Crafting Powerful Ads

Advertising sales people are unique. Most salespeople sell something someone else created; we have to design our own product. How well we design ads has a lot to do with our long-term success. If we create a layout that is attractive and effective, our customers will be happy and ready to buy again. If the ad is poorly done, we have made a repeat sale much more challenging. Below are some thoughts on creating powerful, compelling ad layouts.

The AIDA formula

Developed over 100 years ago, the AIDA formula is a proven tool for structuring effective advertising. AIDA is shorthand for Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action. These steps form an outline to follow when building an ad. Here's how the AIDA formula works:

ATTENTION elements are used to grab a reader as they page through your publication. Ads need to use strong graphics, compelling headlines and white space to jump off the page and catch the reader's eye.

INTEREST elements engage the customer once you've attracted their attention. It is important to tell the reader what benefits the advertiser has to offer them. This is a chance for the advertiser to explain how they can save the reader money, solve a problem for them or make their life better in some way. The advertiser should describe how they differ from their competition.

DESIRE elements amplify the reader's interest in the product offering. These are statements that help the reader visualize ownership and motivate them to make a purchase. Testimonials, special prices or coupons make a quick purchase more attractive. At this point the ad has grabbed the reader, engaged them and made them want the goods or services offered.

ACTION elements show the reader how to act on their desire to purchase the advertiser's products. This can be as simple as including a phone number, an address or the customer's e-mail. Research has found that simple "call to action" statements like "CALL NOW" increase the response to an ad. Limited time offers and references to "limited quantities available" heighten the buyer's sense of urgency motivating them to contact the advertiser.

The AIDA technique forms a sequence, which takes the reader from casual shopper to customer. Sometimes it is helpful to write A—I—D—A along the margin of a sheet of paper as a guide when designing an ad. Focusing on these steps makes it much easier to create an ad that fully engages the reader and that delivers its message in a persuasive and logical manner.

Ad Design Checklist

Checklists are powerful tools. A checklist is a simple way to make sure that "all the I's are dotted and all the T's are crossed." This is why checklists are so widely used in fields like medicine and aviation, where forgetting something can be disastrous. What follows is a checklist you can use to develop strong ads. Asking yourself these questions before sending your copy to the printer is a sure fire way to create ads that clearly and forcefully communicate the advertiser's message.

Message

- **Does the ad address the advertiser's marketing objective?** If the advertiser does not know what they want to accomplish there will be no clear focus to the ad. If they don't know what they want to say, there is no good way to say it.

- **Does the ad speak directly to the target audience?** Ads work best when targeted to a specific audience. Some audiences are broad—people who want to save money. Others are more narrowly focused—senior citizens. You can accomplish this with headlines and graphics. A hearing aid ad that starts "Attention Seniors" and features an illustration of an older person is speaking directly to the right demographic target.

- **Is the copy easy to understand?** Copy should be written in simple language and should be free of technical jargon. A reader probably doesn't understand "BTU's" but they do understand "Keep your family warm."

- **Does the copy make a strong selling argument?** Remember an ad is a "Sales call in print." Does it tell the reader why they should patronize the advertiser? I recently reviewed 15 pizza shop ads in my publications. Out of the 15, only one actually said, "Our food is delicious." All of the others were essentially menus. If you don't give consumers a reason to choose your advertiser, they will decide based strictly on price or location.

Graphics

- **Does the overall look of the ad reflect the advertiser's image?** In my area we have an off price marketer whose ads are intentionally cluttered and chaotic. This reflects the look of his stores and his other advertising. This approach would not be appropriate for a law firm or a fine furniture store.

- **Is the ad balanced?** Human beings are hard-wired to appreciate symmetry. If you have several graphic elements or blocks of copy on one side of an ad and nothing mirroring them on the opposite side, the ad will appear out of

balance. When laying out an ad I will print out the design elements that I plan to use and cut them apart like puzzle pieces. I experiment with the ad layout by moving these pieces into different positions until I find one that is pleasing to the eye.

- **Does the ad flow?** In the first grade we learned to read by starting at the top left hand side of the page, then to move our eyes from left to right down toward the bottom of the page. This is how readers are conditioned to "travel" through an ad. If this pattern is interrupted they may not continue to the end of the ad. An ad with several dominant and disconnected elements confuses the reader and is difficult to read. The flow of an ad should mimic the way we read a book i.e. left to right, top to bottom.

- **Does the artwork "shout" what the ad is about?** We've all heard "that a picture is worth a thousand words". When choosing a graphic we need to make sure it is communicating the right "thousand words." A local chiropractor placed a large spinal column on the left side of his ad, above the word "CRACK!" in large red letters. The fine print in the ad explains that he does "gentle chiropractic" with no "cracking" but this is not the message communicated by his artwork. I wonder how many readers grimaced and moved on quickly without reading the rest of his copy.

- **Is the type easily read?** Don't get fancy when choosing type. Simple type is much easier to read than complex "artsy" fonts. Script or "artistic" typefaces may frustrate readers. Also make sure that the type is large enough to be read. Bear in mind that the type may be clear on a computer printout or screen but may be harder to read when reproduced on newsprint.

Offer

- **Is the offer compelling?** Does the discount or other incentive offered, provide enough value to motivate potential customers to give the advertiser a try? Remind the advertiser that they are buying customers. Even if the offer is a loss leader, the new customers the offer brought in may spend thousands in upcoming years.

- **Is the offer prominent?** P. T. Barnum said, "Don't hide your light under a basket!" Make sure your offer pops out of the ad. Offers will not motivate a consumer if they can't see it.

- **Is the offer easy to understand?** Simple offers outperform complicated ones. A "dollar off" or "buy one-get one" is easy for the reader to visualize. Avoid putting too many conditions on the offer. If an offer requires the shopper to think too much, it will not be redeemed.

- **Is the offer competitive?** Make sure you are aware of what similar businesses in the area are offering. If the competitor is offering "$20 Oil Changes", an offer of "$21.95 Oil Changes" will not pull unless you can clearly justify the difference.

Call to action

- **Does it create a sense of urgency?** The longer the time lag between a consumer seeing an ad and contacting the advertiser, the less likely they are to make a purchase. Life is busy and full of distractions; if a shopper does not act immediately they may forget about the offer. You should ask the reader to act: "Call Now For Free Estimate", and make them feel that they may lose out if they procrastinate.

- **Does the ad make it easy to do business with the advertiser?** The advertiser's contact information should be prominent in the ad. Anything that facilitates doing business with the advertiser will enhance the response. Toll free numbers, websites and e-mail addresses make it painless to reach the advertiser. Give good directions to their location with references to well known landmarks. If the advertiser is out of the way, a simple map is a great help to potential customers.

In a struggling economy, value is king. Before shoppers make a purchase they need to be sold on the value offered by our advertisers. In this environment a generic or poorly designed ad won't do the job. We need to design ads that grab a reader's attention, prove the value of the product/service advertised and motivate them to buy. This is how we create value for our customers. Anyone can sell space. Selling space and then filling that space with ads that generate business for our customers is what sets the true advertising professionals apart from the average salesperson.

"This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver"