



Caples - Revisited And Updated

Andy, this month, continues his popular 'Copycat' series and returns to the inspirational years of direct marketing and mail order, to revisit the work of a genius.

Ev Grady was the copy chief at a large New York agency in the 1920's.

He was the man who gave legend John Caples his very first copy assignment.

As regular readers of this column will know, I believe Caples was one of the giants of our business. He was a true genius.

I have learned so much from him and, in fact, still do...

These days, the professionals in our business understand the things that make copy work. We have John Caples to thank for that. You see, he DISCOVERED them.

He was a pioneer in copy testing, and, as a result, he discovered the do's and don'ts of creative over a career that spanned 58 years - 56 of them at BBDO.

His books are amongst the best ever written on all aspects of advertising technique, approach and copywriting. I pluck those books off the shelf all the time...

This weekend, I re-read Making Ads Pay, which I strongly urge you to read, if you can get a copy. It was his third and last book, written in 1957. It is a masterpiece.

So, for this month, I want to share with you, some of the things that John Caples felt were important.

Ev Grady sat down with the young Caples on the first day and told him " One of the secrets of good writing, is skilful exaggeration. People are lazy. They don't want to work hard. All they want is an easy way to solve their problems."

Those few words stayed with Caples always. So much so that later on, when he started to write his books, he talked about the formula that worked for him. A formula that was behind some of the most effective and successful writing ever seen in our business.

It was a simple formula too - Curiosity and Reward.

Well, I can tell you this. Styles change. Basic principles and human nature do not. People are still curious and people still want rewards. Now that the balance of power has shifted irrevocably to the customer, rewards are now absolutely vital, because that customer expects it. Most now demand it.

In fact, I believe that in these tough times, if there is no offer, there will be no sale...

Anyway, I have taken 10 of Caples' main guidelines and mixed in a bit of my own experiences to create an updated Ten Commandments for the writer of today. I hope you find them useful:

1. Appeal To The Self Interest

In all selling copy, there has to be real benefit for the recipient. Remember the benefits not features rule that I have shared with you before. As my pal Ray Jutkins from the US said, "No one is interested in red buttons. What they are interested in is what happens when you press red buttons".

Caples said "When ads talk about themselves and the headlines come from the advertiser angle rather than the reader's angle, it's MBA ' manufacturers belly ache'".

2. Select The Right Audience

This goes without saying, doesn't it? Not for a lot of people out there it seems.

We are all getting badly targeted and irrelevant communications every day.

Emails have now made it worse still. It staggers me, I have to say. Clients are telling us in agency circles that budgets are tight and they can't afford this and can't afford that.

Yet, those same clients are wasting money hand over fist, on badly targeted communications. If it wasn't so serious, it would be funny.

3. Make Your Advertising Easy To Understand

Caples said that it's a life's work in itself to learn how to write simply. It's so true.

A lot of people go through their entire life without anyone understanding what they are talking about.

Some of the greatest books are still on the shelves, because they are basically unreadable.

Simplify, simplify, said Thoreau.

Here's a good test to do. Ask yourself the following questions:

What am I trying to say? Have I said it?

What is the objective of this letter? Have I achieved it?

4. Provide News Or News Of Benefits

If you have some news, some benefits or some news of benefits, then shout it from the rooftops in your letter copy.

And shout it as loud as you can. And as often as you can.

What's more, use emotional and dynamic words to deliver your message. Words that make people pay attention and buy things. Words like Announcing, Introducing, New, Save, Remarkable and, the best one of all, Free...

Words like that, words that mean the same things, tend to work best. Because they relate to 3 very important things: benefits, news and emotion.

Remember that we all buy for emotional reasons and justify it with logic.

5. Make Your Advertising Believable

Caples believed this to be a vital element. I totally agree. There is so much rubbish out there right now that is not believable at all. When I view this stuff, a phrase comes to mind from a Paul Simon song of many years ago, when he said "the words don't connect to the eyes".

I've seen a lot of copy that fits that description. Mind you, I've met a lot of people that match it too...

Let's face it. We are dealing with a sceptical audience these days.

No one believes anything anymore. So you have to work doubly hard with your copy to make it as believable as you can. In this regard, don't forget testimonials. They are gold dust. Not enough people use them.

6. Offer Quick Results

"Tell me quick and tell me true. Or else my love, to hell with you"

Famous words from another legend, David Ogilvy.

People have no patience now. They want everything today. Not tomorrow. So you have to offer the quickest fix you can.

It helps to write in present tense. The present tense is now, which is all the reader is interested in.

Offer them an immediate benefit, if they respond NOW !

7. Be Specific

Caples had a snappy line for this: "be specific, be terrific..."

...yes I know. Even the greats have their off days...

But the point is clear. Specifics sell. Generalities do not. We know, through quite detailed testing, that "76.3%" is much more believable than "over 75%"

But, surprisingly, you still see the latter used more than the former. That's because a lot of writers can be lazy too.

A specific percentage or performance figure makes the whole proposition much more believable as well.

8. Arouse Curiosity

We are all curious. And copy that can utilise this effectively, can be hugely successful. Ev Grady's advice to John Caples in 1926, mentioned earlier, was based on human nature.

In *Making Ads Pay*, Caples said: " He was describing a formula that worked 31 years ago and which I feel sure will work 31 years from today. And I expect it will work 310 years from today"

Once again he was spot on.

A word of warning, though. Delivering effective curiosity in selling copy is not easy.

You have to be careful that you don't damage the vital element of clarity. It's difficult, but well worth persevering with. The results can be breathtaking.

9. Give The Reader Something Of Value

The reader of your communication is giving you his time. You have to make sure that the experience is valuable and relevant.

"What's in it for me?" the reader will say. Tell him.

To start with, give the reader what he wants, not what you want to sell.

This way, you should have a fighting chance of gaining attention, creating interest, generating desire and influencing action (AIDA)...

...and that, after all, is the whole object of the exercise...

10. Provide A Reward

This is basic psychology. We all want to get something in return for our business.

No, let me rephrase that and bring it bang up to date. We all expect and demand that we get something in return for our business.

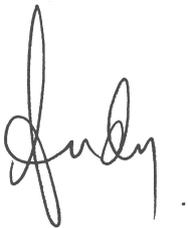
And, if you won't give it to me, I will go to someone who will.

Simple and basic, but at the very core of contemporary communications in these tough times. Yet I still occasionally hear clients saying things like "we don't do discounts...or special offers cheapen our brand and we don't like them..."

In the business, it's called it the Caveman mentality. On thing's for sure, they won't be in business long...

Just writing this piece today about the genius of John Caples is stimulating. I hope you have been inspired too...

See you next month. Keep the faith...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andy', with a small dot at the end.

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Don't forget to check out Andy's superb new DVD on Copywriting called "*How To Write Copy That Really Sells.*" To find out more and see excerpts from the DVD, visit <http://www.andyowen.co.uk/buy-online.html>