

Billions of Dollars of Marketing Research for Free

By Clayton Makepeace

Good morning, Sunshine! And how was *your* weekend?

What's that you say? You're well-rested ... brimming with energy and optimism ... and eager to begin making this your best week ever?

Cool beans.

But please – *for mercy's sake* – go put some clothes on. We're going to the bookstore: One of the few places we copywriters and marketing folk probably *should NOT* work in our underwear!

I know – you assumed this issue would be just another one where I was going to preach about dominant emotion or benefits or some such stuff like that.

But frankly, I don't feel like it today. Unlike *some* people I could name, I did not have the luxury of swilling beer and watching *Survivor* reruns all weekend.

In fact, I spent two full days sweating over every word on seven headline test panels. And I'm so close to this damn copywriting tree, all I can smell is bark.

I need to take a giant step back and get a good, long look at the salesmanship forest.

So let's begin our week leisurely-like – savoring a latté ... maybe a biscotti ... and three glorious hours of relaxed inspiration.

All you'll need is an open eye ... an open mind ... your trusty pen and a yellow pad ... and of course, a couple of sawbucks for the Starbucks.

We're headed down to the local Borders bookstore.

And be prepared to remove your shoes. For bretheren and sisteren, we are about to tread on Holy Ground ...

The Temple of Marketing

Puh-raise CAPLES! Thankew, OGILVY! Hallelujah, HOPKINS!

For verily, verily I sayeth unto thee, no place on Earth or in the heavens above containeth greater wisdom on the art and scienth of persuasion ...

... Or insighth into what thy prospecth art buying now ...

Or more ideath thou canth shamelethly filch for your next promotion!

Just step through the front doors and take a deep breath: *Can't you just SMELL the money?*

This year, we Americans will spend considerably more than \$30 BILLION on books and magazines.

For the numerically challenged among us, that's *thirty thousand MILLION* dollars!

This Borders we just walked into is part of a chain that moves somewhere around \$4 billion-worth of books and magazines each year – and it's not the biggest chain out there. The Barnes & Noble/B. Dalton folks do about 25% better.

As they'd say here in North Carolina, "That's some powerful BIG binnus!"

Now, with that many shekels at stake, you'd expect the competition to be ferocious. You'd be right.

Take a look around the store. How many book and magazine titles do you figure you see? 10,000? 20,000?

Guess again, oh Prescient One. This is one of the bigger temples.

You are in the presence of nearly 200,000 titles! Lay one copy of each end-to-end, and they'd stretch out for some 25 miles!

Imagine being the marketing guy or gal whose product is only one of 200,000 competing for your prospects' attention ...

... AND being limited in your quest for A-I-D-A (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) to a single thought that will fit on a book jacket – or worse – on its spine!

Or imagine your product being one of hundreds of periodicals displayed on the magazine rack – and because the covers overlap, only *the top third* of your cover is going to be visible!

Even worse, as a magazine marketer, you have to come up with a different way to capture max eyeballs twelve times a year – or in some cases, every single week!

And you thought competing with five or ten direct mail or e-mail promos that hit prospects' mailboxes at the same time as yours meant *you* had it tough!

Billions In Marketing Research on the Hoof

Because of the huge amount of money at stake, every one of the publishers represented on these shelves pays a king's ransom for market research each year.

Every title ... every subtitle ... every "also inside" fascination on every magazine and every design element you're looking at is the product of that research.

Fact is, you only *think* you're looking at mere books and magazines, here: You're looking at billions of dollars of market research on the hoof.

And if that don't make your nips snap to attention and holler "howdy!" you ain't *no kind* of marketing person!

OK ... so now that you fully appreciate the value of our little field trip, let's see what we can learn ...

First Stop: The Holy of Holies

First things first – the latté and biscotti. I'll take mine skinny – with skim milk and Splenda.

You *are* buying – right?

Just checking.

OK ... let's do this systematically – we don't have all day.

Let's make a beeline for the Holy of Holies: The Best-Seller shelf.

This is where we're going to see the books that are making their authors and publishers the richest.

