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The Best Headlines of All Time – And What They Can Teach Us

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FROM **THE ADVERTISING SOLUTION**

The headline of your sales copy carries a big responsibility. It takes just seconds for your prospects to decide whether or not to read further, and their decision is based largely on the headline. Does it grab their interest? Does it convince them there's something here worth learning more about? Does it predispose them to like what you're selling?

Having a winning headline is so important, we devoted an entire chapter to them in *The Advertising Solution*.

Through the years, classic headlines have revolutionized the field, sold hundreds of millions of dollars worth of products, and were copied and used again and again over decades. Some time back Raphael Marketing compiled a list of historic headlines that could well be the best ever written. When we read them today, they may seem old-fashioned – even a bit silly. But these headlines worked fabulously well in their day because they followed certain basic rules. By looking at them now we can tease out some of these basic principles so that we can apply them to writing powerful, effective headlines today.

Here are Raphael Marketing's 15 top headlines (the entire list included 100 headlines) along with some comments on what makes them so powerful.

“They laughed when I sat down at the piano – but when I started to play!”

This is the all-time great headline by our Legend John Caples. In a mere 15 words he tells a complete story featuring a person that any reader can identify with. Here's a person who maybe doesn't get a lot of respect. All his friends and relatives sneer when he walks to the piano. But he's got a secret. He's been learning how to play without anyone knowing it. He starts playing and – voila! – his triumphant super powers are revealed. Maybe a young single woman in the crowd will fall in love with him. That one simple headline involves the reader in a story in which the reader himself (or herself) becomes the successful hero, getting back at all those people who ever doubted him, and maybe hinting at romance. Who wouldn't want to learn how to accomplish the same thing?

This headline presented one strong idea, it offered a benefit based on a powerful emotion, and it promised a solution. No wonder this headline was used, and lovingly copied by others, for many years.

“They grinned when the waiter spoke to me in French – but their laughter changed to amazement at my reply.”

This classic headline is obviously a copy of the headline we just looked at. Here again the protagonist, seen as a doofus by his “friends,” turns around and shows everyone that they, not he, are the doofuses.

Here the super power that turns him from Clark Kent into Superman is his sudden ability to speak French. Take the French course he did, and you too can have the same, ego-boosting experience.

The key here is the emotional, engrossing story that the headline tells. Readers identify with the hero, and feel compelled to find out more.

“Do you make these mistakes in English?”

This famous headline has several things going for it, including one key word

The word is “these.” A headline that says “Do you make mistakes in English” wouldn’t be nearly as powerful. By saying “these” mistakes you’re challenging the reader. Which mistakes is he talking about? Do I make them? I’d better read this to find out what those mistakes are.

This headline demonstrates the rule of specificity. The word “these” makes it clear that there is very specific information to be found here, and compels the reader to learn what it is.

“Can you spot these 10 decorating sins?”

This ad is a direct offshoot of the previous one, and it too plays off the rule of specificity. It also engages readers by inviting them to spot the decorating sins. Reading this ad sounds like it would be a fun game. Plus, the reader might secretly want to make sure she's not making the same sins. She starts off reading because she feels superior to those who make such mistakes, but her hidden motive is to see if there's anything she has to correct.

“How a ‘fool stunt’ made me a star salesman”

This headline introduces the powerful word “how.” This always attracts a lot of interest. The reader knows there could be some valuable information here – actual directions for accomplishing some goal.

In this case, the headline promises that readers will learn how to become a star salesman. Everyone wants to be able to persuade others, so this is a goal that would interest anyone. And then there's the curiosity factor. What's the “fool stunt” and how did it transform the writer from a (presumably) poor salesman into a great one? All these strong points added up to a headline that sold lots of product.

“How a strange accident saved me from baldness”

This ad has a lot in common with the one before it. It uses the word “how,” it arouses curiosity about the “strange accident,” and it promises relief from a condition that bothers many men – baldness. This headline, sent to the right group of prospects, was tremendously successful.

“Who else wants a screen star figure?”

This intriguing headline pulls in readers a number of ways. First it leaves the assumption that others have successfully achieved a screen star figure using the product advertised. So the proof is implied in the headline.

Second, there’s a bandwagon effect: “All right ladies, we know this product works, so who’s next to get on board? Will it be you?” It’s not a question of whether it can be done, but whether the reader will agree to do it herself. This is an invitation many women could not refuse, as proved by the success of this ad.

“Who else wants a lighter cake – in half the mixing time?”

This headline also takes advantage of implied proof and the bandwagon effect (others have lighter cakes – do you want them too?) – and then adds an extra benefit (“in half the mixing time”) just to clinch the deal.

“Free to brides - \$2 to others”

This headline has the word “Free” which always captures interested attention. And it singles out brides as a special group. This ad probably went primarily to brides, so the “others” who have to pay \$2 might not even see the ad. But the wording makes the brides – who are the target prospects – feel special, and better than the “others.” Developing a feeling of exclusivity is an important feature that many ads exploit.

“Free to high school teachers - \$6 to others”

This headline replaces the “brides” of the previous ad with “high school teachers,” with the same effect. The principle of exclusivity is what carries the day here.

“Announcing the new Ford cars for (year)”

This headline uses two words that have proven strength in ads. The first is “announcing.” By using this word the copy sounds less like an “ad” and more like important information the reader needs to know. Readers think it could be worthwhile to find out what they can learn here. The other critical word is – of course – “new,” which is one of the most powerful words in advertising.

“Are you ashamed of smells in your home?”

This ad plays on people’s secret fears. “Oh, no, does my home smell? Maybe I should be ashamed about that. And I should do something about it right away. They wouldn’t use this headline if they weren’t going to offer me a solution. I’d better read what they have to say.”

Playing on fears like this is a great way to design a headline. But for it to work, you need to develop a question in your headline that most people will agree with.

“Buy no desk until you have seen the sensation of the business show”

The strength of this headline is that it is a command that stops readers in their tracks – arousing fear that they might be doing the wrong thing. Then it immediately directs their attention to what they should be looking at. It’s a very powerful combination.

“Can you talk about books with the rest of them?”

This is another headline that plays on readers’ self-doubts and wish to impress others. Then it offers a solution that will build their social abilities and standing. Setting up a problem, and then offering a solution, is a feature of many successful ads.

“Car insurance at low cost - If you are a careful driver”

This headline appeals to two wishes people have: to save money, and to be seen as a good driver. It also plays on the exclusivity aspect we looked at earlier. These special prices are only available to careful drivers. Are you one of them?

Are You One of the Savvy Businesspeople Who Can Adapt These Winning Headlines and Build Your Profits?

There’s a lot of information here that you can use to write headlines of your own. Take some of the principles we discussed and apply them to your own product or service. See if you can’t take a wishy-washy headline and turn it into a powerhouse that will inspire people to take action.

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