

The 50 Greatest Headlines Ever Written

There have been many books written about the "greatest headlines" and why they pulled results so well. This particular list is as good as any. Readers will find the headlines cited "ancient." Yet, the ideas and emotion behind them are as new as tomorrow. Human nature doesn't change. I found it on the Internet. There was no by-line, no attribution. But if you read it, you can't help learn something about the art of writing headlines that work. Frank Kaiser

1. THE SECRET OF MAKING PEOPLE LIKE YOU

Almost \$500,000 was spent profitably to run keyed ads displaying this headline. It drew many hundreds of thousands of readers into the body matter of a "people-mover" advertisement --- one that, by itself, built a big business. Pretty irresistible, isn't it?

2. A LITTLE MISTAKE THAT COST A FARMER \$3,000 A YEAR

A sizeable appropriation was spent successfully in farm magazines on this ad. Sometimes the negative idea of offsetting, reducing, or eliminating the "risk of loss" is even more attractive to the reader than the "prospect of gain."

As the great business executive Chauncey Depew once said, "I would not stay up all of one night to make \$100; but I would stay up all of seven nights to keep from losing it." As Walter Norvath says in *Six Successful Selling Techniques*, "People will fight much harder to avoid losing something they already own than to gain something of greater value that they do not own." It is also true that they have the feeling that losses and waste can often be more easily retrieved than new profits can be gained.

What farmer could pass up reading the copy under such a headline --- to find out: "What was the mistake? Why was it 'little'? Am I making it? If it cost a farmer a loss of \$3,000 a year, maybe it's costing me a lot more? Perhaps the copy will also tell me about other mistakes I might be making."

3. ADVICE TO WIVES WHOSE HUSBANDS DON'T SAVE MONEY --- BY A WIFE

The headline strength of the word "advice" has often been proven. Most people want it, regardless of whether or not they follow it. And the particular "ailment" referred to is common enough to interest a lot of readers. The "it happened to me" tag line, "by a wife," increases the desire to read the copy. (This ad far outpulled the advertiser's previous best ad, *Get Rid of Money Worries*.)

4. THE CHILD WHO WON THE HEARTS OF ALL

This was a key-result ad that proved spectacularly profitable. It appeared in women's magazines. The emotional-type copy described (and the photograph portrayed) the kind of little girl any parent would want their daughter to be. Laughing, rollicking, running forward with arms outstretched, right out of the ad and into the arms and heart of the reader.

5. ARE YOU EVER TONGUE-TIED AT A PARTY?

Pinpoints the myriad of self-conscious, inferiority-complexed wallflowers. "That's me! I want to read this ad; maybe it tells me exactly what to do about it."

As you go along, you will notice how many of these headlines are interrogative ones. They ask a question to which people want to read the answer. They excite curiosity and interest in the body matter that follows. They hit home --- cut through verbose indirectness. The best ones are challenges, which are difficult to ignore, cannot be dismissed with a quick no or yes and without further reading, are pertinent and relevant to the reader. Note how many of the ones included here measure up to these specifications.

6. HOW A NEW DISCOVERY MADE A PLAIN GIRL BEAUTIFUL

Wide appeal; there are more plain girls than beautiful ones --- and all want to be better looking

7. HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE

This helped to sell millions of copies of the book of the same title. Strong basic appeal; we will all want to do it. But without the words "how to" the headline would become simply a trite wall motto.

8. THE LAST 2 HOURS ARE THE LONGEST --- AND THOSE ARE THE 2 HOURS YOU SAVE

An airline ad featured a faster jet-powered flight. Headline is a bull's-eye for air-experienced travelers who know what those last two interminable hours can do to their nerves and patience. Like many fine headlines, it doubtless came right out of the personal experience of its writer. This headline (and all the others discussed here) would have been good even if any picture had not supported it at all. But its effect was heightened by a photo of a wristwatch with the hour marks indicating 1 to 10 bunched together --- and 10, 11, and 12 stretched wide apart.

