

Simple Tips For Creating Effective Ads

Good advertising really isn't all that difficult to create or implement. Follow these simple best-practices and you're well on your way to strong marketing ROI.



The “Do’s and Don’ts” Of Effective Advertising

For every charming gecko, memorable slogan, or unforgettable jingle, thousands of businesses advertise very effectively by being authentic, direct, and adhering to a couple of simple ideas. You don’t have to be a creative genius to use advertising effectively! Below, you find several simple best-practices to help you decide what to say, how to say it, and where you should say it. Focus on these practices and you’ll be off to a great start:

Part 1: What Your Ad Should Say

Do: Focus on one idea – ideally the most powerful competitive advantage or unique consumer benefit that you deliver. Use your ad time or space to convincingly explain a single, compelling benefit (remember that people don’t buy “features,” they buy benefits). Always make your point in terms that enable prospects to understand ‘what’s in it for them.’

Don’t: Try to tell prospects everything that is great about your brand, service or business. It’s extremely easy to lose people or blend into the crowd when you tout a laundry list of familiar benefits.

Do: Use copy/dialogue, tone, and sound to tap emotion. Contrary to what we generally believe about our decision-making, most of us act on emotion more often than we act on cold hard logic. Most of us are all too familiar with the way that emotions can over-ride logic. Logic, more often than not, acts as a brake on our actions. Emotion, more often than not, accelerates our actions. Advertising that taps into an emotion is almost always more powerful than a similar campaign that focuses strictly on reason.

Logic is certainly important: we want things that last, we want things that work better, we want things that will make our lives easier. Those are all logic-driven wants. But more often than not, it will be an emotional lever that gives us permission to actually take action and purchase those things.

Don’t: Ignore logic and facts that articulate your uniqueness in consumer-benefitting terms. You have to explain what you do and who you are, and facts are the most credible ways of doing that. It’s a matter of balance. Think of facts as the content and emotion as the tone and a context in effective advertising.

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Don't: Use emotional levers that aren't really part of your DNA. Emotional levers should support the experience of using your business, including the tone and values that customers would see in your staff, your store, or your service operations. Be careful when using emotions like fear. A negative vibe can literally give consumers the creeps when they think about your brand. If you need to go in that direction, make certain that the emotional tone of your ad speaks loudly to the emotional positive – security, safety, or comfort – if fear is ever used as a lever in your ad.

Do: When you address the 'next step' that you'd like customers to take, think about what they should do if they're not ready to buy today. Most advertising

experts will tell you that you need to have a 'call to action' -- a specific request to do something. This request is often "call us or visit us today." While this call to action serves an important purpose, it usually only affects those who want or need your product *right now*. Keep in mind that consumers generally buy when *they're ready* to buy. Some may need your service right now, but the majority probably won't need it for weeks, months, or even longer. The "immediate" call to action is therefore irrelevant to most of your potential market.

Thanks to the Internet, we now have several ways to extend our call to action to potential customers who *aren't* ready to buy right now. The first is simply to conclude ads by asking consumers to visit your web site or fan page. Consumers have become conditioned to evaluate almost everyone that they do business with via the web -- they appreciate the chance to learn more about you before they invest the time to walk in or call.

The second approach is to offer something to consumers who visit your site. This should be of value to the consumer and the content of that offer should elevate the perception of your brand. Firms as diverse as dry cleaners, lawyers, doctors, and even pet trainers now promote web site offers consisting of tips & time-savers associated with their specialty, notifications of special events such as seminars or special pre-sales, and discount coupons for their service. This can be a powerful incentive to visit the site, as well as a great step toward additional contact with new prospects.

If the offer is compelling, firms can also use it to solicit an email address from the prospect. Offering a monthly 'eTips' newsletter or future mailing of discounts and other special opportunities is generally the best way to garner registrations. Be very mindful,

Many of your potential customers aren't ready or willing to buy today. **Don't waste** your impressions by not offering these consumers a way to **interact** with you in the meantime.

however, that you're asking for the consumer's trust in an era where spam is the rule, not the exception. If you want someone to give you permission to contact them, treat that permission like gold and don't abuse it, no matter how great the temptation.

