

How to write an effective headline.

A headline is the first, and sometimes only, impression you make on a reader. Whether an advert, press release, article, web page, sales letter or email, unless your headline grabs them within the first few words, you'll have wasted time, money, energy and above all, opportunity. So what makes a good headline?

Target

Picture the person you're selling to and try and get into their minds. Get to know what makes them tick – what they like and dislike, what age they are, their level of understanding and why they might be interested in what you're saying. This should give you a clear indication of what tone and style to use.

Simplicity

People are short on time and long on impatience. So your headline has got to be short, simple and attention-grabbing – your language should be simple and straight to the point and your headline should be no more than 15 words for an article and between 5 and 10 for an advert or email heading.

Interest

The best headlines appeal to basic human desires such as self-improvement, good value and peace of mind. A headline that promises an interesting or compelling story is guaranteed to catch the eye and encourage the reader to read on.

Provoke

Controversial or provocative statements arouse curiosity and give your publicity news value. If you have an opportunity to make a statement in a manner that is consistent with your message, make sure that the claim (a) can be substantiated, (b) is not offensive in any way and (c) is fully explained in the body copy.

Curiosity

Questions address the reader at a personal level, eliciting their agreement and creating a need for the product or service. Well-targeted, thought-provoking questions - what, when, who, why, how – draw the reader into the body copy by arousing curiosity.

Promise

Promise answers to a question or solutions to a problem. Headlines such as 'How to...', '5 reasons why...' and '10 top tips for...' promise the reader nuggets of useful information when they read the body copy. These headlines can be extremely effective, so long as you deliver on your promise.

Humour

Don't be clever for the sake of it as it can come across as smugness. We all get carried away sometimes and try to write for ourselves rather than thinking of the reader. Resist the urge to be clever – unless you have a world-beater, a straightforward, punless headline almost always works better than a clever one.

Power

To provide some building blocks and creative inspiration, consider using power words and phrases such as 'the truth about', 'discover', 'do you know', 'how much', 'secrets of', 'facts about', 'imagine', 'protect your', 'how would you' and 'free!'.

Test

No matter how good your story, if your headline is weak your message will fall flat on its face. Always check for spelling, grammar, accuracy, exaggeration and anything which could be misleading or misunderstood.