

Analysis
**What Can B2B Marketers Learn from B2C?
The Same Things B2C Can Learn from B2B...**

**A Closer Look at B2B and B2C Copy that Succeed for
the Same Reasons**

We business-to-business (B2B) sales & marketing professionals naturally feel our business-to-consumer (B2C) counterparts exist on a different planet.

But when you look at effective B2C and B2B *copy* side by side, you know what? The differences are often just cosmetic. (And not necessarily even that.)

The gears turning in the background are the same.

The reasons they do their job well are the same.

After all, consider these three shared qualities:

**1. Effective B2C and B2B copy both show they know their audience(s).
Very well.**

Ever been in a conversation with someone and, after hearing what you've said, that person says something back which shows she knows *exactly* what you're talking about?

It could be about maintaining classic "muscle cars," it could be about taking care of young kids, it could be about managing a global supply chain.

Whatever's been said, you know that person "gets" you.

And from that point on she is, in your mind, on a higher plane. You want to talk to her again! She's earned membership into your proverbial club.

Good copy, whatever the product or service, does the same thing—it gets you into the club.

2. Effective B2C and B2B copy reduce perception of RISK—among those who will use the product or service, not just those who will be paying for it!

We frequently see marketing copy (particularly B2B marketing copy) that speaks only to the person holding the purse strings. And that's a mistake. Because the person who pays is only going to get his money's worth if the product or service is used.

So, when applicable, the copy must address the needs of the user and the "payer."

And the ideal way to do that? Describe the product or service in ACTION, from each of their perspectives. Make it so each person can picture your product or service accomplishing exactly what he cares about.

3. Effective B2C and B2B copy both appeal to EMOTION.

Just as it takes a lot to get a large organization to buy a multi-million dollar software application or vendor service contract, it can also take a lot for someone to buy what only costs a few bucks.

It's not just about money. And it's not just about quantifiable benefits the product or service might provide.

We're all like that. We may appreciate it's logical to make a change, but that doesn't mean it's enough to make us change.

The way we do things—whether it's how we run a computer hosting facility or the kind of breakfast cereal we buy—may not be the "best" way, but it's the way we're used to. We're comfortable with it. It's the devil we know.

So effective B2C and B2B copy don't rest their fates on prices, numbers, or statistics. Sure, if we buy maybe we'll get a rock-bottom price. Or we'll lower our costs, or increase our return on investment by X amount. All fine and well, that's great, but...that's not necessarily enough to get us out of our comfort zone.

Illustrations and Analysis

The illustrations below—surprise!—come from my own work.

Though I'm a "B2B" guy, I work in the B2C world from time to time, and those experiences have made the above three "shared qualities" all the more clear.

In the process I'll be highlighting what you may have concluded already: Accomplish ONE of the three...and you tend to accomplish the others!

Showing your readers you "get" them appeals to the emotional need to be understood.

Reducing perception of risk by describing your product or service accomplishing what your readers care about...it shows you "get" them!

And...the whole notion of reducing risk is based on emotion: The need for stability. The need for control. The fear of failure. The fear of *punishment* for failure. The fear of the unknown.

My B2B illustration(s) will follow the B2C—just to underscore the mere stylistic nature of their differences. All B2C examples come from the same B2C company—a publisher of hobbyist magazines. All B2B examples come from the same B2B company—a FORTUNE 1000 services organization.

1. B2C and B2B examples of showing you know your audience—very well.

B2C illustration: Excerpt from direct mail letter for hobbyist magazine *Mustang Enthusiast*:

Because we know that's the point. It IS fun! Most of us aren't professional drivers (not that it wouldn't be cool if we were). And while we may know our way around over and under the hood, most of us aren't professional mechanics (not that it wouldn't be cool if we were!).

Yep, most of us are just folks in love with Mustangs who drive 'em (or want to drive 'em!) day to day, out in the real world...with all the obstacles and opportunities the real world throws at us. And we want to get the most enjoyment we can!

If that sounds like you, Mustang Enthusiast is at your service.
(© 2007, Amos Press, Inc.)

B2B illustration: Excerpt from a brochure explaining FORTUNE1000 services company's "learning solutions" offering:

The fragmented character of the corporate learning function has also meant certain programs, processes, and technologies have become unnecessarily duplicated: across departments, across lines of business, and across geographies.

Other costs weigh heavily. For example, purchasing learning technology and implementing it in-house can require paying a license fee for every employee—even though only some employees will be tapping into the learning "infrastructure" at any given time. And, that technology grows obsolete quickly, necessitating ongoing upgrades.

Plus, less than truly "strategic" activities eat up a disproportionate portion of staff time, adding that much more to costs. For example, organizations face the Herculean task of evaluating, selecting, and integrating the content and technology of an increasing number and variety of suppliers, many with limited track records. Given an organization's perpetual need for new content, the integration work never ends.

