

Go to the Head of the Class: Writing Great Headlines

In a previous issue of *Printips*, 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.

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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 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 three 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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