9. WHO ELSE WANTS A SCREEN STAR FIGURE?

Who doesn't? Except men --- and this successful and much-fun ad is not addressed to them. "Who else" also has a "get on the bandwagon" connotation: not "Can it be done?" but "Who else wants to have it?"

10. DO YOU MAKE THESE MISTAKES IN ENGLISH?

A direct challenge. Now read the headline back, eliminating the vital word "these." This word is the "hook" that almost forces you into the copy. "What are these particular mistakes? Do I make them?" Also notice (as with many of the other headline reviewed) that this one promised to provide helpful personal information in its own context, not merely "advertising talk."

The attraction of the Specific: In this first breather let us stop to impress upon your mind how significant a part the "specific" plays in so many good headlines. It appears in many of our first ten. And it will appear in a surprising number of the next ninety. You will see how magnetically it helps to draw the reader into the body matter of an advertisement. So notice, as you continue reading, how many of these headlines contain specific words or phrases that make the ad promise to tell you: How, Here's, These, Which of these, Who Else, Where, When, What, Why. Also, note frequently exact amounts are used: number of days, evenings, hours, minutes, dollars, ways, types of. This "attraction of the specific" is worth your special attention --- not only as relating to words and phrases, but also concerning headline ideas themselves. For example, compare the appeal of "We'll Help You Make More Money" with "We'll Help You Pay the Rent."

11. WHY SOME FOODS "EXPLODE" IN YOUR STOMACH

A provocative "why" headline. Based upon the completely understandable fact that some food combinations virtually "explode" in the stomach. Broad appeal. (Relevant picture of chemical retort shaped like a stomach, starting to explode.)

12. HANDS THAT LOOK LOVELIER IN 24 HOURS --- OR YOUR MONEY BACK

Universal appeal to women. Result guaranteed: "Or Your Money Back."

13. YOU CAN LAUGH AT MONEY WORRIES --- IF YOU FOLLOW THIS SIMPLE PLAN

Something everybody wants to be able to do. A successful keyed ad upon which many thousands have been spent.

14. WHY SOME PEOPLE ALMOST ALWAYS MAKE MONEY IN THE STOCK MARKET

A profitable check-results ad selling a book written by a partner in a well-known and highly regarded brokerage house. Important key words: "some" and "almost" --- which make the headline credible.

15. WHEN DOCTORS "FEEL ROTTEN," THIS IS WHAT THEY DO

What's the secret of the success of this well-known ad? First: the suggestion of a paradox. We seldom think of doctors as being in poor health themselves. And when they are, what they do about it is information "right from the horse's mouth"; carries a note of authority and greater assurance of "reward for reading the ad." Note the positive promise of reward in "This Is What They Do."

Also, the use of the unabashed colloquialism "feel rotten" gets attention, sounds human, natural. Besides, it has surprise value --- since the vocabulary of the advertising pages has a certain sameness and stilted quality. Many a headline fails to stop readers because its vocabulary is so hackneyed. No word or phrase in it has any attention-arresting element of surprise, no words, expressions, or ideas not commonly used or expected in the headline of an advertisement. This ad pulled only half the number of responses when a test was made changing "When Doctors Feel Rotten" to "When Doctors Don't Feel Up To Par." (Other examples of the use of common colloquialisms and words are given, and commented upon, in many of these good headlines.)

Since the idea of using headline words not commonly utilized in the lexicon of advertising is worth such serious consideration, let us cite a few more examples. For a book on scientific weight control: the one word "Pot-Belly"! (Not very elegant, but it proved an effective stopper.) For a dictionary: a single word (onion, hog, shad, pelican, skunk, kangaroo, etc.) as the boldface headline of each in a series of small-space advertisements. You couldn't miss it on the page and you wanted to know what it was all about. The copy followed through by illustrating how simple and clear the definitions were in that particular dictionary. For a book of golf instruction: "Don't Belly-Ache About Your Golf This Year!"