Start with the fiction section. Not a lot for direct marketers to learn here, but some. Take a look at the titles. Any good headline ideas there?

Hmmm ... *The 5th Horseman*. Reminds me of a headline I snarked for a financial package once: *The Four Horsemen of the Stock Market Apocalypse*. Gangbuster response.

Da Vinci Code. "Da what?" Actually – I got my idea for my "Cracking the Wall Street Code" promo from this one. Next thing I knew, Mark Victor Hansen and Robert Allen had *Cracking the Millionaire Code* in bookstores everywhere. Thanks, Mr. Brown!

Dirty Blonde – The word "dirty" in a title (or headline) arouses prurient interest. Like the word "forbidden," it's sure to get read.
Note to self.

What Price Love? – Obviously a tome either on soiled doves or divorce. Hmmm again. "What price profits?" What price healing?" Not a head, maybe – but maybe a sidebar head or subhead ...

You make your notes; I'll make mine.

Now, what about the cover designs? The first two use very warm colors – burgundy and gold for *Da Vinci* ... tan and orange for *The House*.

5th Horseman: Wow. Look at the size of that 5!

The Tenth Circle: Another number in a title. What do they know that I don't? Great red, combined with cool lavender. Wonder what's going on under that blanket?

I'm done with the best-selling fiction aisle. Let's take a look at the non-fiction stuff: Much closer to what we do for a living anyway.

Actually, I just noticed the *New York Times* doesn't call it "nonfiction" anymore. They probably figured calling books with titles like *One Minute Millionaire* nonfiction was too much of a stretch. Now, it's called "Advice."

So what do we have here?

Inspiration by Wayne Dyer. Lousy title; great author. In fact, the author's name is the real title – that's why his name is three times larger than anything else on the cover.

The publisher wasn't born yesterday: He knows folks will buy every drop of ink that dribbles out of this guy's pen.

Dyer is the real product here. (That little bit of inspiration would have done me a LOT of good when I was launching Louis Rukeyser's letter and committed the unforgivable sin of leading with benefits instead of the celebrity name!)

Natural Cures "They" Don't Want You To Know About: Ho-hum. I first wrote that title in 1991 – as a headline for *Health & Healing*.

Crack it open and scan the chapter titles. Any good headline ideas there? NOPE!

Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living At Your Full Potential by Joel Osteen. MAN has that guy got a head of hair or what?

Another number prominently in the subtitle. Couldn't write a chapter title if you held a gun to his head. Move on.

REAL MONEY: Sane Investing in an Insane World. Not bad – especially the subtitle.

A bit passive for my tastes, though – not as strong as the more declarative *Stop the INSANITY!* title that blonde Nazi-looking chick wrote a few years back – but the juxtaposition of "sane" and "insane" definitely has potential.

Worth a look inside:

"How we find hot stocks without getting burned" ...

"Ten Commandments of Trading" ...

"Tips Are for Waiters" ...

"Stock market junkie" ...

Fascinating turns of phrase. I'm writing notes like crazy. I may even take this one home with me for further study.

And so it goes, until I've shamelessly pulled every power word, turn of phrase, copy concept or content idea I can find.

That last item – content – is especially important. We'll do it again when we hit the magazine section.

See, a lot of the promos I write are advertorials. That means instead of leading with product benefits, they lead with a topic that's of interest to my prospects and delivers valuable information and advice before introducing my product and asking for the sale.

Knowing what people are reading tells me what they're thinking about – and either worrying about or dreaming about.

So after making a few more quick notes about the general content of the "advice" books, it's off to the paperback fiction and nonfiction bestsellers, for the same kind of gleaning.

Fatal Burn (Ever wonder why the word "fatal" shows up in so many movie titles? It sells!) ...

Wicked (Oooh – more prurient interest!) ...

Confessions of an Economic Hit Man (Reminder: Headlines with the word "confessions" nearly always work well) ...

The End of Faith (Note to self: Find more ways to eliminate faith from the purchase decision) ...

Running With Scissors (HAH! Great word picture of what prospects do if they ignore my clients' health or wealth advice) ...

