



Smart guide

Create compelling headlines that attract employees' attention

How to write better headlines for internal communication



The most important content element? Headlines, of course

Consider these facts:



That means a headline needs to promise the content will be worthwhile to encourage employees to keep reading. Most importantly, the headline needs to convey the essence of the content—because it may be all an employee reads.

But the problem is the majority of internal communication headlines are . . . well, boring. It's no wonder employees skip or delete headlines like:

- ✓ U.S. Sales Leadership Announces Organizational Changes
- ✓ XYZ Product Exceeds Expectations for Sales in Asia
- ✓ New Initiative to Improve Time to Market for Products in Development

While it's true you need to share what's happening in the organization, these headlines are too much like press releases to appeal to an employee's self-interest. There's no WIIFM (What's In It For Me) so employees don't see the benefit of reading the article.

The solution: Write headlines that help employees solve a problem or improve the way they do something. This guide will show you how.

Data source: Copyblogger



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3 essential principles to upgrade your headlines

Before you even think about writing a headline, consider these essential principles:

1 Focus on employees' needs

Make sure you know the answers to these questions:

- ✓ What are employees interested in?
- ✓ What do they need to know?

And then decide: How can you write a headline that will solve a problem or answer a burning question?

2 Use consumer media and marketing as your role model

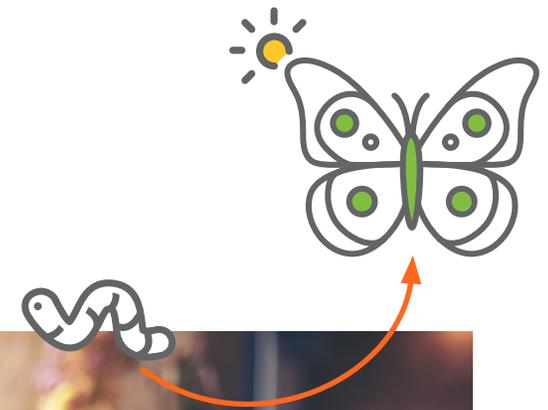
While external communication is not always the best inspiration for how you should approach communicating internally, you can learn a lot about how to create appealing headlines and subject lines. Start by looking at your personal email, visiting news websites and noticing how marketers try to capture your attention. Best of all, this inspiration is free and widely available.

Throughout this guide, we've included examples from magazines, tabloid newspapers, bloggers and other external sources to show you how to create headlines. For example, see page 8 for advice from *Cosmopolitan* and page 10 for inspiration from *The New York Post*.

3 Make a promise

Repeat after us: "The purpose of a headline is not to report on news; it's to provide employees with useful content." You are not an editor at *The New York Times*, so journalistic neutrality is not your objective.

Instead, you are creating a headline that promises valuable content to motivate employees to click, open and consume the content you've provided.



An example of meeting the audience's needs

Better Homes & Gardens is clear about the problems its readers want to solve—such as eliminating clutter and organizing their stuff. So the magazine's editors write headlines like:

- Storage Mistakes You Make (& How to Fix Them!)
- Declutter Like a Pro
- Max Out Your Bath's Storage Potential
- Smart Solutions for Awkward Items



5 most appealing types of headlines

So many headlines, so little time! Headlines come in so many varieties that you can spend years trying out different formats. But start here—with five headline styles that work well for any internal communication content you create:

1 Direct

Direct headlines succinctly capture the key message of your content. That way, employees who don't read any further will still get the point. Use strong verbs and key words to make the headline as clear and strong as possible.

Example

Why the military hasn't stopped sexual abuse
USA Today

2 How to

The most compelling headline phrase? These two little words: "how to." That's because the how-to headline offers a benefit that the article will solve a problem or offer advice to employees. Copywriter Robert Bly says, "Many advertising writers claim if you begin with the words how to, you can't write a bad headline."

By the way, you don't have to use the actual words "how to" to write a how-to headline. By starting with a verb, you can imply the phrase.

Examples

Beat diabetes. The 15-second test that can save your life.
Prevention

Eat better for less—grow the perfect garden
AARP The Magazine



3 Question

Phrasing headlines in the form of a question will not only help you win at Jeopardy, it also appeals to employees.

