

Carol Tice:

Hi, everybody. It's Carol Tice here. I'm here with Linda Formichelli.

Linda Formichelli:

Hello.

Carol Tice:

And this is module three of Pitch Clinic on How to Write a Kick Butt Letter of Introduction. We have gone over for you all the details of how to write a query letter but sometimes you can't write a query letter because you just don't have enough information about what the publication might run. What we're thinking of here is trade publications and custom publications.

Trade publications are about a particular industry. They're for an audience of dentists or apparel store owners. These kinds of publications tend to be planned editorially by the staff and then they go looking for writers to assign things to. It's very difficult to pitch them an idea that will fit because it's pretty pre-planned. Custom publications are actually put out for companies. Think of the magazine you might get at a hospital or at a hotel you're staying at or in a lot of retail stores have a magazine for customers.

These also tend to have an editorial agenda because they're really thinly disguised promotion for that business. They are just going to have all the ideas already planned out. Your job is to convince the editor simply that you understand their readers and are the perfect person to write on their topic and you're reliable and fun to work with. That is kind of the gist of the LOI.

What we've got for you is 11 key points to know for creating a solid LOI...and I think Linda has point number one.

Linda:

Yeah. The first point is that you need to know who to send LOIs to. In other words, who gets them and who doesn't get them. And there are two main groups that do accept and give assignments from LOIs. One of them is businesses and non profits and you can think of your LOI in that case like a sales letter. And the other one is trade and custom publications. And the reason you can often break into those with an LOI is that they are such niche magazines that the editors typically come up with ideas in-house because it's a very hard for an outside person to get a handle on what it is that they are looking for. That said, if you have a query that you think is going to fit for an LOI, I mean for a trade or a custom pub, you can send it and it's perfectly acceptable and they will typically accept them, but they do accept LOIs and they do assign from them.

Consumer magazines typically you don't want to send an LOI to and by consumer magazines I mean those glossies, the ones you see on the newsstand, national magazines, because they have tons of writers coming to them with pitches and that's what

they expect. And I've tried sending LOIs and the best response I've ever gotten from one from the consumer pub was "okay, send me a pitch." So...

Carol Tice:

Yeah, the thing is it's just too competitive.

Linda:

Yeah, exactly. A little too easy to think you can break into one of those with an LOI, but they're great for the other two groups.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, and you know we got this question in the Den yesterday about will a custom publisher that has a consumer audience, it's like a hospital magazine for patients, or a Kimberly-Clark's newborn mother kind of magazine. But the problem is that the editorial is being planned with an agenda that's a secret agenda that you can't learn, which is you know, this month we really want to plug this bottle that we make or something. So you're never going to be able to guess and that's why an LOI works.

Linda:

Yeah, and like I said, if you have an idea and you are pretty sure that it's going to stick then I would say send it. It's always more ammunition to come to them with an idea, but if you don't have one don't knock yourself out about it. Send an LOI.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. Before you hit point two, I'm just getting a couple more messages that people still aren't seeing slides. You may need to totally exit and come back in. And should we take notes or will there be something to review afterwards? Actually, I do have a handout up my sleeve. I prefer that people listen, I know a lot of people who run presentations are always saying now, get out a piece of paper and take lots of notes, but I actually prefer that people just kind of listen and absorb what's going on and we will give you handout so no worries there.

Linda:

And make sure that you've clicked synchronized slides with webcast audio if you're on webcast or with phone, if you're on phone sync with phone works for me the second one doesn't work.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, that could solve it too. Anyway, on to point two.

Linda:

Yes, point two. Take aim. I know this is really hard for people, but you need to find the exact right person at the business, the trade magazine, or the custom publication to send your LOI to. A lot of people just go for the first thing they see, which is often like a general black hole address, like edit@, or marketing@, or whatever. You really want to find the correct

person and think of this as practice doing research, which is something, you really, really need to do as a writer.

