

The Power of Persuasion

by Janis Fisher Chan

Maya has a problem. The renovation project on her complex's community center is behind schedule, and the residents are complaining because they cannot use the pool. Each time Maya telephones the contractor's office, she speaks with a different person who promises that the work will be done immediately...but the project is still not finished.

Finally, Maya writes a letter to the contractor. She clearly states what she wants the contractor to do—establish a schedule that results in completing the renovation within four weeks and stick to the schedule. She reinforces her message with reasons the contractor should do what she wants him to do, including the consequences of failing to complete the project as promised.

Maya's letter gets results. She receives a new schedule the next day, and the renovation project is completed within a month.

Of course, not every problem can be solved by writing clearly. But written communication is an excellent way to focus on issues and make sure people understand what you wish to convey. In fact, the ability to communicate clearly and concisely in writing is an asset for any real estate manager, since it will help you influence your reader and accomplish your goals.

Think About The Message

To write clearly, begin by thinking about the reason you are writing. Sometimes your purpose is primarily to inform—to provide information readers need. When writing to

Dear Mr. Owner,

Please consider using ACME Management Company for all your management needs.

inform, be sure to include pertinent information that answers your readers' questions about the subject.

An example of informative writing is a letter explaining changes in rental policies. You would include information to answer such questions as what the new policies are, why policies are being changed, and when the change will take place. If you are planning to raise rents, explain to your audience why the rents are being raised, when the rent increase takes effect, and what, if any, benefits your audience might receive. Your primary objective is to provide enough information to notify your reader about an item that will affect their lives. It is important to be as specific as possible when writing an informative letter.

However, once in a while your primary purpose for writing is to influence readers—to persuade or convince them to take some kind of action. Readers need to understand not only what action they should take, but they need to be convinced to take this action because it would be beneficial to them.

Suppose you are writing a letter to persuade property owners to use the services of your management company. What information would be most convincing to your readers? In order to determine whether to hire your company,

the property owners need to know how they would benefit from your services. They need to know how your qualifications would enable you do the best possible job. And the letter should stress ways in which your services are superior to those they are currently using. Will your services save them time or money? Will your services offer better quality work? Is your management company able to retain tenants better than the current firm? This is the kind of information needed to convince someone to use your services.

Providing your reader with the right information is important, but it does not guarantee that you will write an effective letter. If you want readers to understand your message and take your points seriously, it is important to plan your writing carefully. Here are some steps to follow:

- Think about the subject from your reader's point of view.
- Focus on your main point.
- Determine what facts and ideas to include.

Put Yourself in Their Shoes

It is easy to get so caught up in the task of writing that you forget you are writing to real people. Unfortunately, if you think about the subject only from your own point of view, you tend to focus on information that interests or convinces you, limiting your ability to persuade and influence your readers. Instead, consider the reader's needs, interests, and concerns. You will find it much easier to decide what information to include.

Suppose a security company asks you to install new security device in your strip mall. The device is more expensive than the one you are currently using, but the company guarantees a reduction in theft. In order to install this model, you will have to disconnect your current system for a couple of days and hire contractors to come and rewire your center. Which of the following points would be most relevant and persuasive?

Point 1: This is the most popular security model on the market and all the other centers in your area are installing it; or

Point 2: The security company guarantees reduction of theft or will refund your money.

You can see that although it is nice that the device is popular, the money-back guarantee and the promise of theft reduction will be the features that motivate you to

switch devices. You would not invest time and money in a product just because it is popular; you would invest time and money because the product is effective.

To make sure that you focus on the reader's point of view when you write, ask these kinds of questions:

- What is it about this subject that interests the reader?
- How would the reader benefit from doing what you want him or her to do?
- What concerns or objections is the reader likely to have about what you are proposing or selling?