Examples

New Flu Bugs: Too Lethal For A Pandemic?
The Wall Street Journal

Looking for the best whiskey in the world? Go to Japan
CBC

5 most appealing types of headlines (continued)

4 Conversational

With all the corporate clutter that employees receive, they respond to headlines that sound human. So, write headlines that sound like how people actually talk.

You're more likely to read emails from people you know (Hi, Mom!) than from people you don't. But even companies can create the sense that we're communicating person to person. That human connection goes a long way for creating a strong enough bond to open an email or read an article.

Examples

Are you normal or nuts? Your quirks, dreams and anxieties explained
Reader's Digest

So You're Smart, but You're Not Rich? This Eye-Opening New Scientific Study Tells You Why
Inc.

5 Intriguing

Sometimes you want to be direct (see #1), but other times a little mystery is a good idea. There's a school of thought, particularly with online content, that it's better not to reveal everything. Instead, give employees a small taste in the headline to entice them to click through for a snack. An intriguing headline creates curiosity to raise a question in the reader's mind which the main content then answers.

Examples

Imagine a city lit by glowing trees instead of streetlights
Fast Company

Where you live impacts happiness and health more than you might imagine
The Washington Post

Why You Should Surround Yourself With More Books Than You'll Ever Have Time to Read
Inc.



To capitalize or not to capitalize?

You may notice that some example headlines in this guide use initial caps or title case (where all words except for articles, prepositions and conjunctions are capitalized) and others use sentence case (where only the first word is capitalized).

Which is better? While there are many points of view about this issue, it really comes down to a style issue. Most book titles are always in initial caps, but there's no consensus on headline capitalization.

So you'll notice that *The New York Times* uses title case, but other newspapers (including *The Washington Post* and *USA Today*) and consumer magazines do not.

If your organization has a style guide, you'll probably end up following the style guide your organization uses. Just make sure you're consistent.



7 tips to take your headlines to the next level



1 Write your headline first—before you even begin the piece

Take the advice of expert Brian Clark at Copyblogger, who advises beginning with the headline.

Why? As Mr. Clark writes, “Your headline is a promise to readers. Its job is to clearly communicate the benefit you’ll deliver to the reader” in return for his or her valuable time. “Promises tend to be made before being fulfilled,” adds Mr. Clark. “Writing your content first puts you in the position of having to reverse-engineer your promise.”

Figuring out your headline gets you heading in the right direction. Even if you go back and change your headline later, you have a great head start to a strong piece.

2 Focus on one message

Too many internal communication headlines try to boil the ocean, attempting to summarize the entire piece. Instead of trying to say everything, before you start to shape your communication, answer this question, “What one thing do you want employees to take away?” This will help you capture exactly what your communication is about.

While crafting your headline, be simple, short and straightforward. A good rule of thumb is to keep the headline in 55 characters or less. Clean up headlines by removing nonessential words and jargon. (A caveat: There’s a place for long headlines; some publications prefer the everything-in-one-long-message approach. But start by being as simple as possible.)

Examples

New ways to beat diabetes
AARP The Magazine

The magic power of sleep
Reader’s Digest



Start with your headline

“If the headline is a good one, it is a relatively simple matter to write the copy.”

— Copywriter John Caples

7 tips to take your headlines to the next level (continued)

3 Be as specific as possible

This is no time for vague concepts. Great how-to headlines are specific so employees know what you mean. And one proven technique that draws readers in is using numbered lists in your article—and then, of course, in your headline as well.

Examples

5 Easy Steps to Organize ANYTHING
Better Homes & Gardens

15 Fresh, Healthy Meals
Good Housekeeping

4 Offer a benefit

Give employees news they can use: advice that helps them solve a problem or accomplish an objective. Hint: “how to” or numbered lists work well in this type of headline

Examples

Your Best Summer Ever!
Men's Health

Free guide: Put the world's data to work for you (No Ph.D. required)
Marketing Profs

5 Provide information that's new and unique

A headline that carries real news—information you haven't heard anywhere else—quickly gets attention. (A caveat: Only use “breaking news” if it's true.)

