Winning by a NOSE:  
The Structure of Persuasion

In an organizational setting, people write for one of three reasons—to inform, to evaluate, or to persuade. For each of these purposes, there is a structural pattern that will produce the best results. You can think of these structural patterns as templates for delivering content in the right order, but they are not templates created by English teachers or document designers. Rather, they arise from the brain of the reader. They are part of our innate mental apparatus.

The human brain is hard-wired to look for content in a specific order, depending on what purpose we will make of the message. If you use the wrong pattern in organizing your content, you will get the wrong results. It's like trying to drive a nail with a screwdriver—you might eventually get the job done, but it's going to be a lot harder than it has to be. In the opening chapter, I asked you to read an executive summary so that you could make a simple decision: worth keeping or not? By asking you to make a decision, I established intentionality in your reading process. You were approaching the task with the goal of making a decision, so you were looking for certain kinds of content in a very predictable order. If I had given you a different challenge, such as reading the executive summary to determine how many factual statements the bank made about itself, you would have approached the task differently and would have been looking for a different pattern.

In fact, if I had asked you to perform the latter task, more of you would have found the writing acceptable. But because you were trying to make a decision, you needed a persuasive structure to the content. One of the most common mistakes that people make when creating proposals is writing informatively rather than persuasively. What’s the difference? And what’s wrong with writing informatively in a proposal?

Contrary to what that VP of engineering thought, the one who believed persuasion was all about “fancy words and pretty pictures,” the real difference between information and persuasion
is a matter of structure. And the reason is an informative structure doesn’t work in a proposal because information doesn’t create momentum toward a decision.

Most people are comfortable providing information. That’s a writing or speaking task you probably feel good about. Evaluations are a little tougher for most of us, and if they involve touchy material, as a performance appraisal might, we may actually dread doing them. However, for the majority of people, persuasive writing is by far the most difficult communication task. It involves a step-level increase in complexity and difficulty over what the other types of communication require.

The goal of persuasion is to motivate the decision maker to take action. Information fails in that regard, because simply listing facts in a descending order of priority doesn’t create any momentum toward action. Unfortunately, when we’re under pressure we are likely to do what we’re confident and comfortable doing. For most writers, that’s presenting information, usually to an audience that’s almost as knowledgeable on the subject as we are. In a proposal, that’s a lethal combination. Factual information presented at a high level of technical expertise not only doesn’t persuade, it may actually alienate the reader.

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**Figure 5-1: Move out of the Comfort Zone to Persuade Effectively**

The purposes that govern informing, evaluating and persuading are so different that using one mode when your purpose calls for the other will condemn your efforts to failure. So let’s
distinguish among the primary reasons people write in a business setting and look at how those different purposes require different approaches.

**Information**

The first and most common reason people write is to inform. They're writing to share factual content with somebody else who needs that content to their own job. The ideals of informative writing are clarity and conciseness. The focus should be on transferring the information quickly and easily. To achieve those goals we should get right to the point—that is, the most basic and important fact that the audience needs to hear—and then drill down to the next most important and the next and so on. When our reader thinks that he or she has heard enough, they will bail out and stop reading. If the reader doesn’t understand the facts or, worse yet, misunderstands them, we have failed in our communication effort.

The best way to communicate informatively is to use the pattern taught in journalism classes: the funnel. (See Figure 4-2.) Start with the fact or set of facts that is most important to the reader. In journalism, that’s often who, what, when, where, why, and how? Then go to the next most important fact. Then the third level of importance, the fourth, the fifth, and so on, until there is nothing left to say. By structuring your document this way, you allow your readers to stop reading as soon as they have seen enough.

The challenge in writing informatively is to figure out which fact is most important to the reader. Too often we assume that everybody will have the same orientation to the material that we have. But that can be a big mistake. Even a single reader is likely to have different interests in the same story. If you pick up a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, you're looking for a different set of facts in the lead paragraph than you are when you pick up a copy of *People*. From one publication we expect a financial orientation, while the other will give us the human interest angle.