16. IT SEEMS INCREDIBLE THAT YOU CAN OFFER THESE SIGNED ORIGINAL ETCHINGS --- FOR ONLY \$5 EACH

Anticipates the reader's natural incredulity concerning such an exceptional bargain. Thus helping to overcome his doubt in advance, by acknowledging the likelihood of it.

17. FIVE FAMILIAR SKIN TROUBLES --- WHICH DO YOU WANT TO OVERCOME?

"Let me keep reading --- to see if I have one of the five." The old "which of these" selling technique; not "do you want?" but "which do you want?" (Interrogative headline helps entice readers into the copy. Note how many of these hundreds are interrogative headlines.)

18. WHICH OF THESE \$2.50 TO \$5 BEST SELLERS DO YOU WANT --- FOR ONLY \$1 EACH?

This keyed ad sold hundreds of thousands of books. Strong comparative-price bargain appeal.

19. WHO EVER HEARD OF A WOMAN LOSING WEIGHT --- AND ENJOYING 3 DELICIOUS MEALS AT THE SAME TIME?

Another example of a headline that anticipates incredulity in order to help overcome it.

20. HOW I IMPROVED MY MEMORY IN ONE EVENING

This is the famous "Addison Sims of Seattle" ad that coined that household phrase. Could you escape wanting to read it?

21. DISCOVER THE FORTUNE THAT LIES HIDDEN IN YOUR SALARY

One of those good "discover what lies hidden" headlines. (Note others here.) A proven puller for an advertiser offering sound securities on a "pay out of income" basis.

22. DOCTORS PROVE 2 OUT OF 3 WOMEN CAN HAVE MORE BEAUTIFUL SKIN IN 14 DAYS

Women want it. "Why two out of three? Am I one of the two? How have doctors proven it? Quick results are what I want....Only fourteen days!"

How Many Words Should a Headline Contain? ...You have probably often read about the desirability of having no more than a certain number of words in your headline. Yet, in this second breather, we want to point out that many of the headlines already quoted (and others to follow) are, by ordinary standards, quite long. Yet, despite their length, they were successful. Obviously, it is not wise to make a headline any lengthier than its primary function actually requires. However, greater-than-usual length need not worry you...provided the headline's high spots of interest are physically well broken up and clearly displayed --- and provided the personal advantages promised to the reader are presented so oppositely that it is almost as though his own name appeared in the headline.

Worth recounting is the story of Max Hart (of Hart, Schaffner and Marx) and his advertising manager, the late and great George L. Dyer. They were arguing about long copy. To clinch the argument Mr. Dyer said, "I'll bet you \$10 I can write a newspaper page of solid types and you'd read every word of it." Mr. Hart scoffed at the idea. "I don't have to write a line of it to prove my point," Mr. Dyer responded. "I'll only tell you the headline: "This page is all about Max Hart!"

23. HOW I MADE A FORTUNE WITH A "FOOL IDEA"

Paradoxes excite interest. Broad appeal: almost everyone has once had a pet moneymaking idea that others have thought foolish and impractical. Sympathy for the underdog: "What's the story of this man who 'turned the tables' on the people who ridiculed him?"

24. HOW OFTEN DO YOU HEAR YOURSELF SAYING: "NO, I HAVEN'T READ IT: I'VE BEEN MEANING TO!"

A well-known book club has spent a great deal of money on this ad. Headline aimed accurately at large market --- people who "mean to" keep up with the new books but somehow "never get around to it."

25. THOUSANDS HAVE THIS PRICELESS GIFT --- BUT NEVER DISCOVER IT!

"What 'priceless gift'? Why is it 'priceless'? If 'thousands' have it, perhaps I should have it too." The "undiscovered" angle has great attraction. Legions of people are convinced that they possess talents and abilities that others have never discovered. Consequently, their world is unfortunately inclined to underrate or misjudge them.

