

# The "Four Great Laws" of Copywriting

## Sorry, Mr. Pickwick, Not These

By  
*Herschell Gordon Lewis*

Charles Dickens, in his 19th-century novel *Oliver Twist*, had his character Mr. Bumble make a comment that has become a standard observation of the legal profession:

"The law is a ass."

OK, OK. Mr. Bumble, by his very name, didn't know what we know – that the indefinite article preceding a word starting with "a" should be "an," not "a." But since his observation already has spawned grins, nods, and piracy for 170 years, Mr. Bumble may have had something there.

The word "Law" generically has power. That may be why, implicitly, it generates attacks. And here are some that ain't a ass.

Take a look at these laws. They should be immune from attacks, because they're not only valid; for marketers, they should be truisms. That's why they're labeled ...

## The Four Great Laws

Too many recruits into our sacred world of force-communication aren't properly indoctrinated. Their instruction – ergo, their background – centers on technique, not results. With that background, they can't compete with those who recognize the purpose of our messages: to cause the message-recipient to perform a positive act as the direct result of exposure to our message.

How can we be sure that will happen? By observing the Four Great Laws.

(Note, please: Although they're simple, easy, and obvious, these laws give you no assurance that you will create a brilliant message. Rather, they give you assurance that by observing them you cannot create a rotten message.)

### The First Great Law

The First Great Law gives direction:

Reach and influence, at the lowest logical cost, the most people who can and will respond.

Don't mistake the meaning of this Law. It isn't an imperative for cheap production; rather, it's an imperative against overproduction. Technicians value production-value; genuine marketers value response.

Unlike the traditional Madison Avenue mantra, "Reach the most people," we don't want to reach the most people. We want to reach the most people who can and will respond. Shooting blindly for high circulation, much of which is pure waste, isn't for us.

## **The Second Great Law**

The Second Great Law is a caution for sanity:

In this Age of Skepticism, cleverness for the sake of cleverness may well be a liability rather than an asset.

This Law is the bane of young "creatives" who are so eager to show how bright they are that their ego is nakedly on the line. Cleverness for the sake of selling something? Yes. Cleverness to show off? No.

Watch for the signs: This copywriter wants you to admire the writer, not the message.

That art director wants you to admire the design, not the message. Both attitudes betray amateurism.

You can see how the first two Great Laws dovetail.

## **The Third Great Law**

The Third Great Law is an equation:

$E2 = 0$ .

No, this isn't Albert Einstein's secret formula for intergalactic travel. It means when you emphasize everything, you emphasize nothing.

So if you have been writing headlines such as "32 reasons why you should buy now," stop. You're not isolating the key selling argument and subordinating the rest. You're telling the reader, "What interests you is in here somewhere. I'm not sure what it is, so fish for it." That's unprofessional.

## **The Fourth Great Law**

The Fourth Great Law is the payoff:

Tell the reader/viewer/listener what to do.

Curiously, although this Law should be the easiest and the most obvious, it's the most violated.

We see advertisement after advertisement, mailing after mailing, email after email, that rhapsodizes about a product or service but never makes the compelling point. Is the creative team afraid to sell, so they fall back to descriptive poetry?

The whole point of salesmanship is lost if we don't tell our targets what to do.

## In Combination ...

These Great Laws are deceptive. If your head nods as you go over them ... if you say, "Of course" ... if you recognize how each one builds impact ... then don't forget the next step:

Be sure your own marketing messages are congruent with the Four Great Laws. Congratulations. You may not have a winner on your hands, but you know you haven't created a loser.

Published: July 21, 2008

### Related Content:

- [Enjoy Lifelong Copywriter Success with Expert Training from AWAI](#)
- [Is Dan Kennedy the Real Deal ... or Just Damn Good at Marketing Himself?](#)
- [Learning From 8th Graders How to Strengthen Your Copy](#)
- [Don't Overspice Your Copy...](#)
- More by [Herschell Gordon Lewis](#)
- More from [The Golden Thread](#)

# 1 Response to "The "Four Great Rules" of Copywriting: Sorry, Mr. Pickwick, not these."

Herschell, my friend, you are a brilliant and patently humble man; you cut right through it, like the 'wounds of a friend.' I am forever grateful.

Your friend,

"Peter the Porter"

*Peter Colman* – over a year ago

**American Writers & Artists Institute**

220 George Bush Blvd, Suite D

Delray Beach, FL 33444

(561) 278-5557 or (866) 879-2924