

Sense and Nonsense in Business-to-Business Advertising

Just The Facts, Ma'am

By Perry Marshall

Anybody who's had anything to do with magazines lately knows that the last couple of years have been awful. Publications have gotten skinnier and skinnier as advertising revenue has dropped off. One editor told me, "As soon as a book gets small enough to fold up and stick in your shirt pocket, you can kiss it goodbye."

And indeed, as the economy has wobbled during 2001 and 2002, quite a few magazines have folded or consolidated. This is due to the facts that vendors have slashed their ad budgets, and revenue for the publications has plummeted.

When the economy is going backwards, there's a vicious cycle that everyone feels helpless to fix: Customers buy less, so there's less money for marketing, which means there's less money to persuade customers to buy in the first place, and eventually the whole industry is gasping for breath. It's just bad for everybody.

But wait a minute – if advertising is often the first point of contact for new business, why would you cut back on it during a recession? Wouldn't you do more?

Sure you would, but only if you were certain it worked.

The reasons people don't buy *more* advertising in a recession is because they're not even sure it works in the first place.

So I have a solution for this problem:

Fix the bad advertising and the problem will go away.

Before you write me off as an arrogant blowhard, let me pass this along from the late David Ogilvy, one of the great advertising geniuses of the 20th century. This is a story from his book *Ogilvy on Advertising*:

Do you think advertising gives you enough information about products?
I don't.

Recently, I smashed my car beyond repair and had to buy a new one. For six months I read all the car ads in search of *information*. All I found was fatuous slogans and flatulent generalities. Car manufacturers assume that you are not interested in facts. Indeed, their advertising is not aimed at consumers. Its purpose is to win an ovation when it is projected on the screen at hoopla conventions of dealers. Show-biz commercials have that effect. Sober, factual advertising does not. If their engineering was as incompetent as their advertising, their cars would not run ten miles without a breakdown.

When I advertised Rolls-Royce, I gave the *facts* – no hot air, no adjectives. Later, my partner Hank Bernhard used equally factual advertising for Mercedes. In every case sales went up dramatically – on peppercorn budgets.

I have written factual advertising for a bank, for gasoline, for a stockbroker, margarine, foreign travel and many other products. It *always* sells better than empty advertising.

Before I started writing advertisements, I spent three years selling Aga cooking stoves to Scottish housewives, door to door. All I did was give my customers the facts. It took me 40 minutes to make a sale; about 3,000 words. If the people who write Detroit advertising had started *their* careers as door-to-

door salesmen, you and I would be able to find the facts we need in their advertisements.

Remember, Ogilvy is talking about *cars*. We all know people often buy cars for very vain reasons, but the fact remains that a lot of solid information has to fall in place before most of us will part with twenty or thirty grand for a new automobile.

How much more true, then, when the audience is engineers who are selecting controllers, drives, networks, I/O, sensors, data acquisition systems, software, motors and displays?

Right now I'm flipping through an industrial product rag from the U.S. An advertiser paid handsomely to be on the front cover. 40% of his expensive placement is devoted to a big smiley face.

Gee, isn't that smart. Engineers always buy stuff when it has smiley faces.

On the back page (very typical, as you all know): A full page ad with an out-of-focus picture and about sixty tiny words of vague puffery at the bottom. Boasting and bragging, but no specific information or story.

Admittedly most ads do try to squeeze in some important information, but most of the time the real story is still buried in the middle somewhere – or not told at all. You have to read it very carefully to discern what's really unique about the product.

Ads like that don't produce nearly as many inquiries as they could, because nobody's going to scour an ad just in case it might contain some kind of important message.

But let me tell you a secret: If you tell the real story, in an interesting, relevant way, people will read all of it. Sometimes they'll read it over and over again.

Back when I was a teenager drooling over stereo equipment, each month I'd get my copy of *Audio* or *Stereo Review* and devour it. At the time, Carver had a product called the "Magnetic Field Power Amplifier" that they advertised with full page ads, full of text from top to bottom. These ads told the whole story behind their amps. They used very simple illustrations to show how the power supply in a traditional amp is like a bathtub full of water – a reservoir that must be filled before it can be emptied, and with finite capacity. The ad explained how their Magnetic Field amplifier, by contrast, was like a faucet bolted onto a water main – all the power you need, available instantly. The ad went on to describe how this results in less heat, fewer failures, less weight, smaller packaging, and... well, awesome sounding bass and hi-fi nirvana.

Some might say "nobody's going to read an ad that's 1000 words long."

But I probably read that entire ad every time I saw it. I wanted one of those amps.

The people who aren't interested in buying your product won't read your ad no matter how long or short it is. But I can promise you, anybody who's worth one hour of your sales person's time *will* read the ad, because he's looking for facts. And every fact you give them that a competitor leaves out is a vote in your favor.

If it costs you several hundred dollars to send a sales person on a sales call (it does) then wouldn't you want him or her to only see people who are looking for the facts?

If slogans and vague generalities are lost on Joe Average, you can bet that the engineer tunes 'em out in a nanosecond. Engineers are a literate bunch, probably in the top 5 to 10% of the population in that regard. And engineers have insatiable curiosity. Pique that curiosity with some attention-getting facts and we're all ears.

Mr. Advertiser, I want to know the facts. I want to know why your product – the one that you spend forty or fifty hours a week selling, the one that you spent millions of dollars developing – I want to know what it will do for me. I want specifics. Does it save me money? How much? Is there a decision making process? What is it? Was there an interesting discovery that made this product possible? Tell me the story behind the story. And just the facts, ma'am.

*Perry S. Marshall is an author, speaker and consultant in Chicago. You can get a copy of his *Industrial Sales & Advertising Tactics* white paper by sending your street address to ma@perrymarshall.com.*

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