

50 Things I've Learned in 50 Years

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Editor's Note: On September 7, 1925 John Caples began his career as a copywriter with Ruthrauff & Ryan, an advertising agency that specialized in handling mail order accounts. In 1927 he moved to BBDO where he is still active.

The famous ad "They laughed when I sat down at the piano," and other well-known campaigns were originated by John Caples. He has written copy for many nationally known products and has supervised advertising research for Du Pont, General Electric, U.S. Steel, Lever Brothers, Liberty Mutual Insurance, Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance, The Reader's Digest, United Fruit, Goodrich Tires, U.S. Navy Recruiting, The Wall Street Journal and others.

Caples has taught advertising at Columbia and at the Advertising Club of New York. He is the author of four books on advertising and in 1973 was elected to the Copywriters Hall of Fame. In 1975 the fourth edition of his book "Tested Advertising

Methods” was published by Prentice-Hall. This book has also been published in Japanese and Italian. In this article John tells some of the things he has learned in his long career concerning headlines, copy, copy testing and account handling.

Headlines

1. The Headline is the most important element in most advertisements.

2. The best headlines appeal to the reader's self-interest or give news. Examples:

The secret of making people like you

Do you have these symptoms of nerve exhaustion?

Announcing a new fiction writing course

How a new discovery made a plain girl beautiful

3. Sometimes a minor change in a headline can make a difference in pulling power. A mail order ad for a book on auto-mobile repair had this headline:

How to repair cars

The pulling power of this ad was increased 20% by changing the headline to read:

How to fix cars

4. Re-casting a headline can make a big difference in response. Here is the headline of a couponed ad selling retirement annuities:

A vacation that lasts the rest of your life

Here is the headline of an ad that pulled three times as many coupons:

A guaranteed income for life

The losing headline attempts to be clever by calling retirement a vacation. The winning headline is a straightforward promise of a benefit.

5. Long headlines that say something are more effective than short headlines that say nothing. A book publisher had difficulty selling a book with the title "Five Acres." This book was transformed into a best seller by changing the title to: "Five Acres and Independence."

Another publisher had a book entitled "Fleece of Gold." The sales of the book were more than quadrupled when the title was changed to "Quest for a Blonde Mistress."

6. In writing headlines, the copywriter should try to break the boredom barrier. “How I became a star salesman” was the headline of a successful ad for a course in salesmanship. The pulling power of the ad was increased by changing the headline to “How a fool stunt made me a star salesman.”

Copy

7. Write your copy to the sixth grade level. Simple language is not resented by educated people. And simple language is the only kind that most people understand. When you read over your copy, say to yourself: “Will this be understood by my barber or by the mechanic who fixes my car?”

8. What you say is more important than how you say it. Mail order advertisers do not use expensive artwork or fancy language.

9. Illustrations that show the product in use or the reward of using the product or service are usually the most effective. Examples: In an ad for a bicycle, a picture of a boy riding a bicycle shows the product in use. In a retirement income ad, a picture of a happy couple sitting on a beach in Florida shows the reward of using the service.

10. There are two forces at work in the minds of your prospect. (1) Skepticism, and (2) The desire to believe. You can do your prospects a favor by giving them evidence that what you say is true. Your client will also benefit by getting increased response.

11. Specific statements are more believable than generalities. An example of a specific statement is the famous slogan for Ivory Soap – “99 44/100% pure”

12. Include testimonials in your ads. Two ads for a financial publication were split-run tested in Reader’s Digest. The ads were identical except that one contained four brief testimonials buried in the copy. The ad with the testimonials produced 25% more sales. Some of the most successful mail order ads have been built entirely around testimonials. Examples: “I was a 97 pound weakling” ... “How I improved my memory in one evening.”

13. Localized testimonials in local media are especially effective. Seven couponed ads for a public utility were tested in New Haven newspapers. One ad featured a testimonial from a New Haven woman. This ad outpulled all the others. A newspaper campaign featuring local testimonials for a packaged laundry soap raised the sales of the soap from fourth place to first place.

14. Ads that involve the reader are effective. For example, the best pulling ad for a book of etiquette showed a picture of a man walking between two women. Headline: “What’s wrong in this picture?” A successful ad for a course in Interior Design had this headline: “Can you spot these 7 common decorating sins?”

15. Straightforward ads usually outpull “cute” ads. Two couponed ads soliciting subscriptions for a daily newspaper were tested by mail order sales as follows:

Ad No. 1

Headline: “Take it from me this
is the newspaper for you.”

Illustration: Picture of a smiling newsboy
offering the reader a copy of
the Times.

