

Why Your Advertising Isn't Working

Before You Can Push the Right Buttons, You Have to Know What They Are

By CHRISTINE L. PILCH

Benjamin Franklin was first to say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

So why do you keep running the same advertising and hoping that the phone will ring more, foot traffic will increase, and your Web site will become more popular? Even a strong and succinct marketing message can grow stale over time. Consumers and customers evolve as their life experiences teach them to desensitize and ignore most messages. In today's highly competitive market the only way your message will get through is if you speak directly to your customers about something that they care about, want, or need.

Does your advertising do this? Most does not.

How many times do you turn on your TV and see local vendors asking you to stop in and see them? Without any conscious thought you dismiss these invitations because the vendors have not given you a good enough reason to stop by. Why should you go buy that gadget from them? A nice smile is not an incentive to do business with them. They simply do not understand consumer psyche. You would pay attention if those vendors were speaking to you about a need or want you had at that particular time, and also included a compelling reason to buy now, from only them. If they had a resolution or relief to your problem or concern, you would likely act on the information. But they did not share the right information to incite you to act on the offer. Not only did they not push the right buttons, but they do not even know what those buttons are.

Marketing is entirely about

understanding and pushing the right buttons. Advertising that mirrors your competition is as effective as jumping up and down hollering, "Me too, me too!" Open your newspaper or yellow pages and look at the ads in your business category. Is there a unique idea or do they all look essentially the same? Unfortunately, without a unique message, your ad and all the similar ones cancel each other out. So you just wasted however much money you spent.

Most companies miss the advertising boat because they do not understand the basic premise that marketing is about perception – the customer's, not your own. You have an idea in your head about what your business is and what you have to offer, but unless you convey that idea, you will stagnate. Consider the Ford F150 pickup. Immediately you think 'tough and dependable.' The ideas aren't your own. They result from a carefully crafted message that the Ford Company has been ingraining for years, although they have repackaged it many times. They have said it for so long, that you come to associate their product that way.

Sadly, some people make the same marketing mistakes over and over. Have you ever said one of these things?

• **'But we've always done it that way.'** The same advertising methods, the same placement of ads, and the same message over and over would probably be fine in a static world. But as technology evolves and people communicate differently, you must also develop new tactics. If your advertising is not working now, it has no current value. The public has grown tired of it or outgrown it, so you must change or become as extinct

as your message.

• **'But everybody else does it.'** Your mother's old warning, 'if Jimmy was jumping off a bridge, would you too?' holds true here. Just because all of your competitors place ads in the newspaper every week, does not mean that it works for all of them. It is likely that they are caught in the same rut as you and are also afraid to stop spinning their wheels in case they can pick up some momentum again. Their advertising is

People care about themselves and what you can do to make their lives better or solve a problem that they have. Egocentric advertising serves only one purpose.

probably as ineffective as yours. Imagine the scandal if you stopped that unproductive 'me too' advertising and committed your money to something that worked.

In addition, you need to establish something unique about your product or service. Identify one factor that you can call your own and run it up the flagpole with a definitive claim on it. First is always the best place to be with marketing. Imitators rarely get the market share of an idea originator, so find your unique selling point and build a campaign around it. Stake it out, but know that others will scramble to copy it, so be sure that you have the follow-up in place. That way, by the time they catch up, you will have already evolved the idea into something bigger and better.

This should be cyclical; always have your next component wait-

ing in the wings when you release the current one, that way you will never be forced to react to your competition. By developing a campaign around your unique selling point you will be the established and undisputed leader.

Think of your marketing campaign as your strategy. Liken it to a sports team's season in which the best strategic coach wins. The games' tactics change, but the successful coach never takes his focus off the championship. His motivation is the overall season, of which the individual games are all pieces of the puzzle that come together at the end. Your campaign should be similar to the coach's strategy. You should have all the ads and their timing of release carefully mapped out before you introduce the campaign to the public.

• **'They have lots of clients so they must be doing something right.'** Unfortunately, this is a bad reason for countless companies to choose an advisor. This is especially relevant to industry-specific marketing firms. Many of them are cheap because they utilize an in-house library of ads and clip-art, which are recycled from client to client. Usually these ads are stand-alone, and there is no capacity to build a campaign with any kind of coherence or potential to make an impact upon a customer over time, thus creating a brand.

These kinds of firms, as well as some media sales reps, are simply order-takers. Their primary question is, "What's your budget?" Then they develop a plan to spend every last dime of your money regardless of whether their particular media is best for you. These commission-based order-takers are not advisors. They do not consider the big picture, your cam-

paign. They do not research your market, specifically determine who your customers are, consider all advertising options and then develop a plan to most effectively reach out to those people. Their primary objective is getting their hands on the biggest possible share of your budget, regardless of whether their media best suits you. Their eye is on the short-term, while yours has to be on the long road ahead. They supply a generic solution because that is all they are capable of before they move on to the next client.

Most companies are fine with generic materials because they do not know any better. You need to understand that a good ad can work for a while before growing stale, but a strong campaign will take you forward for years to come.

- **'We can't afford that.'** You can't afford to keep doing what you're doing. Yes, you have to spend money to make money, and marketing is an essential element in any successful operation. The best marketing first considers your company's situation and goals, then moves forward with a plan that is tailored to your needs and aimed at the right demographic. Most companies forget the first, most essential step. They don't do the work to specifically identify who they are speaking to, so their messages are fragmented, unappealing, and confusing.

The right message aimed at 100 of your ideal customers, with the highest potential of wanting or needing your product or service is better than a weak message in front of 1,000 people, which

holds no appeal to anyone. The expensive option is not necessarily the best one, so you probably can afford the right kind of advertising.

- **'I' or 'We'.** If your ads contain the words 'I' or 'we,' you are probably not conveying a message that your customer cares to hear. People do not care about you. They care about *themselves* and what you can do to make their lives better or solve a problem that they have. Egocentric advertising serves only one purpose. It does not make customers walk through the door, make the phone ring, or increase traffic to your Web site. In most cases, it is a waste of money.

Consumers are so much savvier now than ever before. Most have been burned too many times

to fall prey to 'too good to be true' messages, and most advertising is simply so boring and meaningless, that they tune it out. Standing out in a highly competitive and crowded marketplace is difficult, but not impossible.

You need to be smart about the things you do. Identify your target demographic and speak specifically to those folks in an appealing fashion about something that they care about, want, or need. Then show why you are the only one to provide it to them. Tap into that marketing fundamental and they will hear you, and they will respond. ❖

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