

Writing an advertisement



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A well written advertisement can dramatically improve the effectiveness of your campaign.

While writing a great advertisement is an art, the key principles are easy to understand — helping you to prepare your own advertisement or evaluate the work of an agency or copywriter working for you.

This briefing covers:

- How to write an effective advertisement.
- How to prepare the advertisement for publication.
- How to check your advertisement.
- Who can help you to produce an advertisement.

1 The basics

1.1 Your most important decision is choosing the **right media** to reach your target market.

- There are many options including local, national and trade newspapers and magazines; online advertising such as a company website, online directories, pop-up adverts, banner adverts and sponsorship; direct mail, mail drops and bill boards.
- Choosing the right media is vital. You will need an understanding of your target market and which media will give you access to them.
- Check the readership and user figures for possible media to ensure they match your target market.

1.2 Before writing anything, remind yourself of your **objective**.

- Who are the individuals or businesses that make up your target market?
- What are you trying to achieve?
- What are the key benefits you can offer, and how do they set you apart from key competitors?

You need to be able to answer your target customer's primary question: 'What's in it for me?'

1.3 Your advertisement can have no effect unless it catches the reader's **attention**.

- A good headline is essential (see **2**).
- An illustration can add impact (see **3**).
- Big, colourful advertisements will catch the eye, but can be expensive.

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ask the distributor of this briefing
about the services available to you.

- Good, clear design can also help your advertisement stand out (see 7).
- Online advertising gives you the greatest flexibility as you can add music, video and graphics at little extra cost.

1.4 Your advertisement needs to carry the right **message**.

- After the headline has captured the reader's attention, most advertisements use the main 'body copy' to build up interest, create a desire for the product and ultimately prompt the reader to take action.

1.5 If the advertisement is intended to generate a **response**, make it easy to respond (see 5).

2 The headline

A compelling headline will draw the eye to your advertisement, so spend time getting it right.

2.1 A **good** headline will grab the attention of your target audience.

Good headlines can:

- Highlight the key benefit of your product or service. For example, expertise, convenience, reliability, service, value for money, or your own unique selling point.
- Contain news or be topical. For example, 'Just launched'.
- Arouse curiosity. For example, by raising a question which the advertisement can later answer.
- Offer value for money. For example, 'Children go free'.
- Provide an endorsement. For example, 'Recommended by dentists'.

2.2 **Bad** headlines will fail to attract attention and may even put readers off.

- Overcomplicated headlines are unlikely to grab attention.
- Avoid hackneyed phrases (eg 'unique offer'), clichés and claims that cannot be supported. An empty boast is unlikely to be convincing.
- A feature (as opposed to a benefit) of your product is unlikely to be of interest to your target market. For example, when advertising saucepans, the Teflon coating is less important than the fact that they are non-stick.
- An irrelevant joke is unlikely to attract the right readers and could cause offence. It is usually best to avoid this approach.
- Your company or product name may be

interesting to you, but is not necessarily interesting to your targets.

- Redundant information (eg that you are a restaurant — when the advertisement will be appearing in the 'Restaurants' section of the publication) is not interesting.
- A misleading headline may encourage interest — but could be illegal and readers may feel let down when they find out what you are really offering.
- Do not put your logo in the headline, as it stops people reading on. If you include a logo, put it at the end.

Your final artwork (see 7) should be designed to make the headline stand out.

3 Illustrations

An illustration acts in much the same way as a headline. Again, it must interest your target market.

3.1 A **relevant** illustration can help to attract attention.

- A photograph showing the product in action, with happy, animated people, can be very effective.
- A cartoon can be effective in some publications. Line drawings are good for technical products, cutaway illustrations and pictures of houses which have not yet been built.
- An experienced photographer or illustrator can usually come up with good ideas, and can make even boring or unattractive products look interesting.
- If you have nothing to illustrate, do not include illustrations just for the sake of it.

3.2 The **quality** of the illustration will reflect on your product or service.

- Use a professional who has experience of your subject, as illustrators tend to specialise.
- Show the photographer or illustrator the proposed layout for your advertisement, so that the professional can shoot (or draw) to match.
- A poor quality illustration will make your product look cheap and poor quality. Black and white photographs reproduce better if your advertisement is to be printed in black and white.

3.3 An illustration will increase your **costs**.

- You usually have to pay for a photographer or illustrator, or for the right to use a 'stock

shot' from a picture library.

- If you have to run a colour ad to make your illustration effective, your advertising costs could be much higher.

A bad illustration can ruin an advertisement. If in doubt, leave it out.

4 Body copy

How much additional text your advertisement should contain will depend on your objectives and your target market.

For example, advertisements that aim to increase brand awareness for perfumes and fashion often contain nothing apart from the headline, an illustration and the product name.

Advertisements in trade magazines may be packed with details that the advertiser is confident the reader will want to know.

Possibilities for the body copy include:

4.1 Following on from the headline.

- For example, enlarging on the key benefit.

