

Headline Writing Basics: What Every Headline Should Do and 9 Proven Ways to Do It

The headline is the single most important element of every print advertisement. It's more than a title or label for your message. It's the salesperson's opening line. It's the foot in the door. It's the first and most lasting impression. A headline wields the power to attract, repel, or slip by readers unnoticed.

The 4 Tasks of a Powerful Headline

To write effective headlines, you must understand how words affect people and generate action. Specifically, most effective headlines perform four critical tasks: they attract attention, select an audience, deliver a complete message, and draw the reader into the body copy. Don't look at these four tasks as a sequence of events, though. A headline performs them all simultaneously and immediately.

1. A headline attracts attention to your ad. If no one notices your ad, you've wasted your money. Therefore, every headline must attract attention. You can do this by appealing to your reader's self interest, by announcing news, by offering useful information, or by using powerful words such as "FREE." The size and placement of the headline can also help to stop the eye. One design rule of thumb (by no means a law) is that the headline, illustration, and body copy should each own about one-third of the real estate in any ad layout.

2. A headline helps select your best prospects. It would be simple to attract attention by printing in bold type the headline "Full Frontal Nudity!" However, if you're selling a new edition of the Bible, this headline will certainly backfire. This is called bait and switch — a sure way to irritate, confuse, and alienate your prospects.

Just attracting attention isn't good enough. You must attract the attention of the right people for the right reason. You do this by including in your headline key words and phrases that flag the reader. For example, look at this simple headline:

We're looking for people to write children's books.

With two words, "write" and "books," it selects the appropriate audience (would-be writers) for the ad's message. Here's another:

GOURMET KITCHENWARE FOR 59¢ A PIECE!

The word "kitchenware" selects those interested in cooking and baking, while the word "gourmet" selects those wanting only the best quality kitchen tools. The offer, "59¢ a piece," further selects those looking for a bargain.

Using key words to select readers sounds like a no-brainer, but look at a few dozen ads and see how many of them violate this simple idea.

3. Ideally, a headline delivers a complete message. Headlines are another example of the all-purpose 80/20 rule. Studies have shown that 8 out of every 10 prospects will read absolutely nothing but the headline of any particular ad. That means that your headline alone carries 80% of the responsibility for the success or failure of any advertisement (while your body copy, by contrast, carries only 20% of the load).

That's a powerful argument for avoiding clever headlines that only tease the reader and focusing instead on headlines that communicate a clear, complete message. Look at how these headlines deliver a complete message that you can immediately grasp:

Own one of these leather-bound books for only \$4.95 ...

Increase sales. Motivate. Reward. With gifts everyone wants — from The Sharper Image.

You can make big money in real estate right now

Logically, it also follows that you should spend less time nit-picking body copy and more time testing and perfecting powerful headlines. In fact, you should be prepared to spend 80% of your time developing your headline (including your background research) and a mere 20% fleshing out the rest of your copy.

4. A headline pulls your reader into the body copy. Despite the fact that only 2 out of 10 readers will take the time to read past your headline, you should strive to up the odds and draw as many readers as possible into your body copy. This is the only way to deliver a full-dress sales presentation.

To draw in readers, your headline can arouse curiosity, ask a question, make a provocative statement, promise a reward, give news, or provide useful information. When done properly, all of the following headline strategies will urge the reader to keep reading.

9 Powerful Headline Strategies That Work

There is no practical limit to the number of ways you can write a headline. However, experience shows that certain strategies stand a better chance of reaching your prospects. The following 9 headline strategies have proven themselves over and over in thousands of ads. When it comes

time to write a headline, try one of these first. This list is far from comprehensive, however it may serve as a creative jumping off point for your next project.

1. Say it simply and directly. The direct headline should be used far more often than it is. No cleverness. No jokes. No wordplay. The direct headline gets right to the point and firmly states the business of the ad. It works particularly well with strong offers, recognized brand names, and product or service types with which the reader is familiar.

Pure silk blouses ... 30% off

The Ultimate Tax Shelter

CompuServe gives you the Internet.

2. State the big benefit. One of the first techniques you should explore with every ad is transforming your major benefit into a headline. After all, your number one selling point should be up front. It stands the best chance of selecting the right audience and setting them up for a sale. Plus, if they read nothing else, they have at least seen the best you have to offer. If you have trouble writing this kind of headline, it's a sure sign you need to think about your product or service a little more.

Now! Moonlight Your Way to a Million Dollars.

Create your own cards, posters and banners in minutes!