Ad No. 2

Headline: How to get the Times
delivered to your home

Illustration: No illustration. Just headline
and copy

Results: Ad No. 2 outpulled Ad No. 1 by 190%

16. In writing copy, don't merely tell your prospect the benefits he will get by buying your product or service. You should also tell him what he will lose if he doesn't buy.

17. Put your best foot forward in your copy. A copywriter asked my opinion of an ad he had written. He said: "I saved the best benefit till the end and used it as a punch line in the last paragraph." I said: "Put your best benefit in the first paragraph. Otherwise the reader may never get to your last paragraph."

18. Avoid humor. You can entertain a million people and not sell one of them. There is not a single humorous line in two of the most influential books in the world, namely, the Bible and the Sears Roebuck catalog.

19. If you want to drive home a point, you should say it three times. For example, suppose you are making a free offer. At the beginning of your copy, say "It's free." In the middle of your copy, say "It costs nothing." At the end, say "Send no money."

20. You can sometimes combine two successes to make a super success. For example: Seven ads for house paint were tested for pulling power. Here are the headlines of the two most successful ads:

1. New house paint made by (name of manufacturer)
2. This house paint keeps white houses whiter

These two headlines were combined as follows:

New house paint made by (name of manufacturer)
keeps your white house whiter

A campaign with this theme sold more house paint than any previous campaign.

21. Long copy sells more than short copy. The more you tell, the more you sell.

22. Write more copy than you need to fill the space. If you need 500 words of copy, begin by writing 1,000 words. Then boil it down to a concise, fact-packed message.

23. You can often improve the pulling power of an ad by setting a time limit. Retail advertisers increase sales by setting a cut-off date. Reader's Digest, in selling subscriptions, frequently uses such phrases as: "Return this card before October 31".

24. Spell out your guarantee. The word guarantee has been used so many times it has lost much of its force.

Here is a classic example of a spelled-out guarantee:

“This is my own straightforward agreement that you can have my coaching material in your hands for 10 days examination and reading before you make up your mind to keep it. You are to be the sole judge.

“You can return the material for any reason, or for no reason at all, and your decision will not be questioned. Your refund check will be mailed to you in full by the very next mail. This agreement is just as binding as though it had been written in legal terms by a lawyer.”

25. You should ask for action at the end of your ad. Tell the reader what you want him to do. Sometimes it pays to offer a reward for action. In selling a 10-volume world history, the Book-of-the-Month Club offers a free book “to new members who enroll at this time.”

26. People who buy once are your best prospects for buying again. I used to write ads for a publisher who sold little booklets by mail for 25¢ each. The people who bought the booklets

were good prospects for the publisher's \$5 books. And a number of the folks who bought the \$5 books were later induced to buy the publisher's \$25 library. The same principle applies in fund raising. People who give once are the best prospects for giving again.

27. The copywriter's job does not begin at 9 a.m. Nor does it end at 5 p.m. His job is with him all the time. Some of his best ideas come to him while he is shaving in the morning, while he is riding on a bus, or at lunchtime, or while he is walking along the street, or sometimes in the middle of the night. He should have paper and pencil handy at all times. He should write down ideas the minute they occur. Otherwise some of his most precious thoughts will be lost.

Testing

28. The key to success in advertising (maximum sales per dollar) lies in perpetual testing of all variables.

29. Over the years, many methods for testing copy have been devised. Opinion tests, readership tests, eye camera tests, pupilometer tests, recall tests, comprehension tests, coupon tests, inquiry tests, attitude tests, etc. Most of these tests produced useful information.

30. Here is a simple test. When you write a piece of copy, put it aside and read it over the next day. You will almost always be able to improve it.

31. Another simple method is to ask somebody to read your copy aloud. If he stumbles over a sentence, say to yourself: "That's not his fault. It's my fault. I must make the sentence better."

32. If you want to get an associate's opinion of an ad you wrote, don't show him just one ad. Chances are he will try to please you by saying: "It's good." That gets you nowhere. Show him two ads and say, "Which is better?"

33. Testing ads by asking people for their opinion is helpful. However, it can be misleading. Many will not vote for all-type ads. Most believe that an ad is not good unless it has a picture. This is not so. Some of the best-pulling mail order ads have had no pictures.

34. In an opinion test, people hesitate to reveal their selfish motives. For example, in an opinion test of life insurance ads, an ad with the headline “What would become of your wife if something happened to you?” outpulled an ad with the headline “To men who want to quit work some day.” When these ads were subjected to a mail order sales test, the results were reversed.

