



SKILL BUILDING

# The Big Idea



*Published by:*  
American Writers & Artists Institute  
Delray Beach, FL 33444  
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Website: <http://www.awai.com>

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# Why Every Promotion Needs a Big Idea

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*By Paul Hollingshead*

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.

## **1** **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.

## **2** **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.

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

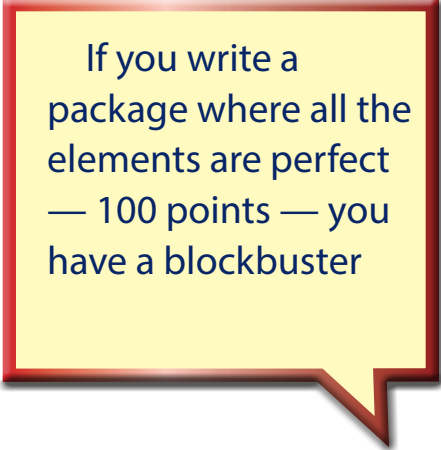
The lead sets the tone of your letter, establishes rapport with your reader, fleshes out the Big Idea, makes it real, and delivers a powerful benefit or promise.

## **4** **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.



If you write a package where all the elements are perfect — 100 points — you have a blockbuster

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.

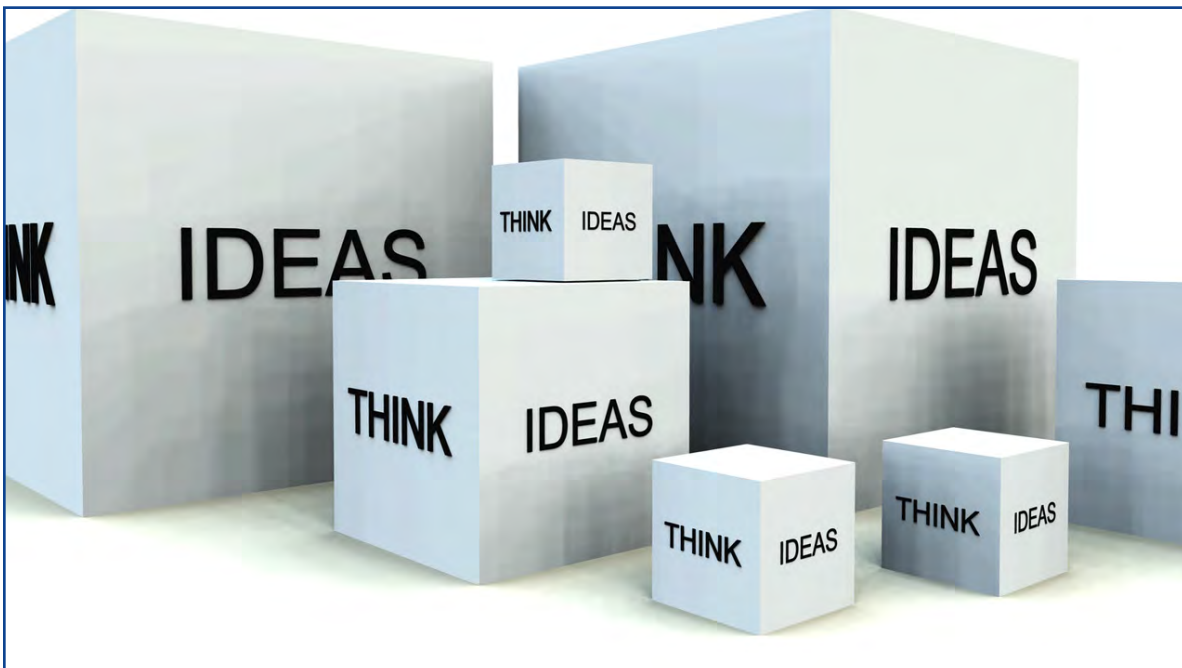
A 50-point package will just barely break even. It's not a good place to be, because if you keep churning out promotions like this you become known as an average copywriter.

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.

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.

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.