You need to be a good researcher and the first thing you can show that with is to find the right person. And this may mean going to LinkedIn, or looking through other social media, doing a Google search, searching through their website or it may even mean calling them up, which I know it's scary, but it has the additional benefit that sometimes you call up and they connect you to the right person and you get to speak to that person which is really great. Carol, do you have anything to add there?

Carol Tice:

Yeah, no it's true, you know, calling you might just blunder right onto the phone with the exact person you need and maybe you'll just make your pitch right there and get a gig, and or get some insight into exactly what kind of stories they are looking for. And that's the best asked question if you do accidentally get them is to just say I was about to send you query letter but you know while I have you on the phone, can you tell me if there's some specific topics that you're looking for? There is usually a few things that they can just never get enough on and too many of the other kind and you might get some really valuable insight.

Linda:

Yeah, and the good news is that with trade magazines, typically you can very easily find the editor's direct e-mail address right on their website. They don't hide it like the consumer magazines. With businesses, it's always great to call and find out who hires freelancers, but typically you're looking for somebody who is the head of marketing or communications, if that helps.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, I'm always thinking marketing manager, that's usually my go to on businesses. And LinkedIn is amazing for finding editors of consumer magazines and places and you can also check Muck Rack on Twitter for people as another possibility. Anyway, I've got the next one, which like my obsession with headlines, you need to have a strong subject line if you're sending a letter of introduction on e-mail, which is generally how we send them these days and I did get that question just recently in the Den about should I snail mail one.

I think these days it's pretty much all happening on e-mail unless you're looking at writers guidelines for somewhere and they're specifically saying like Parade magazine does, that you must snail mail it. And then of course they e-mail you back at the end. And I think why did you make me do that, but some publications are still doing that as kind of a personality test where it's more work to snail mail things so they just want to see if you're that hot to work with them. That you'll take the effort to go down to the old post office and mail something off to them.

But anyway, back to our strong subject line. We all know we all get a lot of e-mails so you kind of need something that gets their attention and that makes them want to open it. And this top choice we like that I'm showing on the slide is actually a favorite of Ed Gandia's and

of course it's all about getting a referral, connecting with someone who knows that editor and then you write, you know, your friend Joe Smith sent me your way. And he says that gets like a 70-80% open. And then Linda has a couple on here that she uses a lot.

Do you need a pro-business writer? Just straight up question lets you know who I am and why I'm writing or if you have some credits to call out with something I could do there would be like writer for Entrepreneur, Forbes, Seattle Business and more. And if they are looking for a writer with those kinds of credits, they might just click on that. So those are all ideas for the subject line because like the headline in a blog post, if you can't get them past the first base of clicking on the e-mail and opening it up, then they're never reading your LOI. So now on to actually sending it and the first thing to know is you should kind of keep it brief. I'm thinking I've seen ones that work that are maybe six paragraphs or so. Four to me is really ideal. What do you think Linda?

Linda:

Mine is actually just three or four paragraphs. I really do believe in keeping it short and sweet. Some people go on way too long and it starts to get bogged down and you really lose interest part way through, and as a writer, part of your job is to really get your point across quickly.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, you know the big thing, and we didn't make this a point, but it's like an insight that I think a lot of new writers don't have about LOIs, which is that *this little introductory letter that you are writing is a writing audition*. And you're showing them, hopefully one of the big things, is that you can be concise. That is what every editor and marketing manager in America is looking for. They want to understand, you know, businesses, one of the big reasons CEO's hire business writers is because they can't sum it up. They know too much, they blabber on and on and they need someone who can boil it down for them. That's often the big task you're really being hired for.

So that's why keeping it short really weighs in your favor is you're demonstrating in your letter that you know how to be concise, and that's one of the big skills they're shopping for. So the next one is to custom craft it. And writers are always asking me can you give me the template for what to say in an LOI, and we're actually going to kind of show you the rudiments of one at the end of this. But what you need to know is the template is like a starting point. And then to make it successful you are going to want to do some research into that market and inject some elements that show that you understand that market and that you get where they're coming from. So you need to get that into what you're doing and have even the writing style, because this is a writing audition, reflect the style that company talks in or that publication writes in. All right, this is a favorite of Linda's. I keep seeing her saying this.