The most common mistakes in presenting information are writing chronologically, which usually leads to wordiness, or starting with facts that matter to the writer but not to the reader, which usually leads to confusion or false emphasis. Another error is to important content at the end of an information piece of writing. Because people tend to scan this kind of writing from the top down and bail out of the process when they think they have the gist of it, they won't see anything you put at the end unless you work hard to highlight it. This is a particular problem
with e-mails, because many people only read the first part of the message, the part that appears in the viewing window in their e-mail browser. They naturally assume that’s where the most important facts are located.

![Figure 5-2: The Funnel-Shaped Structure of Informative Writing](image)

Start with the most important or most general fact first. (For example, who, what, when, where, why, how.)

Less important facts next in descending order of importance to the reader.

Simply quit at the end.

**Evaluation**

The second reason business people write is to evaluate something or somebody. A performance appraisal, a competitive analysis, an appraisal of an asset—in all of these cases, simply presenting the facts is not enough. What we want to know is what you think, what your opinion or value judgment is, because we assume that you are a person of experience and training who has dealt with similar issues before. (Or we recognize that you are in a position of authority so that your opinion matters, even if it’s not terribly well informed.)

When they are offering a professional opinion, people aren’t trying to communicate facts alone. Instead, they’re trying to interpret what those facts mean. This is particularly true when the facts are being offered in comparison to another set of related facts. For example, consider what happens in a court case when one side calls in an expert witness. Such a witness isn’t asked to establish facts about the case—“Where was the defendant on the night of July 15?” Instead, the expert witness is asked to offer an opinion about what a certain body of facts indicates. “On
the basis of these facts, do you think the defendant is mentally competent?” “Given this sequence of events, did the defendant act in accord with the profession’s current standard of conduct?”

In the business world, each time you write a performance appraisal or do a competitive analysis, you’re writing an evaluation. If you merely recite the facts but don’t offer your opinion, you aren’t doing the whole job.

The pattern for evaluative writing is depicted in Figure 5-3, below, where an evaluation is compared to a hamburger. The point of the illustration is that you need a top bun (the introduction), a bottom bun (the conclusion), and lots of meat in the middle. By contrast, informative writing doesn’t need an introduction to set the scene and it really doesn't require a formal conclusion. To write an effective evaluation, however, we must to define our subject—what (or who) we are evaluating—and the criteria on which we are basing our evaluation. Then we need to present our observations and evidence. Finally we need to offer our opinion. If we follow that structural pattern, our opinion will sound logical and our evaluation will be easy to follow.

![Figure 5-3: The Three-Part Structure of Evaluation]

Good examples of evaluative writing can be found in Consumer Reports. If you were thinking about buying a new camera or a refrigerator or snow tires, you could find articles there that would evaluate the various brands and models available. First, the editors define what they are discussing, why you as a reader might care about this kind of product, and what criteria are being used to evaluate the options. Next, they evaluate every model or brand point by point.
according to the criteria they listed. Usually this part is a combination of text containing anecdotal information about their testing and a table or matrix in which every brand or model is presented. Finally, they conclude the article by indicating which model is the “best buy” in their opinion. Do they care if you buy a DVD player or an ice maker or snow tires? No. It doesn’t matter to them if you never buy anything. Their sole purpose is to take a look at what’s available and offer an expert opinion about the various choices.

What usually happens when we read an evaluation from a trusted source, like *Consumer Reports* in the United States or *Which?* in the United Kingdom, is that we skip the opening and the middle parts and go right to the end where they tell which brand is the "best buy." Because we know they are objective and do their research carefully, we trust their evaluations. All we want is their opinion. We're less interested in how they got there.

Sometimes, though, you get an evaluative report where the opinion is shocking or doesn't make any sense. Suppose you are looking for an appraisal of a piece of real estate you own, perhaps to use it as collateral on a loan. Typically, a bank will want to get two appraisals of that property. You probably have a pretty good idea of what the property is worth, so if one of the two appraisals comes in at half the value of the other one, you'll immediately turn to the body of the report to find out why they are so different.

