

Investing in Creativity: Does it Pay?

So there you are. You've invested a lot of money in a new advertising campaign and are running it in all the right places. You're anticipating hundreds of inquiries, a 10 percent incremental increase in sales, or five additional points of market share.



And nothing happens.

It's unfortunate, but unfortunately not uncommon. Because today, more than ever, advertising has to be inventive, original, even daring, to get noticed.

People buy publications to read the articles, not to look at the ads. So the job of advertising professionals is to reach out and make a connection, so the readers stop to take a look at you – your company, your product, your service. This is what we call “breakthrough advertising” – advertising that breaks through the clutter and catches the reader's attention. And it's in especially short supply in business-to-business advertising.

Close your eyes for a moment. Try to think of images you see frequently in business ads. You'll probably come up with a list like this: globes, chessboards, mazes, people shaking hands. One particular globe – a NASA photo of the Earth shot from space – comes to mind; companies have used it to sell everything from computers to financial services to sanding equipment (e.g., “Welcome to the World of Sanding.”).

The problem? These images are so overused, they've lost their power. They communicate nothing original or meaningful to the audience. And if you fail to intrigue your reader, if your page is too easy to turn, you've wasted your money.

Entrepreneur columnist Jerry Fisher advises: “Create the unexpected even if it makes you a little nervous.”

And advertising guru Jay Chiat is known for this classic line: “If your palms don't sweat a little, you haven't produced breakthrough advertising.”

Advertising for serious audiences

Does this advice hold true even with advertising for serious audiences? The *Wall Street Journal*, most would agree, is a conservative publication read by sophisticated, astute executives. CEOs, CFOs, CTOs and others rely on the *Journal* for information to help them make bottom line decisions.

So you'd assume that smart advertisers in the *Journal* would provide their prospective customers with the key facts and figures they need to conduct business profitably.

Consider these three ads from recent issues of the *Journal*.

The Ernst & Young ad uses no images, just type. And not much of that. Imagine this headline in bold type: "1, 2, 3." Then the first copy line reads: "Because we came from numbers, we tend to have a preference for tangible results." In this ad, readers learn that, like themselves, the people at Ernst & Young have a financial, numbers-oriented background. So they share a similar mindset, perhaps a similar set of expectations about tangible results.

Nortel Networks' ad features this headline: "Come together. Right now. Over me." This ad works in a different way, making you hum, think about the Beatles, remember your past.

Apple's headline says: "14.1-inch screen. DVD drive. And a battery that will let you watch all of Austin Powers. Twice." The Apple ad acknowledges that you're a business person, but recognizes that you like to relax, too.

What do all three ads share? They work by creating a personal connection as the gateway, or stepping stone, to making a business connection.

So the real challenge is to connect with your readers. Because if you fail to make this connection, your paragraphs of critical facts and figures will go unread.

How to create the unexpected

So what does make advertising work? And what role does creativity play in this process? Advertising that sells starts with smart thinking and ends with creating the unexpected. The thinking part ensures that you're saying the right thing to the right audience. The creative part ensures that you're saying it the right way. Two campaigns illustrate this process. Both were idea-driven; both achieved their business goals.

Case Study #1: Product launch

Challenge

DuPont asked our agency to help launch a new, experimental product targeted to makers of trophies. Huge company, small budget. Why such a small budget? Before making a bigger investment, the company directive was to find out if they had a winner on their hands.

Solution

We knew the product would be making its first appearance at a trade show. So our role was to let the attendees know the benefits of the product, where it would be exhibited, and how they could “test drive” it at the show.

The challenge: how to stretch the budget to create an adequate impact. The decision? A two-part campaign:

- Create a direct mail piece to send to attendees before the show.
- Develop an innovative ad we knew attendees would read.

To motivate people to visit the booth, we identified the single, most compelling nugget of truth from the prospective user's point of view, then created a direct mail piece on it.

The ad media budget was tight: it would buy one full-page black-and-white insertion in the convention issue. Instead, and for the same budget, we combined the unexpected (in this case humor) with an innovative format. Our creative team developed four quarter-page ads placed on succeeding pages in the publication focused squarely on the key product benefit.

Results: After the show, the client called to tease us, saying there was one big problem: “We couldn't fill orders fast enough. We were signing people up until they turned the lights off at the show.” Show attendees, he told us, remembered the direct mail they'd received, linked that in their minds to the ad, and on entering the exhibit floor noticed the trade show banner, leading directly to sales.

Bottom line: Strong impact, small investment. And the client was armed with tangible evidence that the product was of great interest to his audience thanks to his trust in a powerful, unconventional idea.

Case study #2: Company launch

Challenge

We were selected, after a national search, to handle the advertising and marketing to launch Serquest, a preclinical drug development company headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama. The client noted that he chose us because he needed “creative flair.” He wanted to be sure that Serquest, a new subsidiary of a larger and well-established research institute, was seen as a fresh, original, even somewhat daring organization.

As in many industries, the trade literature in this category is quite dull. So it was clear there was an excellent opportunity to stand out from the crowd. As marketing columnist Al Nucifora proclaims, “The average is the norm and mediocrity is in vast supply.”

Solution

Because this was a brand new company, we started with a clean slate. No preconceived notions. No restrictions.

As with any campaign, we worked through the strategic process until all the components and messages formed a cohesive, integrated whole. First, we defined the company's positioning and persona. Second, we confirmed that our strategy would work with different media: advertising, direct marketing, public relations, trade shows, giveaways, and websites.

So what is the nugget of truth that differentiates Serquest from its competitors? What could Serquest say that its competitors could not? Only Serquest is a brand new company with a 58-year history.

This discovery gave birth to the tagline: "A miracle of modern science." Serquest is a miracle, because it is both brand-new and 58 years old at the same time. Furthermore, the extraordinary depth of experience of the Serquest scientists has led to important discoveries.

It's a natural, then, that our positioning and tagline led us to this headline: "Introducing a miracle of modern science. A brand new company with a 58-year head start." And how did we represent this? With the unique image of a man's head on a baby's body. No globe will ever get as much attention as our man-baby.

We carried this approach to the launch direct mail, pre-show direct mail, advertising, and trade show graphics.

Bottom line: Did this unexpected, powerful idea work for the client? Absolutely. At the kick-off trade show, the booth was among the busiest. Clients and prospective clients are calling our collateral the best in the industry. The coordinating giveaways turned out to be hits at the two shows the client has attended so far. And nearly twice as many people as projected attended the launch party in response to our bold invitations. Last, but not least, calls are already coming in from the ad.

The idea's the thing

In both case studies, as well as in the *Wall Street Journal* ads, the one commonality is that powerful ideas drive the campaigns. Some are type-only ads; some feature intriguing photography. But all are the result of strategic thinking and creative application.

Creating successful advertising is hard work. In fact, the irony of great advertising is that, when it's done right, it looks simple. "Just do it." What could be simpler?

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