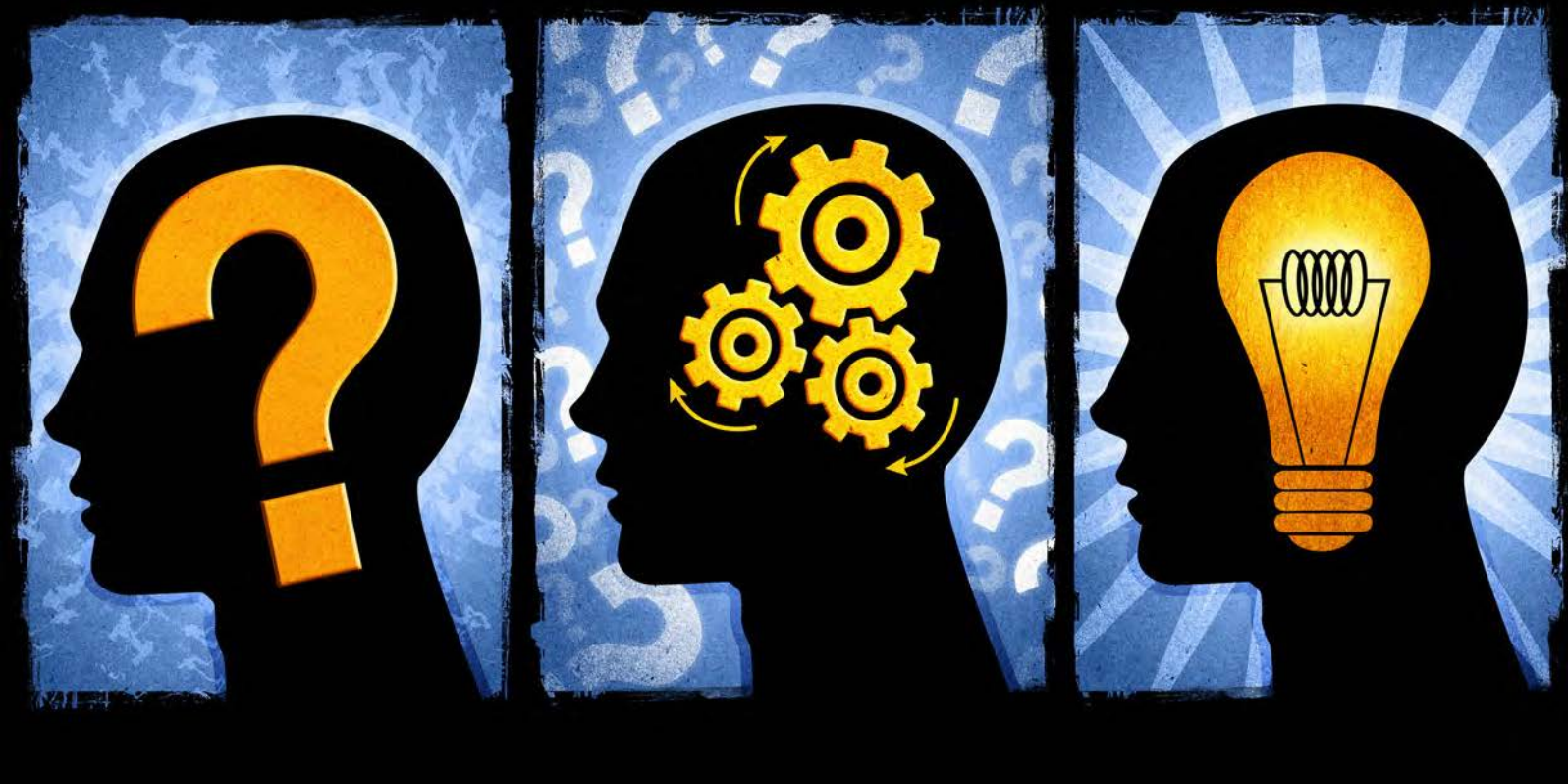
**Second**, it's the most fun part of the promotion! You get to use the creative part of your brain and challenge yourself to come up with a strong idea that will carry the package.

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.

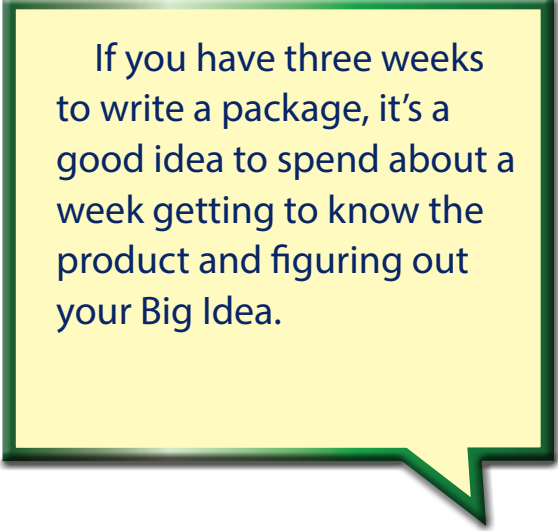
The second version is more compelling. It offers the reader news, with a story the "average investor" probably hasn't heard yet, and hints at a promise of making money from this potential crisis. In other words, this headline contains a Big Idea.

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.



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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 getting a lot of press, you may find that investors will respond to promotions about new discoveries in biotech.

In the health market, pitting yourself against the FDA or the medical establishment is a common tactic. But if you're going to do that in your promotion, you need to tie it to something current — a new FDA regulation or story or changes in Medicare.

Of course, the most timely things you can address in a health package are the aches, pains and diseases your prospect is suffering from right now. That's why most of these promotions go to an older crowd.

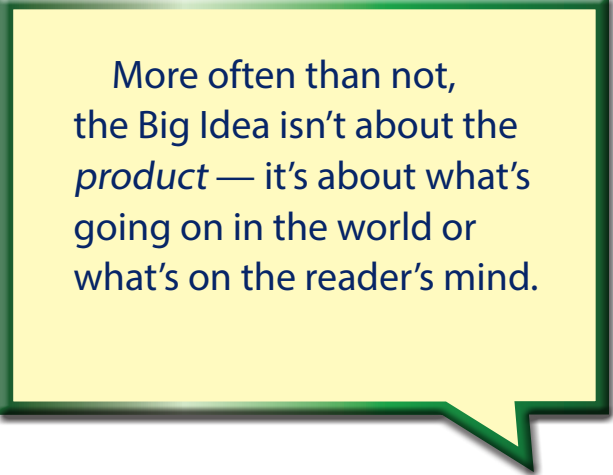
### Unique

For an idea to be "big" it has to be unique. (Yes, one of the 4 U's you're familiar with.)

