



ISSUE

Insights on Important Marketing Communications Issues

10 Criteria for a Successful Ad

What makes for a successful ad? For years *Business Marketing* magazine (now *B-to-B* magazine) has used the following criteria in its “Copy Chasers” column to evaluate ads submitted to them for critical review.

Perhaps no ad will meet all of these criteria perfectly. And perhaps not all of these criteria are applicable for each and every ad. But these “Copy Chasers” criteria make good sense for you to consider when creating an ad to communicate your message.

1. The Successful Ad Has a High Degree of Visual Magnetism

On average, only a small number of ads in an issue of a magazine will capture the attention of any one reader. Some ads will be passed by because the subject matter is of no concern. But others, even though they may have something to offer, fail the very first test of stopping the reader in his or her scanning of the pages. Ads perish right at the start because, at one extreme, they just lie there on the page, flat and gray, and at the other extreme, they are cluttered, noisy, and hard to read. An ad should be constructed so that a single component dominates the area—a picture, the headline, or text—but not the company name or the logo. Obviously, the more pertinent the picture, the more arresting the headline, the more informative the copy appears to be, the better.

2. The Successful Ad Selects the Right Audience

Often, an ad is the first meeting place of two parties looking for each other. So there should be something in the ad that at first glance will enable readers to identify it as a source of information relating to their job interests—a problem they have or an opportunity they will welcome. This is done with either a picture or a headline—preferably both. The ad should say immediately to the reader, “Hey! This is for you!”

3. The Successful Ad Invites the Reader into the Scene

Within the framework of the layout, the objective is to visualize, illuminate, and dramatize the selling proposition. The ad must take into consideration the fact that the type of job a reader has dictates the selection of the illustrative material. Design engineers work with drawings. Construction engineers like to see products at work. Chemical engineers are comfortable with flow charts. Managers relate to pictures of people. And so on.

4. The Successful Ad Promises a Reward

An ad will survive the readers’ qualification only if they are given reason to expect that if they continue on, they will learn something of value. A brag-and-boast headline, a generalization, or an advertising platitude will turn readers off before they get into the message. The reward that an ad offers can be explicit or implicit; it can even be stated negatively, in the form of a warning of a possible loss. The promise should be specific. The headline “Less maintenance cost” is not as effective as “You can cut maintenance costs by 25%.”

5. The Successful Ad Backs Up the Promise

To make the promise believable, the ad must provide hard evidence that the claim is valid. Sometimes, a description of the product’s design or operating characteristics will be enough to support the claim.



Comparisons with competition can be convincing. Case histories make the reward appear attainable. Best of all are testimonials: “They-say” advertising carries more weight than “we-say” advertising.

6. The Successful Ad Presents the Selling Proposition in a Logical Sequence

The parts of an ad should be organized (the ad layout) so that there is an unmistakable entry point (the single dominant component referred to earlier) and the reader is guided through the material in a sequence consistent with the logical development of the selling proposition. A layout should not call attention to itself. It should be a frame within which the various components are arranged.

7. The Successful Ad Talks “Person-to-Person”

Much industrial advertising, unlike consumer goods advertising, consists of one company talking to another company—or even an entire industry. But an ad is more persuasive when it speaks to the reader as an individual—as if it were one friend telling another friend about a good thing. The terms used should be the terms of the reader’s business, not the advertiser’s business. But more than that, the writing style should be simple: short words, short sentences, short paragraphs, active rather than passive voice, no advertising clichés, and frequent use of the personal pronoun “you.” A more friendly tone results when the copy refers to the advertiser in the first person: “we” rather than “the company name.”

8. The Successful Ad Is Easy to Read

This is a principle that shouldn’t need to be stated, but the fact is that typography is the least understood part of creating an ad. The business press is loaded with

ads in which the most essential part of the advertiser’s message—the text copy—appears in type too small for easy reading or is squeezed into a corner or is printed over part of the illustration. Text type should be no smaller than 9 point. [At least one of our clients insist that the type size of the text be no smaller than 10 point.] It should appear black on white. It should stand clear of interference from any other part of the ad. Column width should be no more than half the width of the ad.

9. The Successful Ad Emphasizes the Service, Not the Source

Many industrial advertisers insist that the company name or logo be the biggest thing in the ad, that the company name appear in the headline, that it be set in bold-face wherever it appears in the copy. That’s too much. An ad should make readers want to buy—or at least consider buying—before telling them where to buy.

10. The Successful Ad Reflects the Company’s Character

A company’s advertising represents the best opportunity it has—better than the sales force—to portray the company’s personality—the things that will make the company liked, respected, admired. A messy ad can indicate a messy, disorganized company. A brag-and-boast ad suggests the company is maker-oriented, not user-oriented. A dull-looking ad raises the possibility that the company has nothing to get excited about, is behind the times, is slowing down. What we are talking about is a matter of subtleties, but the fact remains: like sex appeal (which is not easy to define), some companies have it; some don’t. And whatever it is, it should be consistent over time and across the spectrum of corporate structure and product lines.

