



How to write powerful headlines...

It's 11.45 on a grey Monday morning. But you're feeling *good*...

You have just spent a lot of time and money creating your current promotion. More than you should have done actually, but you were really confident about this one...

It's a full-page ad, a direct mail pack and an email. All selling your latest range of superb gizmos.

You're excited, because you know this important promotion is effectively 'live' today. In fact, you've seen the ad this morning – and it looks great.

Your seed mail pack arrived in your morning mail too - and, in your opinion, it stood out from the rest.

Same with your email. The subject line came bursting out of the screen to you this morning - and it seemed to be the only one you noticed in your list...

But, it's now coming up to lunchtime and you are a bit worried.

You have been expecting a call from your Head of Sales to say the phone has been ringing off the wall and the emails are flying in.

But no call has been forthcoming.

You can't wait anymore. You call him. He reports that really nothing has happened.

"Been quiet as the grave. Are you sure the ads have appeared and the mail packs and emails have gone out?"

"Yes, they have." You swallow hard...

Fast-forward 7 days. Nothing's really changed.

You are now a *very* worried man. You know you've got a complete turkey on your hands.

That promotion has cost you £25K. And you've got no sales to speak of.

You are dreading the monthly board meeting, as serious questions will be asked – and, right now, you have no answers. And neither does your agency.

"Can't understand it, Bob", says the agency head. "Ad was colourful and attractive, the direct mail pack stood out - you said it yourself – and we all thought the email was really *clever*..."

"Must be the current nervousness out there. Seems like consumers are very worried you know - and we're sure it's affecting spending. I think maybe you should consider running some more ads, to give it a boost".

Somehow, none of this rings true to you. So you decide to call in an expert in DM to try and analyse why this promotion has failed so miserably.

Andy Owen walks in to your office 48 hours later. You had sent him the collateral the day before. After the pleasantries, he opens his briefcase and gets out your file.

He then hands you his detailed critique.

You know Andy never pulls his punches. He always tells it like it is.

This is no different...

You read it.

And silently, you weep.

You've just wasted £25K.

Now, interesting as that little story is, it's actually not too far off the mark. In fact, it actually happened.

Quite recently. I can't tell you who it is, for obvious reasons. What I can tell you is this:

My critique contained a number of observations on poor use of creative and copy within the 3 items, but really, this promotion bombed, for pretty much one reason.

The headline...

...or in this case, the terrible use of it.

Both the ad and the DM letter had an opportunity to sell very hard in the headline.

Neither did. Not even a *little* bit.

And the email subject line was a dead loss. Plus, the email was made even worse by having the senders name as a bureau – stfbn3456 –you know the type of thing, which always reduces opening rates and obviously affects response.

The headline in any promotional message has always been incredibly important. In these tough times, it has never played a bigger part.

As anyone who studies the communications business knows, the headline is now *gold dust*. The headline **MUST** contain a benefit and a relevance to the reader and it must do its best to get that reader to read on...

But, it seems to me, that very few marketers out there seem to know this.

So, let me take a few minutes to talk about headlines:

Victor Schwab, a very talented copywriter in the days of yore - and author of the excellent book, *How To Write A Good Advertisement*, said this about headlines:

"Some of the most tremendous flops amongst letters and advertisements contain body matter filled with great copy. But the headline was poor and it never got read..."

Another giant in the business, John Caples, summed up the importance of headlines with this remark:

"I spend hours on headlines -- days if necessary. And when I get a good headline, I know that my task is nearly finished. Writing the copy can usually be done in a short time. I can be sure that the advertisement will be a good one – that is if the headline is really a "stopper".

John knew, as do the professionals, that a good headline can be as much as 17 times more effective than a so-so headline.

And this is with exactly the same body copy.

This is not the gospel according to Andy Owen, by the way. It's a fact. And, it has been proven many times by myself and a dwindling band of pros who take the time to test key creative and copy elements.

Testing is one of the best ways I know, to gain knowledge...

It's another proven fact that, on average, five times as many people will read the headline of your ad and letter, than will read the body copy.

David Ogilvy underlined this many years ago, when talking about writing headlines for ads, direct mail and inserts:

He said *"When you have written your headline, you have spent eighty cents out of your dollar."*

So, it is a golden rule that the winning idea, the proposition, must be in the headline, not merely in the copy. Because, if it isn't in the headline, then there will be no selling proposition to 90% of your audience.

This is exactly the reason my client wasted £25K. He didn't know that basic commandment. Neither did his agency. Mind you, they were a 'through the line' agency.

Whatever *that* is supposed to mean...

You would think that everyone who has a responsibility in this business would know that headlines that work best, are those that promise a benefit.

You would be *wrong*.

Very wrong, in fact.

Just look at the ads in that magazine on your desk, or the newspaper in your briefcase. Just get the direct mail letters out of the bin underneath your desk that you threw in there a couple of hours ago - and see clearly why you didn't bother to read the copy.