26. WHOSE FAULT WHEN CHILDREN DISOBEY?

What parent wouldn't be stopped cold by this headline? "I'm the one who's probably to blame. It's a distressing condition --- and, most important, a reflection upon me. Maybe this ad tells me what to do about it."

27. HOW A "FOOL STUNT" MADE ME A STAR SALESMAN

What is the 'fool stunt'? Why did people call it that? How did it transform this fellow? I'd like to be able to 'sell' myself and my ideas --- even though selling may not be my vocation.") A large expenditure was made profitably on this ad after its resentfulness had been proven.)

28. HAVE YOU THESE SYMPTOMS OF NERVE EXHAUSTION?

Everyone likes to read about his "symptoms." The appeal is broad; the condition of "nerve exhaustion" is common.

29. GUARANTEED TO GO THROUGH ICE, MUD OR SNOW --- OR WE PAY THE TOW!

If you offer a powerful guarantee with your product, play it up strongly and quickly in the headline. Don't relegate it to minor display. Many products are actually backed up by dramatic guarantees - but their advertising does not make the most of them.

30. HAVE YOU A "WORRY" STOCK?

"Perhaps this ad will tell me why I need not lose any sleep over it --- or how I can replace it with one that will zoom."

31. HOW A NEW KIND OF CLAY IMPROVED MY COMPLEXION IN 30 MINUTES

Promises a desirable reward for reading. And the true experience of another person (with something relevant to our own desires) is always interesting.

32. 161 NEW WAYS TO A MAN'S HEART --- IN THIS FASCINATING BOOK FOR COOKS

Again, the attraction of the specific --- tied up with a strong basic appeal.

33. PROFITS THAT LIE HIDDEN IN YOUR FARM

Widely run in farm papers, with exceptional results. The hidden-profit ideas and the suggestion of retrieving a loss.

34. IS THE LIFE OF A CHILD WORTH \$1 TO YOU?

Trenchant headline for a brake-relining service. Strong emotional appeal: how the life of a little child may be snuffed out by an accident due to your ineffective brakes.

35. EVERYWHERE WOMEN ARE RAVING ABOUT THIS AMAZING NEW SHAMPOO!

The colloquial: "raving about." The "success" word: "everywhere." (The increasing popularity and sale of a product are adduced as evidence of its merit. "Nothing succeeds like success"; and people love to climb on a bandwagon.) And the overworked "amazing" still seems to have some power left.

36. DO YOU DO ANY OF THESE TEN EMBARRASSING THINGS?

Bull's-eye question. All of us are afraid of embarrassing ourselves before others: being criticized, looked down upon, talked about. "Which 'ten' are they? Do I do any of them?"

37. SIX TYPES OF INVESTOR --- WHICH GROUP ARE YOU IN?

This ad produced inquiries in large quantities. Investors reviewed the characteristics of each of the six groups, as described in the ad, then inquired about a program designed to meet the investment purposes of their particular group.

The Primary Viewpoint --- The "Point of You" ... Breather No. 3 is a short one because you already know the "lesson" very well. But to stress its importance, let us point this out to you: 43

of these 100 headlines contain one of these actual words --- "you", "your", or "yourself." Even when the pronoun is first person singular (for example, "How I Improved My Memory in One Evening"), the reward promised is so universally desired that it is, in effect, really saying, "You can do it, too!"

Thousands of words have already been written about the "point of you" --- but let me remind you that, given a fountain pen, 96 percent of 500 college women wrote their own names; shown a map of the USA, 447 men out of 500 looked first for the location of their home towns! Howard Barnes, of the American Newspaper Publishers' Association, really was on target when he said: "To call up an image of the reader, all you need to do is pin up a target. Then, starting at the outside, you can label his interests in this order: the world, the United States, his home state, his home town, and we'll lump together in the black center his family and himself....me. Myself. I come first. I am the bull's-eye.