Get a FREE vase when you buy a dozen roses.

3. Announce exciting news. Newspapers and magazines are popular because people love news. It's just basic human nature. We're curious. We not only want to know, we need to know. Casting your headline in a way that suggests news, rather than just advertising, can have the same powerful appeal of a feature story in the morning paper.

An important note: the product or service doesn't necessarily have to be newly created to qualify as news. It merely has to be news to your reader.

At Last, American Scientists Have Created the Perfect Alternative to a Mined Diamond!

Introducing the newest idea in cross-training. From NordicTrack (of course).

Now program your VCR by simply speaking to the revolutionary VCR VOICE programmer

4. Appeal to the "how-to" instinct. The how-to headline appeals to the need most of us have to improve ourselves or our lives in some way. The secret here is to key in on a need or want of the reader and promise to fulfill that need or want. Be careful, though. The how-to must highlight the benefit or final result, not the process itself. Look at this example:

How to make money working from home with your PC

Suppose instead it said "How to start a full-time computer business in your home." This misses the point, doesn't it? It sounds like a lot of work. It says nothing about the real motivator, which is using a computer you already own to make money. To write a how-to headline, begin with the words "How to" or "How" then immediately fill in the benefit.

How to stop smoking in 30 days ... or your money back

How You Can Profit From the 3 Greatest Service Businesses of the Decade!

How to do Central America on \$17 a day. (Land Rover)

5. Pose a provocative question. Asking a question directly involves your reader. However, your question cannot be a random or clever one. It must relate directly and clearly to the major benefit of the product. It must also prod the reader to answer "yes" or, at least, "I'm not sure, but I want to know more."

Do You Make These Six Common Mistakes On Your Taxes?

Gotten a speeding ticket lately? Read this.

How do I know which mutual funds may be right for me?

6. Bark a command. Many ads fall flat because they fail to tell the reader what to do. This headline type allows you to be direct, relay a benefit, and take a commanding posture simultaneously. It's not conversational, it's dictatorial — but in an acceptable way that readers have come to expect in clear writing.

Be today's complete drafter. (correspondence course)

Find anyone, anywhere, anyway you want! (CD-ROM phone books)

Draw the shades, bolt the door ... and enter a world of mystery, suspense and terror. (book club)

7. Offer useful information. Let me clue you into a little secret that too many marketers don't understand: Most people don't want information. What? But what about all the books and newsletters and magazines and other sources of information that people inhale like a narcotic morning to evening, seven days a week? Surely people want information.

No. People daily swim in a sea of facts. Most of us have a slush pile of unread magazines by our desk. We feel like we're drowning in data. What people really want is a sense of order and predictability in their lives. We want to feel a sense of power over our world. Therefore, we seek out the secrets, tips, hints, laws, rules, and systems that promise to help us gain control and make sense of things. Notice how these headlines promise information that does just this:

THE 20 MOST IMPORTANT STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO LIVE LONGER.

FREE. The best kept secrets in America

Free brochure shows you how to end your money worries for good.

8. Relay an honest, enthusiastic testimonial. A testimonial headline can do two things for you. First, it presents your reader with a third party endorsement of your product or service. Second, it capitalizes on the fact that people like to know what other people say.

"Quite Simply, the Finest Children's Software Ever Released."

"This diet program worked for me. It can work for you, too!"

"It's the first book on personal finance that really made sense to me."

A variation of this strategy is to write a headline in the first person and put quotation marks around it. This "virtual testimonial" gives you a more interesting headline and improves readership just by adding the quotation marks.

9. Authenticate your proposition with a little something extra. People distrust advertising. And for good reason — a lot of it proves inaccurate or downright dishonest. To cut through this basic wariness, you can add a little something extra to your headline that seems out of place, yet rings true. Look at the following headlines and notice how the words "Ohio man," "Obsolete," and "Frustrated bartender" stand out. Their specificity or quirkiness adds a truthful aura that traditional verbiage could never achieve.

Ohio man has 21-year tested formula to create multimillion dollar business from scratch, without bank loans, venture capitalists or selling stock

Small Company's New Golf Ball Flies Too Far; Could Obsolete Many Golf Courses

Frustrated bartender develops incredible device to clean and disinfect your entire home ...

There are many, many other ways to write a headline. Whatever strategy you choose, don't make a decision too quickly. The best favor you can do for yourself is to brainstorm. Write dozens or even hundreds of headlines. You never know exactly what you want to say before you say it, so giving yourself plenty of choices is the surest way to arrive at the best, most powerful headline.

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