

David Ogilvy's Copywriting Technique That Made a Homeless Man's Cup Runneth Over ...

By John Wood

I hope you've enjoyed this week's *Writer's Life* as we've examined some of the most innovative ad campaigns of the past 10 years or so.

I want to end the week with a story about copywriting legend David Ogilvy featured in the book *The Idea Writers*, by Teresa Lezzi.

He was walking down the street one morning when he encountered a blind homeless man begging.

The sign read:

I am blind, please help.

His donation cup was empty.

Ogilvy paused and rather than putting some money in the man's cup, he took the man's sign and rewrote it.

When he left his office later in the day, the homeless man's cup was overflowing with money.

So what had Ogilvy written on the man's sign?

Instead of just conveying information (I am blind) and asking for an action (please help), it now told a story.

Using just seven words, Ogilvy conjured up an image in people's minds that played to their imaginations, fueled their emotions, and lit their memories on fire.

The homeless man's sign now read:

It is spring, and I am blind.

When people read the sign, they immediately thought of their own springtime memories.

The beauty of a cool spring morning. The exhilaration of flowers blooming and nature in all its glory. The pretty girls (or handsome guys) dressed casually enjoying a sunny day.

They thought of all that — and then of how this poor man was deprived of enjoying any of it.

Their empathy for the man made them open up their hearts (and wallets and purses) to him.

Great story, wouldn't you agree?

It turns out there is more to the story ... or should I say "less."

Earlier this morning, Nick Osborne saw the original version of today's issue on the AWAI website. He immediately emailed me with a subject line that read: **It wasn't David Ogilvy!**

The story, which has become part of advertising folklore, was based on an actual incident in the life of French poet Jacques Prévert.

In addition, both of the key lines are different!

Here is the Prévert story (using a poem by American poet David Kirby as the source):

Prévert saw a beggar who had a sign that said "Blind Man Without a Pension."

Prévert asked him how it was going.

The beggar replied ...

"Oh, very badly. People pass by and drop nothing in my hat, the swine."

Prévert took the sign from him and altered it.

A few days later, he went up to the beggar and again asked him how things were going.

The beggar said, "Fantastic! My hat fills up three times a day."

Prévert had written the following on the beggar's sign:

"Spring is coming, but I won't see it."

When I first read the Ogilvy story I thought it was a great story. But I think Prévert's story is even better. Not only because I like his line better, *but because it actually happened.*

Thank you Nick your value input into today's issue.

But either way, the lesson here is the power of the story. Stories allow you to "show, not tell." Stories give you the power to tap into your reader's imagination and trigger deeper emotions.

And once you've tapped those emotions, your readers are more likely to take the action you want them to — such as giving you their contact information or buying your product.

What do you think of Prévert 's line and "Ogilvy's" line? Which do you like better? Do you have other examples of great storytelling in a headline? If so, post them here.

If you're looking for ways to be more productive during the day, check out my article "[Eight Applications that Will Increase Your Productivity](#)."

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12 Responses to "David Ogilvy's Copywriting Technique That Made a Homeless Man's Cup Runneth Over..."

I purchased a few Ogilvy books recently and although I haven't finished, I was going to mention the fact that I hadn't heard that anecdote. I'm glad that you brought it to my attention. I like both but I love Prevert's version. I can FEEK it!

Guest (Tieuel Legacy) – over a year ago

I do like the story (2nd) one. It adds a bit of richness to it.

Tina – over a year ago

youtube.com/watch?v=Lw9bct2n04I

this video has made the rounds for quite some time now

Guest (kpk) – over a year ago

Yes, words are powerful. It wasn't too long ago that I saw a video showing this.

youtube.com/watch?v=pzjEzohHmaM

It's a beautiful day and I can't see it.

Karen D – over a year ago

Oh, I just loved this! I like the French line better. We don't know unless we test, what might happen with the American line.

I'll remember to write more stories.

Guest (Stephen Newdell) – over a year ago

Thanks for this fantastic example! When I read the Ogilvy, I said aloud, "Oh my God!" By the time I got to Prevert's line, I was already prepared; but I, too, like it better. I find it stronger, partly because he's using a verb instead of an adjective for the punch line. Another great headline from the past: "How can you worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?"

Guest (maria n) – over a year ago

'The Power of Words' on YouTube youtube.com/watch?v=Hzgzim5m7oU A lovely remake of Prévert's original?

Jude – over a year ago

I had originally encountered this story within the last two years in video format as, "It's a beautiful day, but I can't see it." One can google this online as video, it's a beautiful day but I can't see it, and quite a few resources will pop up. Here is one for a less than two minute version, matteventoff.com/words-and-messages.html. There is also a Spanish version of less than six minutes on You Tube at, youtube.com/watch?v=zyGEEamz7ZM. Must see in video format.

Cheryl Sharp – over a year ago

My daughter would like to go to school. I can't see that happening.

Guest (Guy Cudmore) – over a year ago

Both signs are compelling, but Prevert's sign is more personal. Many people can't personalize the concept of "blind". However, everyone can personalize the concept of "I won't see it."

Guest (Raykir) – over a year ago

An excellent comentary on the difference between asking for something, and asking for understanding of something. The first provokes distance, the second provokes kinship. Kinship provokes responsibility, and in kind - action.

Guest (reg keown) – over a year ago

Great effort by these men but I think this copy would be better... 'I can't see spring, help me feel your kindness'

Guest (James) – over a year ago

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