

# Principles of Effective Print Advertising

By **Steve Blom**

Steve Blom is Director of Sales & Marketing at Readex, a mail survey research company outside St. Paul, Minnesota. Blom has been calling on magazine publishers, sales managers, and research managers to help them improve profitability since 1990.

## 1. Establishing an Objective

### Introduction

Time is a scarce and precious resource.

Marketers need to keep that fundamental premise in mind when creating a print ad. Readers will decide in a second or two – or perhaps even a split second – whether or not an ad is worth their time. After all, there are 100 more pages to go through in the publication, two more magazines in the stack waiting to be read, followed by budgets to review, customers to call and employees to evaluate.

As a marketer you face keen competition for the eyes and minds of your target audience. As much as you are convinced that your product is the most important thing in the world, remember that readers likely feel otherwise.

That's your challenge, and it's by no means a small one! Here are some tips that will increase your likelihood of succeeding.

Most of these tips are common sense practices for experienced marketers. But, sometimes common sense gets lost during the creative process and people get bored with the tried and true — “it's time to break the mold” becomes the motto. More times than not, that's not the case.

First, a quick disclaimer.

I claim no particular expertise in designing ads – no advanced degrees, no substantive design experience, and no discussions with higher powers telling me the meaning of life ... and how to market.

Instead, the points that I make are based on data that my employer, Readex, has collected via thousands of print advertising studies. These are studies in which readers have looked at numerous ads in a publication and indicated, in a variety of ways, which worked for them: which they remembered seeing, which got their attention, which they took the time to read.

This is about the ads that work, not the ads that win creative awards.

### Establish the Objective

In a college class I was involved in a group project in which, according to the professor, the goal was “to win.” After a quick discussion, our group realized that the way to score the most points included a strategy in which we deceived and lied to the other groups.

After several rounds my group was well ahead and we finished with the most points. Imagine how

surprised we were when we were told that we hadn't won at all. We actually finished on the bottom.

The goal wasn't to get the most points, but to maintain and strengthen relations with the other groups – we simply inferred something else.

In advertising, the same thing is true. You need to understand what your objective is before putting words and images on a page.

- Are you trying to sell the total company image or to sell a specific product or service?
- Is this a new product that you are rolling out and introducing, or an established one that's known to most of your audience?
- Is it an impulse item or a capital purchase?
- Are you trying to get the reader to take a specific action ("call within the next 30 minutes and you'll get a steak knife set too!")
- Or simply to reinforce your brand or image in the mind of the reader ("Just do it.")?

Unless you have a specific objective based on your particular situation, you will end up with a hodge-podge. Your objective will serve as your focal point – something that you can reference at all stages of creative development.

## **Present One Central Proposition**

Once you've established the objective, stick to it and resist the temptation to introduce other points and concepts.

Avoid cluttering up your message (or the page) with additional information that isn't germane to the objective. Your reader is continuously being bombarded with advertising messages; by diluting yours, your ad runs a bigger risk of being one of the forgotten.

Consider the lost opportunity created when your headline does its job of getting a reader's attention, but the text is only casually devoted to the topic called out in the headline.

The reader that you had pulled in with your headline has now been hit with a bunch of unrelated messages -- a history of the company, a picture of the manufacturing plant, a discussion of other products in the line -- a print ad version of bait and switch.

The reader feels shortchanged, and turns the page.

## **Support the Basic Proposition with All Elements of the Ad**

Since the ad must support a central proposition, then all elements within the ad must support that proposition.

For example, how many times have you come across ads where the goal of the ad is to help introduce a new widget, but the illustration is of a kid playing baseball, a puppy, or a woman on the beach — visuals which have absolutely nothing to do with the new widget.

While the illustration might have been a means of getting the attention of the reader – an obviously necessary function – this particular approach usually is viewed as nothing more than a cheap gimmick.

Reader comments for this type of ad usually revolve around the theme of “what does a kid with a baseball bat have to do with your new widget?” Readers aren’t dumb, and they don’t like to be tricked into reading something. They end up confused and in some cases, even resentful because their time has been wasted.

Go back to the premise that you only have a couple of seconds to reel in your reader. You’ll be more successful if all of the images and words you present are consistently touting and presenting the same basic idea.

## 2. Sell to the Objective

### **Sell the Merits of the Product or Service.**

- Why on earth should I waste my time reading your ad?
- What’s in it for me?
- What will this product do for me and/or how will it improve my life?

These are the questions that readers are subconsciously asking themselves as they see your ad. So, let’s say that you’ve put out a compelling headline (“Cut Your Production Time by 20%”) and have a visual that supports the headline (a new piece of machinery, for example).

Now you need to answer the reader's questions. Support the headline and visuals with text that reinforce the message — figures, statistics, and comparisons.

Again, don’t forget that readers aren’t dumb. Avoid outlandish claims or statements that can’t be substantiated (are you really the best?). Document your claims where possible to build credibility with your readers, and speak in terms that readers will understand.

### **Emphasize Benefits, not Facts**

In most cases, facts are of little interest to readers – moreover, they are of less use to them. Statements such as “Family owned,” and “Serving customers for 50 years,” are simply facts that are focused more on the seller than the buyer. The statements are often self-serving and a turn-off to potential customers. After all, how often does a customer benefit because your company is “family owned”?

At best, ads with “We” statements focus on what the product is, and what the product does, in a cold, mechanical sense. These ads fail to solve a problem or offer helpful ideas, and instead often serve only to boost the egos of those who are trying to do the selling. A classic example of this is the

marketer who insists on using a picture of the manufacturing plant — or its owner — in its ad. What good does that do the reader?

Instead of simply offering facts, use your ad to offer a dynamic explanation of what your product can do for the reader.

