

SOME COMMENTS ON THE BUSINESS LETTER

Anca-Irina CECAL

„Al.I.Cuza” University Iasi (Romania)

Scrisorile de afaceri sunt considerate o importantă cale de comunicare în lumea afacerilor. Scopul acestei lucrări este de a oferi studenților și oamenilor care lucrează în diferite arii ale afacerilor un ghid util în ceea ce privește scrierea corectă a unei astfel de scrisori. După ce se menționează unele aspecte generale legate de subiectul dat, lucrarea se focalizează pe prezentarea unor detalii specifice structurii și formatului unei scrisori de afaceri, așa cum este acceptată în general.

Introduction

As many people know, communication in the business environment takes two main forms: the verbal communication - with or without the visual component or the physical presence of the interlocutors - and the written communication. Business letters are largely used nowadays; they are conceived as being either an effective, adequate and convenient way of communicating when face to face communication is impossible or undesired, or a necessity, since they often function as written documents in various areas of business. Since most people are connected to the world of business one way or another these days, and many of them function as employees of various companies, it is very useful for almost everyone to become familiar with the format and structure of business letters. This short paper aims at providing a guide to writing a correct and successful business letter.

1. General Aspects Related to Business Letters

Even though the culture of business has become less and less formal in recent times, business correspondence tends to keep a rather formal, often classical, style and structure. It is probably so because both employers and employees working in this medium are generally very aware of the fact that the way they express themselves in writing is representative of their personal image “on the market” and, at the same time, reflects the efficiency and success of the firm or company they work for. Therefore, it is generally agreed that business letters must be clear, concise and courteous.

2. Business Letter Types

Business letters vary according both to the branch of activity with which they are dealing and to the purpose they serve. There are numerous types, and some are especially worth mentioning due to their frequency in use: enquiries, offers, orders, confirmations, requests, complaints, announcements, applications, apologies and adjustments, references asked or given, notices, collection letters, etc. Describing and analysing each type of business letter separately could make the subject of a whole book. The purpose of this paper is rather to present the format and the key structural elements that are recognisable, more or less, in most kinds of business letters, so as to provide a brief but useful guide to writing such a letter.

3. Business Letter Components

The components of a traditional full block business letter are shown below in picture form and some hopefully useful explanations are provided in the next pages. Of course, the format proposed and displayed here is just a guide which may be adapted to specific needs or replaced altogether with another acceptable form. When dealing with business letters, variations and customizations are common, and not all elements presented here are needed in every type of letter. Certain letters, such as the job application cover letter, thank-you letter, memorandum or curriculum vitae assume special forms according to their purpose. Nevertheless, most business letters are built according to a pattern which we shall attempt to describe in what follows.

Margins of 1-1.5”

Heading: (1)
Name of sender
Address
Phone, fax no.
Current date (2)

Ref.: (3)

Delivery notations (4)

Recipient notations (5)

The inside address: (6)
Recipient's name and title
Company name
Address

Greeting + recipient's name: (7)

Subject: (8)

Opening paragraph (9)

Body of the letter (10)

Closing paragraph (11)

Complimentary close (12)

Signature (13)

Sender's name and professional title or position (14)

Other (optional) components

4. Business Letter Structure

From the point of view of *structure*, every business letter has several distinctive parts, or blocks, and these elements are easily recognisable at an overview of the letter. These parts have been marked with numbers in the picture above so that they can be traced in the explanations offered here.

Business letters usually start with the *heading* (1), which consists of the name of the sender (person, company or both), the symbol and the logo of the firm (if there is one) and relevant contact information such as the postal address, the telephone and fax numbers, the e-mail address or web site. Sometimes the addresses of other branches of the company and the banking account appear as well. In many cases, all this information is included in printed stationery, to which only the date is added. The same information appears on the envelope if the letter is sent by regular mail.

If the stationery includes a letterhead, the *current date* (2) is typed several lines under the letterhead. If not, the date appears under the return address. The date may take one of the following forms:

Month + Day (cardinal numeral), Year (e.g. June 11, 2007);

Month + Day (ordinal numeral), Year (e.g. Feb. 2nd, 2001);

Day (ordinal numeral) + Month, Year (e.g. 28th Sept., 2004).

The first form is preferred nowadays. It is important to note that the names of the months are abbreviated as follows: Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec. However, May, June and July are never abbreviated.

The components which follow are aligned at the left margin of the page. The *reference* (3), usually abbreviated as Re: or Ref: has the role of identifying what the letter is in regards to. Some examples are: „Re: Your notice dated Mar. 9, 2007”, „Re: Your offer letter of Jan. 15, 2003”, „Re: Invoice no. 174”.

The *delivery notations* (4) and *recipient notations* (5) are always written in capital letters. They appear only when necessary and they are made of words like: SPECIAL DELIVERY CERTIFIED MAIL, AIRMAIL, VIA FACSIMILE (delivery notations) and PERSONAL, CONFIDENTIAL (recipient notations).

