd like to ask you a small favor in return. See, for the last seven years, I've been proud to send out the "Copywriter's Roundtable" -- named by expert copywriter Bob Bly as "the single best e-newsletter on copywriting" -- to anybody who wanted to read it.

But in that time, the only marketing I've ever done has been strictly word-of-mouth. No Google ads. No pop-ups or list shares. Just straight up good press and generosity from the best source anyone could imagine, my loyal readers and fans.

These days, we're looking to do a little more to spread the word. But my favorite strategy is still to turn to you and ask you, providing you like what you see, to just mention the newsletter to any friends and colleagues you think might benefit.

Of course, as you know, the e-letter is free. And you can either send people to the website URL (www.copywritersroundtable.com) or show them this page and they can click below to get started:

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In case they need a description to let them know what they're getting into, you can send them this:

Every week, we cover breaking trends and industry news, tricks, tips, and techniques, and all the nitty gritty you'll need to know. I also love to dig deep for you into the psychology of selling... into the big ideas that drive what we do... into the career insights and personal stories you'll want to hear...

And all in as personal, funny, and engaging style as possible.

Have something you want to read about or a question you want answered? Even now, I still try to answer every reader email. Lots of those answers show up as live articles in issues that follow. And not just from me, but penned by some of the top experts and contributors in the world.

Today, the CR has over 10,000 readers worldwide.

And you, my readers, did that. Of course I'd like to double, triple, even quadruple those numbers. And I'd love to be able to accomplish that with your help.

Who should you send this recommendation to?

Pros and beginners, business owners, marketers, and just plain hobbyists read the CR every week... anybody you like. Naturally, you can tell them confidently that their privacy is 100% honored and the e-letter itself is free now and will stay that way. *Again, let them know they can always click the link below to head to the "official" Copywriter's Roundtable website for more details... Thanks!*

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