

Writing Effective Brochures

A brochure is a one to four page piece that describes in brief, a product, solution or architecture. Brochures are intended to provide customers with additional information on corporate offerings, and are used by sales personnel to persuade customers to purchase a product. The brochure – also called a data sheet, product brief or solution brief – describes the main features of the product, any specifications for its use and is usually accompanied by either a picture of the product or an architectural design, illustrating the solution. Other brochures resemble more of an advertising piece.



Writing effective brochures is an art as well as a science. It requires a combination of competent writing skills, knowledge of the market for which the brochure is intended and the ability to creatively combine and integrate information about a product into a coherent and convincing piece. This article is intended for the novice marketing writer or the technical writer who is interested in writing corporate brochures. It provides some guidelines and tips for writing effective brochures

Understanding Your Customer

Your brochure needs to be targeted specifically to the market for which it is intended. Before starting to write, you should identify the potential customers and familiarize yourself with their needs and requirements. Here are some strategies that you can use to gather information about the market and your customer:

- Identify, together with your marketing team, the potential markets for the brochure and agree to focus on a specific market segment for the brochure (see below).
- Visit the web sites of the customers you are selling to and the web sites of your competitors. You should be able to gather information on the type of products that are being sold and how these are presented.
- Analyst reports provide in-depth and useful information about the current state and future development of the market. You can use these to clarify or even to quote in your brochure, to give weight to the benefits of the solution or product that you are describing.
- Determine who are the decision makers in the targeted customer company and what type of information they are looking for in the brochure. For example, are technical data or figures going to convince them, or are they looking for a more high-level, descriptive explanation of the benefits of the service/product to their company?
- If possible, visit the sites of potential customers and talk to them about their needs and what they are looking for in a solution (either informally, or through a structured questionnaire). If this is not possible, then ask a member of your sales or marketing team to provide you with this information.

Writing Effective Brochures

Market Segments

Determine the marketing segment, which the brochure is targeting. In general, most markets can be divided into levels or tiers:

High-end, Tier 1 markets are large-scale corporations, usually operating at an international and national level, who are market leaders in their field, with abundant financial resources and capital to invest in expensive and often uniquely customized equipment. When writing for this audience, you should be emphasizing aspects that are important to tier 1 customers, such as scalability, robustness, reliability and high performance.

Middle-end, Tier 2 markets are medium to large sized corporations, operating at a national or international level. These corporations may not be as established or have the abundant financial resources of tier 1 corporations. Usually, tier 2 companies are seeking ways to expand their market share and to forge potentially lucrative partnership that can assist their company to grow and expand. When writing for this audience, emphasize the aspects that are important to tier two companies, such as openness, flexibility and scalability, which enables them to integrate their products with those of partners and to expand their services.

Low-end, tier 3 markets are small-scale, local or national businesses seeking to expand their market share or gain profitability. These could be local distributors, low budget businesses and startups, which usually do not have extensive financial resources and are looking for cost-effective solutions to their business needs. When writing for this audience, emphasize the cost-effectiveness of the solution and the options for future scalability.

The Consumer or end user. The consumer is the person who purchases the final product or service being offered by a corporation, distributor or retail outlet. There may be hundreds of thousands to millions of potential local and international consumers. When tailoring a brochure towards a consumer market, you will need to know who your consumers are. Professional agencies can provide you with profiles of your customers, including their habits and buying tendencies. When writing for this audience, remember that purchasing decisions are not based solely on rational or business motives, but may have emotional or historical reasons behind them. For example, personal goals or desires, or experience using a certain product or brand may determine when and what consumers decide to buy.

Gathering Information about a Product or Solution

Once you have determined your audience and analyzed their needs, start gathering facts and useful information about the product or solution. It may be helpful to organize this information into categories. The following is an example of categories that could serve as placeholders for collecting information.

A) The User

- Who is the User?
- What is his current problem or objective?
- What does he need or what is he looking for?