Consider these two approaches to selling widgets:

**Facts:** “ABC Widgets has been manufacturing quality products since 1960. We are family owned, and our products are made in the US. We are staffed by over 100 industry professionals!”

What do any of these facts do to support the purchase of ABC widgets? Would these facts help a purchasing manager justify a decision to go with ABC Widgets?

**Benefits:** “XYZ widgets are 15% stronger than our competitors, and cost 10% less. Your order is shipped out via next day service, so you’ll never be out of stock.”

While it is certainly up to the reader to determine whether or not the claims are believable, the statements attempt to differentiate the product from its competitor and do a much better job of offering readers a compelling reason to consider XYZ widgets.

### 3. Designing the Ad

#### Design the Overall Ad for Easy Reading

Be sure to use simple and specific language.

Try to solve your reader’s problem or offer helpful ideas. Call your readers to action – and give them the essential information needed to act. By aligning your call to action with the ad’s objective (Call now to discuss your application/ Check-out our Web site for a free trial), you can help facilitate your ad’s success.

There are at least a couple of factors that often contribute to “unreadable” ads.

The first is the desire to get the most for your money. This results in a creative that, visually speaking, looks more like an article than a well-crafted ad. The phrase “less is more” should usually be heeded.

Another culprit is the fact that a desktop design capability is so readily available. Now that everyone with a computer has access to all sorts of ways to design a page the tendency is to think that the old tried and true look (headline, illustration, text) is much too mundane; “What’s the point of having access to 70 different fonts if I’m only going to use two of them?” Fonts and graphic tricks are like atomic weapons: just because we have them doesn’t mean we should use them.

By choosing typefaces based on size and on the basis of readability, you’ll be improving your ad’s chances for success. Whether your copy is long or short, it must be well organized and well laid out, or

else you'll lose the readers' interest mid-stream.

Being aware of these readership detractors is only half the battle. It's tempting to violate them with various excuses. Only give "artistic license" to those designs that ensure ease of reading. Although it's hard to admit, an aesthetically unattractive ad is not necessarily bad if it contributes to readership.

There are numerous techniques that may "look" great, but which typically detract from a readers' ability to read and understand the intended message. For example, dark backgrounds, small headlines, difficult-to-read fonts, numerous unrelated photos/images, and atypical layouts (vertical headlines, imbedded headlines, etc.) make the reader wonder, "Where do I start?"

For example, a frequently used attention-getting technique is the use of reverse type. If used properly, the technique can lead to a visually stunning ad. However, our research has shown that less than half as many readers found an ad using reverse type to be "of interest" than the identical ad which did not use the technique.

## **Illustrate Your Product in Use**

Help your potential customers relate to the product. By showing the product in action, your ad can create a visualization of your central sales point: what the product will do for the reader.

Readers are only giving you a split second of their time. The easiest way to capture their attention – and bring them further into the sales points you make in the copy – is via a compelling visual that demonstrates how the product works and what its advantages are.

Try to avoid static graphics that portray product categories, assortments, or lines. Although, sometimes easier to obtain, these graphics are simply the "facts" of the illustration world.

When you show your product in action, you'll emphasize the benefits instead of the facts. If product line pictures are unavoidable, be sure to use the headline and copy to draw out the benefits, perhaps with callouts, and clearly explain why the choice is offered.

## **Avoid Humor & Shock Value**

As an advertiser, humor is probably not your primary objective. It is often not a successful method of making sales points.

Keep in mind that what advertisers find humorous is not necessarily funny to your audience. What you have in common is the potential interest/need in a product you are trying to sell — not necessarily the same sense of humor.

While shocking your reader is often attention getting, it probably doesn't support your ad's objective. Ads with violent or sexual images may get readers attention – but usually create a negative perception and image.

Invariably the comments we see from readers who've been asked to rate these ads are negative: "What does a woman in a bikini, standing in a bird cage, have to do with it?"

Attempts at humor or attempts at shocking your readers can frustrate, confuse, or in some cases, even offend them; three objectives you don't want your ad to meet.

## 4. Evaluating the Ad

### **Repeat a Successful Ad -- Drop an Unsuccessful Ad**

Stay with a winner.

A well-designed ad will not wear out as fast as many advertisers think it will. We have research showing that readers' interest ratings for an ad can remain consistently high for up to 7 insertions.

But seven is no magic number; continue to run the ad until the reader tires of the message, not until you do. Although it's tempting to confuse your boredom with the ad, with the boredom of your readers, resist.

Repetition reinforces the message that achieves your objectives, and frequency reinforces basic selling propositions. Although, repetition is not a contributor to the ad's overall effectiveness, it can contribute to long-term campaign success.

On the flip side, an ineffective ad will not improve with repetition; if it's not working for you, get rid of it — regardless of its artistic beauty or how much time and effort was put into it.

### **Don't Blame Ad Placement for Poor Performance**

Our data consistently shows that a "good" ad is determined by what is on the page.

While this seems to be overstating the obvious, there are still myths that placement has a direct affect on ad performance. "Right-hand page, Far forward" is a frequently heard request.

Unfortunately, it has virtually nothing to do with whether or not your ad will succeed. A well-designed ad will perform well wherever its location: front or back, left-hand page or right.

Disagree? Next time you're sitting near someone paging through a magazine check out whether they only look at right-hand pages or whether they close it up when they get to the middle of the issue.

By focusing on ad position, we lose sight of the importance of ad design. It truly is what is on the page that will prompt a reader to read an ad once it has been seen.

### **In Conclusion**

Obviously, all of the rules listed can be broken, and each has exceptions.

After examining readers' reactions to tens of thousands of ads studied over the years, there is little doubt that the best way to create an effective ad is to present one key idea; in a manner which is easy to read and understand; that speaks to the needs and interests of your target audience; and is supported by the headline, illustration, and text.