Now, it's easy to think that just because you have something new, it's unique. That's not quite true — there's a difference.



For example, products that are “New and Improved” aren’t exactly unique ideas. Adding another blade onto a razor may be new — and the razor companies will promote it as if they’ve just invented space travel — but it’s hardly a breakthrough idea.



More often than not, the Big Idea isn’t about the *product* — it’s about what’s going on in the world or what’s on the reader’s mind.

No, your idea needs to be *original*, such as a “secret” no one else knows.

You also have to be careful not to think that just because you have something unique, it must be new. Again, that’s not always the case.

Say you’re writing for an investment guru who has a unique system for investing. And yes, his *system* could be brand-spanking new, proven, and everything an investor could dream of having. But seriously, nearly every investment guru has a “unique” system, so this idea is nothing new to your reader — you’d need an original take on it for it to be a compelling lead.

Or you may be selling a health product that has a “unique” mix of supplements. But your readers are weary of hearing about this. The idea is not new.

That’s why, more often than not, the Big Idea isn’t about the *product* — it’s about what’s going on in the world or what’s on the reader’s mind.



I admit, it's not easy being original. Sometimes you just have to find the unique twist or the different angle to something that others are already talking about. That's okay too — as long as your reader hasn't already seen it presented this way.

## Bold

Since you only have a few seconds to get someone interested in your promotion, don't be timid. Your reader has no time for anyone who shuffles meekly through the door and mumbles, "Well, I might have something that interests you... uh, that is, if I'm not bothering you... no really, I can come back later..."

Forget it! You want your package to grab your reader by the collar and say, "I've got something so important to tell you that you'd be foolish not to give it a look."

Remember, you're up against a ton of competition. Your Big Idea has to be bold enough to make all those other promotions shake in their boots and crawl off into the trash can. You don't get points for niceness here, only for bringing in the orders.

Consider the promotion for the health newsletter, *Alternatives*. The headline: "Read This Or Die."

You may not be *that* audacious in your claim, and you don't want to risk turning your prospect off if they see you as arrogant or pandering. But it's a good template to keep in mind, because you want your prospect to think: "Read this or \_\_\_\_\_."

Fill in the blank with the worst thing that could happen to your prospect if they don't read your package. Now, what Big Idea can you find that would get them thinking, "I've got to find out more"?

And your prospect *will* want to find out more if your Big Idea is...

## Impactful

English teachers will cringe at this word, but it sums up how your prospect should feel about your promotion — that it will have a *huge impact* on their lives.

Your Big Idea should suggest a major change ahead for the reader — about their finances... health and well-being... personal status... career... attraction to the opposite sex — the *important* stuff we think about all the time.

That means your Big Idea must also tap into your reader's core buying emotion, and make a connection with what they really want, deep inside.

Part of your research will be to understand your prospect at this deeper level by knowing their beliefs, feelings and desires. Only then can you create an effective promotion aimed at them.

So even before you start looking for your Big Idea, make sure you have a complete, three-dimensional picture of your prospect in your mind. Once you do, you're more likely to find an idea that has a big impact on them.

## A Few More Important Traits of the Big Idea

### **Should be rooted in the product's Unique Selling Proposition (USP)**

The Big Idea has to come back to what the product is and what it can do for your reader. You're not going to look for a big story about "the coming oil crisis" when you're selling a health supplement.

### **Should appeal to your prospect's underlying desire to know something others don't know**

We *all* like to know secrets or learn about hidden discoveries that no one else knows about — makes us feel a bit superior. This gets back to your idea being original and new, but it also helps if your idea is mostly unknown to the general public.

### **Should have a "built-in" benefit, whether implied or direct**

Your reader should be able to get the idea through the headline, and make a connection in their mind, that they'll get some benefit if they find out more.

### **Should have copy that backs up bold claims**

Obvious, right? You should have proof for any claim you make in your promotion. But this usually won't be a concern, because more often than not you'll find your Big Idea from doing research. So the proof will come first, and you'll base your Big Idea on the facts you dig up.

## **Should not offend or take advantage of your reader**

Don't treat your readers like idiots. Your Big Idea should be the kind of thing that excites you so much that you want to tell people about it. It won't shock just for the sake of shocking, and it won't be condescending in any way.



## **Should be easy to grasp and easy to explain.**

If you can't state your idea in a sentence or two, you probably don't have a Big Idea. This is important for two reasons. First, you're going to have to boil it down into a headline and subhead that captures the idea, and that's easier to do with a simple idea.

Second, your prospect should be able to restate the idea in their own mind: "I'm ordering this product because they're telling me that \_\_\_\_." It can't take too many words for them to fill in the blank, or you could lose the sale.

