

How to Write Effective B2B Headlines

By Steve Slaunwhite



Most copywriters find it a challenge to write strong, effective B2B headlines.

There's a bit of mystery to writing a headline, isn't there? It's almost as if the great headlines seem to come out of thin air.

It can be frustrating because there really isn't a guaranteed step-by-step methodology you can use to write the perfect headline every time. Writing headlines involves inspiration, good ideas, and activating the creative part of your brain.

So, I'd like to give you a couple of my favorite strategies for brainstorming headlines and for deciding whether a headline will be effective.

Headlines have to grab the reader's attention and stop them in their tracks

Now as you know, headlines are important. They do a lot of work. And probably the most important thing they do is gain reader attention.

Keep in mind, prospects don't *have to* read most of the marketing pieces you write — the sales copy, the advertising, or the emails.

The marketing piece is often an interruption. They may be reading a blog and there's an ad you've written for your client right next to the blog. The headline has to get their attention, stop them in their tracks, and pull them into your ad. That's a lot of work

for a headline.

Or, think about when a business prospect is doing some product research and actively engaged in the marketing materials. Website headlines still have to do a lot of work because they have to gain and hold the reader's attention and keep them engaged with your copy.

B2B buyers are busy people, and your headlines help keep them reading.

There's a wonderful quote from the legendary copywriter John Caples, "If the headline is poor, the best copywriters in the world can't write copy that will sell the goods. They haven't a chance because if the headline is poor, the copy will not be read."

That's as true today as it was back then.

So, how do you write an effective headline?

Well, first of all, let me give you a warning when writing headlines. We're all impressed with creative headlines, aren't we? We're impressed when we see a creative headline with a clever wordplay, or one that's unique and inventive. But headlines that rely on cleverness and curiosity alone often don't work.

So I always recommend you write headlines that communicate a benefit — either implied or directly stated.

Let's say, for example, you came across this headline:

"Find it. Nail it. Be it."

It's what we call a curiosity headline because it's relying primarily on curiosity to get your attention.

I recently used this example in a workshop and asked the participants to guess what the product was. One person guessed it was for carpentry tools.

It's actually a headline for an executive search firm company that helps executives find jobs. So find it — find the job. Nail it — nail the interview. Be it — get the position and enjoy the job.

The reason why that headline is so tricky and probably would not work is because it doesn't communicate a benefit. Instead, it relies on curiosity and cleverness.

Sometimes clever headlines work, but it's rare. The best headlines are headlines that clearly communicate a benefit.

You can fix the headline by adding a subhead or changing it to incorporate a benefit, and still keep its cleverness. You can have a main headline that says, "Find it. Nail it. Be it." And then a strong, clear subhead right below it that says, "Isn't it time you finally had the job of your dreams?" Then it's communicating a benefit.

Good headlines communicate a benefit either directly or indirectly. So when you're brainstorming headlines, keep that in mind. Keep thinking, how can I communicate the strongest, biggest benefit directly or indirectly? That's a great place to start when you're brainstorming.

5 Characteristics of Good B2B Headlines

In my opinion, there are five characteristics of a really good B2B headline. I just explained the #1 characteristic in detail, and also, here are the other four ...

Keep these in mind when you're brainstorming headlines.

#1. Benefit

The headline communicates a benefit in some way —either directly or indirectly.

#2. Clear

Your headline should be clear. You know what the headline means. You don't have to decipher it. One of the problems with "Find it. Nail it. Be it," is that you have to try to figure out what that headline means.

#3. Urgency

The headline should tell the reader they need to pay attention to this right now rather than later. Don't leave this for another time. That's very important when you're writing copy to persuade business buyers because they're so busy.

Maybe there's a time limit to this offer, or only limited quantities are available. They need to respond before a deadline. Or it solves a big problem and they should read it now.

#4. Credible

Great B2B headlines are credible. There's not a lot of hype. There's a ring of truth about it. It's very important when writing headlines targeting B2B buyers that the headline needs to seem credible.

So a headline that says something like, "Double your business income in 30 days with our SEO services" is an impossible-to-believe headline. How can that company know they can double anybody's business in 30 days without knowing a lot more about that business? That's just hype.

#5. Fresh

Good B2B headlines are new and interesting. There's some creativity and some inventiveness to it. But it doesn't rely on creativity and inventiveness alone. It still has the other four factors — especially communicating the benefit. The best headline is fresh and unique because that helps to gain attention.