(© 2006, Convergys Corporation)

Analysis

The *Mustang Enthusiast* copy, by showing it knows its audience well, attempts to make itself stand out in a crowded market. Those interested in information about Mustangs have many options at their disposal, in print and online.

With that in mind, it behooves *Mustang Enthusiast* to make it clear what kind of Mustang driver it serves. And, more than that, to hold up a mirror in front of that kind of driver so he thinks: "That's me. I see me. You're talking about me. You're speaking to ME. Thank you!!"

Like we said, by showing people you "get" them, you connect with their emotional need—OUR emotional need—to be understood.

The B2B example holds up a mirror to the lives of those in large organizations responsible for tens of thousands of employees' ongoing training.

And in doing so, it must show it understands multiple audiences very well.

Like the specialists "on the ground" who handle different components of training. The managers who must make sure all those components work together. All the way to the VP of Human Resources (HR), who has to justify millions upon millions of training dollars.

Compared to the *Mustang Enthusiast* copy, it may be dry...but it's not ANY less emotional.

Here, it's the stress of making everything work together so that it pleases employees, your boss, and your boss' boss (all having different requirements). The stress of having to take the heat for unproven suppliers.

And/or the exhaustion of something that's always demanding your attention and yet isn't ever completely in your grasp.

2. Reducing perception of risk by showing the product in action— from the perspective of the user AND the "payer."

B2C illustration: Excerpt from a print ad for a crafting publication called *Paper Made Easy*:

<ad headline>
You can MAKE IT!

<first half of body copy>
You can...take a basic photo frame and turn it into something you'd, well, want to take a photo of!

You can...take a nice-but-conventional gold pendant and, with paisley-patterned paper and glass finish paint, transform it into a treasure that begs to be worn again and again.

You can...create a birthday card that will itself be a cause for celebration. (And an anniversary card that—fittingly—will be cherished through the years!)

*With Paper Made Easy at your side, being creative—being unique!—
isn't intimidating. Or time-consuming!*
(© 2006, Amos Press, Inc.)

B2B illustration (addressing needs of “payer”): Excerpt from a sell sheet explaining an “absence management” offering designed for large companies:

Consider a California employee who is on short-term disability, returns to work, and then needs to take family-specific leave, but intermittently, not all at once. In each instance the employer must account for disability rules, FMLA, and CFRA (California Family Rights Act). No matter how intricate the situation, the Convergys system automatically ensures every increment of time is precisely tracked.

This one feature of the Convergys solution ends what has been a veritable nightmare for larger companies; from 1998 to 2003, over 16,000 FMLA complaints added up to \$19 million in damages.
(© 2006, Convergys Corporation)

B2B illustration (addressing needs of “user”): Another excerpt from sell sheet explaining an “absence management” offering designed for large companies:

With or without absence management technology in place, managers have often been unrealistically expected to understand the nuances of employee absence laws and then asked to take appropriate actions.

With Convergys' technology, managers have an eligibility calculator, a calendar, and a “dashboard” that they can use to tell them what they need to know when they need to know it. This means they can give their employees the guidance they require, be notified about upcoming or immediate absences and act accordingly, and, overall, spend more time managing people instead of absence-fueled crises.
(© 2006, Convergys Corporation)

Analysis

Remember how the B2B “corporate learning” example felt drier and more factual yet was JUST as emotional as the B2C one?

Well, the *Paper Made Easy* “you can...” copy is as factual as it is emotional. The two aren’t mutually exclusive! In fact, they may be one and the same.

Let’s take another look. In the *Paper Made Easy* copy the emotional undercurrent is certainly unmistakable. Every “you can...” appeals to the need for empowerment—to be able to do more than you think you could, or would.

(Especially in situations where the “status quo” isn’t good enough, but you put up with it. How many of us have a hard time picking out greeting cards because there are so few good ones?)

Every “you can...” also appeals to the need to be memorable, to stand out. To feel liked or loved.

(Think about how good you looked when you gave someone a gift or card that was just perfect...)

But at the same time, every “you can...” illustration is REAL—every one has appeared in past issues of *Paper Made Easy* (along with take-you-by-the-hand instructions).

Each one is pictured in the ad, too, so you can see, for example, what a “birthday card that’s itself a cause for celebration” looks like.

So, because you can SEE *Paper Made Easy* in action, it feels less risky to buy a subscription. There won’t be any surprises. Logically and emotionally, you know exactly what your money (in this case, about 20 bucks) will bring you. Even if you’re not buying *Paper Made Easy* for yourself! From seeing the illustrations you know the “creative” person in your life would welcome it.

And—shifting to B2B—the same goes with “absence management”...

If you’re the one who has to attach your name to the purchase order, you won’t even consider it unless the “product”—in this case, a multifaceted service offering—proves it’s worth the gamble.

More specifically: Reducing perception of risk means it shouldn’t feel like you’re making a gamble. (Hence “reducing perception of risk”!)

And so the copy puts the product “to the test,” in an involved real-world situation (“*Consider a California employee who is...*”). As if to say: Yes, rest assured, this thing really works.

