

A Quick Guide to Effective Advertising

By James Loftus

You want to sell your products, services, ideas. The question is how to do it as successfully as possible.

Whether you prepare your advertising yourself or have someone do it for you, you will be the initial inspiration for the concept presented, and the final check of the finished product. While there are many factors involved in the success of advertising, there are some simple basics that should never be ignored. Failure to do the basics is the main reason that ads fall short of expectations. Here are some tips and pointers to help you create more effective advertising.

Before you start to think about how your ad should look or what it should say, you need to determine what you are trying to accomplish by running the ad. You need to have an idea of what it is that you want out of the process, and what your customers want as a result of having what you are selling or proposing to them. These are the goals that determine the parameters of your advertising. When combined with your resources and the time frame available, they will help you decide what does and doesn't belong in your ad.

Your own goals are fairly easy to understand. They will range from mundane (making more money) to the altruistic (inspiring and helping more people) and in between. Write them all down, then rank them in order of importance. Consider which goals must be accomplished before others can happen. Focus on the first things that have to happen as your immediate goals for your advertising.

Then make a similar list from your customers' point of view. What do they want from involvement with your business? Here it is important to consider the more emotional aspects of your products and services that come into play; it is a fact that people do what they want, and later justify why that action was right or made sense. These personal aspects are all important to the customer in making a decision.

Now that you have an overview of what you want to accomplish, it is time to begin to create your ad. There are four basic parts to an ad, regardless of the specific details of your situation. This applies to full-color display ads, radio or television ads, and to simple classified listings. Even if your objective is to create awareness of your product, service, or idea, rather than to sell something, if the reader is unable to get your message then nothing will happen. The four parts can be remembered by thinking of the acronym AIDA.

The first thing an ad must do is be seen. You have to get the reader's **Attention**. This can be accomplished by any of several devices, some of which can also help to create an attitude about the rest of the ad's content. The three basic attention grabbing devices are the headline, the illustration, and the layout.

The headline is the simplest and cheapest way to catch the reader's eye. It is, unfortunately, not the easiest way. The headline must be short and engaging. Engaging means that it needs to make a provocative statement, or ask a provocative question. Some examples:

"Pets Never Die"

"Who is your Guardian Angel?"

"You Are Younger than You Think"

"Pain-Free in 30 Minutes"

Each of these headlines poses a situation that engages the targeted reader in an idea that is intriguing to him or her by implying more than they say. A flat statement is one that is easily dismissed, likewise a question with an obvious answer does not invite further exploration. Note that "short" is a

relative term in a headline. Consider that the easier a phrase is to absorb, the longer the headline can be, and too many unfamiliar words make for poorly grasped, easily ignored headlines.

An illustration or photo can often catch the eye more readily than a headline simply because it is perceived in a single glance, even if its content takes more time to absorb. A good advertising illustration needs to be interesting in its own right, because initially there is no textual content to amplify it. This doesn't mean that it cannot be simple line art, however. Even a single line, if suggestive of an image or symbol, can serve to stop the eye and begin the process of getting the reader into your ad.

Generally speaking, your logo or a picture of your product are not good illustrations, unless they are intrinsically interesting to the reader. By all means, use your logo for identification and a picture of your product for its informational value. If space does not permit an intriguing illustration, use a good headline rather than a boring graphic.

Layout that catches the eye is tricky, as are typefaces that are so bizarre that they are unreadable. If you or your artist can carry this off it can be a real bonus for getting attention, but there is a fine line between striking and overdone. Don't cross it unless you are sure you know what you are doing.

Second, your ad must spark the reader's **Interest**. Once you have stopped the reader, you have only a few moments to create an interest that will carry through the rest of your ad. The first line of copy has to build on the attention created by your headline and/or illustration, then the next few lines must take the reader to the payoff that has been promised.

Which, of all the points you listed as your customers' reasons to buy, are the two or three most emotionally compelling? How are they related to each other? Here you must be as objective as you can: the points you find most interesting may not be those that intrigue your prospective customer. The reader must become personally involved with your concept, must come "inside" the ad, and not be allowed to remain a dispassionate observer. In fact, if the reader is still uninvolved by the time he or she gets to the halfway mark, your ad will be skipped over or not remembered, if the reader does actually finish it.

