

*The*  
**Big**  
Idea

**How to Find and Develop  
a Captivating Idea  
That Sets Your Promotion  
Apart From the Crowd**

**By Paul Hollingshead**

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# Why Every Promotion Needs a Big Idea

As a copywriter, you've learned about all the elements that go into a successful promotion. You know about writing conversationally... making bold promises... piling on the proof... making the offer... and closing the sale.

But what makes the prospect want to read *your* promotion?

The headline and lead? Yes... but most importantly, it's the *idea* behind the headline and the lead — the concept around which you wrap the whole package — that gets a prospect interested in your promotion.

And not just an idea, a ***Big Idea***.

Packages based on weak ideas typically don't perform well... and they definitely don't perform as well as they could. And you can't make a career writing packages like that. But copywriters who “get” the concept of the Big Idea — who can identify and develop powerful, compelling concepts for their promotions — wind up making a lot of money.

Keep in mind...

**Of every tool and technique you've learned about writing copy, implementing the Big Idea effectively can have the strongest impact on package performance.**

Okay, so maybe you can get away with weaker packages in *some* markets. But I assume you want to write copy for markets where packages mail in the millions and you can earn tens of thousands of dollars in mailing fees.

That means writing for the competitive markets — and *that* means giving your promotion every advantage you can so it will stand up to the competition.

The best advantage you can have is finding and developing a Big Idea, which is why I've written this special report for you.

Once you're done reading, you'll understand the concept and know exactly how to go about unearthing Big Ideas that make your sales letters a "must read"... instead of just more pieces of junk mail.

And something else will happen. When you know how to anchor your promotion with a Big Idea, headlines will come easier. Leads will just flow onto the page and your letter will fall into place.

That's because good ideas breed good copy. You're excited about it. You believe in it. And I can tell you from personal experience, my best results have always come when I've been most excited about the product I'm writing about and the Big Idea behind it.

But before I show you what a Big Idea is, let's look at...

### **The 4 Elements That Are Crucial to Your Letter's Success**

Here's a system I've come up with that assigns points to the four main elements of a promotional letter. We're not going to get too analytical about it, but it helps you see the importance of each part of the letter.

#### **The Big Idea (30 points)**

This is the idea that drives the package, sets it apart from all the clutter, and grabs the reader's attention.

#### **The Headline (25 points)**

The headline captures the Big Idea in an intriguing way, makes your reader want to learn more, and hints toward a promise or benefit.

#### **The Lead (+25 or -25 points)**

The lead sets the tone of your letter, establishes rapport with your reader, fleshes out the Big Idea, makes it real, and delivers a powerful benefit or promise.

## Everything Else (+20 or -20 points)

Everything else is the nuts and bolts of the letter — all the things you have to include for the letter to finish doing its job, such as:

- Proof you can deliver what you've promised via track record, credibility, testimonials, numbers, charts, data, etc.
- Secondary benefits you unveil
- A strong and clear offer — what they get, how they get it, when they get it, gifts and premiums they'll get
- Guarantee of satisfaction
- Urgent “call to action”

Now, we can quibble about how many points to assign each element. But after having written many controls — and many packages that weren't so successful — and after having reviewed hundreds, maybe even thousands, of other winning promotions, I'm confident that my point-value system is pretty close.

Here's how the points translate to success or failure of the letter:

100 = Home Run Hit!

75 = Good, solid, money-making package

50 = So-so, breakeven at best

30 = Most likely a loser

<30 = Out-and-out bomb

If you write a package where all the elements are perfect — 100 points — you have a blockbuster. The promotion brings in a flood of orders and suddenly you're known all over the industry as a great copywriter.

At 75 points, your package is a good, solid money-maker. Most successful copywriters — myself included — consistently write packages at this level. We

can stay in this business because we can write decent packages that keep our clients happy.

A 50-point package will just barely break even. It's not a good place to be, because if you keep churning out promotions like this you become known as an average copywriter.

Down at 30 points or below, forget it — we don't even need to talk about that.

### **How to Write a Blockbuster Promotion**

Using my point system, you can see that if you nail the Big Idea you're nearly a third of the way toward writing a winning package.

Now, stop and think about this a second. If you *don't* take the time to find a Big Idea that captures your reader's interest, you're putting yourself at a serious disadvantage. That's why many promotions bomb — they don't have a unique "hook," and readers who have seen it all just chuck them in the trash.

Because this is such a crucial part of the promotion, I spend about 30% of my time on it. Makes sense, right? If the Big Idea accounts for 30% of the promotion's success, you should devote a large chunk of your time to finding and developing it.

Don't worry right now if you're not sure how to come up with a Big Idea. By the time you finish this report, I guarantee you'll be an expert — and you'll know exactly what you need to do to find the Big Idea that will set your promotion apart from the crowd.

Let's continue adding more points to our promotion here.

Once you find your Big Idea, you then turn it into a headline. That takes a lot of work, and it's where your skills as a copywriter really come into play. But if you can succinctly capture your Big Idea in an intriguing headline that draws the reader in, your package is now at the 55-point mark in my point system — above breakeven.

Now for the lead. You can really blow it here, because if you don't quickly start proving your case and promising a benefit, you'll lose your reader. But if you write a strong lead, you can add another 25 points.

As for the rest, you want to do as good a job as possible there. But even if some spots are weak — say, your guarantee isn't so hot or you don't have great testimonials — you can still have a package that racks up 60 to 80 points. And if you work hard and nail everything else, bingo! You've got yourself a winner.

