

# Tell them what to do

By David Waters, Managing Director PrimeCare

March 2009

C-T-A. It sounds like a dreaded disease with long, unpronounceable names that have been conveniently shortened to an acronym to make it less offensive.

Unfortunately, most marketing communications haven't caught the 'disease' yet ... but should look at getting infected as soon as possible. Yes, this is one you want to catch.

CTA is short for Call To Action.

Every business person that's ever earned an honest shekel knows that, at some point, they have to ask for the order, offer their pen for the contract signing or simply ask "When would you like that delivered?"

These are classic examples of a Call To Action. It's an actionable request. For a good salesperson it's as natural as breathing. Unfortunately, most care service providers have been exposed to the 'disease' and often feel uncomfortable asking their own Call To Action.

Yet most underperforming marketing communications can be diagnosed with poorly constructed, weak or unclear requests for action. Sometimes they simply don't exist at all. After your headline statement, your CTA is the most valuable, hardworking and essential piece of your message.

Why does your Call To Action matter? Communication inspiration comes from the most unlikely places ... this time, from the study of health psychology.

Way back in 1960, a Yale University researcher by the name of Howard Leventhal was studying why it was so hard to change the behaviour of people even though it may be in their best interest. An important question for health professionals.

Since the early 1950s, psychologists had identified that seemingly insignificant actions or details within a message could have disproportionately large effects on its effectiveness. Think of the parent who delivers many passionate speeches and warnings but sees no change in their teenager's driving habits. But news coverage of a car accident may change their attitudes in a moment. This has become known as the study of channel factors.

Mr Leventhal decided to test the reaction on senior students to some compelling reasons to get a tetanus injection. Various communications from printed materials to lectures and even graphic pictures of tetanus infections were used. The result? Very few students arrived at the campus medical centre requesting the vaccination. Reportedly only a three percent response.

Then - and this is the really interesting part - he changed the conclusion of his message to include a map of the campus with the medical centre circled, the phone number and the opening hours.

The results shot up by over 900 percent. A total of 28 percent of the target audience (senior students) turned up to get their injection.

This is hardly surprising to enlightened communicators half a century later. But it begs the question why communications suffer from a CTA deficit?

So here's your homework. Collect your marketing communications pieces. Brochures, flyers, fact sheets, press releases, DVDs, promotional products ... everything ... and check its Call To Action.

Is it clear? Is it understandable? Is it obvious? If your service requires a series of steps to be completed, have you detailed these in an easy to follow format?

Your clients and prospects are silently begging to be led. Don't disappoint them. Deliver your distinctive message sandwiched between a compelling headline statement and an actionable last request.

