



# Merchandising

► by Keith Evans

## Headlines have tremendous power

*An advertisement with a great illustration and no headline is like a three-legged sheep dog. Its bark will attract attention, but it isn't able to drive the flock into the fold.*

### Don't lose power

The headline is read by five times more people than the number who read the rest of the advertisement. Advertisers who fail to include a strong sales message in their headlines fail to reach hundreds, if not thousands, of potential buyers. It is an opportunity lost and a waste of money.

In his classic book, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, the late David Ogilvy stressed that the headline is the most important element in most advertisements. The headline, he explained, should always appeal to the reader's self-interest. It should include news as often as possible and always promise a benefit.

An effective headline is a lot more than a few words set in bold display type. In conjunction with the illustration, the headline should grab the reader's attention.

It expands on the promise of the illustration and offers the reader a direct benefit. Your headlines should tell why you are showing a large, full-color photograph of "Big Jim." It may be because Big Jim can offer cattle producers a benefit that isn't readily available elsewhere. Maybe he provides an attractive benefit package of calving ease, heavier weaning weight and carcass value. But whatever sets Big Jim apart should be summarized in the headline.

Ogilvy warned advertisers to never use headlines that mean nothing if they stand alone — the kind that readers can't understand unless they wade through the rest of the ad. Most readers don't have the time or the interest to solve a riddle. They simply move on to the next page.

### Chronic problems

Confusing or meaningless headlines are a chronic problem in the registered beef cattle business. Leaf through any livestock

publication and observe the ads. You will see few attention-grabbing, benefit-laden headlines. What you will find is an overabundance of farm names and labels. As I write this, I have before me two typical breed association magazines. In one, an expensive, full-color ad is headlined with the words "Annual Production Sale," combined with the herd name. There is nothing to capture your interest. Another expensive ad is headlined "The Choice." But what the choice is and why anyone should make it is not clear. In the other magazine, two facing ads are case studies in opposites. The ad on the right is headlined "Jones (not real name) Farm — Second annual production sale." The ad on the other page proclaims that Big

Jim (not his real name) is a "High Growth and Female Sire." Which ad would you read?

Emotional, provocative words should spark your ad headlines. It has been long known that the two most potent words in advertising language are "new" and "free." You won't want to overdo

these words, but do tell potential customers when you have something new in your operation. And you often provide something free to your customers, so use the two words when appropriate to attract attention to your ads. "Our Fifth Annual Production Sale" contains nothing emotional or provocative.

Be positive. The headline that reads, "Big Jim Has No EPD Below Breed Average," is an attempt at being positive. What is likely to be remembered, however, are the words "below breed average." It's much better to write the headline, "Big Jim — All His EPDs are Above Breed Average."

Never stretch the truth in a headline. There are many registered beef cattle

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advertising claims that are not as effective as they should be because they claim more than the animal can deliver. "He Does It All" or "He Has It All" or "He's One of A Kind," are typical of the headlines used in many

livestock ads. The animal being promoted may well possess valuable traits of economic importance, but a pompous headline detracts from, rather than reinforces, the truth. How much better if the headline simply proclaimed, "This Sire of Market-Topping Calves Is Available at a Price You Can Afford."

### Constructing an eye-catcher

How long should a headline be? There is no set rule. It should be long enough to deliver the message, with no unnecessary words. There are classic examples of outstanding advertising with headlines of 20 words or more. There have been powerful ads with headlines of one or two words. Use as many words as it takes — no more and no less.

With so much riding on the headline, many advertisers write it first, then build the ad around it. It works. A good advertisement is built upon a good idea, and that idea should be encapsulated in a provocative headline. Once this is accomplished, the rest of the advertisement should fall logically into place.

You may never be a great ad writer, but you can learn to identify good headlines and understand their job in an advertisement. Never be satisfied. Critique every ad you pay for and determine how it can be made better. Insist that those who do your advertising understand that the headline will be read by five times more people than read the rest of the ad. What's more, when the headline isn't read, the remainder of the ad is usually ignored.

You wouldn't send a three-legged dog out to gather sheep, so don't send out a crippled headline to bring in the customers.

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