The *inside address* (6) contains the full name, title and complete address of the person and/or company to whom/which the letter is addressed. It is generally written at the beginning of the letter at the left-hand side.

Under the inside address and near the left margin, there is the salutation or *greeting* (7), which is composed of the traditional „Dear” followed by the name of the recipient, if known. If the name of the individual is not known, it is replaced by the person’s title or position in the company (e.g. Sales Manager, Account Executive). „Dear Sir”, „Dear Madam”, „Dear Sir or Ms.” are other acceptable forms. In the case in which the recipient is a company or a department, the usual greeting forms are much more general, like: „Dear Sirs”, „To whom it may concern” or even „To” followed by the name of the department. The form “Gentlemen” is used only when an employee sends a report to his Directors or when a letter is addressed to a committee or public body. Trying to guess names is not a good idea. It is always a much safer choice to use less personal salutation forms than to mistake or misspell the names of the recipient of one’s business letter.

There are a lot of business firms using a *subject* (8) line after the greeting in order to clearly indicate in a few words the subject matter of the letter (e.g. Subject: appointment of the new CEO).

The topic is developed in the main body of the letter, which may consist of one or several paragraphs, depending on necessity.

The *opening paragraph* (9) or phrase of the business letter is written in a rather formal style and depends to a large extent on the subject of the letter. It generally begins by thanking the correspondent for his previous letter or by helping him recall the letter to which the current one is a reply and the subject matter of that letter. (e.g. „In reply to your enquiry dated May 7, we are pleased to inform you that...”, „Thank you for your letter of May 7 referring to...”, „This is in response to your advertisement in the ... newspaper...”).

The *body of the letter* (10) deals with the subject matter in detail and provides all the necessary information in explanatory sentences that are clear and to the point. It is usually divided into several paragraphs if it is too long.

The *closing paragraph* (11) also depends on and is related to the subject matter of the letter. Here are some endings that may be used: „Thanking you for your cooperation we remain”, „Regretting that we cannot accept your... we are your...”, „Looking forward to setting up a convenient time for discussion, we remain...”

The *complimentary close* (12) is placed beneath the last line of the letter and it should keep the same tone and degree of formality as the salutation and the rest of the letter. For example, if the letter begins with „Dear Mr. Grey”, one should end with „Yours sincerely” or „Yours faithfully”. The register of the complimentary close can vary from the very formal „Respectfully yours” or „Yours truly” to the typical „Sincerely” and to the friendlier „Cordially yours” or „Cordially”.

Some blank lines are usually left under the complimentary close for the *signature* (13), which is followed by the full *name and title* or position (14) of the sender. In companies, the head of the department or a principal of the firm signs the letter, writing his or her name beneath the name of the firm, if included. Sometimes a seal or stamp is added below and in other cases some other components may appear too if they are necessary.

5. Business Letter Format

As far as the *format* of business letters is concerned, equally sized *margins* are required on each side of the sheet or page. The letter may be typed in either the *indented form* in which each line starts an equal number of spaces away from the margin, or in the mainly used *block form* in which all the lines start at the margin.

Each one of the letter's components is separated from the others by at least two spaces, vertically.

The heading is placed in a centered position at the top of the page or in the upper right-hand corner. The shorter the letter, the lower the heading will be placed and the wider the margins will be.

Both the heading and the inside address should contain no abbreviations except those in the name of the company (e.g.. Inc, Ltd), common titles like Mr., Ms., Mrs., Dr., and those which appear as two letter zip designations for state names in the U.S.A. (e.g.. NY = the State of New York). Also, no punctuation should ordinarily appear at the end of the lines in either the heading or the inside address.

Especially if it is long, the body of the letter is split up into several single spaced paragraphs, with two spaces between them. In a short letter, one may double space the lines of the paragraph and triple space the paragraphs.

The complimentary close is placed at least two spaces beneath the last line of the letter and is usually aligned with the heading.

The signature appears right below it, with the full name printed several spaces beneath if it does not appear on the stationery. Each additional component (if needed) is double spaced below.

Besides format, structure and contents, great attention should be granted to spelling, grammar, language style and punctuation. Once the letter has been written, it is very advisable if not compulsory to read it entirely at least one time before sending it, in order to check for and correct any possible mistakes. This way the sender makes sure that his/her letter to the recipient is a letter to the success of his/her business.

Conclusions

As described above, the business letters' structure and format must observe certain standards. Even though there may be variations, the form which was presented above is generally accepted and used. A further development in this kind of research could be the comparative study of the main types of business letters from the point of view of the relation between structure and use.

References:

1. Adelstein Michael E. and Jean G. Pival, The Writing Commitment, Third Edition. - Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, USA, 1984.
2. Milea Constantin. Commercial, Financial and Accounting English – a practical course. Ediția a treia. - Bucharest: All Educational, 2002.
3. ***, Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, Inc., Springfield, Massachusetts, 1986.

Prezentat la 10.12.2007