I'm up to five pages of notes and we've only done two aisles!

Second Stop: The Bazaar

All right – we've plundered the bestseller racks for all they're worth. Now it's time to head off to the magazine section.

I love this part of a bookstore best. While everything else in a bookstore feels more like a library, the magazine section feels like a third-world bazaar – with all the brightly colored goods spread out before you.

Wowzers. Just *LOOK* at all those covers!

Let's take a minute to soak it all in. Stand back from the racks and kind of squint so your eyelashes blur the words – allow only the colors to reach out to you.

Which ones grab you by the eyeballs? Why?

What colors and color combinations seize your attention first? Purple with Day-Glo lime green? Hot pink and baby blue? Nazi colors – black, red, yellow and white?

Scribble, *SCRIBBLE!*

Now, approach a rack – with reverence, please. Each one of these publishers has been testing cover design and copy for years. You are looking at the products of truly gargantuan research budgets.

Study how the headlines are set. Are they reversed? Or are they dark ink on a light background? Are they set in serif type or sans-serif?

How big are the characters? Do they have dimension – say a drop-shadow behind them or hand-crafted to look like three-dimensional letters?

Take a step or three closer. What kind of photographs or illustrations do you see? How many include an interesting-looking person doing something? How many feature only inanimate objects? What kinds of inanimate objects?

How many feature multiple photos? How well does each connect, illustrate or amplify the message in the main headline?

Knowing what you know about the primary market for each type of magazine you're studying, what do these choices suggest research might show about grabbing the attention of younger men (*Maxim*, *Playboy*, etc.)? Of younger women (*Cosmo*, et. al.)? Of older men (*Robb Report*) and women (*Better Homes & Gardens*)?

How about health-conscious people (*Prevention*, etc.)? Technology buffs (*Popular Mechanics*, *PC*, etc.)? Newshounds (*Time*, *Newsweek*, etc.)? Investors (*Forbes*, *Fortune*, etc.)?

And don't forget the mumu set (*National Enquirer*, etc.)?

Getting writer's cramp yet?

Me too – *isn't it GREAT?*

Now, let's do what we did in the bestseller section: Quickly scan each headline and any additional copy on the covers.

We're looking for three things here:

First, we're looking for words and short phrases that reach out and grab us by the short-and-curly. Or to put it more delicately, that have the greatest visceral power.

I'm talking pucker factor here: Something you feel – or more importantly, that you believe your prospects will feel – deep down in the gut.

Second, we're looking for propositions, the phrasing of benefits and sentence structure techniques that deliver those words and the power they carry in the twinkling of an eye.

And third, we're looking for topicality – the subjects and themes that millions in research told the publishers would resonate best with their prospects.

Need another yellow pad? There's some for sale over on Aisle Four.

Now, we're going to make a stack of the magazines that are speaking directly to our best prospects, lug them over to a reading table and pick each one of them clean.

My thing is selling to the health and investment markets, so I load up on those kind of mags.

And one by one, I'm going to scour the covers and tables of contents for headline, fascination and content ideas – and if something really grabs me, maybe read a couple dozen articles.

Speaking of the articles, be sure to check out how the editors begin each article – the techniques they use in their article titles, deck copy and opening paragraphs to hook readers.

See how they use questions and declarative sentences to "sell" folks on reading. Study the techniques they use when leading with fear ... desire (greed) ... intrigue ... or benefits.

Pay close attention to the graphic layout, too. Observe how they use pull-quotes, sidebars and graphics to catch scanners and drive their eyes down into the fine print.

Note the types of eye candy they've found are best at keeping attention. What kinds of photos, illustrations and charts are they using?

While these devices are increasing readership are they also making the article text more credible? How do they handle captions on these devices?

Think about which of these techniques you might borrow to ramp up readership on your next promotion.

And while you're doing all of that, be sure to carefully check out the ads as well. Sure – most of them suck. Especially the "image" and "name recognition" boondoggles.

But you'll still find a useful turn of phrase here or there ... and there are a few direct response ads in there that are definitely worth learning from!

