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Surprise! The Value of Adding an Unexpected Element to Your Sales Copy

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FROM **THE ADVERTISING SOLUTION**

Are you writing copy for an email or direct mail campaign? Copywriters are always looking for ways to make their copy engaging and memorable. The promotional Legends featured in *The Advertising Solution* were masters of using headlines with a twist, dimensional mail, and other techniques to intrigue prospects.

Your first goal is to capture your readers' attention. Then you want to help them remember your product and the steps you want them to take to order and pay for your product.

Your prospects are being bombarded continually with advertising messages from a variety of media – radio and TV, online ads, magazine and newspaper ads, road signs – even cars have advertising messages plastered on them by owners who are trying to earn extra income by turning their vehicles into moving billboards. And of course, there are all those other sales pieces that are sitting in the mail box or inbox right along with yours.

So, how are you going to get your message to cut through all the noise?

There are many different qualities that contribute to creating noticeable and memorable sales copy, but the one I want to highlight here is the element of surprise. It is no secret that things that are surprising will stand out from the crowd and get noticed. Of critical importance is the fact that they are also better remembered.

Get Your Message Noticed

One way to get someone's attention is to present something that's unexpected. You can do it with bright colors, graphics, or maybe something lumpy in the envelope. But our focus today is on the use of a certain kind of copywriting to get the response you want.

One of the most effective ways to accomplish this is with a headline that builds suspense, or that looks like it came out of left field. Here's a small list of classic headlines that are famous for having attracted a huge response. Some of them are quite old, but offer great intrigue, or arouse curiosity. Would you read the ads attached to headlines like these?

- Thousands have this priceless gift — but never discover it
- Do you make these travel mistakes?
- Do you make these mistakes in English?
- Do you do any of these ten embarrassing things?
- How a fool stunt made me a star salesman
- How I made a fortune with a “Fool” idea
- How a strange accident saved me from baldness
- The lazy man’s way to riches
- When doctors “feel rotten” this is what they do

These powerful headlines worked because they got people curious so they were compelled to read the rest of the ad. And once they did, the rest of the sales copy clinched the sale.

Get Your Message Remembered

What else can we do to get a message noticed and remembered? Believe it or not, there’s actually been quite a bit of research on this. Cognitive psychologists, basing their studies on the seminal work of Dr. Hedwig von Restorff, a Gestalt psychiatrist, have confirmed that we tend to remember the unusual more easily than the commonplace. There is some dispute over why this is true, but one prevailing theory is that items that are distinct are more easily coded into the structure of memory.

Two aspects of the so-called Von Restorff Effect are humor and bizarreness. Copywriters have made good use of both elements, as can be seen from the following classic headlines:

- The Crimes we commit against our stomachs

- The man with the “Grasshopper Mind”
- This horse paid my daughter’s way through college
- A hog can cross the country without changing trains – But you can’t!
- Men who “know it all” are not invited to read this page
- At 60 miles an hour the loudest noise in this new Rolls-Royce comes from the electric clock (This is one of my all time favorite headlines!)
- How to get your children stuck into a book instead of glued to the television

According to theory, if you can put a humorous or bizarre image in your readers’ minds, you’ll increase the chances that they’ll remember your product. It’s certainly worth trying.

A Little Humor Goes a Long Way

While humor, tongue-in-cheek copy, and bizarre images can brighten your ads and increase their effectiveness, they can also backfire on you. So move forward with caution.

First, “humor” that is negative, degrading, or offensive is not going to win you any sales. It may help you go viral on YouTube, but that’s not the kind of publicity you want. So make sure you don’t overdo it.

Second, your aim is to increase product recognition and response, not just give your reader a good laugh. You want to get people’s attention and relax them before getting down to business, which is to sell your product. If the humor overwhelms your true message, you’re defeating the purpose. Think of using humor like adding a pinch of salt.

Third, make sure that your kind of humor can be understood by your audience. Something that’s hilarious to one group of people will completely go over the head of another group. I saw a great example of this while I was doing some research for this article. I found a reference to the joke that was voted to be the

funniest by voters at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was the following one-liner by English comedian Rob Auton:

“I heard a rumour that Cadbury is bringing out an oriental chocolate bar. Could be a Chinese Wispa.”

Huh? At first I thought the whole report was a joke – about something not funny winning a humor prize (or should I say humour?). But then I did some more research and realized the whole thing was a cultural issue.

First of all, the Cadbury chocolate company (which I have heard of) used to produce a candy bar called a Wispa (which I never heard of but apparently was quite popular). But what makes the whole thing make sense (and funny) is that in Britain, there is a game like the game we, on this side of the pond, call “Telephone,” only they call it . . . wait for it . . . Chinese Whispers! You see, it’s a pun – only one that you would only understand if you were from the British Isles. It’s not for Americans.

The moral is, if you’re going to put a joke into your ads, make sure it can be understood – otherwise it’s just annoying, and won’t do you any “favours”!

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