## **A Summary of the Big Idea**

- Anchors your promo
- Responsible for (at least) 30% of your promo's success — maybe more, because a strong Big Idea will spawn a more effective headline and lead
- Breaks through the clutter and is new and compelling

- Tells the reader something they don't know — something of interest; something they aren't likely to find out anywhere else
- Jars the reader out of complacency
- Makes an impact on the reader's life, and is timely
- Gets you excited and makes you want to tell other people about it.

If your idea fits these criteria, you're onto something big.

## The Big Idea in Action

Now that you know what a Big Idea is, it's time to look at some examples of actual winning promotions.

We'll start with a letter I consider to be an outstanding illustration of the Big Idea concept.

This promotion was written by Porter Stansberry — for his *Porter Stansberry's Investment Advisory* newsletter — and it launched his entire franchise sometime back in 1999. You may have seen it before, but it's still one of the best examples of taking an ordinary idea and making it bigger than life and more compelling.

Let's take a look at the lead, and then we'll dissect it a bit to see how the Big Idea played a huge part in this promo's success.

# There's a New Railroad Across America

## And it's making some people very rich...

In fact, one ex-bond trader with a mixed track record  
made \$1.8 million per day for 540 straight days!

Dear Investor,

*Imagine yourself wearing a top hat and tails, on the balcony of a private rail car, the wind whistling past you as you sip the finest French champagne...*

*It's 1850; the railroad is growing like a vine towards the west. And, although you don't know it yet, the same rail that you are riding on today will soon more than triple your wealth, making you and your family into one of the great American dynasties...*

America's economic history is illuminated by stories of quick fortunes made by daring entrepreneurs with new technologies — railroads, motorcars and more recently, computers. I've spent nearly my entire professional life studying exactly how great entrepreneurs made their fortunes — both in the past and today. What I've learned contradicts what most people believe about wealth building — and explains why 95% of mutual fund managers can't beat the market's average return.

I'm writing you today to show you what I've found. This year, four out of the six stocks I've picked for a well-known investment club have more than doubled the S&P 500's return for all of last year. Meanwhile the other stocks are poised to earn more than my first recommendations combined by the end of this year. I'll show you exactly how I did it. But for now, flash back again — it's 1908...

*You're an urban banker in Detroit, living a life of country clubs and summer ballroom parties. It's a far cry from your humble start as a clerk, but the last 25 years have been good ones, and you made the most of them. Even so, all of your previous success can't hold a candle to the importance of the deal you've just inked today. You're backing a young, wild-eyed mechanic, whose new system for making motorcars promises to revolutionize the industry. Puffing on your cigar, you experience the rare exhilaration of clinching a life-changing deal...*

It's a true story — that "wild-eyed mechanic" is Henry Ford. And, his early backers turned \$10,000 investments into over \$25 million stakes in Ford Motor Co. The previous story is true too

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*over please.*



This promotion is about telecommunications and laying fiber-optic cable, so it probably wouldn't work today. But back at the height of the Internet boom it was a blockbuster.

You see, everybody was wondering how to make money off the Internet, and the mail was flooded with Internet promotions. If you were on any investment newsletter mailing lists, just about every week you'd get a promotion about "How to Make 500% on this Breakthrough Internet Stock."

That's how ordinary copywriters positioned their packages. But not Porter.

He tied together what was happening with the Internet to what happened with the railroads back in the 1800s. In fact, as he explains in the promo, one entrepreneur was building a fiber-optic communication network across the entire country *right underneath* the old railroad tracks.

Now stop for a second and consider.

Suppose you had been researching Internet stocks in



1999. You learn about Nortel Networks and their new fiber-optic technology. You also learn that when Southern Pacific and Union Pacific merged in 1997, the former owner of Southern Pacific got the right of way on both railroad lines across America — and was using that right of way to lay fiber-optic cable.

You could think, “Well, that’s interesting.” You might even lead your promo with a headline about a company that will make a gazillion dollars with its new communications network.

But the beauty in Porter Stansberry’s promo was that he made the connection between the two — his Big Idea — and captured it in just a few words with the headline:

## **There’s a New Railroad Across America**

Now, remember who this was aimed at — investors. You may not care one whit for the idea of a “new railroad.” But for a lot of investors, the idea of the railroads is captivating... and a bit romantic.

Anyone familiar with the history of America knows how the railroads created wealthy family dynasties for those who invested early in this new “disruptive” technology. Many investors still think to themselves, “Man, if I could have lived way back when and gotten a piece of the railroad action...”

Another reason this headline works is that nearly all investors are looking for the next big thing — the “next Microsoft”... the “new Intel”... the “FedEx killer” — something they can get in on early that will make them rich.



In Porter's promotion, the idea is that investors who own the new railroad of commerce — the new global computer networks and telecom companies — will be among the richest people in the world.

Which brings us to the first subhead:

### **And it's making some people very rich...**

There's the promise, the implied benefit for the reader: If you know how to invest in these "new railroad" stocks, you too can become rich.

