Characteristics of Good Letters

Know your purpose – Know your audience

Clear Content

- Separates ideas into short paragraphs
- Guides reader through the ideas with transitional phrases
- Uses familiar words
- Uses active voice

A Tone of Goodwill

- Create a positive feeling toward individual or organization
- Present message from reader's perspective – emphasize the “you” point of view
- Point out the benefits to the reader
- Be sensitive to gender, race, age, bias, disability, etc.
- Frame ideas positively

Correct Format

- Appearance reflect the writer's carefulness and experience
- Make a good impression – be professional
FIGURE 9.1 Business Letter Formatting

Dateline
(2 inches down
or 1 blank line
below letterhead)

May 18, 2003

Inside address

Ms. LaTonya Williams
Health Care Specialists
2006 Fairview Road
Costa Mesa, CA 92627

Salutation

Dear Ms. Williams:

Subject line

SUBJECT: Formatting business letters

At your request, this letter illustrates and explains business letter formatting in a nutshell. The most important points to remember are these:

1. Set side margins between 1 and 1 1/2 inches; most word processing programs automatically set margins at 1 inch.
2. Start the date 2 inches from the top edge of the paper or 1 blank line below the letterhead, whichever position is lower.
3. Allow about 5 lines after the date—more lines for shorter letters and fewer for longer ones.

The two most popular letter styles are block and modified block. Block style, with all lines beginning at the left, causes the least trouble. In modified block style letters, the date and closing lines start at the center. For both styles the complimentary close is followed by 3 or 4 lines for the writer's signature. Reference initials and enclosure notations, if used, appear in the lower left corner, as shown below:

So that you can see additional styles, I'm sending our office style guide. I certainly hope this material is helpful to you and your assistants, Ms. Williams.

Sincerely,

Sharon Montoya

Writer's printed name

Reference initials

Enclosure

Handwritten signature

Complimentary close

Leave side margins of 1 to 1 1/2 inches

Don't justify line endings; keep them ragged right
Two page letter

FIGURE 12.2 Informational Report—Letter Format

Tips for Letter Reports
• Use letter format for short informal reports sent to outsiders.
• Organize the facts section into logical divisions identified by consistent headings.
• Single-space the body.
• Double-space between paragraphs.
• Leave two blank lines above each side heading.
• Create side margins of 1 to 1 1/4 inches.
• Add a second-page heading, if necessary, consisting of the addressee’s name, the date, and the page number.

Center for Consumers of Legal Services
P.O. Box 260
Richmond, VA 23219

September 7, 2003

Ms. Lisa Burgess, Secretary
Lake Austin Homeowners
9209 Oak Hill Drive
Austin, TX 78754

Dear Ms. Burgess,

As an executive director of the Center for Consumers of Legal Services, I'm pleased to send you this information describing how your homeowners' association can sponsor a legal services plan for its members. After an introduction with background data, this report will discuss three steps necessary for your group to start its plan.

Introduction
A legal services plan promotes preventive law by letting members talk to attorneys whenever problems arise. Prompt legal advice often avoids or prevents expensive litigation. Because groups can supply a flow of business to the plan's attorneys, groups can negotiate free consultation, follow-up, and discounts.

Two kinds of plans are commonly available. The first, a free plan, offers free legal consultation along with discounts for services when the participating groups are sufficiently large to generate business for the plan's attorneys. These plans usually act as a substitute for advertising for the attorneys. The second common type is the prepaid plan. Prepaid plans provide more benefits, but members must pay annual fees ranging of $500 or more a year. Over 50 million people are covered by legal services plans today, and a majority belong to free plans.

Since you inquired about a free plan for your homeowners' association, the following information describes how to set up such a program.

Determine the Benefits Your Group Needs
The first step in establishing a free legal services plan is to meet with the members of your group to decide what benefits they want. Typical benefits include the following:

Free consultation. Members may consult a participating attorney—for phone or in the attorney's office—to discuss any matter. The number of consultations is unlimited, provided each is about a separate matter. Consultations are generally limited to 30 minutes, but they include substantive analysis and advice.

Free document review. Important papers—such as leases, insurance policies, and installment sales contracts—may be reviewed with legal counsel. Members may ask questions and receive an explanation of terms.

Source: Mary Ellen Guffy, Business Communication: Process and Product
Discount on additional services. For more complex matters, participating attorneys will charge members 75 percent of the attorney's normal fee. However, some organizations choose to charge a flat fee for commonly needed services.

Select the Attorneys for Your Plan

Groups with geographically concentrated memberships have an advantage in forming legal plans. These groups can limit the number of participating attorneys and yet provide adequate service. Generally, smaller panels of attorneys are advantageous.

Assemble a list of candidates, inviting them to apply. The best way to compare prices is to have candidates submit their fees. Your group can then compare fee schedules and select the lowest bidder, if price is important. Arrange to interview attorneys in their offices.

After selecting an attorney or a panel, sign a contract. The contract should include the reason for the plan, what the attorney agrees to do, what the group agrees to do, how each side can end the contract, and the signatures of both parties. You may also wish to include references to malpractice insurance, assurance that the group will not interfere with the attorney-client relationship, an evaluation form, a grievance procedure, and responsibility for government filings.

Publicize the Plan to Your Members

Members won't use a plan if they don't know about it, and a plan will not be successful if it is unused. Publicity must be vocal and ongoing. Announce it in newsletters, meetings, bulletin boards, and flyers.

Persistence is the key. All too frequently, leaders of an organization assume that a single announcement is all that's needed. They expect members to see the value of the plan and remember that it's available. Most organization members, though, are not as involved as the leadership. Therefore, it takes more publicity than the leadership usually expects in order to reach and maintain the desired level of awareness.

Summary

A successful free legal services plan involves designing a program, choosing the attorneys, and publicizing the plan. To learn more about these steps or to order a $26 how-to manual, call me at (304) 333-9991.

Sincerely,

Richard M. Ramos, Esq.
Executive Director
pas

Source: Mary Ellen Guffy, Business Communication: Process and Product