Helping hands

- A** An **advertising agency** can handle all aspects of preparing your advertisement.
- B** A self-employed **copywriter** can write the headline and body copy.
- C** A **photographer** or **illustrator** can plan and produce a picture or illustration.
- D** A **graphic designer** can design your advertisement and do the artwork.
- E** A **printer** can design and produce the artwork.
 - The design may not be as inspired as the work of a graphic designer.
- F** The **publication** the ad will appear in can do the design for you.
 - Design and typesetting are often included in the cost of advertising, but the in-house team is unlikely to produce outstanding creative work for you.

Whoever you use, remember to brief them fully on what you are trying to achieve.

4.2 Supporting your claims with facts.

- For example, providing a third party endorsement.
- Precise figures are more believable than generalities.
- Even if you do not include the facts in your advertisement, you must be able to back up any claims you make.

4.3 Explaining subsidiary benefits.

- Be cautious about creating a cluttered ad with a long list of unconnected benefits. If in doubt, leave it out.

4.4 Prompting a response (see 5).

4.5 Deterring unwanted enquiries.

- For example if your product is (deservedly) expensive, you may want to give an indication of cost, to avoid time-wasters.

4.6 Reinforcing your main message.

- For example, ending the advertisement with a pay-off line that relates back to the headline.
Many advertisements repeat the main offer three times, in different ways.

The whole advertisement must answer the 'What's in it for me?' question. So write it from the reader's point of view, focusing on benefits rather than features.

Use simple, clear and concise language that the reader can understand immediately. Break up paragraphs into easily readable points.

5 Response mechanisms

5.1 If you want readers to respond, make it easy for them to do so.

- Include your company's contact details in the advertisement: company name, address, phone number, email and web address.
- Consider providing a coupon or a freephone number.

5.2 You can prompt readers to respond.

- Provide an incentive, such as a 'special offer' discount.
- Give a deadline by which your offer ends.

► Advertisements should be 'legal, decent, honest and truthful'. If in doubt, you can ask the Committee of Advertising Practice's Copy Advice Service (020 7492 2100 or www.cap.org.uk) to check your ad free of charge.

5.3 Devise a response mechanism that will allow you to **measure effectiveness**.

For example, ask each respondent where they read about you.

6 Check your advertisement

Before you design the layout of the advertisement (see 7), check the content. Look at it through the eyes of target customers.

6.1 Will the headline (and any illustration) grab the reader's **attention**?

6.2 Is the body copy **interesting**?

- Does it tell readers what they want to know?
- Are the special benefits of your product given the emphasis they deserve?
- Is it saying something different from your competitors' advertisements?

6.3 What **effect** would the advertisement have?

- Would it achieve your objective?
- Would it make people aware of your product?
- Would it affect readers' attitudes towards your product?
- Would it encourage readers to act?

7 Artwork

7.1 Choose clear **typefaces** ('fonts').

- Emphasise important text (eg the headline, your freephone number) by using large, bold type.
- Use type that is large enough to be easily read throughout your advertisement.
- Use a font that reflects the image you want for your company.
For example, clean, crisp and smart, or traditional, established and reliable, or young, stylish and innovative.
- Avoid ornate fonts, which are often difficult to read.
- Do not mix too many different typefaces in one ad.
- Avoid reversed-out type (white on black) for large amounts of small print.

7.2 Lay out your advertisement with plenty of **white space**.

Cramming illustrations and text together creates clutter, which is off-putting.

- If everything will not fit in easily, you probably have too many words anyway.

7.3 Produce final **artwork**.

- Ask what size and format you must provide your artwork in.
- Check if you need to provide a hard-copy version of the advertisement.
- Provide any photographs or graphics that are needed. Identify each photograph on the back. Do not use staples or paperclips.

7.4 Check a **proof** copy of your advertisement before it goes live or to print.

- Check once, without reading the words, to see what the overall visual effect is. Will the advertisement stand out from other ads appearing on the same page, website or elsewhere in the same publication? Will it give the right impression of quality?
- Check a second time to make sure there are no typographical errors (eg spelling mistakes, missing text, wrong typefaces used).
- If you are using an illustration, check that the picture is sharp.
- If your advertisement will be in colour, check a colour proof.
- Do not let the finished advertisement go out of the door until you genuinely believe it will be effective.

If there are errors that are not your fault, insist that they are corrected at the publication's expense.

8 Free help

8.1 The **Advertising Association** has an extensive website at www.adassoc.org.uk.

- You can download a copy of the booklet 'Advertising means business: a practical guide to advertising for small businesses'.

8.2 The **Committee of Advertising Practice** (www.cap.org.uk) offers free online advice to help ensure your advertisement complies with industry rules.

8.3 The **Institute of Practitioners in Advertising** (020 7235 7020 or www.ipa.co.uk), the professional body for advertising agencies, provides a list of members.

- Its website also offers free guidance on choosing an agency.

Expert contributors

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