Writing Effective Brochures

B) Business Benefits

The bottom line for most corporate customers is “*how will this product or solution benefit my business?*” Often, customers want precise details on return of investment (ROI), meaning that if they invest say 1000\$ in purchasing your product, how long will it take them to recuperate the cost of the initial investment, before they start making a profit. This information could be presented as a table or a chart, based on industry estimates for growth in the market or on figures presented by real customers.

The case history is an example of an informational marketing piece that describes the benefits of a product/solution to a particular customer who purchased it. The case history describes the reasons why the customer decided to purchase a product/solution, how the solutions was installed and set up, what problems were encountered and solved using the solution, and what were the business benefits (cost-savings or revenue) that were generated. Determine whether your customers are looking for a case history or a more descriptive piece that describes the features of the product.

C) The Product

Ask your marketing and sales personnel the following questions about the product:

- What are the **unique selling points** of the product? No other supplier in the market has these features. The brochure should emphasize these features as the relative advantage of the product over its competitors.
- What are the **major selling points**? These features are essential to the customer, but may also be offered by your competitors. The brochure should emphasize these features as an integral part of the product.
- What are the **nice to have features**? These features may provide added value to the customer, but are not essential to his/her needs. If there is space to mention some of these features, they should be referred to as “value-added” features, towards the end of the brochure or on the back page.

D) Product Categories

When organizing information in the brochure, it helps to break it down into standard categories, under key word titles, such as the following:

- *Openness* – can the product be integrated into an existing platform or with third party equipment? Are there APIs or SDKs available for integrating and customizing the product?
- *Standards support* – will the product work with the systems of other vendors? Is it based on proprietary technology or on a standards-based solution?
- *Security* – does the product provide security measures, to prevent fraudulent use or abuse? Are corporations and end-users protected when using your product?
- *Reliability* – how reliable is the product? Have any reliability measures been attained? Are customers satisfied with the reliability of the product?
- *Redundancy* – are mechanisms in place for redundancy and failover, in the event that one element in the system fails?

Writing Effective Brochures

- *Performance* – what is the capacity of the system? Have any performance measures been attained?
- *Quality* – does the product provide measures of quality? Are there mechanisms for fine-tuning the quality of a system?
- *Scalability* – can the customer upgrade the solutions once it is purchased, and expand their system?
- *Flexibility* – how flexible is the product to the customer's needs? Is this a modular product, which enables customers to fit together a solution, based on the modules that they need? Can it be customized or tailor-made to suite the customer's unique circumstances? Can it be re-branded to fit the customer's corporate identity? If this is a product for an international audience, are there options for localization of the product?
- *Robustness* – how rugged is the platform. Is it an industrial-graded platform?
- *Cost-effectiveness* – will the solution aid the customer in reducing costs or work more efficiently? This is an important factor in the current economical climate.
- *Industry ratings* – how has the product been rated by industry analysts and consumers? Has it received any awards for excellence?

You may need to emphasize or de-emphasize some of the features, depending on your targeted market and whether a feature is unique, essential or nice to have.

E) Product Specifications

If this is a more technical piece, or a product description, you may need to provide precise and detailed product specifications. Specifications should be tailored to the needs of the audience, providing just the right amount of information that they need, but not overwhelming them with detail. Product specifications can usually be obtained from one of the following sources:

- Engineering specifications and documents
- Product managers and existing technical manuals
- Third party vendors or testing laboratories
- Certification institutes – such as UL, CE, NEBS etc., provide standard testing and compliance procedures for vendors that wish to comply to a specific standard. Find out which standards your product complies to and which of these standards are important to the customer.

Check that the specifications contain all the essential information on standards, safety, electrical and environmental requirements, heating, size, weight, interfaces, reliability, and performance.

Creating a Template

Consistency is the key word in designing a template and applying it across a series of brochures.

A template design could include the following:

Writing Effective Brochures

- Title
- Slogan line
- A few core features, in bulleted format
- Placeholder for picture or figure
- Heading titles for the main features
- Specifications
- Address Information

Make sure that you are consistent across different brochures. When describing a benefit or feature in one brochure (shared by other products in the series), it should be described in the same manner, using the same language, in other brochures – unless there is a specific reason for doing otherwise.