Don't: Over-use the email addresses that you collect on the web. Consumers have (and legally require) the right to ask you to take them off of your list. If you send too frequently, or use email to 'advertise' in cases where the consumer was expecting real value, you'll quickly see your list of contacts evaporate. Use the golden rule of web marketing: don't contact the prospect unless you have something of real value to offer. If they don't respond today, it's probably because they don't need you today. Don't assume that sending more email will change this. If you use email respectfully, you'll start winning customers when they are ready to buy.

Don't: Expect consumers to visit your site unless you tell them why it's important or valuable. Consumers have so many sites to visit or think about today that you need to offer them a benefit for visiting yours. It can be as simple as a free quote. Make that benefit support your core point of difference. Make it free, or of distinct value, and make it easy to get!

Part 2: How To Say It

Do: Use the first few seconds to engage prospects and get their attention. There's an old saying in advertising that still rings true: *You need to stop them to sell them.* There are plenty of ways to get a consumer's immediate attention without resorting to obnoxious sounds, hype, or silliness that detracts from your credibility. Ask a very pointed question. State a relatively surprising fact. Use white space or its audio equivalent -- *quiet* (a whisper gets far more effective attention than a scream).

Don't: Start an ad with generalizations, clichés, a long set-up or a rambling conversation. We've all heard them enough and we tune out immediately.

Do: Be authentic. For most small businesses, the character and knowledge of their principals/owners are the single most distinguishing assets that they own. Let that character show by simply being yourself. You'd be surprised how refreshing a short, honest message about who you are and why your business is special, followed with an

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invitation to stop by and meet you, can be in a sea of over-hyped advertising. Prospects will appreciate the insight that your experience brings to the table, particularly if you can tell them something that they don't already know.

Don't: Over-represent, or misrepresent, your business through advertising.

Nothing is worse than getting a prospect's expectations up and then not meeting those expectations. Plus, it can be illegal in particularly egregious cases.

Don't: Try to be funny because you think that consumers respond better to humorous advertising. Entertainment, when done right, can create great advertising.

But if humor isn't part of your day-to-day persona, you might find it uncomfortable or awkward to make it the centerpiece of your advertising. Humor is also very subjective, so use it with caution. If you're working with agencies or other third parties, and you're not entirely convinced that a humorous slant is effective, try something more straightforward. Finally, humor has a short shelf life. Your first humorous ad can get stale rather quickly. If you can't use a humorous concept consistently in several, if not many, different pieces of your campaign, think about another approach. The goal isn't to entertain – it's to engage. There are a lot of ways to engage without trying to be funny.

Focus your message on what makes your business **truly unique**. But don't try to fake it. If you're pretty similar to all of your competitors, use the **voice** of your message to build a familiar brand.

Do: Focus on benefits that make your business truly unique.

Differentiation is critical to help people understand why you're a better choice. It's also a key to being remembered. The human mind is actually wired to ignore things that look/sound common. It's the exceptions that stand out and get noticed. If your location is special and it's key to your success, focus on that. If you have a massive inventory, a unique guarantee policy, or even unique your hours of operation, that impress your customers most, take that approach.

If you don't have one of these assets, developing a media-powered brand is essential. These brands create differentiation simply by the way they communicate. The emotional tone of a message, the authenticity of the communication, the values espoused, even the identity of the spokesperson can create meaningful differentiation. A great example is the insurance industry, where the products are remarkably comparable. Geico uses its gecko, cheeky humor, and contemporary sound tracks to give the brand a fun and likeable air. Allstate, on the other hand, tries to build confidence with a warm, self-assured, no-nonsense, Dennis Haysbert.

Don't: Focus on differences that aren't real. Face it; many businesses do pretty much the same thing. If consumers would expect you to be fairly comparable to your competitors, don't try to force the issue by stating things that would strain credibility. Also, be wary of price-based differentiation. It's the easiest difference for a competitor to cover (even temporarily) and if that happens, it will quickly erode your campaign's impact.

Do: Be prepared to say the same thing for quite some time before you decide to change it or stop advertising altogether. Advertising is very similar to exercise (for someone who has been out of shape for a while). You generally don't see a lot of results after your first trip to the gym. In fact, you have to undergo a significant period of slowly, steadily building muscle and cardiovascular capacity before you start to see obvious benefits. But once you've built that base, the results come faster and with less onerous effort. Eventually you'll be looking forward to more. The hard sweat yields tangible benefits: it makes you look better, feel better, and live longer. The same applies to advertising: it may take several months to build a base of awareness among the people who have interest and the ability to use your business. Once that base is built, steady advertising (consistent exposure and a consistent message) will usually yield steady results.