Linda:

Oh yeah, the next point is, and this is really important, is to insert some personality. I read a lot of LOIs for my mentoring clients, and on the Den, and one mistake I see in almost every

one of them is that they sound too stiff and formal, like a business letter. All of a sudden, even the people with the biggest personalities, all the personality kind of drains out of their LOI and I think their thought process is, this is a business letter, therefore it must sound business like. But, nobody wants to read that kind of writing. If you're writing for any magazine or any business. Yes?

Carol Tice:

Yeah. I was just going to say as a really longtime business writer, writing for a lot of business publications and business trades, I can tell you that none of them sound like a business letter from the 1950's anymore. The tone of business is increasingly casual and conversational and it's just sort of a misimpression that a lot of writers have that oh, it's a business thing so it should be really formal. That's just not true.

Linda:

Right. And I am seeing this with all kinds of trades and custom pubs. Whatever the LOI is, there is just no personality. It's very stiff. One tip I like to give is to read it out loud and see if it sounds more like you're talking to a friend or you're dictating a business memo. And you really do want it to sound more like you are talking with a friend. But for other ways to insert some personality, and this one, I mean it sounds really trivial and I feel like I'm harping on it all the time, but it's really important is to use contractions. So many writers avoid them, they do want to sound more businesslike, but you wouldn't say I am a business writer and I have written for.

You would say I'm a business writer and I've written for...and it just flows off the tongue better that way. It sounds more casual. It's just really a better style of writing for LOIs. Another thing you can do is use a little bit of humor where appropriate and you'll see in my LOI I mention that I'm not a diva and that's my little bit of humor. And the most important thing is to use the tone that the publication or the business uses so you'll need to do a little bit of research to show that you get their audience. But do read some back issues or do read some materials from the company and just try to replicate that and I guarantee that in most cases it's going to be casual and conversational.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, I think if you don't spend a lot of time reading Pizza Today and Chain Store Age and the kind of hot, sexy publications, trade publications that Linda and I have written for, you just may not be aware how fresh and lively and conversational their tone has become over the years. But they're trying to hold an audience just like everybody else and grab their attention at the top of articles and really it's all very similar to consumer. The only difference is that they're talking to a sophisticated audience in terms of their knowledge about the topic. That's what's different and you see industry jargon popping up that they all understand that you wouldn't see in a consumer magazine. Like when I got my staff trade job at Home Center News, which was all about hardware stores and retail. My first question was what's an SKU because they kept talking about that and it's a stock keeping unit. So you'll see that kind of jargon pop up, but aside from that, it's very friendly, and conversational, and lively. Anyway, next point.

Linda:

It's you.

Carol Tice:

Oh, it's me. You're right. And it's don't be a suck up and this is something that we see a bit off in some of the LOIs we've been looking at, which is where you kind of go overboard on the research and you go on and on and on about how some recent article in their trade publication was amazing and insightful, and if you wind along too long about this, it starts to be sort of obsequious and it also ends up taking too long to get to the most important thing you have to say, which is, I'm a freelance writer and do you need one? So that's a common problem that we have seen with many LOIs. Linda.

Linda:

And that kind of leads into the next point, which is to make a warm connection. You do want to let your research show a little bit and mention something about the business or magazine in your LOI. It could be an article you liked or even in the case of my LOI, it's just I really enjoyed reading through your website today. Just to show I'm not just scanning this out to everybody, but like Carol was saying, you don't want to go on too long and come off like a fan letter. Carol do you have anything else to say on that or it kind of blends right into the next one.

Carol Tice:

Yeah.

Linda:

Yeah, because the next one is get to the point. And this means you want to bring up the fact that you're a freelance writer and the whole point of your writing right up front. And when people do go on and on with the research and oh, I love this article and it reminds me of this other thing and blah, blah, blah. You know, people are wondering why the heck are you writing to me.