35. Do not discard opinion testing because it is sometimes inaccurate. Opinion testing has one big advantage over mail order tests. You can ask the respondents why they voted for a certain ad. You can find out if the copy is understood or misunderstood. You cannot do these things in a mail order test.

36. The best tests, if properly handled, are sales tests. Mail order advertisers have an advantage in this respect. Every mail order ad is a sales test. In mail order, you can test copy, media, position in media, and season – all by sales results. Hence, mail order advertisers know a great deal about the realities of advertising. Much of this knowledge is applicable in those forms of advertising which cannot be accurately tested.

37. The most accurate test is a mail order split-run test where two ads – Ad A and Ad B – are tested under identical conditions. Many publications offer split-run copy testing. They do this by splitting the press run. Ad A runs in half the circulation. Ad B runs in the other half of the circulation – same issue, same page, same position on the page. If a news dealer has 100 copies of the publication, 50 copies will contain Ad A and 50 copies will contain Ad B. Thus each ad has an equal chance to get results.

38. Testing copy is fun, exciting, rewarding. I recall working on ads for a finance company that offered small loans. Several of us wrote ads and we tested them in newspapers by counting phone calls from prospects. For example, one ad would say “Telephone this number and ask for Miss Smith.” Another ad would say “Ask for Miss Miller,” and so on. Thus we could tell exactly how much business each ad brought in. Then each copywriter would bet a dollar that his ad would win. Testing copy became a game we all enjoyed. It was as thrilling as betting on a horse race. We learned a lot. And the client benefitted.

Account Handling

39. When you are soliciting a new account, don't tell the ad manager how bad his ads are. You may be talking to the man who wrote the ads.

40. In starting work on a new account, you are sometimes faced with the tough problem of beating the client's best ad – an ad that he has used successfully for years. How do you proceed? One way is to include in your ad every good thing in the prospect's ad plus some good things of your own. Another way is to test, not just one new ad but ten new ads. Your chances of finding a winner are increased tenfold.

41. Here is a philosophy you can use when your ad is competing with somebody else's ad. If your ad wins, you can say to yourself: "My experience paid off." If your ad loses, you can say, "I learned something."

Socrates used a similar philosophy in regard to marriage. He said: "If a man has a good marriage, that is a good thing. If he has a bad marriage, he becomes a philosopher, and that is a good thing."

42. Clients often tire of ads before the public does.

Hence advertisers who cannot measure sales results frequently demand a new campaign every year or so. Mail order advertisers repeat an effective ad till it wears out. Max Sackheim's famous ad "Do you make these mistakes in English?" ran for 40 years before it wore out.

43. Be honest. I recall serving an advertising manager who was the smartest client I ever met. I said to myself: "I can never fool this man. If I think a quarter page ad will be more efficient than a full page ad, I must tell him so, even though the agency makes only one fourth as much commission. If I try to mislead him, he will see through me. After that he will never trust me." This policy of honesty paid off. It was a happy account to work on for eighteen years. After I stopped serving this man, he continued to recommend my services to other advertisers.

44. Be flexible. I used to take train trips to Hartford to present new ads to the advertising manager of a large insurance company. It was a happy relationship. The ad manager became one of my best friends. We usually agreed on ads. But sometimes we disagreed. In those cases, I argued all morning for my point of view. But after lunch, I would remark: "There may be something in what you say. When I get back to my office, I'll try it your way."

45. Be diplomatic. A successful account executive said to me: "If the ad manager is in a rejecting mood, I don't show him any more new ads that day. I keep them in my brief case and show them to him some other time."

46. Don't feel bad if your client revises your ad. He will like the ad better and his revisions may improve it.

Miscellaneous

47. Bruce Barton, former head of BBDO, gave this advice: "Be polite to everybody, even the Western Union messenger. You never know when he may turn up as a client. If you are going to be mean to somebody, be mean to the chairman of the board. He won't be around very long."

48. Get out and meet new people whenever you can. Don't spend all your time with comfortable old cronies. One time I was having lunch with a BBDO associate. A man stopped at our table. It was Roy Durstine who was then president of BBDO. He said: "You men can't make any money talking to each other."

49. Alex Osborn, former vice chairman of BBDO said:
“Never have an open break with anyone. The memory of the break will linger on long after the object of disagreement has been forgotten.”

50. Find work you enjoy. My earliest ambition was to make enough money so I could retire at forty. But at twenty-five, I had the good fortune to get into advertising. Now that I am in my seventies, I never want to retire. The secret of happiness is enjoyable work plus helping others.