Because the idea, headline and lead account for 80% of your promotion's success, I recommend that you focus 80% of your energy on that part of the package.

I know that sounds a bit out of balance. After all, we may be talking about just the first page-and-a-half of a 20-page package. But there are two big reasons to get the idea, headline and lead right:

First, this sets up everything else in your package. Once you've found the Big Idea and captured it in a solid headline and lead, the rest of the package just falls into place and is a lot easier to write.

Second, it's the most fun part of the promotion! You get to use the creative part of your brain and challenge yourself to come up with a strong idea that will carry the package.

Okay, so you know that a Big Idea is crucial to the success of your package, especially in areas where the competition is fierce, such as financial and health. Now it's time to understand just what we mean by the term "Big Idea."

## What is "The Big Idea"?

The Big Idea is the idea that drives the package and sets it apart from all the clutter. It's a **new** and **interesting** way to say what everyone else is saying or has said many times before.

A promotion that contains a Big Idea will make your reader stop, take notice and want to find out more. A promotion that fails to pique your reader's interest will most likely get thrown in the trash.

And these days your prospects have seen it all. They're smart, sophisticated and skeptical. Plus, in addition to what they get in the mail, they're now getting bombarded with sales messages on the Internet.

You can no longer get away with simply stating a powerful benefit in the headline. Every good, experienced marketer does that.

No, if you want to get your promotion read, it needs to be anchored in a **strong, unique** and **compelling** Big Idea. Keep those three key words in mind. Strong, unique and compelling.

A Big Idea has to give the reader something they don't know. It has to engage the reader and be intriguing enough to draw them into the promotion, while making an implied promise.

And most importantly, it has to **jar the reader out of complacency** — out of the sense that they've seen this all before.

I'm not going to pretend it's easy, because it's not. Finding a compelling Big Idea takes a lot of work, but the payoff can be huge — it's the difference between a package that fizzles and one that pays you five- or even six-figure royalties.

Before I get into more detail about the characteristics of a Big Idea — and how to know one when you find it — let's look at an example.

### **A Benefit Headline vs. a Big Idea**

Let's say you're writing for a newsletter geared toward internationally-minded investors, and the editor is promoting an alternative energy company in Europe. His research suggests that the company's stock could triple in the next six months if they can roll out their new windmill technology. (I'm just making up this story — we'll look at real examples later.)

Your headline could state the benefit:

#### **Earn 200% With This European Alternative Energy Company**

Yawn. Haven't we all heard something like *that* before? This package is headed straight for the trash.

But suppose you've been reading about energy and you know that Western Europe gets one-fourth of its natural gas from Russia. In a footnote to one article, you read that an official high up in the Russian bureaucracy suggested "playing hardball" with the rest of Europe.



Hmmm, you think, what if that means shutting off the natural gas pipelines altogether? Radical? Yes. But not completely out of the question if you've been paying attention to what's been going on between Russia and its neighbors — and you know that Russia actually *did* stop sending natural gas briefly to Ukraine in early 2006, in the middle of winter.

So now your headline becomes:

**Russia's New *Secret Plan* to Stop All Natural Gas Flows  
to Europe — and one company that stands  
to make a fortune this year**

Can you see the difference? The first version merely states a benefit. You can play with it to make it more intriguing, such as “Unknown Energy Company Can Earn You 200% in Six Months.” But the idea — or lack of it — is the same.

The second version is more compelling. It offers the reader news, with a story the “average investor” probably hasn't heard yet, and hints at a promise of making money from this potential crisis. In other words, this headline contains a Big Idea.

Could it be worded better? No doubt. And capturing the idea succinctly in a powerful headline *is* important.

But in fact, finding the Big Idea has nothing to do with *writing*. This is the work you do *before* you write.

You research, talk to the editor or product manager, spend hours studying the materials you've been given and the new ones you've found, and *think*. You're trying to figure out what interests your market and how to position the product you're selling.

As I mentioned earlier, this is the creative part of your project, and you need to spend enough time developing the idea before you start writing. If you have three weeks to write a package, it's a good idea to spend about a week getting to know the product and figuring out your Big Idea. We'll cover those steps later.

Now, let's really dig into what makes an idea a ***Big Idea***, and how to spot one.

## Characteristics of a Successful Big Idea

Here are the elements of a Big Idea, which you can use as a checklist to see if your headline and lead qualify as a truly Big Idea.

### New

If you're going to cut through the promotional clutter out there, you have to present something *new* to your reader.

In this sense, you want to come up with an idea that would be worthy of publishing in a newspaper, with a headline that would stop a reader who was casually browsing the news stories. It could be about a new technology... a new law... an event — something with news value that the reader hasn't seen before or isn't aware of.

That means your idea has to be...

### Timely

Old news doesn't sell. Your big idea has to be something the prospect is thinking about today (or maybe hasn't heard of yet — as long as it's hot.)

For example, back in the 1990s, a lot of financial promotions focused on the Internet and technology stocks. Those were the hot buttons of the day and investors were in a lather to find out more.

Today, I doubt you could do a successful package about the Internet. Lately, investors have wanted to hear about oil and energy.

Yes, they're *still* interested in new technologies, but those change with the times. A few years ago after the terrorist attacks, and as America prepared to go to war with Iraq, you could talk about military technology in your promotions and people would pay attention. Today, alternative energy technology is on a lot of people's minds.

And these things can go in cycles. Biotech was big in the '90s, then interest in that died out. But now with stem-cell research, cloning, and the bird flu