So you need to get right up front, I'm a freelance writer and you'll see that in my LOI and also you could even work your research and your icebreaker right in to the fact that you are a freelancer. For example, you could say as a freelance writer with a PR background, the article PR Tactics That Work in your September issue really resonated with me. That's it. You read the magazine, you've been through the website and you're a freelance writer, and it's all right there upfront. What do you think Carol?

Carol Tice:

Yeah. I'm a really big fan of that "As a freelance writer..." intro because it immediately casts a context for the rest of the e-mail. That sets up that it isn't a fan letter and we just worry that if you go about two paragraphs in raving about their thing and showing your research that their forwarding that to whoever keeps the brag file about how great they are. Or they're throwing it into that folder that they have in their email of like testimonials or something and

they're not ever realizing that you're trying to get a gig from them. So, that's a quick way to do it. You're going to see some other examples when we analyze these LOIs.

So this is one I've been seeing a lot just recently and it's a quick way to make sure that you've kind of got the right approach. If you find yourself saying I at the beginning of every sentence in your LOI, you don't have the right focus because it's not about sell, sell, selling you and saying I've done this, I've done that. A lot of people are like restating all their resume highlights within in an LOI, where you really want to keep your story about you to about two lines max. One is awesome as well. And most of it should be about here's how I see that my experience would help you. It's really about you the client. If you focus on how I will help you, you know remember that WIIFM, what's in it for me, is what the client is wondering as they scan this e-mail. So you want to have that emphasis and I'm going to show you a great example of how James Patterson did that in one of his LOIs, coming up here.

So, this one Linda, really rocks and that is to have a strong, yet nonthreatening call to action. And I'm going to go even further than that and say one that puts most of the action on you to do, rather than... "So please go to my website and look at my clips and then please give me a call if you want to work together."

They have to do three things and you don't have to do anything. And that's why Linda's stock answer of may I send you some clips is so great. Because it indicates all you have to do is return to this e-mail and say yeah sure, send them over. And then I'll do all the rest. So it's very little that they have to do and it also sort of starts an interaction. Which is really the main, main point of an LOI is to begin an interaction. This leads right into Linda's final point.

Linda:

The final point is to use the LOI to build a relationship, not necessarily to get an assignment right away. And I know a lot of writers, they send out a lot of LOIs and they get discouraged because they don't get a bunch of assignments right away, but the purpose of the LOI, I've been thinking about this a lot lately, is not necessarily to have people just throw work at you. I mean, of course you want that, but it's typically not going to happen because it's really a timing issue.

You know, do they have work right now, is it work that they don't have a writer for and are you the perfect writer for it right now. Often that's not the case. So the whole point of LOI is to kind of open the door to conversation so that you can then get back in touch with them. Reach out to them every few months, let them know you're still around, let them know what you're doing. And when you start to build a relationship they start to trust you. They see that you're a professional, and in many cases, if you keep up with them every few months then when they do have an assignment that comes up that's perfect for you, their going to think of you because you've been writing to them for the last year.

So that's why I end my LOI with may I send you some clips? It's a very easy thing for the editor to say yes to and it opens the door to a relationship. So it's not saying can I have an

assignment, which is just close the door, no, the end. And you have no reason to ever contact them again, but this opens the door to my following up, because once I send the clips now I can follow up. Did you get the clips? I can follow up a few months later. Oh yeah, we were in conversation a couple of months ago and I just want to let you know what I'm doing now. So really thinks of it as a sort of long term agenda. I mean of course you want to get assignments right away and sometimes it happens. But don't get discouraged when it doesn't happen. Just think of it as building a relationship.

Carol Tice:

Yeah. Right on and something I love to do to keep that going is that if I see an article that I think would be of interest to that marketing manager or that editor, I'll send it over. Like I had a company that does marketing for franchises and if I wrote an article myself on franchising, I would send it over. Hey, I knew you'd be interested in this. And the reason that you need to kind of cultivate these relationships is quite often trade pubs, maybe they aren't assigning freelance all the time, but they'll have these special issues that come up two, four, six times a year where they've got a big section around some convention that's going to happen, or some issue.

