

Show Some Game and Get the Girl – How to Be a Typographic Player

By Todd Lerner

Let's say you are a single man. You sign up at an online dating site and you need to write your profile.

All the desirable women have inboxes overflowing with pitches from other men. [Not unlike desirable subscription prospects who have mailboxes overflowing with pitches from other magazines.]

You're not a bad writer and you draft your dating profile's "About Me" section:

Your dating profile draft

A good man looking for a good woman.
I take care of myself and I'm told that I am attractive. I work hard and I have a successful business, but I also value leisure activities: I write and record music. I shoot pool. I read philosophy. Although I am very responsible, I often like to cut loose and be spontaneous. I cherish my loving family and close friends, and... I am now looking to find a worthy romantic partner with whom to share my great life.

So far so good.

And you're lucky because you happen to have two friends in advertising who can offer input. The first is a designer – he works in subscription marketing or something. You show him your paragraph.

The designer's touch

"Not bad," he says, "but look, you can go up into this menu here and style the type to add emphasis."

"Really?"

"Sure. What you are saying is important. For emphasis you can make text bold, all caps, italicized or underscored; you can break out paragraphs and use bullet points; you can even choose a second color. I'll show you..."

The designer friend applies some typographic formatting to your paragraph.

"You see? Now it's no longer just a monotonous area of boring text. There are some visual lures in there to catch a woman's eye."

"Hmm. I see. Thank you, but are you sure it isn't looking too flamboyant? I mean the words alone tell who I am. Don't I risk coming across as desperate?"

"Nah. You need to stand out first and be noticed, otherwise no one will even read what you have to say."

"Okay," you agree.

Then you print out the revised profile and bring it to your second ad friend. She's an assistant marketing manager at a consumer magazine.

The marketer's input

"I like what you have so far," she says, "and I like how you've called out certain parts. Reading through it, I see some other things that you can pop out for extra emphasis..."

So she marks up your ad. You bring it home and make all the additional changes.

Now your copy looks like this:

Your dating profile – over pimped

A GOOD MAN LOOKING FOR A GOOD WOMAN.

I take care of myself and I'm told that I am attractive. **I work hard** and **I have a successful business**, but I also value *leisure activities*:

- I write and record *music*
- I shoot *pool*
- I read *philosophy*

Although I am **VERY RESPONSIBLE**, I often like to **cut loose** and be **SPONTANEOUS**. I cherish my loving family and close friends, and...

I am now looking to find a worthy romantic partner with whom to share my great life.

Yikes! How quickly things have gotten out of hand. Any sane woman would click right past that creepy emphatic mess.

Granted, dear reader of this article, my example is purposefully somewhat over the top. But it does help make two principles plain to see:

- 1) Visual overemphasis can undermine credibility.
- 2) Visual overemphasis can actually result in nothing really standing out.

And now we're ready to take a look at what constitutes a more tempered approach to emphasis when formatting type.

The tempered approach to typographic emphasis

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Here is a version of the dating ad with what I believe to be a better balance of formatting emphasis:

Your dating profile – styled like a player

A good man looking for a good woman.

I take care of myself and I'm told that I am attractive. I work hard and I have a successful business, but I also value leisure activities:

- I write and record music
- I shoot pool
- I read philosophy

Although I am very responsible, I often like to cut loose and be spontaneous. I cherish my loving family and close friends, and...

I am now looking to find a worthy romantic partner with whom to share my great life.

Notice the hierarchical organization. The headline is bolded, and there are no other bolded words fighting against it. The ad is formatted so that it's easy and inviting to read, but it doesn't try to over-hype meaning into the copy. It lets the words do their job as words.

The typographic presentation implies confidence in the offer and in the product. It demonstrates self respect. It stays cool. It shows some game and it's designed to get the girl [or win the subscriber].

Following, are more detailed notes on some of the different types of typographic formatting choices.

Boldface

Boldface type is a good option for headlines and subheads. It can also work for entire little promotional sections of copy.