So far, so good. But the skeptical reader will think, "Oh, really? Prove it." So Porter immediately backs up his claim in the second subhead:

### **In fact, one ex-bond trader with a mixed track record made \$1.8 million per day for 540 straight days!**

Now that's a compelling subhead. Nearly any investor with a pulse is going to think, "If someone with a 'mixed track record' can make almost 2 million bucks a day, how much could *I* make?"

Let's look at the first few sentences to get a better feel for the package. It begins:

Dear Investor,

*Imagine yourself wearing a top hat and tails, on the balcony of a private rail car, the wind whistling past you as you sip the finest French champagne...*

*It's 1850; the railroad is growing like a vine toward the west. And, although you don't know it yet, the same rail that you are riding on today will soon more than triple your wealth, making you and your family into one of the great American dynasties...*

America's economic history is illuminated by stories of quick fortunes made by daring entrepreneurs with new technologies — railroads, motorcars and more recently, computers.

In just a few short paragraphs, Porter has tied together the romantic idea of becoming wealthy in the “olden days” of the railroads to the idea of becoming rich today with the new technology of computers.

And nowhere in the lead does he mention his newsletter. No, the Big Idea here is all about making money with new technologies — just as people did over a century ago.

Here's what Porter has to say about the Big Idea:

“What I write sells because the main idea behind my package is so exciting that people would buy it even if I were a terrible writer. The hard part is doing the research required to find a new ‘Big Idea.’ You know it when you find it, though. It's huge. It's valuable. And it makes you want to tell other people about it.”

## More Examples of Big Ideas

At this point, you should be able to go through your swipe file and recognize the Big Ideas.

You'll notice that a lot of the most successful promos don't lead with the product. Many of them don't even state a direct benefit in the headline — which seems to break a cardinal rule of marketing.

But read carefully and you'll see a few things:

- 1) The headline and subhead talk about something so compelling, you want to find out more (assuming you're part of the target market).
- 2) The benefit is at least *implied* in the headline and subhead, and stated directly within the first page or two.
- 3) You may not even find out what they're selling until well into the package.

Let's look at a few more examples of leads from winning packages so you can see how the Big Idea works. (These packages were provided by Mike Palmer. He presented these at his powerful presentation at *AWAI's FastTrack to Success* boot camp in 2006.)

## **The U.S. Govt's Secret Colorado Oil Discovery**

**Hidden 1,000 feet beneath the surface of the Rocky Mountains lies the largest untapped oil reserve in the world — more than 2 TRILLION barrels.**

**On August 8, 2005 President Bush mandated its extraction. Three companies have been chosen to lead the way. Test drilling has already begun...**

## COMMENTS:

When this promo for a newsletter went out, investors were crazy about oil (then at \$70 per barrel) — and concerned about our dependency on oil in the unstable Middle East. The idea that we're sitting on a couple trillion barrels of oil right here in the U.S. is pretty intriguing, which is why this promotion was hugely successful.

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### **Can “National Policy 41-201” save your retirement?**

**It enables you to take advantage of “SRI,” the government loophole of a lifetime. This rarely publicized way to pay for retirement could add an extra \$15,000 to \$75,000 to your bank account, each year for the next 25 years.**

**There are 5 easy ways to begin receiving your checks immediately, no matter what your age, income or job status.**

## COMMENTS:

Everybody wants to have more money for retirement. “National Policy 41-201” isn't something the reader has heard of before, so it's new and unique — and it's credible because it's a national policy. Saying it's a “loophole” and “rarely publicized” makes it seem like a secret others don't know about. And it's a bit audacious in the claim of how much it could add to your bank account.

## Make the Communists Pay

**A single call (or click) to your broker can put you ahead of the biggest market move of 2006**

Dear Reader,

I found a way to make several times your money — on three separate occasions — all within the next 365 days. The best part is, you get to do it at the expense of the Chinese government.

Thanks to a strange anomaly in the world's currency markets, you have the opportunity to take money back from the Chinese.

### COMMENTS:

There's a huge sentiment in the U.S. that our jobs are going overseas and the Chinese are undercutting our businesses and putting people out of work. The Big Idea here is that you can profit from this trend and make money off of the Chinese government.

Notice that the headline *could* have been, "How a Single Call to Your Broker Can Put You Ahead of the Biggest Market Move of 2006"... or "How to Make Several Times Your Money Within the Next 365 Days"... or even "How to Take Money Back From the Chinese." But the writer captured the Big Idea with four simple words: "Make the Communists Pay."

# **Canada's Govt.-Authorized Royalty Checks Could Ensure You Never — EVER — Run Out of Money**

**Smart Americans are already cashing in and  
pocketing \$59,000 to \$157,000 every 2-3 years**

## **COMMENTS:**

Everybody wants to get royalty checks, especially from the government. Few investors will have heard about these "government-authorized" checks from Canada, so this passes our test of being new and unique. It makes a bold claim, and speaks to the emotional desire to be financially secure — and to be among the "smart Americans" who are pocketing a nice chunk of cash every few years.

## **How to Find the Big Idea for Your Promotion**

Okay, now for the million-dollar question: How do you come up with a compelling Big Idea?