38. HOW TO TAKE OUT STAINS...USE (PRODUCT NAME) AND FOLLOW THESE EASY DIRECTIONS

An example of a good "service" ad --- one that, besides being relevantly tied up with the product, also contains helpful information usable in itself. (Such ads often have considerable longevity because they are cut out and used for future reference.)

39. TODAY...ADD \$10,000 TO YOUR ESTATE --- FOR THE PRICE OF A NEW HAT

Who wouldn't want to do that? Doubt as to the promise if offset by the fact that the advertiser is a large and reputable insurance company.

40. DOES YOUR CHILD EVER EMBARRASS YOU?

Direct, challenging, a common occurrence. Brings up a flood of recollections. How can such unpleasant experiences be avoided in the future? Based upon a strong selfish appeal. Parents, are first, individuals; second, parents. The kind of reflection that children cast upon the prestige and self-esteem of their parents is a useful copy angle to remember. (This headline is the negative opposite of No. 4, The Child Who Won the Hearts of All.)

41. IS YOUR HOME PICTURE-POOR?

A rifle shot question hitting thousands of readers. Illustrated by a photo of an otherwise attractive living room with blank areas on its walls; with X's indicating where pictures would improve the room's appearance.

42. HOW TO GIVE YOUR CHILDREN EXTRA IRON --- THESE 3 DELICIOUS WAYS

It obeys the wise maxim of newspaper reporters: "Start where the reader is." In other words, the public already accepts the fact that children's blood should contain plenty of iron. So the headline goes on from there --- promising "extra" iron and "3 delicious ways" to get it ("delicious" ways; so not the common parent vs. child battle).

43. TO PEOPLE WHO WANT TO WRITE --- BUT CAN'T GET STARTED

Unerringly selects its audience, which is large --- and stymied.

44. THIS ALMOST-MAGICAL LAMP LIGHTS HIGHWAY TURNS BEFORE YOU MAKE THEM

The word "almost" lends believability. Headline promises an automatic no-effort method of relieving an annoying condition or avoiding a dangerous emergency.

45. THE CRIMES WE COMMIT AGAINST OUR STOMACHS

Most people already believe they often give their digestive process some pretty rough treatment.

This rapport, between the theme of the ad and the common belief of its readers, makes the "we" and "our" practically equal in effectiveness to "you" and "your."

46. THE MAN WITH THE "GRASSHOPPER MIND"

An immediate association with himself leaps to the mind of the reader. He wants to check at once on the personal parallel. What are the symptoms? Starting things one never finishes? Jumping from one thing to another.

"How much am I like him? It's not a good trait. What did he do about it?" This is an example of a negative headline that strikes home more accurately and dramatically than would a positive one.

47. THEY LAUGHED WHEN I SAT DOWN AT THE PIANO --- BUT WHEN I STARTED TO PLAY!

Another one that has entered our language. Sympathy with the underdog. Particularly interesting, structurally, as an example of a headline which "turns the corner" by using a final tag line to make itself positive instead of negative.

Also worth remembering: the before-and-after angle can be effective in many headlines.

48. THROW AWAY YOUR OARS!

Short and positive commands often make good stopper headlines. When Ole Evinrude, the outboard-motor king, ran a small ad with this headline, he took the first step toward building his one-room machine shop into a big business. (A similar headline, Throw Away Your Aerial! was also once responsible for building a business in the radio field.) This type of headline is worth thinking about when the product you are advertising eliminates the need for some, heretofore, necessary piece of equipment, some onerous job, or some sizable item of expense.

49. HOW TO DO WONDERS WITH A LITTLE LAND!

A successful headline that pulled 75 percent better than "Two Acres and Security" and 40 percent better than A Little Land --- a Lot of Living. The reason: "how to" and "do wonders with."

50. WHO ELSE WANTS LIGHTER CAKE --- IN HALF THE MIXING TIME?

Strong appeal. Another good "that else" headline. (No 9, Who Else Wants A Screen Star Figure?)

*Want to learn more about developing advertising that works for you?
Write frank@kaisercom.com.*