We don't like boldfacing single words or phrases in the middle of a paragraph. You might see a "Save 50%" in the middle of your paragraph and itch to make it bold, but we suggest resisting the temptation. No doubt you've already effectively presented the great offer elsewhere – there's no need to freak out and start schlocking up every square inch of your communication with bold splotches.

Yes, eyes do dart around an ad and read patches of boldface type. But they also first take notice of the piece as a whole and form a judgment, like for example: "cheap junky hacked-out low budget crap coming from a second-rate company."

So instead of automatically reaching for a rickety typographic crutch, like unnecessarily using boldface, first consider ways in which to make your written words and strategic angling itself more bold.

All caps

Short headlines can be set in all caps, which may look good

in certain fonts and for other design reasons, but one must use them judiciously because words set in all capital letters are more difficult to read. That's because people recognize word *shapes*.

Notice how letter ascenders and descenders give the following words distinct and somewhat recognizable outline contours:

Words have distinctive outline shapes

Happy, Traffic, Best,
Subscribe, Savings

Let's look at the same words in all caps and you will see how they now have similar rectangular outlines, making them less visually distinguishable:

Words set in all capitals are less visually distinguishable

HAPPY, TRAFFIC, BEST,
SUBSCRIBE, SAVINGS

Another consideration, especially in today's email and instant messaging world, is that using all capitals can be rude because savvy communicators view it as screaming.

One last point on capitals in subscription marketing: Just because a magazine logo is designed in all caps (examples include The New Yorker, Glamour and Maxim) doesn't mean one should annoyingly typeset the name in all capitals throughout the body copy of marketing materials. The actual logo is already displayed elsewhere, right? In fact, although magazine names are technically supposed to be set in italics, we don't always follow that rule when advertising – instead, we sometimes take creative license and save the visual emphasis for when we really need it.

Italics

Italics are good for captions and other call-outs. And since we don't always "use up" italics on a magazine's name, we can deploy their full weight for other missions. As an example, we sometimes set the name or title of a premium in italics.

Underscored text

Underscoring can be a good way to emphasize without excess. We've been known to underscore the savings offer in the middle of a paragraph (where boldface, we think, would be too much).

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Paragraphs and bullet points

You can break out paragraphs and use bullet points to make your copy more inviting. There are many reasonable ways to visually seduce readers without resorting to manic type over-styling.

Color

Words are symbols representing abstract concepts. They have been mentally grasped since childhood as black letters on a white or light background, so we are careful about straying from this norm. We usually want our type to be black – or white when we drop it out of a darker background. Just because a second color is available doesn't mean one has to necessarily use it on nice black words.

Other tricks

Other effective ways to focus attention on your copy include: Circling or highlighting, a pointing arrow, even a handwritten notation. A comprehensive course covering all the subtleties of typography and related design tactics is beyond the scope of this article, but the essential point I'd like to offer is to consider taking it easy on the font styling.

Show some restraint

Good creative aims for strong copy along with inviting yet unobtrusive design. Just as amateurish copywriters want to end every sentence with an exclamation point, amateurish designers want to blemish every paragraph with overdone typography.

To be sure, there are times when it might be proper to purposefully jazz up the type. An example would be when creative wants to mimic editorial styling, like in a magalog. But all in all we think it's best to default to moderation.

It's not becoming of a marketer to typographically drool their desperation for a sale all over the prospect. She's too smart for that anyway. We believe you are more likely to spark her interest and win her over by playing a more subtle game.

The subscription marketer as typographer

As a subscription marketing executive, there's no need for you to also be a master typographer. But it doesn't hurt to have an overview on the matter. Especially in today's circulation marketing field, where it can sometimes be a challenge to find a single paragraph of copy unmarred by blotches of bold, capitalized, italicized and colored text. From our perspective, however, we consistently win control after control for our clients with a more restrained approach to typography. **SM**

Todd Lerner Advertising specializes in direct marketing creative for clients that include Time Inc., Disney, The Financial Times, Radisson, Condé Nast, Rodale, Columbia House, Hearst, Smithsonian, and others. Feel free to email Todd with questions or comments about this article: todd@toddlerneradvertising.com