Examples

Breaking News: Ketchum calls it quits on Russian work
PR Week

In a Stunning Announcement, McDonald's Just Revealed What's Going to Be on Its New Dollar Menu
Inc.



Write for skimmers

“On average, five times as many people read the headline as read the body copy. It follows that unless your headline sells your product, you have wasted 90 percent of your money.”

— Advertising legend David Ogilvy

7 tips to take your headlines to the next level (continued)

6 Relate to what's happening right now

Is the sun shining? Has spring finally sprung? Then provide a nod to the season or event by creating headlines that make a connection to what's happening.

Examples

Spring Into Action: Renovate on a Budget
Real Simple

Spooky Fun! Halloween Tricks, Treats and Pumpkins
Woman's Day

7 Have some fun

You may have a serious objective for creating content (like getting employees to enroll in their medical benefits) but it doesn't mean your headline can't be lighthearted and playful.

Examples

Mousse crossing: Make way for easy chocolate desserts!
Martha Stewart Living

Peas Try These 6 Springy Recipes
Bon Appétit



Inspiration: *Cosmopolitan*

Of all the reasons to read *Cosmopolitan* magazine, here's one you probably haven't thought of: Doing so can help you write better headlines for your internal communication channels.

That's because *Cosmo* is masterful at writing headlines (or, as they're known, cover lines) that help readers solve their problems, accomplish their goals and achieve happiness.

Here are typical *Cosmo* cover lines:

- Facts about marijuana that are beyond dispute
- How to triple your energy (It's so easy if you will only try it)
- What every girl should know about doctors (as men)
- What's new and true about yoga?
- Hypoglycemia: Is low blood sugar getting you down?

Cosmo cover lines use these key techniques:

- **All about you.** *Cosmo* headlines are geared to the needs and interests of readers.
- **Short, snappy language.** You only have a few seconds to get your point across, so choose punchy, action-oriented words. Here's a recent example: "Is your workout making you fat?"
- **Clear voice.** *Cosmo* headlines are clearly written by a person, with a strong point of view. They're authentic. They make a connection with the reader.



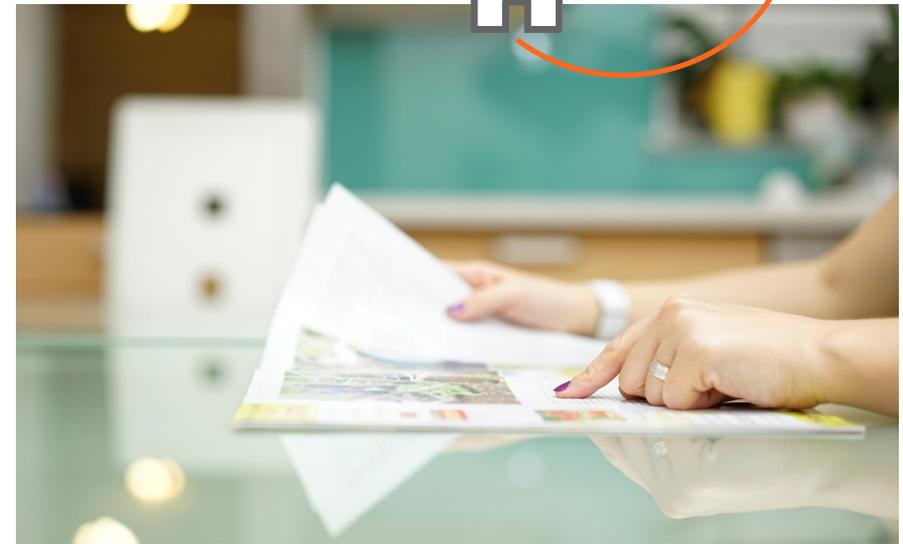
9 headlines transformed

1 Employees can now enter their time more efficiently using a new time tracking app called MyTime.

Before	After
New Time Tracking App Now Available on Phone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Enter your time anywhere, anytime from your phone ✓ Never be late entering your time with MyTime app

2 Career Development is inviting all employees to join a networking event on September 23.

Before	After
Participate in the Fall Networking Social on September 23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 5 reasons not to miss this awesome networking event ✓ Advance your career at the upcoming networking event



3 Global Marketing has created a PowerPoint slide presentation to help tell the company's story, which can be used for internal and external presentations.

