

Drayton Bird

How to write the perfect headline



Not long ago I had dinner with two friends who are much cleverer than me. One, Professor Srikumar Rao, runs one of the hottest business school courses in the world. You can read about it at www.areyoureadytosucceed.com

The other, Joseph Sugarman, is a legend among marketers. He has made God knows how many millions, first advertising in magazines, then on TV. His *Adweek Copywriting Handbook* is wonderful.

Joe has written all his own advertisements. And he says the only purpose of each sentence is to make people read the next one.

I will shortly discuss what is the most important sentence, but what you are about to read is so simple and obvious that I almost apologise for writing it. However every time I look at ads in the press I'm astounded by how many simple and obvious things many people in marketing either don't know, have forgotten or just ignore.

To start with they spend far too much time on the thing that matters least to their customers, and far too little on the most important.

Does that sound a bold statement to you? Well the thing most firms and their agencies spend an amazing amount of time and hot air on is their slogan. But that is not what gets you sales or readers

- especially if it reads like a few I picked out a while ago:

- Transactions speak louder than words
- Direct access to the world
- Online, offline, any time ...
- Retail solutions for a multi-channel world
- Engineering the flow of communication
- Built around you
- Bringing it all together
- The world's local bank

You think those will make anyone buy something? No. I thought not. You don't care how local your bank is. You just hate their rapacious charges.

If Joe is right - and I wouldn't dare argue with his success - your most important sentence in any ad, e-mail or letter is the not the one at the end. It is the one at the beginning: the headline.

This is certainly true, because some years ago a study revealed a startling statistic. 80% of advertisements are never read beyond the headline. If you don't start with something that grabs people, you're in trouble. The moral is simple. Spend more time on your headline than on anything else.

So which headlines do work best? You may not be in the position to write something as startling as the *Sun's* famous line - "Freddy Starr ate my hamster" - so the first thing to understand is what interests people most.

Well, the poet Pope once observed that "the proper study of mankind is



man" so you must always remember that the most popular sport in the world is not soccer or fishing, it is people-watching. People are fascinated by people. Any heading that has something human in it is likely to work better.

People love stories, too. So a headline that has story appeal tends to work. They like surprising or puzzling headlines. And they tend to like things that promise a benefit of some kind.

Good headlines used to be called "stoppers". But they must not only stop - they must start, too - make people ask "I wonder that's about?"

Take a look at any successful magazine or newspaper and see what headlines they run on the front page. Here are a few examples taken at random:

[Brad and Angelina: at breaking point over 'other man'](#)

[Building 3m new homes will not end crisis, adviser warns minister](#)

[WICKED WHISPERS: Why we all love gossip \(even when it's not true\)](#)

[The most beautiful city in Southern Italy](#)

[SPICE WARS LATEST](#)

[Change your life - do nothing, says Bishop](#)

[174 HOT WINTER BUYS](#)

[Montenegro - the Mediterranean's undiscovered coastline](#)

[REAL LIFE: 'I LOST MY SONS BECAUSE I'M A WORKING MOTHER'](#)

Most 18-24 year olds would rather give up sex than their mobile phones

When you're trying to write a headline you could do a lot worse than adapt one you've seen in a successful magazine. It's a good idea to keep a file of headings that strike you.

The key to writing good headlines - and good copy - is the same as the key to success in conversation. Don't be a bore. Don't talk about yourself unless you have something really interesting to say.

Nobody wants to read about your latest triumph unless they see very quickly that it will benefit them - and why. Nor will they drool over pictures of your chief executive - unless he has something interesting to say.

Nor will they open their wallets because you say "Take a different road" to advertise a car very like all the others but a bit uglier. Trust me on that.

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About the Author

In 2003, the Chartered Institute of Marketing named Drayton Bird one of 50 living individuals who have shaped today's marketing. He has spoken in 53 countries for many organisations, and much of what he discusses derive from his work with many of the world's greatest brands. These include American Express, Audi, Bentley, British Airways, Cisco, Deutsche Post, Ford, IBM, McKinsey, Mercedes, Microsoft, Nestle, Philips, Procter & Gamble, Toyota, Unilever, Visa and Volkswagen. In various capacities – mostly as a writer – Drayton has helped sell everything from Airbus planes to Peppa Pig. His book, *Commonsense Direct and Digital Marketing*, out in 17 languages, has been the UK's best seller on the subject every year since 1982.

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