

Go to the Head of the Class: Writing Great Headlines

In a previous issue of *Printtips* we discussed the importance of headlines for establishing interest in sales-related copy. As we mentioned then, advertising legend David Ogilvy is often quoted about the importance of headlines:

“On average, five times as many people read the headlines as read the body copy. It follows that unless your headline sells your product, you have wasted 90 per cent of your money.

The headlines which work best are those which promise the reader a benefit—like a whiter wash, more miles per gallon, freedom from pimples, fewer cavities. Rifle through a magazine and count the number of ads whose headlines promise a benefit of any kind.

Headlines which contain news are sure-fire. The news can be the announcement of a new product, an improvement in an old product, or a new way to use an old product—like serving Campbell’s Soup on the rocks. On the average, ads with news are recalled by 22% more people than ads without news.”

From Ogilvy on Advertising, 1985

Claude Hopkins, another advertising industry legend and author of *Scientific Advertising* (originally published in 1923), said, “We pick out what we wish to read by headlines.”

The importance of a headline

Regardless of whether a headline appears above advertising copy, on the front page of a newspaper or the cover of a magazine, or in a newsletter, its purpose is the same: to engage the reader’s interest enough to move ahead with the accompanying text. Well-written headlines exemplify the AIDA principle of advertising in miniature – attract the reader’s attention; promote interest and desire in continuing to read; and act on the desire.

The goal of good headline writing is to stir emotion in the reader and create excitement while the reader imagines enjoying the benefits of your product or service. This is best done by succinctly stating the *unique selling proposition* in the headline.

Great headlines begin with research

Until you know a great deal about the target audience, you won’t be able to write



a compelling headline. This is because the headline must be tailored to elicit an emotional response from the reader, and answer the question, “What’s in it for me?” from the reader’s perspective.

Research is also required to generate good body copy, so the time spent getting to know the target audience will reap double rewards.

Headline types

There are four headline types that have a good track record of selling products and services: “how to”, a question, top reasons; and testimonial. Each is effective by appealing to the buyer in a different way.

- **How To:** A “how to” headline promises a solution to a problem and evokes a natural curiosity to learn the method. Familiar examples of a “how to” headline address the problem of ceasing to smoke or losing weight. Although a “how to” headline might actually begin with the words *how to*, it could also

Burlington Press Gives Back!

For the second year, *Burlington Press* will take part in the *International CreateAthon Program*. The *CreateAthon* is a 24-hour, work-around the clock creative blitz where local advertising agencies and printers generate advertising services for local nonprofits that have little or no marketing budget.

This international effort has benefitted 833 nonprofit organizations with 1,809 projects valued at \$7 million. In the Delaware Valley *Burlington Press* is partnering with Hypno Design of Moorestown. Some of the past beneficiaries of *CreateAthon* have been Special Olympics, Second Harvest Food Bank, Goodwill Industries, Living Beyond Breast Cancer, The American Red Cross, ActionAids, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Habitat for Humanity, Camden Youth Soccer Club and the Salvation Army.

This year’s *CreateAthon* will be held on September 13 & 14. If you are a member of or know a nonprofit organization that could benefit from free marketing and print services, an application can be downloaded at:-

http://www.makepeoplehappy.biz/cat2007/FinalCAT2007_APP.pdf

or contact us
for more information at

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begin *The secret of...* or *See how easy it is to...* or *Little known ways to...*

- **Question:** A “question” headline poses a question that the target audience wants answered, such as *Do you make these mistakes?* or *Are you spending too much on...*

The focus of the question is always a benefit for the reader.

- **Top Reasons:** A “top reasons” headline promises an explanation for something of interest to the reader. Examples are *Four ways to stop smoking* or *The top ten reasons students fail*. A “top reasons” headline can be posed as a question, such as *Do you know the 3 warning signs for diabetes?*
- **Testimonial:** A “testimonial” headline uses the words of a satisfied customer to convey a benefit. It works because it adds veracity to the claims you make about your product or service. To indicate the headline is a testimonial, use quotation marks to enclose the customer’s words: *“Now I have a driveway I’m proud of”*.

Ways to start a headline

John Caples, the advertising great who is #21 on AdAge’s list of Top 100 People

of the 20th Century, devotes five of 18 chapters in his book *Tested Advertising Methods* to writing headlines. In it he offers 29 formulas for writing good headlines.

Caples wrote that effective headlines often begin with key words that are proven to attract a reader’s interest. Here is a list of key words:

Introducing, Announcing,
Now, At Last, Finally,
How To, Why, Which,
This, New, You, Your,
Who, People, Want,
Easy, Simple, Money, Free.

Headline content

If your offer is particularly compelling, consider featuring it in the headline.

Some examples of a compelling offer are price (or reduced price), payment plan, or bonus with purchase,

You can also include the unique selling proposition (USP) in the headline. To qualify as a USP, the headline will have to explain a specific benefit that is not being offered by competitors.

The headline can make a promise (*i.e.*, *Learn to speak Spanish in 8 weeks*) which can also be backed up by a guarantee

(*or we’ll refund your money.*) Finally, the headline can appeal directly to the target audience – *Attention college students.*

Practice makes perfect

There is only one way to write great headlines: practice. Since a headline is built around the benefits of the product or service, start by brainstorming all the benefits of each feature. Record those on a sheet of paper.

Now pick a benefit and write a series of headlines in each major headline category (how-to, question, top reason, testimonial). Write enough headlines in each category to use all the opening words mentioned earlier in this article. Aim for at least 30 headlines in each category.