By looking at these, you will see huge amounts of money being flushed down the toilet every day.

You will see 10 bad headlines for every 1 effective one.

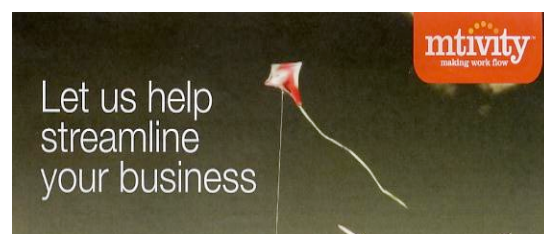
And you will see the main reason that marketers in Europe now hold on to their jobs, on average, for only 13 months.

Because, quite simply, the vast majority of them haven't got a clue what they're doing...

Here's a few examples of what I mean, taken from my own postbag over the last few weeks.



Useless headline from some more misguided souls in financial services.



We all see these types of banal headlines every day. Not a hope in hell of working.

Rewarding banking wherever you are.

Here we go again. A headline from Lloyds that says absolutely nothing.

Subj: Always the unique of products & Services from Al Hilal Bank
Date: 10/03/2010 14:55:53 GMT Standard Time
From: ralissa@alhilalbank.ae
To: andyowen@aol.com

The subject line is a disgrace for a reasonably sized bank like this.

Dear Mr Owen,

When your business gets snowed under,
we can help you through it.

Well it is Royal Mail. What do you expect for heaven's sake?

With British Gas
you can afford
a boiler repair
every month

From just
£13
a month*

I suspect this would make people laugh, rather than sell product. Rather sad.

Summer sounds better with Bose 

Weak, limp and says nothing at all.
Simply creative masturbation.

Windows®. Life without Walls™.
Dell recommends Windows 7.


The power to do more

Give yourself
a head start.

Dell are better than this. What on earth this is supposed to mean, I haven't a clue.

You may have giggled at most of those, but it's actually pretty serious stuff. All of the above cost a lot of money to produce and run. A couple may have cost jobs.

Let's cut to the chase, here. If you have news to tell, don't bury it in your body copy.

Because, as I have already pointed out, without a benefit-laden headline, nine out of ten people, won't even get to read it.

If you have a real benefit or a strong offer, shout it from the rooftops. And why not?

One of the most successful direct response ads of all time was this one - and it was all down to the headline. Before John Watson wrote this classic ad, no one had used the word 'die' in life insurance ads.

Unbelievable, but true...

FREE!
Personalised
Leather
Wallet with
Tools in
calculator

Cash if you die. Cash if you don't.

Should you choose to put your money into life insurance? Or should you put it into a plan that gives you a cash return? Today, with Lloyds Life Linkplan, you don't need to split your money because Linkplan gives you both.

With Linkplan, Lloyds Life has created a new way of life insurance. It's a plan that gives you a cash return on your money, and it's a plan that gives you a cash return on your money.

Designed for people who don't want to pay for life insurance, Linkplan gives you a cash return on your money. It's a plan that gives you a cash return on your money.

There's nothing else out there like Linkplan. It's a plan that gives you a cash return on your money. It's a plan that gives you a cash return on your money.

For more information, call 01-234 56789. You'll find out how Linkplan can help you.

TAKE A MAN ALIVE NOW!

There's nothing else out there like Linkplan. It's a plan that gives you a cash return on your money. It's a plan that gives you a cash return on your money.

For more information, call 01-234 56789. You'll find out how Linkplan can help you.

THE MONEY MANAGER CALCULATOR

It will tell you how much money you can have when you die. It will tell you how much money you can have when you die.

For more information, call 01-234 56789. You'll find out how Linkplan can help you.

HOW THE PLAN WORKS

Linkplan is a plan that gives you a cash return on your money. It's a plan that gives you a cash return on your money.

For more information, call 01-234 56789. You'll find out how Linkplan can help you.

GO FOR GROWTH

Linkplan is a plan that gives you a cash return on your money. It's a plan that gives you a cash return on your money.

For more information, call 01-234 56789. You'll find out how Linkplan can help you.

PERSONAL ILLUSTRATION REQUEST

Send within 10 days for specially low cost rates. Receive your FREE Personalised Money Manager.

For more information, call 01-234 56789. You'll find out how Linkplan can help you.

Drayton said of this ad many years ago – “it delivers a prime benefit and offer in an instant statement, instantly comprehensible.”

No one, but no one, would turn the page on this classic ad without reading it. The headline grabs you by the throat. It's an absolute gem...

David Ogilvy, in his book, 'How to Create Advertising That Sells', said:

“It pays to promise a benefit which is unique and competitive and the product must deliver the benefit you promise. Most advertising promises nothing. It is doomed to fail in the marketplace...”

Top copywriter, Clayton Makepeace, confirms this:

“The only reason any rational human being ever purchases anything, is to derive a benefit from it! That means any scrap of sales copy that fails to clearly, dramatically, emphatically, credibly and repeatedly present the benefits a product will deliver, is destined to fail miserably.”