Often, you will have never met your readers or even talked with them on the phone. Even if you have met your readers, you might not know them well enough to predict how they will react to your inquiries. When this happens, use what you do know or can safely assume about the person to answer the questions. For example, if you're asking condominium owners to spend money on common-area improvements, you can assume that they want to know exactly how the expenditure will benefit them, what risks

Dear Valued Resident,

We regret to inform you of our change in rental policy effective June 1. We no longer accept...

are involved, and how much the improvements will cost. They will also want to know how long the project will take, how it will affect their lives, and other relevant details. However, in order to persuade them to accept the charges, you need to convey that the improvements are necessary and the improved services will enhance their lives. Write the memo as if you were a condo owner and someone was asking you to spend money on a new project—what would convince you to agree to the charges?

State The Action Clearly

Have you ever received a letter that left you wondering, "What in the world is this person trying to say?" For example, suppose you receive a letter from a prospective tenant pointing out a series of defects in a property you manage. After reading the letter two or three times, you have no

idea why the person wants you to know about the defects—does she want you to fix things? Offer a lower rent? Perhaps the writer was trying to convey the information in a way not to offend you, but chances that you and the writer are confused about what action should be taken.

Another important step when writing to influence is to think about what you want your readers to do. Then write one sentence that expresses this message. When you write your first draft, put that sentence in the first paragraph. When writing to influence, the message must express the action you want

Dear Tenant,

We are happy to offer our tenants a special opportunity to join the building's new health club with no initiation fee.

your readers to take. Phrases such as: "Vote for my candidate" "Hire me for the job" "Contract with my company" or "Approve my proposal," motivate readers to take action. The most important idea should always be near the beginning of a letter so busy readers will not need to wade through paragraphs of detail trying to decide what you are trying to convey. Keep in mind that if you bury the main point in the body of the letter, readers might miss it altogether.

Here is a good way to focus on your main point. Imagine that your reader is driving by in a car. Ask yourself, "What would I say if I had only four seconds to get my message across?" Don't worry if your main point seems too direct or too abrupt

when you first write it down (after all, you only had four seconds to relay a very important message.) When you write your draft, you will find it easy to soften the message with "color" words such as "please," "I would appreciate...", "or I would like you to..." without losing the clarity of the message. For example, instead of writing "Pay your rent on time," you can write, "Please make sure that you pay your rent on time."

Tailor Your Message

A good salesperson knows that no matter how good the product, people will buy it only when they see how it meets their needs; the best salespeople also know how to tailor their products for individual customers. It is the same when you are writing to influence. People will only "buy" your message when they see that it meets their needs, interests, and concerns.

Once you have clarified the action you want readers to take, the next step is to think about why they should take it. Keep in mind that the points that influence you are not necessarily the ones that the readers will find convincing. Be a good salesperson—look at the situation from the reader's point of view and tailor your message for your reader.

Use brainstorming techniques to list every fact and idea that might convince or persuade the reader to take action. Suppose you want a tenant to move to a different space so you can renovate the floor. Your main point would be that you want your tenant to move to XYZ space until the renovations are completed. Now, write down every point that comes to mind without stopping to censor, evaluate, or organize the points.

Perhaps the renovated space will be more attractive and more functional, thus better for the tenant's business. The temporary space might be comparable in size and location. You will arrange and pay for the move, and offer the resident a rent reduction while renovations are underway. You might also mention that remaining in the original space during renovation will subject the tenant to increased noise and inconvenience.

Once you've identified the most persuasive points, organize them logically. In the example above, all the points relating to money might be grouped together with a key sentence, "We will absorb the cost of the move and reimburse you for the inconvenience." This key sentence might be followed by details about costs, either in a paragraph or a list.

Planning Gets Results

When you finish the planning steps, you will have an outline for your writing. The outline makes it much easier to write. You have already done the hard work—deciding exactly what you want readers to do, coming up with the points that are most likely to influence them, and organizing the points logically. The time you spend planning will pay off by increasing the chance that your writing will achieve results. Effective writing can be an essential tool to help property managers convince clients to see things their way.

Janis Fisher Chan is co-owner of Advanced Communication Designs, Inc., a training company that conducts writing skills training and publishes self-study business writing books. She is the co-author of *Professional Writing Skills, Grammar for Grownups, How to Write Reports and Proposals, and Writing Performance Documentation*. For information, contact by phone (415) 459-3563, fax (415) 459-8618, www.Writeitwell.com/.