This literally *is* a million-dollar question, because I've seen promotions with powerful ideas bring in a million dollars over a weekend. So yes, knowing how to find the right idea to wrap your promotion around is a skill that's worth big bucks.

I wish I could give you a formula, but all I can really do is point you in the right direction, show you the steps to go through, and give you some examples of the thought process you might follow. It's up to you to sit down and do the work.

Where do you start?



First, you may get lucky. The Big Idea might come out of the initial creative meeting with your client. These meetings (or conference calls) typically include the product manager, a marketing manager, and others who know the product and the market well.

Don't think that just because you're the copywriter — the "creative" person — you have to come up with *all* the ideas. Sometimes you'll get great ideas from the client. After all, they're the ones most familiar with the product and their audience.

So listen carefully during the creative meeting — your Big Idea may come out of a casual remark or a piece of information someone mentions. Then it's up to you to turn it into a breakthrough headline and lead. You may even want to record the meeting, so you can listen to it again — just to focus on pulling the golden gems from amidst the rocks.

You also may have a bit of luck by getting your Big Idea from the “guru” behind the product. That could be the editor of a newsletter... the author of an information product... a doctor who endorses a line of alternative health supplements... or whoever created the product, works on the product, or specializes in the subject you’re writing about.

Now, a lot of those folks won’t understand the whole marketing concept. They just want to work on their product and they have no interest in the promotion you’re about to put your heart and soul into. But I’ve known newsletter editors who have come up with a great idea and given it to the copywriter to run with.

What happens if you’re not that lucky? Follow these steps:

## **1** Immerse Yourself in the Product

Learn everything there is to know about the product. If it’s a newsletter, read past issues. If it’s an information product, go through it, notepad at hand. If it’s a health supplement, read all the scientific studies that show why it’s effective.

Ask your client for any other materials about your product — manuals, reports, market studies — and dig into it like an archaeologist searching for treasure.

Then ask your client questions about what you find. For example, when I work on financial newsletter promotions, I may run across something interesting in the back issues. So I ask the editor, “Why did you recommend this? Do you still recommend it? What’s your thinking here?” By doing this, I’ve found Big Ideas buried in the product.



## **2** Read Past Promotions

You can also find good ideas in old promotions — even ones that didn't do so well. Sometimes copywriters don't put the right idea into the lead, but there's a Big Idea lurking inside the promotion.

Just scan through these old promotions and see if anything jumps out at you. If so, you could have the germ of a Big Idea for *your* promotion.

## **3** Follow the News

Earlier I told you that your Big Idea must be timely because you want to tap into what's on your prospect's mind *right now*. To do that, you have to know what's going on in the world that your reader is paying attention to.

Determine what the big news stories are that affect your prospect and that tie in with the product's USP. It could be anything from an outbreak of the bird flu to the latest scandals in Washington or Hollywood.

You'll also get ideas by reading what your prospect is reading and watching the TV shows they're watching. Now, I don't recommend you spend a lot of time in front of the television, but at least be familiar with the popular shows.

## **4** Research the Product's USP

Spend a day on the Internet researching your product's USP — the problem it solves or the subject it covers. Think of as many words or phrases as you can about the product's USP, then use those as search terms.

This can be tedious work — or it can be the most fun part of the project. Either way, you need to be patient. Allow yourself time to follow leads, because you never know what you'll find. Your research can take you from one topic to another, or from a general subject to a specific story that has the potential to be a Big Idea.

You're like a sleuth, and the trail will take twists and turns you never expected. But as long as you keep an open mind you'll find a lot of material you can use in your promotion — and some of it may turn into your Big Idea. One caution though: Although you want to be open-minded, you need to make sure your research doesn't roam so far that you spend needless amounts of time chasing dead ends. Constantly keep your eye on the goal and connect back to the product to keep your meandering in check.

## **5** Talk With the Person Behind the Product

Previously, I said that you might get your Big Idea from the guru behind the product. That's usually the case if the guru is actively involved in, or at least interested in, the marketing of the product. They may be in the initial creative meeting, or might even come to the marketing manager with an idea.

Since that is an unusual event, make it a point to talk to the person behind the product and be prepared to ask a lot of questions. But don't make them feel like they're being interrogated — just give them a call and have a conversation about the product.

The best way to get information out of someone is to get them excited about their product and get them talking about it. Eventually they'll say something that's relevant to what you're after.

Later, I'll give you an example of how I got a breakthrough idea by chatting with a product specialist over drinks. With one off-handed comment, he practically wrote my headline for me.

## **6** Keep Your Eyes and Mind Open

This is something you have to do through *all* the steps above. Don't allow any pre-conceived notions about what you're looking for blind you to a Big Idea when it appears.

Sometimes the Big Idea seems like a little idea... at first. You won't always have a "Eureka!" moment when you find it. You may run across some tidbit and think, "That's interesting." Well, your Big Idea may be staring you in the face, but you've got to keep your eyes open to recognize it.

## What to Do If You Still Don't Have a Big Idea

Okay, so you've done all the work — you've had the creative sessions, you've read the product materials till your eyes fell out, you did all the research and all the legwork — and you still don't have a Big Idea. Now what?