We use evaluative writing in proposals when we are asked questions that involve comparing two or more approaches. Sometimes the question will be worded to ask for "strengths and weaknesses in your opinion" of a particular approach, technology, or other element of the solution. I have even seen RFPs that ask you to indicate what differentiates you from your competitors. Using the evaluative structure enables you to set up the terms of comparison so that you offer a reasonably objective opinion based on rational assumptions.

**Persuasion**

The third reason people write is to persuade. Persuasion means we are attempting to influence what somebody else thinks or feels or does. We’re trying to influence our audience in some small way so that they are motivated to take actions. We want to get them to support our policy, to care about an issue as we do, or to sign a contract and give us their business. Effective persuasion requires more than simply delivering a bunch of facts, and our opinion alone isn’t going to persuade a customer to buy from us. Instead, we have to structure our message so that
we deliver the content in a way that produces the right kind of change in our audience’s thinking or beliefs or behavior.

Undeed, in contract to an informative article about a product or an evaluative review in "Consumer Reports," when we write persuasively we care very much whether the reader is motivated to buy. Persuasion combines elements of information and evaluation, of course. Good persuasion must present facts accurately in keeping with the maxim of quality, and it should offer intelligent, informed opinions. But to be successful as persuasion, what we write or say must influence the audience.

Fortunately, the most effective pattern for persuasion is easy to understand and use. It consists of four steps. It's a straightforward process of identifying the customer's needs, issues or concerns; acknowledging the importance of these needs in terms of the meaningful outcomes the client will gain by addressing them; recommending a solution that solves the problem and delivers the right results; and finally presenting evidence that we can deliver the solution on time and on budget. That's it.

I used to call this pattern the Persuasive Paradigm, but lots of my clients began calling it the NOSE pattern because the four elements of persuasive structure—Needs, Outcomes, Solution, Evidence—create the acronym NOSE. So now I tell people that they can win by a NOSE. That they should follow their NOSE to more success. That effective persuasion is as plain as the NOSE on their face. That if they pick persuasion as their controlling purpose, they should pick their NOSE. I keep saying these things until the groans drown me out. But I'm hoping that by making these lousy jokes I will help people remember the acronym, which means they will also remember the single most important key to writing persuasively.

The four steps to persuasion embodied in the NOSE pattern are summarized in Figure 5-4.
Let's take a closer look at each element of the NOSE pattern:

**First: the customer’s Needs.** The initial step in persuading is to demonstrate you understand the customer’s needs, issues, or problem. Your first job is to summarize their business situation briefly, focusing on the gap to be closed or the competency to be acquired or the problem to be solved.

By focusing on the customer's pains, we gain their attention. In fact, they will probably be surprised that a vendor has actually listened to them closely. They will also be less anxious about moving forward, because they will see that we have defined the problem correctly. As a result, the solution we propose is likely to be sound. People approach the buying process with a lot of anxiety. *Will I waste my money? Will I waste my time? Will I damage my career by making a bad choice?* If our proposal starts with our company history, the buyer's anxiety level shoots up. But if we start with their needs, immediately they feel calmer and more confident about looking at our recommendations.

Research into the psychology of judgment and economic behavior by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky led to what they called "prospect theory," an explanation of how people make decisions under uncertainty—or, in other words, in the real world as opposed to some thought experiment cooked up by an economist or philosopher. This work is the foundation of what is frequently called behavioral economics and resulted in Kahneman receiving the Nobel Prize in
Economics in 2002. At the risk of oversimplification, we can say that prospect theory describes how people choose among alternative courses of action according to a reliable heuristic. In making a buying decision, the heuristic is basically to ask three questions:

1. Are we getting what we need?
2. Is it worth it?
3. Can the vendor actually do it?

The first question grounds the decision in relevance. Does each alternative address something that we think is important? The second question then poses the issue of utility: Is this the best way to spend our money, our time, our energy? Note that in asking this question, we're not assessing the features and benefits of the various solutions. Instead, we're asking whether the problem itself is worth addressing. Will solving this problem pay enough dividends that the investment we have made in solving it yields a positive return? Finally, the last question addresses the issue of the probability of a successful outcome. Assuming that the alternative is addressing what we consider to be a meaningful need and that we believe there is a compelling reason to move forward to address that need, how likely is it that this vendor will be able to deliver the solution. By answering these three questions in that order, we deliver a message that motivates the customer to say Yes.