Headline appearance

A few final words to ensure your headlines will be eye-catching: pay attention to how they appear on the page. For example, look at line lengths. It is best to have each line of approximately the same length. Similarly, in multi-line headlines, avoid line breaks that split an infinitive. Strive to keep punctuation, except for hyphens and dashes, at the end of a line.

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a vocabulary of the graphic arts

Active voice: a verb form in which the subject of the verb carries out some action. *Example:* She picked up the pencil.

AIDA: an acronym said to describe the steps a purchaser goes through before buying a product or service. A = attention (to get the customer's attention); I = interest (to interest the customer with a features, benefits and advantages); D = desire (to develop desire by showing how the product or service will meet the customers's needs or solve a problem); A = action (to inspire the customer to take the next step).

Infinitive: in grammar, the infinitive is the form of a verb that has no inflection to indicate person, number, mood or tense. An infinitive is often introduced by the word *to* as in *to read*.

Johnson Box: a box positioned at the top of a letter before the salutation that succinctly states the main message of the offer in a compelling way. The "box" can be made of lines, asterisks and may be tinted. The Johnson Box is named for direct marketer Frank Johnson.

Passive voice: a verb form in which the subject is acted upon. *Example:* The boy was called by his mother.

Swipe file: a collection of noteworthy examples of various items of interest that can be used by a writer or editor to promote creativity or to assist in developing copy for publication.

Teaser copy: words printed on the outside of a mail piece that interest the reader in opening the mail piece.

Unique selling proposition (USP): a statement of differentiation about a product or service. USP was introduced as a marketing concept in the early 1940s by Ted Bates & Company. Chairman of the board Rosser Reeves provided a definition of USP in his book *Reality in Advertising*. To be considered a unique selling proposition, the advertisement had to make a proposition to the customer ("buy this product, and you will get this *specific benefit*."); the proposition itself had to be unique (something that competitors do not, or will not, offer); and the proposition had to be strong enough to pull new customers to the product.

C O R N E R

Much of the information about writing effective headlines can be applied to writing teaser copy for direct mail marketing or for the text appearing inside a Johnson Box. After all, the goal is the same: to engage the interest of the reader so he will continue to read the text.

For a direct mail marketing piece that does not have the look of a personalized letter, we recommend using *teaser copy* on the envelope. Teaser copy is information that is printed on the outside of a mail piece.

Some people object to using teaser copy because it identifies the mail piece as advertising mail. However, well-written teaser copy can increase response rate by creating desire to open the mail piece to see what's inside.

According to direct mail marketing expert "Rocket" Ray Jutkins and author of *Power Direct Marketing*, here are seven tips for writing

effective teaser copy:

- *Make sure the teaser relates to the offer.* Don't mislead the customer just to get them to look inside.
- *Think benefits with teaser copy.* No benefit, no reason for the audience to look inside.
- *Urge action.* A call to action should always be in your teasers, something like "Limited Offer."
- *Tie the teaser copy on the outside to what's on the inside.* Make sure it does. The audience will better understand what you are offering.
- *Ensure the graphics and copy work well together.* Make sure they complement the issue, not confuse it.
- *Give teaser copy a "YOU" attitude.* Explain what the customer will gain in his language. And don't speak at him or to him, but speak with him.

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In past issues of *Printips* we have introduced the idea of a *swipe file*, which simply put, is a collection of noteworthy examples of best practices. We've suggested that newsletter editors create a swipe file of possible articles; that marketing directors create a swipe file of eye-catching display ads; and that direct mail marketers create a swipe file of persuasive mailing pieces.

A swipe file is also relevant to headline writing. The basic tenet of effective

TRICKS & tips

headline writing is just that – a few rules and a proven formula that results in a convincing headline. By noticing and saving headlines that strike you as particularly effective, you will begin to understand how the tenets translate into an actual headline.

A swipe file provides a concrete illustration of what works and what doesn't, of what you prefer and what you don't. It helps you understand the possibilities, and offers practical

instruction of how the rules are used. By mimicking what has been successful, you'll develop your own style more quickly.

Do remember, though, that a swipe file is meant to be a source of inspiration, not examples to be plagiarized. The goal is not to copy successful work, but to adapt it to your own headline writing requirements.

Q. How do the rules of grammar and punctuation apply to headlines?

A. Because a good headline eliminates unnecessary words and focuses on one compelling idea, the rules of grammar and punctuation as applied to headlines are designed to promote reader comprehension. Here are some guidelines:

- *Use active voice.* In grammar, *voice* is the relationship between the verb and the nouns associated with it (called the *subject* or the *object* of the verb). There are two voices in English – active and passive. Active voice, in which the subject of the sentence performs the action, is preferred for headlines because it is clearer and more succinct than passive voice.
- *Use present tense.* Tense is the indication of the time at which the event described by the sentence occurred. In English this is a property of the verb and may be either past, present, or future. In headlines, use present tense for immediate past events; past tense for more distant events, and future tense for coming events.
- *Use numerals.* Unlike text, numbers are allowed at the beginning of a headline and do not have to be spelled out if below 10. An exception is the number *one*.
- *Use a comma in place of the word "and".* In addition to its normal use, a comma may be used in place of *and* in a headline.
Example: GM, Chrysler Open Talks
- *Use short words.* Find a short synonym for a long word. For example, *panel* or *group* is better in a headline than *committee*. And remember that adjectives are usually not needed.

questions and answers