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Ad Design: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly



By Duane Carey

How do you make a good print ad?

Use a Thought-Provoking Headline. Everyone knows that “free” and “sex” are two of the most compelling

words in advertising. My advice: combine them and include “free sex” in every headline you write. It’s bound to work. If you won’t go that far, at least be sure to include those terms that are most compelling in your industry.

Marketing geeks will tell you that the five important elements to any good ad are, in order: Visual, Caption, Headline, Copy, and Signature. This is the formula that David Ogilvy, founder of famed ad agency Ogilvy & Mather, used to make millions for himself and his clients. For many small businesses that can’t afford professional photography, however, the visual and caption are sometimes cost-prohibitive, so the headline becomes the key. It’s true that there are excellent stock photos available on the web, but the most compelling visuals that Ogilvy used were images that truly spoke a thousand words, because they were shot specifically for the ad. The challenge for the advertiser is using the fewest words possible to speak those thousand words.

Copy is perhaps the most important component of the ad; typically, the shorter the better. In some ways, when it’s done well, a good headline might be all you need. No photo or other imagery. No long list of bullets. No seemingly endless paragraphs. The ubiquitous “Got Milk?” ads are great examples of this concept, which is why that headline has been ripped off repeatedly in hundreds of different industries. Got originality? It’s okay if you don’t. Just follow the formula

laid out by the Madison Avenue big shots and you’ll be well on your way.

Don’t Speak A Foreign Language. Although it’s hard to avoid when you’re so close to your subject matter, do your best to avoid industry jargon. Regular people (i.e., prospects and customers) just don’t think that way. If they see such language in your ad, their eyes will just gloss over and skip it. Always have a layperson review the copy to make sure they “get it”.

Use Lots of White Space. Publishers have to get the most out of every square inch of space, but advertisers don’t. In many cases, the effectiveness of an ad is inversely proportional to the number of words. Maybe it’s because we’re lazy, or maybe it’s a matter of overstimulation, but we just can’t deal with too much stuff crammed into a small ad. Remember: unlike editorial copy in a newspaper or magazine, which is something the reader chooses to read, display ads are inherently intrusive – they’re trying to avert your attention for a few moments before you move to the next article. Don’t make the reader work too hard, and you’ll get much more attention. Don’t be afraid to “float” the ad. If the ad space is a rectangular 5” by 4” space, don’t be afraid to make a curvilinear ad, or one with no borders at all, that fits well within that available space, maybe roughly 3” by 2.” A local electrician does this well with an ad that fits within the outline of a light bulb and leaves white space on all sides – I bet you can picture it, particularly if you live in one of the Columbia Village Centers where he advertises in the village newsletters.

In some cases, completely violating this white space convention is advantageous. A trend among chiropractors, which is reportedly very successful, is to write very prose-heavy ad copy with small font, literally cramming a lot of text into a small space. The visual effect is compelling,

because it stands out from its surroundings. The text then goes on to describe either his own personal story of pain and injury that led him to chiropractic medicine, or the case study of a patient who found great relief. Take home message: at either extreme you will get attention; in the middle, you’ll be lost.

Use Pain or Pleasure. Every buying decision is based on pain or pleasure, loss or gain. If you don’t show your prospects what they will gain by doing business with you, you must show them what they will lose if they don’t. For most people, the fear of loss is stronger than the perception of gain. This is why insurance ads typically use heart-wrenching examples of loss to sell policies; the idea of a 7-page, double-sided policy that you stick in the filing cabinet for a year is not perceived as a “gain” or in any way “pleasurable” by most people. But a restaurant ad will almost always be pleasure-based (with lots of imagery) so you can practically taste that first bite of juicy steak. Pick the most appropriate choice for your industry and craft your ad around the pleasure or pain that will be most compelling to your prospects.

Use a Coupon (or a reasonable facsimile thereof). We’ve been conditioned to know that the dashed line forming the rectangular box indicates we will save some money by reading that ad. If you can give some kind of a loss-leader discount, do it. Your ad will have a greater response rate as a result. If you operate a professional-services business, do not hesitate to offer a complimentary initial consultation. Even if everyone in your industry gives a free consultation, it will still have value if you call attention to it.

Prove It. Finally, remember that you have to illustrate a benefit, and compel the reader to take action to enjoy that benefit. Do this, and you will be well ahead of your competitors.