As you can see, there is nothing sneaky or deceptive about answering these questions. But sometimes people with a strong technical orientation—the kind of people who have been trained using materials that are rigorously informative in structure and who are most comfortable themselves writing informatively—are very suspicious of persuasion. They just want to get right to the solution. They think that's all that matters. The vice president of sales for a large HVAC firm once asked me, “Why should I tell the customer what their problem is? They already know that. If they didn’t think they had a problem, they wouldn’t have called us.”

The answer, of course, is that we are not telling the customers something they don’t already know. We’re reducing their anxiety. They’re worried that the solution we propose won’t work because it’s the right solution to the wrong problem. By showing the customer that we “get” it, that we listened to them and understood what they told us, we raise their level of confidence. We help them feel confident that what we propose will be appropriate for them.
Decisions arise first from an emotional response and then are logically justified after the fact. By focusing on Needs and Outcomes up front, we engage the decision maker's emotions. The traditional view of human decision making, certainly since the rise of rationalism, is that human beings make decisions by following logical pathways. Some people do make decisions that way—Charles Darwin describes how he created a list of pros and cons for getting married and when the pros outweighed the cons decided to ask his cousin, Emma Wedgewood, to be his wife. (On the pro side he wrote that a wife would be "better than a dog anyhow.") But research done by Antonio Damasio, head of the University of Southern California Brain and Creativity Institute, has shown that emotions underpin decision making. Studying brain-damaged patients, Damasio shows in his book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, that without the ability to generate emotions, we have no ability to make decisions. Accordingly, by first addressing Needs and Outcomes, we are flipping the emotional switch that will lead our customer to make a decision in our favor.

**Second: the desired Outcomes.** The next step in persuasive structure is to focus on the outcomes or results the customer wants to achieve from solving the problem or meeting the need. How will he or she measure success? What must the organization see in terms of results to make their investment in your products and services worthwhile?

This part of the persuasive structural pattern is probably a bit counterintuitive. After all, wouldn’t it be more logical to state the problem and then give the solution? The thing to remember is that our goal is motivation. If we don’t create a sense of urgency in the decision maker to go forward with our recommendation, we have not been successful in our persuasion effort. However, motivation does not come from problems and needs. Most businesses are faced with dozens and dozens of problems or needs, most of which will never get solved. Why? Because in the mind of the decision maker, “it’s just not worth it.” In other words, the return to be gained from fixing the problem doesn’t outweigh its cost.

The reality is that every business has lots of problems, most of which will be ignored. If you were to ask management why they don’t do something about those problems, the answer would that there just isn't enough payback from solving them to make it worthwhile. Solving these problems just isn't worth it. This is a key principle of Kahneman and Tversky's prospect theory: we see options that yield lesser outcomes as net losses and options that yield greater outcomes as
gains. We pursue those courses of action that are most likely to yield the highest rate of return or the most value (what Kahneman and Tversky call "utility") and reject those that offer less. This is particularly true when we are making decisions on behalf of a group to which we belong. (We will discuss the relationship between decision heuristics and value in more detail in chapter seven.)

You don’t want your solution to fall into the category of “not worth it.” You want to create a strong motivation to move forward in your customer by showing that the problem you are addressing is one that really should be fixed because of its potential yield. You want them to see that the Outcomes, the return on investment or improvement in productivity or whatever, is so big that they can’t afford to wait. And you need to do that right away, as soon as you have identified the

Focus on their pain to get their attention; focus on their gain to get their commitment.

Third: recommend a Solution. The heart of your proposal is, of course, your Solution. If you have first whetted the client’s appetite for it by focusing on their Needs and potential Outcomes, your client will be eager to hear your Solution. But many proposals stumble at this point.

The problem is that the presentation of the Solution often lapses into technical details and jargon, focuses on details rather impacts, and comes across as self-centered because it never connects back to either the Needs or the Outcomes. The client still wants to know why you’re recommending this approach or this product. What makes this the right way to go? How does it solve the key problems? Why is it the best way to deliver the results the client seeks?