On the one I've written for many times is the Nation's Restaurant News NRN 50, which they do like at the end of January every year. It's like 50 articles in a package so obviously their staff can not do 50 extra articles in their free time and it has to be freelanced. So if you keep checking in, you have better odds of hitting one of those inflection points where they're looking to assign a big stack of freelance.

So that all having been said, the real meat of this presentation now begins because we're going to look at some actual LOIs and talk about and look at these elements in action in successful LOIs. And Linda, why don't I let you walk through your one and then I will walk through the ones I have from James that I love.

Linda:

Okay. Well, sure. So I start out just dear name and it's really important to get a name and not just say dear editor or dear marketing manager or whatever. And there's always a question of whether you should use first name or Mr. and Ms. and last name. And really, I use first name but whatever you're comfortable with is usually fine. I actually interviewed a bunch of editors about it. Most of them actually said they preferred first names, so don't feel bad if you want to do that. So my lead is hello, I enjoyed looking through the magazine archives these past few days. Short and sweet shows that I at least am familiar enough that I've been through their archives.

Next one. Thanks. Do you assign articles to freelance writers? Right to the point, I mean I do not dilly dally, I do not go on and on about something I saw in their magazine. You know, if I see something in their magazine that really stands out to me, like an article that really resonates with me, or something that I've written a similar article about, I'll mention that, but I do get right to the point. Do you assign articles to freelance writers?

Now I have my bio and so I'm a freelance writer in Raleigh, who writes for such newsstand and trade magazines as and I just give a whole list of them. Now, this is another place where I would customize this. So if I were writing to a restaurant trade magazine, I've written for several restaurant trades, I would mention those here. If it's a business, I would mention that I'd written for Ink and Business Startups and so on. If this were a pet magazine, I've written for a couple of pet things. So use what you have but try to make it as relevant as possible if you have clips to choose from.

Now, this is where the personality comes in. I say I'm easy to work with, no diva here. Professional and fast. And then I give examples of what I've been doing. Now, I know that I could strengthen this because it really is more about me than it is about them. I mean this is a very successful LOI for me, but I'm learning a lot in the Den and I see a lot of people do a much better job at showing the benefits of you know, I can take some things off your plate, I can make your job easier, you know, what benefits am I offering you. Not just the features.

Carol Tice:

Yeah, and I love how it's one sentence long.

Linda:

Yeah. Exactly.

Carol Tice:

A model to aspire to there.

Linda:

Thank you.

Carol Tice:

Yeah.

Linda:

Is there more?

Carol Tice:

Yeah, I'm sorry. And the close.

Linda:

May I send you some clips? That is my call to action. Now, I have to say, if there's any other creative way you can think of for saying this, do it because every LOI I am reading lately ends with may I send you some clips now and it's starting to feel like a little like oh, they're using that typical closing that everybody's using. I feel like some editors are going to start seeing this a lot because everybody's doing it. So if you can think of some creative way to keep that door open, then do so. What do you think Carol?

Carol Tice:

You can even just restate that. You know, I'd be happy to send you a few of my clips in this particular niche, just let me know. You know, just recast it. It can be sort of the same call to action, but you don't have to use the exact same language.

Linda:

Yeah.

Carol Tice:

So, if you have been in the resource library and gone all the way to the end, you may have noticed a couple of awesome letters of introduction from James Patterson. They were actually the very first resource in the resource library and I am just about to create a resource library index page. A static page where you can quickly look all the resources up because it's getting so hard to find them. So look for that pretty shortly. The reason I held on to these is because, first of all, Linda's I think is more aimed at a publication and these are both businesses. I believe I don't have necessarily all of each of these, they're more like excerpts.

So this is a cupcake company in James's Idaho town that he decided he wanted to go after as a client. And it is a masterpiece of personality and casual language and of understanding on how this company talks.

So it says "First of all it's late and I wish you guys were still open because I've just got a hankering for a grasshopper cupcake like you wouldn't believe, but alas you closed 14 minutes ago."