But that said: Even if it “really works,” it doesn’t (and can’t) work in a vacuum. Will people actually USE it?

With that in mind, the copy also puts itself in the shoes of different categories of users.

If you’re an employee, why is it worth changing the way you’re used to doing things?

What if you’re a manager? (The copy excerpt you see above.)

What if you’re in HR...and so managers and employees both depend on you?

You want your copy to make them ALL react like this: “This product will do THAT for me?” And from there: “Okay, well, if that’s the case, can we make this happen...sooner rather than later, please?”

And from there...surprise! That long sales cycle turns out to be not quite so long.

3. B2C and B2B examples of appealing to emotion.

B2C illustration: More from *Mustang Enthusiast* direct mail letter:

<letter headline>

The Friend Who’s There to Give You a Hand (and Maybe a Laugh...)

<body copy excerpt>

(...)

Think of us as a friend who’s in your garage right there beside you. The friend who’s already done it and knows what’ll happen at every step, what to look out for, what to worry about, what not to worry about. The friend who doesn’t leave any detail out—and explains those details in a way only a friend would.

The friend who—as a friend is supposed to do, right?—makes it all even more fun.

(© 2007, Amos Press, Inc.)

B2B illustration: Excerpt from a sell sheet explaining FORTUNE1000 services company's "defined benefits administration" offering:

As calculation routines are automated and more and more historical pension data is available electronically, Convergys is able to provide your employees self-service capabilities. But easily accessible information and tools will only be effective if they're easy to understand and use, and defined benefits certainly isn't a naturally easy subject. With that in mind Convergys presents the information in a way the average person can understand.

(© 2007, Convergys Corporation)

Analysis

We've now seen it for ourselves: Accomplish one of our three "requirements" and you tend to accomplish the others.

In talking about appealing to *emotion*, we could also make the same point by saying this: Appeals to emotion don't work in a vacuum.

(Yep, there's that "it can't work in a vacuum" thing again...)

While illustrations already discussed appeal very much to emotion, their emotional appeals succeed because they COME FROM clear and specific description.

Clear and specific description of the reader's life.

Clear and specific description of the product accomplishing what matters to the reader!

Which brings us back to *Mustang Enthusiast*...and the connection it attempts to make to an inherently emotional concept: friendship.

As noted, those interested in information about Mustangs have more than a few choices. So just saying "think of us as a friend" isn't going to convince someone to pay for another Mustang magazine. Or pay for a Mustang magazine, period!

The “friend” analogy works because it reflects the content of the magazine—i.e., it reflects the product in action. (Just as the “you can...” approach of the *Paper Made Easy* ad reflected the content of that magazine.)

You don’t see it in the excerpt, but in the letter we also included snippets from *Mustang Enthusiast* “how-to” articles...snippets that show the columnists’ penchant for cracking a joke or two when doing so helps them convey information more clearly.

Just like you’d expect from a friend.

(And so came that analogy!)

Just like the *Mustang Enthusiast* illustration, the emotional firepower in the copy selling defined benefits administration comes from clear and specific description.

And compared to our earlier B2B illustrations, it’s got just as MUCH emotional firepower.

Start with one of the target audiences: HR staff in large organizations responsible for defined benefits.

They want to be appreciated—by the employees they serve and by those who dismiss them as a “cost center.”

And so they could hear the oft-used phrase “self-service” and think, “But is it *really* self-service? Is this going make employees like me more, or like me less...because they find they can’t actually USE it? And if that’s the case, then they’ll *continue* to like me less because I can’t keep up with all their requests!”

Such a reaction hints at the skepticism *employees*—another target audience—might feel.

Like any of us, employees want the information they want when they want it, and they want to be in control. Given all that, they might *welcome* the idea of self-service.

But—again, like any of us!—they don’t enjoy feeling stupid, or inadequate, or frustrated.

And when they're expected to use something but can't make sense of it, they not only feel any or all of the above. They feel angry. They feel like they have less control, not more.

By acknowledging all this and noting what's done to address it ("*...defined benefits certainly isn't a naturally easy subject. With that in mind...*"), the copy allays these fears.

Conclusion: Wait Before You Change that Dial...

If good B2C and B2B copy succeed for the same reasons, then it behooves all of us to be students of B2C marketing.

We're engulfed in it every day, so it's easy...

Read the solicitations in your mailbox.

Listen to radio ads. Glance at banner ads.

Watch TV commercials.

Peel away the stylistic exterior and make note of how the good ones accomplish everything we've discussed.

And use them as inspiration as you work to sell your products and services with greater clarity and specificity.

About the author: Business-to-business companies with complex product & service offerings—and, yes, some excellent consumer companies!—hire **Mike O'Sullivan** to help them write sales & marketing materials that are more likely to be read, absorbed, and acted on. Visit www.mikeos.com to see more of Mike's work and to read what his clients say about him.