Another problem is that most proposals don’t actually recommend anything. They lapse into informative writing and merely describe products or services in a flat, factual way. To be a Solution, the products and services you are recommending must be linked to the customer’s specific situation. “You indicated that one of the problems you are facing is declining value in your eCommerce transactions. To help increase transaction value we recommend….”

Also, when you recommend a solution, sound like you believe in it. Say the words: “We recommend the immediate installation of LeadPoint asset management software.” “We urge
you…” “We are confident…” Don’t be wishy-washy. Don’t depend on telepathy to get your point across.

To solve the puzzle of the solution, write from the top down. In your first sentence focus on a general statement of what you are recommending as a means for solving the client’s problem. The next sentence or two should explain the recommendation in functional terms. What will your solution do for the client? How will it work? Then make sure you have shown the linkage with the client’s specific needs. To do that, explain what component(s) of your solution are intended to address each need, what positive impact each aspect of the solution will deliver, and finally cite a brief bit of proof—a reference, an award, test data, or some other form of objective validation—that substantiates your claim.

Here’s a sample solution statement that is written informatively rather than persuasively:

| The InVicta IronClad model 2100 Access Control Head End Hardware and Software will be the heart of the system for your offices in Pittsburgh. The panel will connect to the new software head end located within your facility. The system will be designed for easy access into your existing network in the event that you decide to connect remote sites to your location. In the initial design we have assumed that the host computer will be located in the Security Console. As part of this project, we will install access control panels, card readers, and alarm contacts for granting or denying access into the existing three doors in your office. In addition, we will install Card Readers on the existing sliding gates and turnstiles. Each of the access points will have a card reader and contact for access into the facility as well as door status. The purpose of the system is to determine who is allowed into the facility at any given time and to keep accurate records of all access or alarm activity. |

Blah, blah, blah… Not very persuasive, interesting, or clear, is it? It’s basically just a bunch of information about the product and the project.

Here’s the same solution statement rewritten using the format outlined above:
To address your need for improved physical security in the office environment at your corporate headquarters in Pittsburgh we recommend an electronic security system that limits access to authorized personnel only. The access system will prevent anyone from entering your offices unless he or she first swipes an electronic ID badge through an automated card reader. We recommend the InVicta IronClad model 2100 Access Control system, which includes all the hardware and software necessary. At the heart of the system, the InVicta uses a comprehensive control panel, known as the “head end” hardware, and a software package that controls all access points, reads the ID cards, checks the database, provides constant monitoring around the clock. We recommend this system because it matches your specific needs:

- **Budgetary compliance:** The total price for the InVicta system is more than $20,000 below the budget you have established. Other systems that use biometric data rather than card readers are much more costly without providing any more security. The InVicta’s lower price will free up funds to cover installation and training, assuring a smooth roll-out. For example, when we installed an InVicta system for a large automobile dealership, the entire package, including all support services, was less than the hardware costs alone for competitive models.

- **Minimal disruption to workflow:** Your employees will find the ID card system easy to use and intuitive to learn. The benefit for you is that they will quickly accept the new system and will make very few mistakes in using it. As a result, your normal pattern of working will not be disrupted and there will be no impact on productivity. To indicate how easy this system is to learn, consider this: we installed a new access control system at a major Pittsburgh bank over a three-day weekend. When people arrived at work on Tuesday morning, management greeted them in the lobby, gave them their new ID cards, and showed them how to swipe the card reader for entry. From that day forward, the bank experienced only two access control problems out of more than 250,000 uses of the system!

And so on. You can see which solution presentation is designed to communicate to the client’s interests and which is just a feature dump.

**Fourth: the Evidence you can do it.** The last step in persuasion is to provide Evidence that you can do the job. Basically, you are trying to show that you can and will keep your promises. You are providing proof that you can deliver the solution you have proposed on time and on budget. You want to convince the decision maker that this is your area of expertise. Sometimes
your Evidence is intended to establish that your firm is financially stable, properly managed, and well prepared.