Don't worry, this happens to me all the time. I don't automatically come up with a Big Idea, even after doing a ton of work. In this case, the following is helpful:

### **Step Back**

That's right, take a break. I know, you're on a tight deadline and you don't have a moment to spare. But believe me — and a lot of creativity experts will tell you the same thing — you need to stop looking so hard for the idea.

Forget it for a bit. Just let your mind mull it over for a while. In the meanwhile...

### **Do Something Mindless**

Get out and work in the garden, take a walk, paint, play with your kids — just do something where you're distracted but can let your mind wander, unpressured.



If you've really immersed yourself in the product and have spent a lot of time doing research, your subconscious mind will be hard at work trying to sort it all out. Let it do its job and something is likely to bubble to the surface.

And there's one surefire way to get that idea to come to you. It works for me and a lot of writers I've talked to.

In fact, this technique practically guarantees you'll become a master of unearthing the Big Idea. You simply...

### **Take a Shower!**

Yep, a shower. We've all had ideas come to us in the shower. I can't explain it, but I get some of my best ideas there. I wouldn't doubt if Edison and Einstein got some of their breakthrough ideas in the shower.

While you're "stepping back" from all the hard work of trying to think of your Big Idea, make sure to keep a pad of paper handy, especially by your bed. You just never know when the idea will come.

So let's recap:

#### **How to Find the Big Idea**

- Do your homework
- Research the product
- Read past promos
- Read the news
- Talk to the product specialists
- Keep your eyes and mind open
- Step back
- Do something mindless
- Take a shower
- Be patient - the Big Idea will come to you.

## How Do You Know Your Big Idea Will Work?

Okay, so you've come up with an idea that gets your heart racing. You may not know how the headline and lead will come out, but you're pretty sure you've got something good. And then a little doubt creeps in and you wonder, "Will this *really* work?"

Maybe it will and maybe it won't — only the market can tell you that. But you want to know if it's at least worthy of testing, right? You want to know if you should spend the next couple of weeks writing a promotion around this idea.

Here's what to do:

### **Trust Your Gut**

Specializing in a niche is valuable because you get to know your market well. You may even be one of them. In this case, you can develop a gut feeling for what your market will respond to. If the Big Idea interests you, chances are it will interest your reader.

### **Ask Someone Else**

If you're not part of the market you're writing to, it can be a bit hard to judge just what will appeal to your audience. And even if you *are* part of the market, you can get too close to an idea to trust your own judgment — your "gut instinct" can get overridden by your attachment to an idea.

In this case, run your idea by someone who's in the market you're trying to reach. Take it to them cold, with no preamble or long-winded explanation. Simply ask, "Does this

idea interest you? Is it something you'd want to find out more about?"

### **Compare It to Other Successful Promos**

Read other promos that have worked. Ask yourself: "Is my idea as strong and compelling as these?" Or even stronger?

If it's good, your idea will be at least as powerful as the Big Ideas in other winning promotions. If not, you might be able to strengthen it by making it bolder or more audacious.

### **Give It "The Overnight Test"**

If you're still unsure, put it away, have dinner, go to bed, get up in the morning and look at it again. If it still appeals to you, it's likely to be a strong idea.

### **Send It to Your Client**

Fire off a summary of your Big Idea in an e-mail to the people you're writing for — the marketing manager, the editor, or whoever has a good feel for what will work with the audience you're trying to reach (but keep the idea brief — two sentences at most).

Because they haven't been looking at your Big Idea as long as you have, they'll bring fresh eyes to it and can probably tell you if it has any appeal.

Over time, you'll develop a good instinct for what's strong and what's not. But you can only develop that instinct by writing packages and taking the time to really understand this concept of the Big Idea. Once you do, it will become second nature to you and you'll be able to trust your gut a lot more.

## How I Found a Million-Dollar Idea... Over Drinks

Here's a good example of why it's important to do your homework and talk to the person behind the product.

I once wrote a promotion for a newsletter that used "quantitative analysis" to make stock recommendations. This system took a whole bunch of information about a stock, fed it into a software program, and apparently could spit out where the stock was headed in the next hour, day or week.

Pretty sophisticated stuff for a guy like me, and I struggled with the promotion, trying to figure out how to position this newsletter.

Now, I could have simply said something about "a computer system that can predict where stocks are going." But frankly, that's not original. You don't get a lot of readers to sit up and take notice with a boring headline like that. So I kept researching.

I had several meetings with the person who owned the system and asked a ton of questions about how it worked. We'd sit at the computer screen till my eyes glazed over, while he showed me the complex charts and explained moving averages and everything else.

Interesting stuff... but the readers of the promo wouldn't have a clue about any of this. What to do? You already know the answer. You have to keep digging and digging until you hit gold.



Several weeks into the project, after yet another brainstorming meeting with the product guru, we were having dinner and cocktails. I asked him, “Does this system *really* work?”

And he said, “Yeah, of course it works, the same way they can predict hurricanes. It works the same way.”

I said, “What? Why didn’t you tell me that six weeks ago? This is exactly what I need! There’s the promo, there’s the headline.”