Do all great and effective B2B headlines have those five characteristics? No, they don't. But if you can get all five, then you can be quite confident you have a headline that can potentially work very well.

Analyzing an effective headline example

Now, let me give you an example of a strong, effective headline.

This is a headline for a company called Less Accounting. They sell small business accounting software and they've used this headline in different variations for many years.

"Bookkeeping sucks. We just make it suck less."

I love that headline because it has all five characteristics.

Does it communicate a benefit? Yes. They're telling you if you hate small business bookkeeping (and most small business owners do), then they make bookkeeping suck less. They take some of the pain out of it for you. So it does communicate a very clear benefit.

Is the headline itself clear? Do you have to decipher it to figure out what it's about? No, it's very clear — they offer bookkeeping services.

Is there a reason to pay attention now and not later? Well, there's no hard reason. There isn't a deadline or a limited time offer stated or anything obvious like that.

Yet, they've hit on an emotional pain that is so severe and that every small business owner wants to be relieved of — the pain of bookkeeping. I don't know any small business owner besides an accountant that likes bookkeeping. Everybody hates bookkeeping.

So because it hits on that big benefit and that big pain point, that alone creates a sense of urgency and a reason to pay attention now and not later. The sooner the pain of bookkeeping is relieved, the better.

Is it credible? Yes, there's nothing over-the-top about this headline. They're not making some huge promise. They're not saying something like, "We can cut your bookkeeping time in half," or something that they couldn't possibly know or prove. No, it simply says, "We make it suck less." That's very credible.

Is it fresh, creative, innovative? Yes, I think so. "Bookkeeping sucks. We just make it suck less." It's innovative.

So, it exhibits all five characteristics and it's been a very effective headline for them.

How to brainstorm headline ideas

How can you brainstorm an effective headline idea? Let me give you a couple of very simple strategies that work well for me.

First of all, start with those five criteria when you're brainstorming.

Then, you want to brainstorm a lot of headline ideas. You want to fill a page with headline ideas. And it's really important to keep going because often when you get to the bottom of the page, that's when some of the really great headline ideas start to come out.

Through that brainstorming process when you're forcing yourself to fill up a page with headline ideas, you'll engage the imaginative, genius part of your brain. It turns on that part of your brain that comes out with creative ideas.

Many copywriters will come up with two or three or four fairly good headlines and quit. They're relieved that they have a headline that's halfway decent.

But you know what? I think you're selling yourself and your client short when you do that. Headlines are so important. They deserve more attention than that.

I've seen tests where a company has tested one headline against another with the same ad or one subject line against the other with the same email. And one of them will beat the other by 50 percent or even 100 percent.

You can get a much greater response out of the marketing piece you're writing by just improving the headline.

This is important, so let me repeat it ... When you settle on "good enough" when it comes to a headline, you're selling yourself short. And you're selling the client short.

Work a little harder. Spend more time on your headline. Fill a page up with headline ideas.

Bob Bly's strategy for brainstorming headlines

Let me give you a very simple strategy for brainstorming ideas. This is a strategy I learned from Bob Bly and I use it all the time.

First of all, start with the words **how to**. Open a document on your computer and type **how to** at the top. Then you simply follow that with the biggest benefit your product or your service has. Or the biggest benefit of the offer you're writing about.

So let's say you're writing an ad for an executive search firm, just like the "Find it. Nail it. Be it," ad that I told you about earlier.

What's the biggest benefit you would write at the top? The biggest benefit might be how to land a dream job you've always wanted. So you write that on top. And that's where you start your brainstorming.

Then you write a bunch of headline ideas that are really variations on that idea. You start with "How to land the dream job you've always wanted."

"Let us show you the door to your next dream job."

"Monday morning has never looked this good because you're on your way to your dream job."

"We placed 199 executives in their dreams jobs. Be number 200 today."

"Stop applying for jobs. Let us find the executive position you deserve."

"How Susie found her career mojo and how you can too."

So you brainstorm and you come up with variations on that **how to**. By going off in different directions as you brainstorm, you can come up with a tremendous amount of very original and very effective headline ideas.

Headlines are important.

Spend some time working on your headlines. Use the five characteristics of a great headline to help you brainstorm. Fill a page with brainstorm ideas. Don't just settle on the first two or three that you come up with that are halfway decent. Fill a whole page full.

And use the how-to strategy as a tool for brainstorming. You'll come up with a lot of great headlines that way — and very quickly.

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