Just observe how your fellow travellers read a newspaper on a plane or train. They speed read. An average person spends four seconds per newspaper page.

In those four seconds, they look at the headlines first. If the headline doesn't attract them, they read on, turn the page and you've lost them.

All that investment in creative, copy and media, lost. Wasted...

It's exactly the same with magazines. Just watch people in coffee shops and waiting rooms and you'll see for yourself how important a strong headline really is.

Here are 12 proven headline tips that will help you with your headlines:

- Headlines that promise a benefit sell more than those that don't.
- Try to include news. A new product, or a new solution. Ads with news in the headlines, generally pull about a 20% better response.
- Headlines that offer the reader helpful information are read and remembered by 75% more people.
- Make sure your headlines have energy and belief. If you don't believe in what you're selling, don't expect the reader to.
- Headlines of 10 words still tend to sell more merchandise than short headlines.
- As with any copy that is trying to sell, emotion is very powerful. Don't be afraid of using emotional words in your headlines. They will always, ALWAYS outpull intellectual words.
- Consider the use of your product name in your headline, if it works. Without it, nine out of ten people will never know what product you are advertising.
- If your ad is aimed at a niche market group, try to include a word in your headline that will immediately attract them - e.g., 'Something special for men over 50', 'How to improve your golf', "For marketers who want to get better'
- Use proven words in headlines. Words like 'you', 'free', 'how to', 'new' 'special', 'announcing', 'introducing', 'saving' and many more like that.
- When a headline is in quotes, recall is increased by an average of 30%.
- Specific headlines work best. General and vague headlines can reduce impact by up to 12% on average. The most damaging headlines are the ones that brag and boast without substance - or use puffery.
- Offer a solution to a problem in your headline. Here's an example that worked exceptionally well a few years ago. "Sixty Days Ago They Called Me Baldy". I would like to bet that not one bald-headed man that saw that ad, ignored it.

Now for a few no-no's...

- Tricky headlines - double meanings, puns and other intellectual offerings nearly always fail. Cleverness for the sake of cleverness rarely works in contemporary communications these days.
- Never write a headline in caps. Setting your ad in upper/lower case will increase readership. The reason is simple. We learn to read in lower case.
- Don't make the headline a head-scratcher. No one has time to work it out. John Caples said, "People are thinking of other things when they see your ad. Don't make them think. Make them act".
- Don't forget to use a headline. I know it sounds daft, but people still do it all the time. The car industry to name one. And retailers too. They either have no headlines (just the name of the business at the top) or totally useless phrases like "Mid-winter clearance" which means absolutely nothing.

Writing great headlines is a critical skill. A good one can make you a star. A bad one can lose you your job...

The better your headline, the better your odds of beating the averages and getting what you've written, read and acted on, by a larger percentage of people.

Next time you write a headline, stress the *benefits* of your product(s), not the product or its features. No one is in the slightest bit interested in you, your company or your products.

They are only interested in benefits and value.

But remember, you must support your headline claims. If your headline is a stopper, your body copy has to work with it and continue to deliver the promise.

I'll leave you with probably my favourite ad headline of all time, that appeared in a tremendous book called "*From Those Wonderful Folks Who Gave You Pearl Harbor*" by top ad man, Jerry Della Femina.

It was selling a product cream to ease piles.

"If you've got a dollar, and you've got piles, send me your dollar and we'll get rid of your piles. Or, you can keep your dollar and keep your piles".

Magical. But it was from the 70's, when people seemed to understand all things marketing, a hell of a lot better than they do today...

Keep the faith...



About the Author

Andy Owen is Managing Director of Andy Owen & Associates, a leading International direct marketing consultancy, specialising in all aspects of creative, copy and strategy for direct marketing.

The company has offices in UK, Dubai, Bucharest and Moscow.

The company's corporate website is www.andyowen.co.uk The specialist copy division has its own site at www.copywritingthatsells.com

Andy is personally involved in every creative and copy element that is produced by Andy Owen & Associates.

As well as his International speaking engagements, Andy runs in-house copywriting and direct marketing Masterclasses, Workshops and Seminars for companies and organisations all over the world. <http://www.andyowen.co.uk/speaker-presenter.html>

If you feel your company could benefit from any of these, or if you would like further information on any aspect of copywriting and creative for direct marketing, please contact Andy personally at andyowen@aol.com

All Andy's previous articles are available to view and download at www.andyowen.co.uk/articles.html

Andy's international events for 2011 are still being finalised, with discussions going on at this time. Potential countries may include:

Croatia, Poland, Chile, Botswana, Namibia, UAE, India, Palestine and Ukraine.

In addition, Andy is considering a short UK tour, plus an event in The Isle Of Man. More details will be available on all dates and events, early in the New Year. Please check the website for the latest information.