Don't: Give up after a few weeks (or even months) because you don't see results. As long as you're achieving decent frequency, you're building a base, just like with exercise. Once you do start to see results, don't stop working. Just like at the gym, you can dial down the intensity a little, but when you stop building the muscle and cardio of your brand, you'll quickly fall 'out of shape' and be right back where you started – and having to go through that whole miserable ramp-up period again! Commit to your advertising or don't do it at all.

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Part 3: Where To Say It

Do: Find a medium or an advertising vehicle where 1) you can reach the same prospects over and over and 2) you can afford to advertise there. This repetition – what we call advertising 'frequency' -- is absolutely critical for achieving the goal of any advertising: influencing consumer behavior. Most businesses can actually generate reasonable return on investment with so-so creative and run of the mill advertising

copy. On the other hand, very few businesses can generate advertising ROI without solid frequency – getting their ad seen or heard by prospects often enough, and consistently enough to trigger memory and familiarity.

Don't: Try to reach more people than you can afford to reach frequently. If your goal is to burn through marketing dollars with little to show for it, the best thing you can do is target a large number of people and reach them only once. The next biggest mistake would be reaching them several times, but with days or weeks separating these exposures.

To get someone to change brands, or to get them to use a specific brand the first time need occurs, advertising needs to stick in the consumer's mind and build critical mass – what advertisers call mind-share. Since consumers don't easily remember things that aren't of supreme, immediate importance, repetition is critical.

Don't: Try to use a lot of different media types in the hope that at least one of them will work. Whether through incrementally adding to the marketing mix over time or just not knowing which media to focus on, a surprising number of businesses dilute the potential impact their ad budgets by spreading the dollars around too thinly. Typical examples are: using too many channels on cable that don't draw the same viewers or using several media like direct mail, print, or broadcast simultaneously.

Think like an infantry commander: focus your dollars on a single target where you can win with overwhelming force – don't try to fight a lot of battles at once! Even if your budget is modest, by carefully selecting an appropriately sized audience that can be reached repetitively, your business can build enough mind-share to increase your sales and profitability. Just make sure that you pick a medium where you can actually reach the same people over and over: loyal, habitual audiences that be reached with confidence day after day.

Don't try to reach more people than you can afford to **reach frequently**. There is no better way to **waste** a marketing budget than reaching a lot of people only once.

Do: Find a medium or an advertising vehicle where your ad can look or sound as good as the biggest advertiser in that media. When you hear or see a commercial or a full-page glossy ad in a monthly magazine by a nationally known advertiser, you generally see the work of a large team of highly paid agency professionals. The commercials might not always influence you, but most look well-photographed, the actors/models are attractive and well spoken, and your first reaction isn't 'that looks awful!'

Now, cut back to commercials for local businesses that you would see on a cable network or ads and circulars in local print media. How do these compare to their national counterparts? In many cases, images are grainy and poorly lit, colors don't pop, and the models/spokespeople are a little less than polished. What does this quality do to your perceptions/expectations for that business?

If you're like most consumers, you have a mental 'benchmark' for what attention-getting advertising looks or like. That benchmark is based on the best, not the average, and certainly not the worst of the ads you're exposed to. Even the best business or value proposition can experience more harm than good when its ads are perceived to fall short of this benchmark expectation.

Don't: Waste your valuable marketing dollars on ad production.

The remedy for low production quality – the type that can negatively impact your brand's esteem, at least in visual media -- is to spend a lot of money on production quality. Since ads need to change regularly, this can lead to an extremely expensive and inefficient marketing strategy. Your marketing dollars need to help you reach new prospects and reach them often, not feed the families of local video producers. This is one of the strongest cases for using radio. Radio is the only local media where the locally owned/operated entrepreneurial business can sound and leave an impression as strong as a leading national brand without investing in Madison Avenue level creative services.

Low-quality ad production can do more to **damage** your brand than a good message can do to promote it. Use a media where your ad can stand **proudly** (and affordably) alongside a top-quality national ad.