



Misplaced marketing

The real reason for the real bad advertising

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Abstract Focuses on “bad” advertising commercials and asserts that such advertising is not because of a lack of creativity, entertainment value or money for production. Bad advertising is often because advertising creators fail to focus on potential end customers, and what they need to see and hear.

Commercials people like, or good commercials?

Everyone knows commercials they like and dislike. Most people like the expensive productions that cost millions of dollars per minute in time purchases during a big sporting event and they hate the obnoxious, yelling presentations from the local discount retailer. But in terms of pragmatic business value, they do not necessarily like the good commercials.

The source of most bad advertising is not a lack of creativity, entertainment value or money for production. Just because a slickly produced commercial is part of an expensive campaign by a large firm does not mean that the campaign is based on a good marketing strategy, or, for that matter, that it had *any* strategy behind it. In reality, many companies employ advertising tactics without a strategy, or if a strategy exists at all, it is presented without reference to consumer views. Millions of dollars are often spent on commercials that never had the consumer in focus.

Entertainment value takes precedence

The business term for advertising writing contributes to many misdirected views of message quality. We call the people involved with message planning and writing “creatives”, they work in the “creative department”, and their job description involves “creative strategy and tactics”. With so much emphasis on this being a creative job, business assessments often allow entertainment interest, artistic value or simple originality to outweigh concerns for the advertising as a message that has a pragmatic job to inform or persuade a target audience.

To an extent, this is easy to explain because so little is known about how or why advertising works. Seeking some sort of closure, the people who write and produce those messages often seek structure from the praise of peers or awards.

Unfortunately, few awards make any reference to assessments of success in doing the marketing job and, of those that do, they might make that actual assessment to be only weakly related to any pragmatic accomplishments (Moriarty, 1996). In one direct comparison of this issue, a sample of viewers were found to respond positively to commercials if

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Need to stand out

the message touched on their personal concerns regardless of whether it was a past award winner while creative department employees responded best to commercials that won awards (Kover *et al.*, 1997). In other words, the advertising writers often write for each other instead of the target audience.

Marketing views also get misplaced by another pragmatic problem of the modern media environment. As commercial clutter increases, consumers seem to be more able to physically avoid advertising or mentally tune it out. Every advertiser has a pragmatic need to stand out. As they focus on developing messages that stand out, too many of them forget that their focus should be on the subject of the message, not the message itself.

Producing a “break out” advertisement or “attention getting” campaign does not do any good if they get attention of the wrong people for the wrong reason. Yet a lot of advertising seems to get attention but do little to sell a product. An instructor who has a loud case of gas in the front of the class will certainly get attention, but I doubt if the students would hear or recall anything said for the next 15 minutes. An attention getting device that is unrelated to the message will not attract readership or viewers interested in what the advertiser has to say. It is an old and reliable rule that is too often ignored (Ogilvy, 1963).

Similarly, in his advertising reviews for *Advertising Age*, Bob Garfield has repeatedly pointed out how “celebrities are seldom used in support of an advertising idea; they are used in place of an advertising idea” (Garfield, 1999). Time and again, advertising campaigns feature expensive celebrities with no connection to the product whatsoever.

This is not to say that celebrities should never be used in advertising. Many decades ago, television commercials and print advertisements for Mapo cereal had to fight the product’s image that people thought of it as something just for small children. Since people saw it as something children would “outgrow”, Mickey Mantle and other rugged sports heroes were shown crying “I want my Mapo”. A more contemporary good use of a celebrity is when Olympic winners are on the Wheaties box, because the cereal is “The breakfast of champions”.

Use of celebrity can be waste of money

Unfortunately, many celebrities are used in advertising in a way that can only be a waste of money. In addition to the costs for hiring a good actor to take a part, the star celebrity also costs a high-priced premium for his or her appearance. But if the image of that star does not fit with the advertising message, the audience will only recall the celebrity, not the product. Michael Jordan’s championship image is a good fit for selling Gatorade or Nike shoes, but it is questionable whether his personal charm enhanced the images of long-distance services or a chain of restaurants.

Similarly, advertising that makes direct comparisons with competing brands also need to take the consumers’ mindset into account. Just because the other brand is a better seller or more famous does not give a basis for making comparisons. A comparison advertisement is a good idea *only* if the compared brand is the target audience’s standard for a quality product *and* the advertising message would show a consumer-desired benefit for which your brand is better. Lots of comparison advertising forgets this, using the better selling brand for just the attention getting value, and having an audience that remembers only the competitor.

“Misplaced marketing” explains the real reason for the real bad advertising as the creators focus on what they want to say instead of what the audience needs to see or hear.

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