Before	After
2019 APEX Core Deck Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ These new core slides will make your next PowerPoint presentation a whole lot easier ✓ 1 simple way to enhance your presentation about the company ✓ The scoop on APEX: how to present about our company

9 headlines transformed (continued)

- 4 Rachel Brown will assume the role of Head Global Services, effective October 1.

Before	After
Organizational Announcement: Rachel Brown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ How Rachel Brown will support Global Services' success ✓ Meet Rachel Brown, Global Services' new Head

- 5 The company introduced a new open door program to encourage employees to share ideas, ask questions and raise concerns in the workplace.

Before	After
Our New Open Door Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 3 ways the new open door policy supports a better workplace ✓ Have questions or concerns? New open door program gives you a voice

- 6 APEX announced \$25 million in sales in the third quarter of 2018 and growth in all five business sectors.

Before	After
2018 Third-Quarter Earnings Report Announced Today	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 5 things you need to know about our 2018 third-quarter earnings ✓ Learn how our businesses performed in 3Q 2018

Inspiration: The New York Post

Who was the best headline writer ever? Many headline aficionados would choose Vincent Musetto, who was responsible for one of the most spectacular headlines of all time: HEADLESS BODY IN TOPLESS BAR, which appeared in the *New York Post* on April 15, 1983.

Although internal communication channels are certainly different than tabloids, we can still learn these lessons from Musetto (who died in 2015):

- **Be super brief.** Even if you're not using 72-point type, you don't have a lot of space. So make every character count.
- **Choose only powerful words.** Every verb needs to pack a punch. Every noun needs to paint a picture.
- **Have fun with it.** Maybe you can't go this far: "Germans Wurst at Penalties" or "Weiner's Rise and Fall." But a little wordplay is a powerful thing.

9 headlines transformed (continued)

- 7 Employees need to schedule and acknowledge their mid-year conversations in the HR portal by July 15.

Before	After
Conduct and Acknowledge Your Mid-year Conversations by July 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Set yourself up for success: schedule your mid-year convo. by July 15✓ How mid-year conversations can benefit your career✓ 7 ways to prepare for your mid-year conversation

- 8 This summer, APEX will host 60 interns, who will spend the summer learning our business and supporting various functions.

Before	After
APEX hosts 60 interns	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ 60 reasons summer interns set APEX departments up for success✓ How to manage summer interns to create learning and accomplish key initiatives

- 9 At the SalesWorld Conference in February, APEX presented data about how its technology platform Movelt increases salesforce productivity.

Before	After
APEX presents data to sales leaders about how Movelt increases salesforce productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ The best way to increase salesforce productivity? Use Movelt, says our data✓ How our best-selling platform Movelt just demonstrated its value



Entice your reader

Employees use the headline to make their decision about whether to open an email, click through to a link or read an intranet article. If your content has a weak headline, it simply won't be read.

The leaders in internal communication

We're Davis & Company, the employee communication experts. Since 1984, leading organizations have depended on us to reach, engage and motivate their employees. Our strategic mindset, creative spirit and practical know-how can solve your toughest communication challenges. Give us a call. We'd love to help.

To schedule a consultation, contact [Vaishali Benner](#) or call 1-877-399-5100.

Take your content to the next level

We can help you:

- Develop communication standards and guidelines
- Elevate your content strategy
- Revamp communication channels

5 things to know about us



Global. We've created communication programs that reach employees across the world, in nearly every continent (but not, we admit, Antarctica).



Experienced. We have decades of experience in communicating change, initiatives, HR programs and policies, and many other topics.



Collaborative. Our favorite way of working is to meet with our clients and put our heads together.



Client-focused. Our mission is to help you solve your problems. To set you up for success. To make sure you get the recognition you deserve. (We think you get the picture.)



Acclaimed. We've won hundreds of awards and routinely earn the praise of clients and colleagues.