Here’s how the lead came out:

## **The Technology That So Accurately Predicts the Path of Hurricanes Can Also Predict Where Stocks Are Headed...**

### **And It’s Making a Small Group of Savvy Investors Very Rich**

This may be your one-and-only chance to gain access to the computer-based “predictive” trading system that recently turned \$21,846 into \$423,202 within six months — and has been wowing institutional investors with its amazing accuracy.

This promotion did very well, bringing in millions of dollars in subscription orders. The reason: It had a Big Idea that was simple to grasp... and a bit intriguing.

People watch the news and see the weather maps showing where the next hurricane is headed, so our readers were familiar with this kind of technology. The timing was also good

because the promotion went out during hurricane season, so the topic was on everyone's minds.

But I wouldn't have discovered the hurricane connection — the Big Idea — without asking a lot of questions about how this stock-trading system worked and letting general conversation take over. Persistence paid off.

## You Can Use a Big Idea to Sell Nearly Anything

Let's look at another example of how doing a lot of research can help you find the Big Idea. This story was brought to my attention by one of our writers.

I want to use it because it's far removed from the kind of promotions a lot of us work on... and it shows how you can find the Big Idea for nearly anything you write about.

The story takes place in the 1960s...

A copywriter named Bud Robbins was hired by an agency to create an ad for the Aeolian Piano Co. The only background information he got was some previous ads and a few faded pictures of the piano. But that didn't tell him why anyone should pay \$5,000 for *this* piano when they could get a Steinway or a Baldwin for the same amount.

If you've written for a number of clients, you've probably run into a similar situation — you're expected to just "come up with something creative" for an ad or promotion, with little real information to go on. It's up to you to request — or demand — access to the people or materials that will help you understand the product inside and out.



Mr. Robbins arranged to visit the factory in upstate New York, where he spent two days touring the plant and learning all about the construction of the pianos. The pianos were well-crafted, but \$5,000 still seemed to him like a lot of money for them.

Here's where the story takes an interesting turn.

Just before leaving, he was escorted into the showroom by the national sales manager, where an Aeolian piano sat next to comparably-priced Steinway and Baldwin pianos. They all looked alike, and he was told that the only real difference was the shipping weight — the Aeolian pianos were heavier.

At this point, would you keep digging for information?

Bud Robbins did, and found out that the extra weight was caused by something called the Capo d'astro bar — a metallic bar under the piano that's fixed across the harp. What's it for?

The sales manager explained, “It takes 50 years before the harp in the piano warps. That’s when the Capo d’astro bar goes to work. It prevents that warping.”

The Steinway and Baldwin pianos also had Capo d’astro bars, but not as sturdy as the Aeolian ones. You’re probably thinking this sounds like the germ of a good USP. Right, but the story gets better.

Robbins asked, “You mean the Capo d’astro bar really doesn’t go to work for 50 years?”

The sales manager casually replied, “Well, there’s got to be some reason why the Met uses it.”

Robbins had just found out that the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City used an Aeolian piano, and he knew why — the superior Capo d’astro bar. Now he was hot on the trail of his Big Idea, so he headed to the Met, which was in the process of moving to the Lincoln Center.

When he talked to the person in charge of the move, she told him...

“About the only thing the Met is taking with them is their piano.”

That quote became the headline of the ad, and resulted in a *six-year wait* between order and delivery. In other words, a blockbuster Big Idea.

Let’s retrace the steps. Bud Robbins visited the piano factory... learned about the construction of the pianos and about the superior Capo d’astro bar... found out that’s why

the Met used this particular piano... and followed that lead to strike gold.

## Two Lessons About Finding the Big Idea

I hope you get a couple of things from the two stories I've just related.

First, it can take a lot of footwork and research before you hit on the Big Idea — and you never know where it will come from.

I got my “hurricane” headline over drinks with the product specialist. Bud Robbins got his from a woman who, before she was in charge of moving the Met, had become legendary for playing Carmen onstage.

Second, no matter what the product, you can find *something* about it that can become a Big Idea.

If I can do it with a sophisticated software trading system I barely understood... if Bud Robbins could do it with a piano when he couldn't even play... you can do it with whatever product you're assigned to write about.

## Conclusion

I started off this report telling you that finding and implementing a Big Idea effectively can have the biggest impact on the success of any promotion you write. And if I haven't convinced you, read what legendary copywriter David Ogilvy has to say on the subject:

*"It takes a Big Idea to attract the attention of consumers and get them to buy your product. Unless your advertising contains a Big Idea, it will pass like a ship in the night. I doubt if more than one campaign in a hundred contains a Big Idea."*

This report helps you understand the concept of the Big Idea, and gives you the tools to find good ideas and turn them into solid headlines and leads. I'm confident that with this information in your hands, you'll be able to take your copywriting to the next level and create blockbuster promotions.

And if you can become one of the rare copywriters who knows how to identify and develop powerful, compelling ideas for your promotions, you can go head-to-head with the best and brightest writers in the marketplace. You'll be able to write packages that become controls and mail in the millions — and you can one day join the ranks of the highest-paid copywriters of all times!