

A Straight-line Plan for Writing Articles

By Barbara McNichol

When you need to take time out of a busy schedule to write an article for a trade publication, you'll want to take a straight-line approach to getting your message out. Let me explain how this worked for professional speaker Ruth Kay Petersen of Denver in the process of writing an article for a magazine called *Step Into Success*.

Ruth Kay had lots of existing material to work from—her promotional brochure, two issues of her newsletter, several articles, her booklet *Fun Stuff to Keep You Laughing*, and her presentations. First, we had to decide which existing elements of her materials “fit” the needs of this magazine, its readers, and the editor’s current requirements.

Because it was the first time we worked with this publication, we dealt with several unknowns. We researched the editor's expectations for this article, specifically the time line, number of words, and delivery method (fax, e-mail, disk, etc.). The article had to be a 1000-word piece, sent via disk (saved in MS Word) within six weeks; it would be published three months later.

Next, we defined the five steps of the straight-line plan and worked through the first four before we wrote a single word. They are:

1. Target audience
2. Message
3. Theme
4. Tone
5. Test

Describing the Target Audience

These questions provided a starting point in the writing process:

- Who reads the targeted publication?
- What are the demographics and psychographics of its readers?
- What do they hope to gain by reading the publication?

We learned that the majority of *Step Into Success* readers are women in direct sales who have a wide variety of experience, often coaching others in their organization. This publication provides inspiration and fresh ideas to help them stay motivated in their sales jobs.

Fine-tuning the Message

We narrowed Ruth Kay's wealth of material to one concept: How to add lighthearted fun to a sales person's day. She wanted to make sure the article's message aligned with the principles she delivers from the platform. Our intent? To match her experience with the needs of the targeted readers. This question kept us on a straight-line path toward setting the right message for the article: *What do we want the audience to think, do, believe, or remember as a result of reading this piece?*

Ruth Kay wanted the readers—both aspiring and experienced sales people—to see the value of using laughter in their everyday interactions. She wrote her article to provide 10 outrageously fun ways to “Add Laughter to Your Sales Success” (also the title). As a result of reading the article, sales people would step up the “enjoyment” aspects of their jobs and reap rewards for doing so.

Determining the Theme

Working with a theme encourages writers to play with our fabulously rich language and give an article more personality. Be aware that the theme is the imaginative pathway leading to an article’s message, but not the message itself. The message has the power; the theme adds color and clarity.

Ruth Kay settled on “laughter is powerful” as a theme. In both her writing and speaking, she is a master of outrageous hyperbole, achieved by telling embarrassing stories and turning them into kernels of wisdom. That part of her personality needed to show up creatively and clearly in the article.

Setting the Tone

Once we clarified the message and theme, we paid attention to the tone and style of articles currently being published in *Step Into Success*. Before we worked on the first draft, we asked these questions:

- Do articles customarily use first, second, or third person (I, you, or he/she)?
- Do paragraphs tend to be long or short?
- Is bullet form used, or longer prose?
- Does the publication include the author's credentials and contact information? If so, follow the same style of use.
- Do the articles commonly feature subheads, graphs, charts, sidebars? If so, use a similar format.

Carefully study articles already published, then echo their style elements to achieve the tone that works for the specific target audience.

Testing Your Intent

Before sending her masterpiece to the editor, Ruth Kay gave her article to some sales people who face the challenge of staying inspired. In addition to getting their general reaction, she asked them to pick out the elements we had built into the article. Could they easily answer these questions from just a quick read?

- Who is the target audience?
- What is the key message?
- What is the theme?
- Do the style and tone “fit” the magazine?

Their responses provided the answers we were seeking, plus a bonus. They laughed out loud at the humorous scenarios and imaginative ideas. Clearly this straight-line approach had brought us directly to Ruth Kay's desired destination.

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