

How to Get and Hold Attention

November 19, 2018



Indy Beagle posted a T-shirt in the rabbit hole that said, "If life gives you melons, you might be dyslexic." Princess Pennie laughed when she read it.

If that T-shirt had said, "If life gives you oranges, you might be dyslexic," would she — or anyone else — have laughed?

Pleasant surprise is the foundation of delight.

Confusion is the foundation of frustration.

When something unexpected happens, but it makes sense, it is surprising.

When something unexpected happens and it makes no sense, it is confusing.

To get a click online is to get attention.

But to hold that attention requires engagement.

Are you satisfied with getting a click, or would you also like to make the sale?

People who are engaged are looking for closure. They are following a mystery that needs to be solved.

Headlines and subject lines that create a mystery are more effective than those that solve one.

No mystery, no click.

No continuing mystery, no engagement.

The key to holding attention is to introduce a new mystery just as you solve the previous one.

This works online exactly as it works in literature, mass media, and entertainment.

The quicker your sequences of mystery and resolution, the more likely you are to hold the attention of your audience. This is what separates good stand-up comics from people who take too long to tell a joke.

Consider the mysteries implied by these famous opening lines:

Call me Ishmael. — *Moby Dick*

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. — *1984*

This is the saddest story I have ever heard. — *The Good Soldier*

It was a wrong number that started it. — *City of Glass*

I am an invisible man. — *Invisible Man*

124 was spiteful. — *Beloved*

In a sense, I am Jacob Horner. — *The End of the Road*

They shoot the white girl first. — *Paradise*

I write this sitting in the kitchen sink. — *I Capture the Castle*

When your subject lines harbor mysteries, you'll see your open rate rise like the sun on Easter morning. And if you solve that mystery just as you introduce a second one, you will have achieved engagement.

Novelists and playwrights have known this for hundreds of years.

Screenwriters and comedians have known it for decades.

I'm merely suggesting that you might experiment with it in your ads.

Who knows? It might work for ad writers, too.