Providing Evidence is usually the part of the persuasive job that most proposals handle pretty well. But there are a couple of ways we can do the job better. First, we can be thoughtful in selecting our evidence, choosing items that are most likely to appeal to the specific decision maker and be relevant to the opportunity. Second, we can present our evidence in the most effective way possible.

In Chapter 7 we’ll deal with selecting the right evidence to support your value proposition, and in Chapter 16 we will cover the best ways to write typical kinds of evidence, such as team member bios, case studies, company histories, and so forth. For now I just want to discuss briefly the "rules of evidence".

The first rule is that just because you have a particular bit of evidence you don't have to use it. Even though you have a snazzy, full-color map of North America showing all 78 of your company’s office locations, don’t use it unless it’s relevant. If you’re trying to sell to a company that also has numerous locations in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, and they closely match your locations, then it’s relevant and helpful. If you’re selling to a prospect who only has one location, forget it.

The second rule about choosing evidence is to consider the source. There are three kinds of evidence—things you say about yourself, things your clients say about you, and things independent third parties say—and each has a different level of credibility.

Among the things you can say about yourself, you might include information about product features, about the members of your team, about your project management methodology, or about your quality control philosophy. Those things are relatively noncontroversial, and a prospective client could check for accuracy if he or she really wanted to. These forms of evidence help establish your competence, which is why the questions in an RFP often focus on eliciting this kind of information. They answer a key question in the decision maker’s mind, namely, “Can these people really do what they claim?”

Another form of evidence you can offer about yourself—a type of evidence that helps minimize the client’s sense of risk or enhances their perception of the value of your offering—
focuses on measurable performance indicators and special financial terms. For example, you might provide evidence relating to unique contractual terms that you are offering. Or you might outline a “gain sharing” or “risk sharing” program based on specific performance guarantees or service level agreements.

The second source of evidence is your previous clients. What they’re willing to say about you is often more convincing than what you say about yourself for the obvious reason that they presumably have nothing to gain from it. (Whether they do gain anything is a different issue, and many companies provide tradeoffs and concessions for clients who give them strong endorsements. All the same, no client has to say anything, so the fact that they are willing to, even if it involves inducements, is still significant.)

You can provide evidence to a new prospect from a prior client by including references in your proposal. Just make sure you check with the reference to make certain they’re still happy with you. Sometimes yesterday’s glowing reference becomes tomorrow’s flaming law suit and we didn’t even know it. You might also include testimonials, including images of letters of praise from previous clients.

One of the most convincing forms of evidence coming from a client is the case study. As long as your case study is from a client similar in nature to your prospect, who had a similar problem, who had that problem alleviated by a solution similar to the one you’re proposing, and who achieved measurable positive results from your work—then you’re in great shape. However, if your case study just rehashes the history of some project in chronological fashion, forget it. That’s boring.

Case studies are usually the single most compelling form of evidence that a decision maker encounters. They have a lot going for them. For one thing, they appeal to what Robert Cialdini in Influence calls the "social proof" principle—other people have used this solution and benefitted from it, so why not us? If the case study involves a well-known client, it may also benefit from what Cialdini calls the "appeal to authority". A big company or a huge government agency chose this vendor, so they must be good.

Finally, third-party evidence comes in the form of awards, rankings, recognition, articles, analyst reports, and so on. Although that form of evidence used to be the most convincing of all, the fact that so many analyst firms are willing to sell their “approval” to the highest bidder has
made them somewhat suspect in recent years. All the same, if you were named the “best place to work” or an “industry innovator” or “Five Star Quality Award Winner” or some such thing, take advantage of it when you can. That’s still good stuff.

**The NOSE in Action**

As we’ve discussed earlier, lots of really bad proposals begin with a history of the vendor or with a technical description of the solution. These approaches don’t work because they don’t address the most important factor that will motivate the reader to decide to buy: a specific problem or need, the resolution of which offers a big payoff for the customer.

Let’s take a look at what happens when we use the right structure to create a persuasive message. First, here is an e-mail written to an internal audience. The author brought it to me in frustration. "This is really important," he said. "We need to do something. But when I make a recommendation it just gets ignored. What do you suggest?"

