

# Caples on copy.

*John Caples may be America's most tested advertising man. And he's passed the test for more than fifty years. A member of the Copywriters Hall of Fame, he's the newest member of the Advertising Hall of Fame. The ads written by this man include many classics. He wrote what may be the best-known, most-quoted ad of all time, "They Laughed When I Sat Down at the Piano." A graduate of the Naval Academy, he served as a Navy Commander during World War II. He has*

*written four of the most useful books on advertising ever published, including "Tested Advertising Methods," a virtual handbook for every copywriter. Speaker, author, teacher, researcher, analyzer, this gentle master can be described in many ways. But perhaps David Ogilvy hit upon the best description when he called John Caples, "one of the most effective copywriters there has ever been." Here, from a recent interview, is Caples on copy:*

## **On headlines:**

"Headlines make ads work. The best headlines appeal to people's self interest, or give news. Long headlines that say something outpull short headlines that say nothing. Remember that every headline has one job. It must stop your prospects with a believable promise. All messages have headlines. In TV, it's the start of the commercial. In radio, the first few words. In a letter, the first paragraph. Even a telephone call has a headline. Come up with a good headline, and you're almost sure to have a good ad. But even the greatest writer can't save an ad with a poor headline. You can't make an ad pull unless people stop to read your brilliant copy."

## **On word power:**

"Simple words are powerful words. Even the best educated people don't resent simple words. But they're the only words many people understand. Write to your barber or mechanic or elevator operator. Remember, too, that every word is important. Sometimes you can change a word and increase the pulling power of the ad. Once I changed the word 'repair' to 'fix' and the ad pulled 20% more!"

## **On first drafts:**

"Overwriting is the key. If you need a thousand words, write two thousand. Trim vigorously. Fact-packed messages carry a wallop. Don't be afraid of long copy. If your ad is interesting, people will be hungry for all the copy you can give them. If the ad is dull, short copy won't save it."

## **On directness:**

"Get to the point. Direct writing outpulls cute writing by a big margin. Don't save your best benefit until last. Start with it, so you'll have a better chance of keeping your reader with you. Don't stop by just telling people the benefits your product offers. Tell them what they'll miss if they don't buy it. If you have an important point to make, make it three times: in the beginning, the middle, the end. At the end, ask for action. If people are interested enough to read your ad, they want to know what to do. Tell them."

## **On humor:**

"Avoid it. What's funny to one person isn't to millions of others. Copy should sell, not just entertain. Remember there's not one funny line in the two most influential books ever written: the Bible and the Sears catalog."

## **On repeating ads:**

"Clients get tired of ads before the public does. Advertisers who can't measure results almost always change campaigns too often. Mail order advertisers know what works, and they stick with it. Of course, you ought to try to develop ads that work even better. That's why I've enjoyed writing mail order advertising. You're always trying to beat ads that do work, to beat the proven winner. When you try to develop a new winner, test ten ads, not just one. And remember, if you lose, you should have learned something from the experience."

## **On dealing with clients:**

"Be honest. Tell your client what works and what doesn't. Stop worrying about commissions. If your advertising works, your client will stay with you, and his budget will grow. Admit when the client is right. Be strong enough to fight with him when he is wrong. But don't argue to the point of making an open break. The memory of the break lingers long after the reason for the argument has been forgotten. Be flexible enough to try it the client's way. He may just have an idea that'll make you a hero."

## **On changing times:**

"Times change. People don't. Words like 'free' and 'new' are as potent as ever. Ads that appeal to a reader's self interest still work. People may disagree about what self improvement is important, but we all want to improve ourselves. Ads that offer news still work. The subjects that are news change, but the human curiosity to know what's new doesn't. These appeals worked fifty years ago. They work today. They'll work fifty years hence!"

## **On The Wall Street Journal:**

"I've spent my life working for results—and measuring them. I know The Journal works. A year ago, I wrote a small space campaign that ran in The Journal. The advertiser expected 400 replies, while I thought we'd be lucky to get a hundred. We received 1,600 responses! The Journal reaches the kind of people advertisers need. You know, when I see someone carrying The Wall Street Journal, my respect for the person goes up. I think, 'Here's an individual who's savvy, who knows what to read! Have you noticed how often art directors use The Journal as a prop in photographs? It's a publication that gives a lift to other people's advertising, even in another medium, for it tells you something about the man or woman who reads it, about the company that features it. I read The Journal, and have for years. I start by skimming through it each day, tearing out the stories that interest me. Some articles—single articles—are worth far more than the price of a year's subscription to me. When I was very young, my parents used to pack me off to my grandmother's house in Ohio. Grandmother had a stack of books on a table in the parlor. But she always kept the Bible on top. Well, in my office, I have a lot of business books, papers, magazines—but I always keep The Wall Street Journal on top. It's my business bible."

**The Wall Street Journal.  
It works.**