So in this opening he's immediately telling him that he totally knows their business. This made me think to look you guys up on Facebook, and there you are. So that's his setup and then he goes let me back up a minute, I'm a freelance writer. So we get to it fairly quick. Usually I work with health and wellness companies, but I've been wanting to do something a little different lately and I've expanded into working with some locally owned restaurants.

This is how he artfully shows them like I'm really, really a pro and I'm looking to get into your niche in a way that doesn't sound like I won't know anything about you or...I just thought this was an elegant crossover pitch. He goes on to talk about their current level of Facebook activity and he says "You know I love you guys and I love your cupcakes, but I'm going to shoot straight with you. You're not maximizing your potential on Facebook." Which I thought was a very artful way of handling the, your current marketing sucks problem.

Because you never just want to say, you know I looked at what you're doing and boy you are clueless. You don't want to ever be nasty about what they are currently doing. You more want to spot the opportunity where they could add to their marketing and that's basically how he's cast it to not be rude.

And then he says “I'd love to work with you guys. I think you'd be surprised how affordable it could be. Give me a call or e-mail me back and let's talk about how to take your social media presence not just to the next level but through the roof.” Then he says “Hit me back.”

What he is doing here is he's talking Facebook language because he wants their Facebook marketing. So that's why it's so casual in its tone and I just thought that was brilliant and I know he signed these guys as a client.

It's so up their alley, that even though his call to action is kind of weak, give me a call or e-mail me. It still worked. And that's the other little thing I want to say is that you don't have to necessarily hit on all cylinders, it doesn't have to be a work of art you sign your name to. You can play with this and have it still work if you understand the client and show them you can talk like that client.

So this is from a different type of company that he was pitching. I think it's like an Internet marketing company. He says “See the thing is I heard about your company through one of my LinkedIn contacts who I gather is one of your new clients.” So that's his warm connection. Totally great. I know one of your clients, and that's how I started checking out your business.

Then he says “I thought I would e-mail you so that we could chat about the many ways I can do what I do best for my clients, make their lives easier and take projects off their plate to free them up to do bigger and better things.” So that is, instead of I write some words for you, you know, he's going for the real value sale. I am going to solve your problems. I make your life easier. I think that's a compelling thing to say in an LOI.

Then here's his little two line summary. I've been writing professionally for eight years and freelancing for two. I specialize in health and wellness. Here's three places I've written for that are pretty high profile. And that's it. That's all he says about his background in it. So then he gives proof. Which if you've ever had proof and some of us don't, but if you have a win with a previous business client where you did some marketing for them and there was a measurable result, you totally want to call that out and give them a link to it so they can take a look at it.

And I know Ed Gandia on one of our calls said that that is what he does that he thinks just completely converts like crazy. You just go I'm getting this result when I do this kind of marketing. Here's an example. That just slays. That's the clincher. So then, here's his sort of closing sentence which blew my mind. Because it starts with anyhoo. I mean look at how casual that is. Just everybody stop and think about writing anyhoo in an LOI and getting away with it. And it's working because of course he's pitching people's social media and you know how casual the tone is.

So he says “Anyhoo, I wanted to touch base with you and talk about freelance opportunities with your company and what I can contribute. I'm not a run of the mill freelancer. I don't do

form e-mails as you can tell. I'm not boring and I can tell you guys aren't either. That's why I think we'd work well together.”

I mean, how are they not going to hire him? I have goose bumps. That made the hair stand up on my arms reading that because it's so awesome. You know, you can just tell that he's put in the time. He's not writing an LOI. He is commanding the language here. It is his slave and does his bidding and that's the zone you want to get into. Where they can see you play with words for a living and you can make them sit up and dance and do whatever you want. You can make it casual, you can make it sophisticated. That way you can talk the way they want to talk to their clients or their readers.

So that's what we've got for you in this episode of Pitch Clinic on writing a kick-butt LOI.

Thanks Linda, this is terrific, and thank you everybody.

Linda:

Thank you. Thanks everyone for coming. Bye.