What involves a reader once you have their momentary attention? Believable facts tied to emotionally charged adjectives and phrases. Consider the last political campaign. When candidate speeches and ads cited a fact you could believe (regardless of where you stood on a given question), and then made an emotionally charged characterization of that fact, you became involved. Negatively or positively, your interest was spiked and you were primed to act.

Using the customers' reasons to buy that you have identified, present them with your factual but emotional points. For example:

"Our cleansing diet quickly and safely lets your body shed five to ten years. The pollutants present in our air, water, and food are gently but thoroughly removed from your system, helping your body to restore the resilience of youth."

"Control your destiny, as others control theirs. Learn to apply the proven techniques that have made the difference for successful individuals for centuries."

"Personal peace is not an illusion. It can be yours when you understand who you are and why you are here. The answers are secrets only because so few seek them."

"Uncover the eight hidden assumptions that are holding you back, and preventing you from greater achievement."

Avoid overblown rhetoric and hyperbole; these create a negative impression, a feeling of trying too hard. Simple, direct language demonstrates a sense of confidence in one's position and the rightness of the proposition being presented. Just as with your headline, excessive use of arcane terminology will only confuse and drive away those unfamiliar with it, not fascinate them with the desire to learn more.

Also keep in mind that the more points you try to cover, the less effective each point, and therefore your ad, will be. An effective ad will actually have only one central focus, even if you discuss it from two or three perspectives. If your points are too diverse, they compete with each other, and end up pulling the reader's attention in separate directions.

If you must make several different points, consider running a series of separate ads, each of which presents one of your ideas, and lists a few bits of information you want to get out that are related to that ad's central theme. Another option is to run an ad that is large enough to accommodate presentation of a main idea and a list of possibly interesting items.

(There are, of course, circumstances where it is a functional to simply run a list of services or products in your ad, however this will not engage the reader in the way we have discussed. For this sort of ad, it may be helpful to make use of as much of what is suggested here as seems appropriate to your needs.)

The reader must now be brought to a **Decision**. He should be ready to have your conclusion made, based on the implied promise of the headline and the involving points made about it. Your points need to have drawn the reader along to a natural conclusion, one which you state for him, and with which he agrees without consideration or quibble.

This is done with a statement, not a question. A question stops the flow, and says that there ought to be more exposition, facts, and so forth. The statement summarizes and crystallizes the position you are promoting and an attitude about it. It provides the decision you desire from the reader. Here is where the analysis put into your advertising most comes into play. Some examples based on the ads suggested above could be:

“Your whole system can begin growing younger with your first visit.”

“This knowledge is yours for the asking today.”

“The first lesson will open new opportunities for you immediately.”

Although these examples emphasize a “now” theme, this is not required for effectiveness. What is required is that the statement create a tension in the reader that needs to be released through action. In some situations this tension must be built over time or through additional exposure to your message. Then the objective of the ad is to continue the process. Regardless, the same basics are again employed.

The fourth step requires that the reader be prompted to **Action**. This is actually the easiest part of the ad to construct, if the other components have properly prepared the reader. He will want to act, be primed to act, and ideally have a need to respond to the ideas presented. If he has read through your ad to this point, all that is necessary is to ask for action. “Call to schedule an appointment,” “Visit our website to find out more,” or “Meet and talk with John Meyer at our store every Saturday from 12:00–4:00,” and similar variations are all valid, depending on your situation.

It may seem obvious, but double check to make sure your ad includes the basics: Your name, address, phone, fax or website address, hours you are open, and directions or a landmark if helpful to allow the reader to respond. Also, it is always necessary to proofread your ad yourself, then have it proofread by someone who is unfamiliar with it. Since you know what the ad is supposed to say, it is easy to see what should be there instead of what is actually on the proof. The reader can't call if your phone number is wrong.

Some other considerations ...

I would truly be remiss if I did not include some points to consider on budgeting your advertising dollars. From a practical standpoint you must consider that to accomplish a given result requires a given amount of investment, and the critical factor here is time. Just like any other financial investment, the longer you can wait for it to mature, the smaller your initial investment can be and still produce the desired result. In advertising this means that a small black and white ad can generate as many customers as a full-page color ad, it will just take longer to do it. If you have an event coming up in a couple of months, you will probably get a better response with larger color ads, whereas if you are seeking to maintain a steady flow of customers to an existing business, regular appropriately sized black and white ads over time will

probably do what you need. If you are building a practice you will need a combination of the two: a larger response to get started plus consistent traffic later, generated by larger ads initially and smaller, regular ads to follow up.

