

One type of headline will always fail

You're invited

That was the subject line for an email I got recently from Boston University. Naturally, I assumed that I was being invited to attend an event. But no, I was being invited to donate money to the annual pledge drive.

This was a classic bait-and-switch.

The following week I got an email from BU that said something about women (fewer/more women getting degrees, I can't recall). Again, I opened it since I thought it would be an article about gender disparity. It wasn't. It was another bait-and-switch. Again, BU wanted me to be among the women who donate to the university.

Bait-and-switch headlines/subject lines are trust-killers.

I understand there's clutter and that you need to work hard to entice readers. Using a bait-and-switch can guarantee people will open your email or read your article, but at a cost. When you fool people this way (and that is what you are doing), you ensure they will no longer trust your content.

"You can fool
all the
people some
of the time
and some of
the people
all the time,
but you
cannot fool
all the
people all
the time."
Abraham
Lincoln

What's going to happen when BU really wants to invite me to an event? What type of subject line will they use? I am not going to believe "you're invited" again.

Writing a subject line/headline is not easy. You want to entice readers to open your email or read your article. You are much better off describing what you are offering inside than using a false premise.

What is your experience with bait-and-switch headlines or subject lines? If you use them, how well do they work for you?

Think a headline does not matter?

A headline can either draw the reader in or not.

The Washington Post has different headlines on its website than in the print edition (why this is, I don't know). This morning, for example, I barely glanced at Charles Krauthammer's op-ed piece "Libyan 'Crossfire'." Then, when perusing WashingtonPost.com I saw the following headline:

Krauthammer: Gaddafi justified his rotten death

Now, that intrigued me. So I clicked and lo and behold, it is the same article.

A good headline is descriptive, yes, and has an element to make you read further. Writing a good headline will get your article (or press release or blog post) seen (if not read fully).