



How to sell in words and pictures

Why do certain things work and others fail? **Drayton Bird** discusses the facts that you really ought to know, which most people don't

In my last piece I pointed out that your marketing messages are just salesmanship through other means. I also showed two advertisements, one highly profitable and one that failed so dismally a business was going broke.

In case you missed the piece, here are the two ads again, a bit smaller. The one on the right was the winner. Most readers were surprised. But this is true of most people who see this case, which I have a

few times around the world. One reader wrote saying: "I am surprised, as I always thought too much text in an ad put people off reading it."

And I replied: "Almost everybody is surprised by this, but they shouldn't be.

You will have noticed that I compared marketing to personal selling. That's what advertising copy is. That is its sole function: selling things, services or ideas.

No good salesperson ever says: "I'll be



Which one made a profit? Can you guess?

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A complete argument is a stronger argument.



Why did ad 'C' do so well? How did the changes in 'D' affect response?

as brief as possible.” They all say: “I’ll keep going till I get a sale—or get thrown out.”

They also all know that every benefit omitted and every objection not dealt with can lose you the sale. I have written thousands of pieces of copy—five this week alone—and lost count of how many tests I have seen.

I have never seen longer copy fail to do better. Usually in immediate enquiries, and always in eventual sales. A complete argument is a stronger argument.”

Hard to believe, but true

This fact about longer copy applies to all media. If all you want is an enquiry, you don’t need as much copy as a sale. You need only emphasise the good things and worry less about the objections, as people have to commit themselves less when enquiring.

But context is everything. The more money people have, the easier it is, as a rule, to sell to them. Again, the nature of what you offer and its cost are extremely important.

Buying a new car is a bigger decision than buying a new iPod. The latter is done more on impulse and costs less. Aesthetic surgery, on the other hand, is agonised over far more than buying a car, even though it is less expensive. Building trust is critical.

Then again, the medium matters. A full page ad is of a certain size. A 30-second commercial lasts 30 seconds (actually, a little less, but let’s not get technical). A poster has given dimensions. There is only so much you can fit in. But a direct mail pack can contain as much as you like.

Again, a letter can be as long as you like—and probably the most profitable one I ever wrote contained eight pages. It was only beaten after a couple of years by a 12-pager.

Really long-e-mails may not work, but a website to which you direct people can (and probably should) contain bags of information, and so should a landing page.

Essentially, within the confines of whatever the medium or format, you must say everything you can that will encourage response and overcome doubts in the prospects’ minds.

What’s in it for me?

But there are reasons other than the length of the copy why the ad that won did so.

The first is the headlines. These are the most important part of any advertisement—as it is the first thing people see, and the vast majority are never read beyond the headline.

Its purpose is to attract attention and get people reading the copy. What attracts attention best? News of benefits: clear, precise, desirable benefits.

What never works? Obscure or vague headlines, or ones that give you no reason to read on.

The losing headline tells you something you agree with, but there is no promise or reason to find out more. The winner actually offers two benefits. People want to know “what’s in it for me?”

Here are more advertisements that were tested against each other. And when I say “tested”, I mean that they ran on the same day in the same paper, appearing in alternate copies.

Again, one made a ton of money, and the other flopped.

You probably won’t be surprised to know which one won—B. Now let me explain why in more detail.

1. It makes a clearer promise, emphasising that this is something new (never neglect to do this where possible, but reassure that it is tested).

2. There is better visual focus, with the bigger picture demonstrating the product in action rather than the product itself.
3. The headline is better placed. The human eye is naturally drawn to one-third down the space
4. There is a face looking out at you. That always attracts attention.
5. It is a testimonial. This inspires trust—vital when we are selling anything to do with health.

I should say here that I did not write those first two ads, but was asked to improve them. So here is what I did. There seems little difference, but let me explain the changes.

Two small but important differences increased response by about 50%.

1. The headline adds the emotional word “blissful”—and people buy (as you know) for emotional, not rational reasons.
2. Although you cannot see it, in the previous copy there were three testimonials, but the ad did not give their names. This one adds credibility by giving them.

I was then asked to beat myself, and produced ad D. I thought it would do better, but to my considerable surprise it doubled response first time out.

This ad demonstrates two other important facts.

1. Making a particular group feel privileged always works.
2. The word “offer” almost always boosts response.

If you accept, as I hope you do, what testing reveals about results, here are some more facts. As a rule, one large picture

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beats lots of small ones; photographs are more credible than illustrations; and cartoons attract most attention.

