

# Tantalizing Headlines: Do's and Don'ts

By Marcia Yudkin

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Put yourself in the position of a newspaper or magazine editor scanning the newswires and the day's email and faxes for relevant content. How would you rate the following headlines, actually found on the Internet:

New Slaves in America

HP Wheels Out Year-long Tour Bringing Digital Adventure Directly to Consumers

Little Kids Re-introduces Squish Ball Adding Shimmer to the Squish!

From the editor's perspective, all three of these headlines stink, because they do not make sufficiently clear what the release is about. The first of the three is the worst, because anyone thinking it concerns human ownership of other humans will roll their eyes upon learning that the release touts a book claiming to "break the chains of economic bondage" through knowledgeable investing.

The second runs aground through its use of the mysterious phrase, "digital adventure." In fact, it plugs a traveling exhibition of three truck-mounted houses containing digital cameras, printers and musical devices. The third headline stays away from complete disaster only because the company name, Little Kids, happens to signal what the product in question is: a kid's toy.

Unlike readers looking at headlines in their favorite periodical, editors and other media gatekeepers are not charmed by cute or obscure headlines. Anything mysterious gets in the way of their task at hand, finding the raw material to turn into articles for their audience. If the headline doesn't answer their three paramount questions - What is this? Who is it for? And where is the news

significance? - they don't have time or inclination to click through and investigate further.

Understanding the mindset of those culling through press releases will help you craft informative headlines. If you need a lot of words to write a clear headline, go ahead. A good guideline is to include as many of journalism's classic "Five W's" in the headline as you can: who, what, when, where and why or how. To address editors' top three concerns, make sure you specify what you're promoting, who would care about it and what makes it newsworthy.

To return to the three unfortunate examples found online, we can fix the first specimen along these lines:

The New Underground Railroad, New Book, Helps Free Wage Slaves from Bondage With a Beginner's Introduction to Stocks, Bonds and Investing.

The second headline improves with a few more details:

HP Wheels Out Year-long Traveling Exhibition of Truck-Mounted Homes Filled with Digital Photography, Computing and Entertainment Products.

And the annoyance factor disappears from the third headline when we revise it as follows:

Little Kids Updates Squish Ball, Specialty Toy from the 1990's for Age 5 and Up, With a Holographic Shimmer.

If after adding clarity, you can also inject some wordplay or fun into the headline, go ahead. But media people giving your headlines just three or four seconds of attention aren't really looking for entertainment. They're on a hunt for relevance, and cuteness runs the danger of getting in their way.

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