Here’s his internal proposal:

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Sample Proposal 1

To: Bill Henderson
From: Woolie Croft
Subject: Data Base Software

Today Mike Hinger stopper to explain the software available from his company which could give our executives personal access to the corporate data base in a way that would provide information to facilitate the decision-making process.
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There are all kinds of things wrong with this message, so many that it’s difficult to begin to enumerate them. There’s the vague subject line, the typo that transforms the verb into something that sounds like a Swedish surname (“Hinger-stopper”), the incredible sentence length, the use of nonspecific language (“personal access,” “decision-making process”), and the fact that its chief organizing principle seems to be a loosely chronological stream of consciousness. But the most
glaring problem, I think, is that it has no clear purpose to it. If you were Woolie's manager, Bill Henderson, your reaction to this memo would probably be a hearty "So what?" This message sounds like one of those worthless scraps headed "FYI," most of which end up being deleted from our e-mail inbox or tossed into the garbage. It certainly doesn't look or sound persuasive. It's not addressing a problem. It doesn't clearly recommend a solution.

Sadly, the author of this memo told me how frustrated he was that "nothing had happened." "Management complains about these problems we have with the database," he said, "but then, when you make a recommendation on how to fix it, they just ignore you." He honestly did not perceive that his memo hadn't recommended anything, that it failed to propose a solution. He was surprised when I suggested that it could be clearer and more persuasive.

Here's another proposal, this one in the form of a letter.

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Sample Proposal 2

August 3, 2002

Mr. Larry Barns
Director, Telecommunications Services
Information Systems Center
Challenger Automotive
P.O. Box 1476
Moreno Valley, California

Dear Larry:

It was a pleasure having dinner with you last week, and I appreciate the opportunity you gave me to present my telemarketing application.

Challenger Automotive is perceived as a leading component supplier to original equipment manufacturers of on/off highway heavy equipment, heavy duty trucks, and passenger cars and light trucks. The majority of your products are marketed to original equipment manufacturers. For this reason, Challenger product identity is usually lost to the vehicle purchaser. Advertising is aimed at
equipment buyers so that when equipment purchases are made, Challenger components are specified.

In the text of its advertisement, Challenger encourages the consumer to write in for further information concerning the product. In some instances, a catalog which is published periodically listing the name, telephone number, and address of dealers and distributors who stock Challenger components is mailed to the consumer.

The risk inherent in this method of advertising involves consumers contacting distributors who no longer carry Challenger components or who are simply out of stock. On the low end of the risk scale, the distributor will refer the buyer to another distributor. This lengthens the buying cycle. On the high end, the distributor will sell the buyer a similar component supplied by a manufacturer other than Challenger.

The solution to this problem is telemarketing, specifically a product we refer to as “Dealer On-Line.” Here is a brief description of how it works: The advertisement for the component will carry an 800 number. The consumer will call in on this number and reach a Challenger representative for the After-Market Sales Group. Using an electronic data base, the representative can direct the consumer to the nearest distributor of Challenger components.

Considering your initial response to my presentation of this concept, I know we have a solid application with “Dealer On-Line,” and I am looking forward to presenting it to the Sales and Marketing group at the division with your support.

Sincerely,

André LeToille

This letter is truly awful. It starts with a hackneyed, cliché opening that is both inappropriate and weak. It’s inappropriate because it implies that the salesperson was allowed to deliver his ideas only because he bought the client dinner. And it’s weak because the tone is not one of partnership, but rather of subservience: “Thank you for letting me present…”

Then the letter wastes the client’s time telling him what kind of business he’s in. Is the client supposed to deduce from this information that the salesperson has done his homework and understands the client thoroughly?
It’s not until the fourth paragraph that we see anything substantive—a hint of a business problem, namely that Challenger's advertising is probably not as effective as it could be. But the solution sounds so canned that the reader begins to suspect that perhaps the salesperson was somebody with a product in search of a need.

Finally, the ending is even weaker than the beginning. The writer completely abdicates responsibility for the selling process and doesn’t really ask for anything. Certainly not for a sale.