150 Titles Down: Only 199,850 to Go!

OK! It's been two hours and we've scoured – what? – 100 bestsellers and 50 magazines?

That's 150 titles out of 200,000. We're almost one percent of the way done!

Just kidding. We've hit the high points – now, it's time for the whirlwind tour.

By now, our lattés are only a distant memory – and that's good. Because we're going to need both hands for this next exercise – the left one to hold your yellow pad and the right one to write feverishly as we cruise every aisle in the store.

We're trolling for as many headline ideas as leap out at us as we stroll through the stacks.

First rule of thumb: When you see a really great title, it's a good bet the subtitle and chapter titles will be killer too. So be prepared to slam on the brakes and take a look at the table of contents.

Second rule of thumb: We want to pay special attention to books that are doing well – just not good enough to make the bestseller list – we can spot them four ways:

1. **End Caps:** The hottest books in each section tend to be featured in end caps (displays at the end of each aisle).
2. **Full Frontals:** Hot sellers in the aisle racks are usually placed with the entire cover visible.
3. **Quantity Clues:** The greater the demand (or anticipated demand) for any book in the stacks, the more copies of that

book you'll see.

4. **The POP Give-Away:** The last place we'll look is at the cash register. This is where you'll find the "Point of Purchase" displays with popular books and magazines the store hopes you'll buy on impulse.

We're Done!

There. Wasn't that fun?

In less than three hours, we recharged our creative energies ... got in touch with what our best prospects are reading and thinking about now ... and picked up a bunch of techniques for grabbing and holding their attention.

Plus, we snagged some valuable insight into graphic design for maximum attention and readership ... and have pages of great power words and phrases to use in our next promotion.

Now, it's time to put all that great stuff to work!

Soon as you get home – while all of this is still fresh in your mind – unlimber those notes and begin thinking about how you might apply each one to a project you're working on now or contemplate starting soon.

Add notes to your notes. Turn your headline ideas into heads that could be used for products you sell. Practice using the deck and opening techniques you picked up for real products. Jot down everything that springs into your mind.

Then save it all in your own personal swipe file and READ IT several times on your next project.

Published: July 22, 2014

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14 Responses to "Billions of Dollars of Marketing Research for Free"

The light and breezy style of this article kept me wanting to read whatever was next. And the content was ever on the mark. I'm heading for Barnes and Nobel as soon as I can to follow every step outlined here. Thank you, Mr Makepeace, for such a valuable and detailed tutorial. I can't wait to put it to use.

Guest (Ronn Jerard) – over a year ago

A truly awe-inspiring exercise. I can't wait to implement it and see if management ask "what I'm doing".

John Keyser – over a year ago

I sense I'm on the precipice of becoming a rabid bookstore junkie. Clayton's article might prove to be the fatal push!

Alan Steacy – over a year ago

Excellent practical article

Wes Fahlenkamp – over a year ago

Awesome article.

Thanks Clayton!

~R

Roy A – over a year ago

Fabulous article. It's already in my "keep" file.

dkdoulos – over a year ago

Great article. Will make my next trip to Barnes and Noble so much more fun and productive. Can't wait.

Guest (Angela) – over a year ago

Clever words and titles are the wings of effective copy.

Pookna Tocka – over a year ago

Thank you. Great practical advice here.

Guest (martin) – over a year ago

What a great article! I never considered this as a source for building my swipe file. I can hardly wait to visit Barnes & Noble.

Guest (Garth Osborn) – over a year ago

WOW! Great advice, can't wait to get to the book store! (All that reading -and writing-and didn't cost a cent!

Guest (Jeannie) – over a year ago

Like I needed one more reason to spend hours in a bookstore.

dan h – over a year ago

I love the way Clayton writes such amazing advice, but so simple. Thank you. I love to write and I love bookstores-- so now I have one more reason to spend my day in my favorite place.

Vicky Jeter – over a year ago

WoW, that was an eye-opener! I don't suppose I'll ever look at a bookstore in the same way. I mean ever again after reading Clayton's Tour Edition of One! I'm sorry I never got to experience him more while he resided on planet Earth!

Wanda F Sewell – 8 months ago

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