An ad can have many reasons for being. Some valid reasons for creating and running an advertisement (regardless of the medium employed) could be any of the following.

- Establish positive expectations in the mind of the customer.
- Create awareness of the offering in your ad, that is, your product, service, or organization.
- Establish credibility, through the content of the ad or by association with the publication in which it appears and with the other advertisers in the publication.
- Make distinctions between your offering and that of others that may appear to be similar.
- Give readers information about your ad offering, or gather information about the people who are interested in it.
- Set up an introduction to your offering, a way for the reader to get more information, begin a process.
- Make a direct sale from the ad.
- Reinforce other promotional efforts made through other avenues.
- Announce an event, such as an opening, sale, appearance or similar.
- Make an offer to prospective customers, clients, or members, usually of some discount, free thing, or opportunity.
- Educate the reader to facts or circumstances relevant to the offering.
- Create value in the offering that might not otherwise be readily apparent.
- Solicit input from readers, users, participants.
- Qualify potential respondents to your offering.
- Support another organization or cause through your advertising; associate yourself with an operation outside your own.
- Support the community with which you are associated by providing information otherwise unavailable for some reason.
- Support the advertising medium itself, usually because of other aspects or services it provides besides presentation of ads.
- Enhance your personnel's image of their organization, by demonstrating to those directly and indirectly involved a tangible commitment to realization of the organization's objectives and principles.

Many of these considerations (and more) are often part of the environment of an advertisement. This is not to say that every time your name appears in print you need to go through deep contemplation of all of these points. But an occasional review of the above can suggest opportunities to maximize the effectiveness of your exposure, and so maximize your advertising budget.

Do consider, though, that your ad does not exist in a vacuum. Coordinate it with your other promotional efforts, including not only current ads in other media, but also with previous and future efforts. At least a basic understanding of human perceptual habits is necessary to do this.

Although there are many other factors involved, in very simple terms, we pursue that which fills a need, once that need is perceived. The need may be one we discover on our own, or one of which we are made aware. Once the need is perceived, we seek to fill it in the most acceptable way available. Here acceptable is the same as comfortable, or in other words, that which promises the desired result with the least threat or risk. Often the chosen solution to a need is whatever is most familiar. In other contexts, this is the root of many problems, of course, but this fact just serves to prove the point that what is familiar is the default option. But in an advertising context, you want your option to be the familiar one when the time is right for the prospective customer to make a decision to act.

Your product, service, or organization needs to be one the reader has already seen, so that subconsciously it is a viable option when the need arises. This sort of perception is accomplished by use of the principles described above, with special attention to maintaining a consistency of image (logo, overall ad appearance), and a coherent and consistent underlying theme that communicates who you are and what you offer. In this regard, be aware that readers will also see your ads individually, rather than as a series. Avoid the temptation to tell a story with your ads that requires the reader to see them

sequentially, or that assumes the reader knows what you know. It is fine to focus on individual aspects, but make each ad consistent with the others (and your other promotions), and make it complete in itself.

As you can see, tracking ad response can be an illusory concept, especially when you consider all the functions your advertising can perform, and that the effect of advertising is usually cumulative, not instantaneous. Add to this the fact that customers don't always accurately remember their thought processes when they are focused on filling a need, and can often give unintentionally misleading answers. They may have called because they were ready to act when they heard your radio spot, but were primed to act by exposure to your print ads and the comment of a friend. Trying to specifically pin down where they heard of you automatically excludes getting a complete answer, and suggesting a possible answer to the question is even worse.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to get some idea of what is working and what is not, so do encourage customers to volunteer the information you need. Just remember to give proper weight to the answers you get verbally, along with tracking phone, mail, and fax responses.

It is, of course, not possible to condense years of advertising, design, copywriting and sales experience into a few pages. There are many other aspects to the creation of a successful advertising campaign, and even a single ad will benefit if it is looked upon as a campaign, albeit a small one. Although the principles given here also apply on a much larger scale, we have focused on giving a basic understanding of one aspect of advertising, the display ad as used in a periodical. Hopefully you will have found this information useful.

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