Both of these sample proposals suffer from the same fundamental weakness. They’re not organized in a way that clearly, effectively, persuasively communicates to the audience, that penetrates the noise and clutter surrounding the customer to make a strong point. They’re not appealing to the innate tendency people have to look for specific content in a specific order.

What happens if we restructure them using the NOSE pattern? Well, we immediately see some dramatic improvements:

Revised Sample 1

To: Bill Henderson
From: Woolie Crofft
Subject: Improving Executive Access to the Database

Our executives need access to the corporate database. The information it contains will be invaluable in helping them develop strategies, make decisions, and respond quickly to changing market conditions. Unfortunately, they are currently blocked from obtaining that information by a number of system-related problems.

Software available from Hinger Associates will remedy the situation. It interfaces easily with our existing system, creating a user-friendly “shell” that allows even nontechnical people to select, format, and manipulate the data he or she needs without affecting the database itself. I recommend we lease this software system for a six-month trial with an option to buy.

Mike Hinger, the developer of the system, indicated that installation will take about four days. He will provide all the necessary documentation and support. A six-month lease runs $2,500 a month, with the full amount credited toward the purchase price of $30,000. If this software offers even a modest increase in
You can see the difference immediately in this revision. Notice how it gets right to the point in the subject line: Improving executive access to data. This is reinforced in the Need statement in the first sentence: our executives need access to the database to make good decisions. Anyone who glances at this memo will see immediately why it’s important and what kind of problem it’s trying to solve. Also, the solution is now clearly stated in the form of a recommendation: “I recommend we lease this software system…” No ambiguity there.

The final paragraph add an extra fillip by providing a value proposition of sorts. It would be better if we had a bit more development in this area, perhaps, but at least the recipient’s thinking has been turned toward impact.

Here’s the other sample, revised using the NOSE pattern:

**Revised Sample 2**

August 3, 2002

Mr. Larry Barns  
Director, Telecommunications Services  
Information Systems Center  
Challenger Automotive  
P.O. Box 1476  
Moreno Valley, California

Dear Larry:

As you mentioned during our meeting on Tuesday, these are extremely competitive times for the automotive after-market parts industry. In such an environment, Challenger Automotive cannot afford to advertise in ways that benefit your competitors.
Unfortunately, that may be what’s happening each time Challenger runs an ad aimed at the consumer segment of the parts market without also including a toll-free number that can connect consumers immediately with the nearest Challenger dealer.

Your current advertisement encourages consumers to write in for information about the product and for a catalog that lists the names, telephone numbers, and addresses of dealers who stock Challenger components. You also offer an option in the ad in the form of your Web site URL, although there is no obvious link from the home page to help a consumer find the nearest dealer.

Consumers want convenience. They don’t want to wait. Some of your target customers are still reluctant to use the Internet to find information, and are not likely to go more than three clicks deep to find what they want. Even for those consumers who are willing to wait to receive a catalog or who have the persistence to use the Web site, there’s no guarantee the information they get will be current. The nearest dealer might be out of stock or may no longer carry Challenger components. The net result? You have spent advertising dollars that ended up benefiting a competitor.

I recommend the installation of a toll-free number: 1-888-CHALLENGER. This number will automatically connect a potential customer to a Challenger representative in your After-Market Sales Group. Through an interface between the telephone switch and the representative’s computer, he or she will see where the caller is located and will be able to identify the nearest distributor of Challenger components with parts in stock.

Challenger’s advertising campaign is a winner. With the addition of a customer-focused tool like the CHALLENGER toll-free number, it can yield breakthrough results. Attached are brief descriptions of the results a similar system delivered for other companies. I have also included a pricing summary. We can install the system and have it fully functional within six weeks of your go-ahead. And sales can begin to soar immediately!

Sincerely,

André LeToille

Once again, I think the improvement is so dramatic that it hardly needs to be pointed out. The first paragraph immediately states a problem in clear terms, and from there develops a case for the recommendation. There’s not a lot of Evidence offered here, but it may not be necessary for a recommendation like this. After all, using a toll free number isn’t exactly a risky business proposition.