Most of the things you see all the time work, despite the fact that they may seem rather hackneyed. For instance, you see many before-and-after pictures in these pages. There is hardly anything new about that. But they are there because they work. They are the best way to demonstrate a problem and solution. Nearly all advertising revolves around that.

And this applies not just to editorial but to advertisements.

Most advertisements do better if they look like editorial. Nobody reads this magazine for the ads. They read it for the editorial.

I know this because years ago I took an advertisement for Barnardos and tested two formats against each other. One was an advertising layout, and the other set exactly like the editorial in the paper. The editorial style won by between 25%–123% in a series of tests.

The more you make your ads blend in, rather than stand out, the better you will do, I promise. If you measured the results of your ads by keying them, you would soon find this out. And if you don't, your advertising is mere guesswork. Would you do that with surgery?

What's in it for me?

Most, if not all, layouts are created to suit the designer or client's taste. But people who have to get their stuff read or lose their jobs—newspaper or book publishers—follow formulae.

They do so because they wish to communicate, not confuse or amaze—which many advertisers waste a lot of money on. The only useful research I have ever seen on this was commissioned by the newspaper industry in Australia, and conducted by Professor Colin Wheildon of New South Wales University.

For many years he researched the effect of type and layout on comprehension. Not what people liked, but what they understood and found easy to read. Here are some things he learned.

Typefaces should be easy to read. The text in this piece is roman serif type,

mostly in caps and lower case, in black on white rather than reversed out. That makes this easy to read because:

- The serifs—or little feet—at the base of letters line up to keep the eye moving horizontally along the line, rather than straying below to the next line. So if you wish to use sans-serif faces, have heavy leading between lines.
- Your eye recognises shapes more easily than letters. A word in capitals has less shape than in caps and lower case.
- It is tiring to read a lot of reversed-out type. Reversing out a page of copy has been known to halve response. (It is not hard to read a lot of serif italic type, by the way.)

This does not mean you should never use sans-serif faces, capitals or reversing out. Just use them sparingly.

Wheildon found that on an A4 page, sans-serif type reduced comprehension from 67% to 12%. Imagine losing so many of your readers—and sales!

The eye is lazy

Just as reversed-out type is hard to read, type set over tints, textures or colours, so that it does not stand out clearly, is even harder.

Very small type is unwise: many people (including me) can't read it very easily. Indeed, around one person in ten has imperfect eyesight. Since the difference between success and failure for an ad may be 10%, that's worth thinking about. And don't forget, older people, who are often richer, have worse eyesight.

Don't change typefaces unnecessarily. They are ugly and confusing: your eye doesn't like constantly having to readjust.

This magazine and all newspapers are set in narrow columns. In paperbacks, the page is pretty narrow. The eye likes to go down the centre of a column rather than back and forth constantly. Try not to set to a measure wider than about 50 characters. Comprehension slumps if the edges of columns, either left or right, are unjustified—that is to say, ragged. Once

again, this is because the eye has to work harder. And once again, this magazine has it right.

Big blocks of type are daunting. They promise great trudes through the desert.

Moreover, when the eye first looks at a layout, it tends to skip around like a butterfly before settling at one place. That's why you should break up your copy with crossheads, subheads and occasional changes of width. It looks more interesting.

Reveal the essence of your message in the headings. They should say enough for him or her to want to start on the body copy. To encourage this, it's often good to have an explanatory subhead after the headline leading into the copy. A 'drop cap'—that is, an oversized initial capital letter—also encourages readership.

Stupid ideas to ignore

Many art directors see the headline as an "element", not a word. And they like them big. But people do not have arms eight feet long. Large headings are a waste of space and your money.

They also like lots of white space. Ditto. White space never sold anyone anything. Keep it within reason.

Illustrations or headlines placed halfway up the page, blocking off columns, discourage readers from carrying on. They may be tempted simply to go straight to the top of the next column, omitting the section under the illustration.

A headline should be a headline, not a baseline. If it is under the body copy you will not be surprised to hear that it stops people from reading the copy at all. The reason is that putting it there misleads the reader; and gravity forces the lazy eye down, not up.

Similarly, things pointing out of the layout—like people's feet, or the direction they look in—lead readers' eyes out of the advertisement.

Commenting on Drayton Bird, advertising guru David Ogilvy, founder of Ogilvy & Matber, said that Drayton "knows more about direct marketing than anyone else in the world". Emails to drayton@draytonbird.com

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