Writing the Brochure

Creating an Outline with Bulleted Points

Before starting to actually craft the brochure, create an outline containing the major headings and the major points you want to discuss under each heading, in bulleted format. This is what should be sent to initial review and approval.

The focus at this stage is on making sure that you have gathered all the correct information and that all the important points are mentioned in the correct order and under the correct headings. The important decisions-makers (marketing and sales people who will eventually use the brochure) should approve the bulleted outline and its contents before you start crafting beautiful and effective prose.

Focusing on the “message” at the early stages of the brochure will save you time in the long run and prevent the frustration of having to redo draft after draft, because the relevant parties cannot agree upon what they want to say or do not know what they really want to say. In addition, the outlined bullets can always be referred back to and function as a reference point for you and the brochure reviewers, making sure that neither of you stray from the important points or lose focus.

Crafting the Language

I deliberately use the word “crafting”, since it is at this stage where the unique linguistic and creative skills of the writer come into play, using language to effectively persuade, convince or inform the reader.

Decide on the tone of voice you are going to adopt with the reader. This could be friendly, informal, formal, authoritative, humorous, suggestive or persuasive. Knowing who your audience is will determine the best approach to adopt.

Cut and prune judiciously. Avoid the use of too many adverbs and adjectives. Cut out any jargon terms, hyperbole or hype. For example, “*The greatest product on the market today*”, sounds like pure hype. Explain abbreviations, acronyms and technical terms.

Make sure that you are consistent in your use of product names and other terminology. Product names that are registered trademarks should have the ® symbol on the first

Writing Effective Brochures

time that it appears and product names which are not yet trademarked should have the TM symbol the first time it appears. The names of third party products should also have the relevant trademark symbol.

Avoid long lists of bulleted items. As a rule of thumb, no more than 5-9 items are recommended. If you really must have more items than this, then break them up into meaningful categories. Order items in terms of importance. The most important items should be placed first, at the beginning of the list. Pay attention to consistency in use of punctuation.

There are many good books written on the subject of effective writing. The reference section at the end provides some suggestions for further reading.

Creating the Final Design and Layout

Writers usually transfer a source file, created using a desktop publishing program, to a graphic artist, who is responsible for the final layout, pictures and production. Whether or not you are directly responsible for the layout and production, you still play an important role in providing your input.

Knowing who your audience is and the language in which the brochure is going to appear can influence the layout and presentation. For example, English readers read from left to right and top to bottom. Therefore, important information should be to the top left of the page and pictures or diagrams on the top right, the bottom of the page or on the back page. However, an effective design can break such rules. Analyze the type of layout used by your competitors for examples and ideas.

Put important information towards the beginning of the brochure. The title should be strong, bold, large and convincing, since this is the first item that the reader sees. It could be accompanied by an appropriate tag line that leads into the main body of the article. A common practice is to highlight the main benefits in bulleted format, at the top of the page. This enables the reader to grasp the core benefits of your offering, and entices him/her to read further.

Make sure that there are ample margins and enough white space, to prevent the brochure from appearing cluttered. A cluttered brochure appears difficult to read and may detract a potential reader. The two-column format is popular with many current brochures.

Color-coding can be used to associate a brochure with a particular type of product or solution.

Catalog numbers, address and copyright information should appear on the back of the last page.

Writing Effective Brochures

Conclusion

Writing effective brochures is a combination of skill, experience and craft. The process of writing brochures should be undertaken in a consistent and orderly manner, as suggested in this article. First, get to know your customers and their needs. Before writing, do produce a bulleted outline of the points that you are going to elaborate on. When writing the article, apply principles of effective writing: determine the tone of the piece; be consistent in your use of terms and avoid jargon, lengthy sentences and hyperbole.

Your reward will be an effective piece of marketing collateral that will aid your sales force in selling the company's products.