

# DIRECTORS' BRIEFING



LearnDirect™

## Writing an advertisement

### 1 Understanding what works

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 either 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.

### 2 The basics

- A** Your most important decision is choosing the **right publication** to reach your target market.  
See Advertising strategy, MA 9.
- B** Before writing anything, remind yourself of your **objective**.
- ◆ Who are the individuals or businesses that make up your target market?  
These are the people your advertisement must appeal to.
  - ◆ What are you trying to achieve?  
For example, announcing a new product launch or inviting enquiries for sales literature.
  - ◆ What are the one or two key benefits you can offer, and how do they set you apart from the competition?

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

- C** Your advertisement can have no effect unless it catches the reader's **attention**.
- ◆ A good headline is almost always essential (see 3).
  - ◆ An illustration can add impact (see 4).
  - ◆ Big, colourful advertisements will catch the eye (but cost more).
  - ◆ Good, clear design can also help your advertisement stand out from the rest (see 8).
- D** Your advertisement needs to carry the right **message**.
- ◆ After the headline has captured the

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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 (see 5).

- E** If the advertisement is intended to generate a **response**, make it easy to respond (see 6).

### 3 The headline

A compelling headline will draw the eye to your space more effectively than anything else. The headline is the most important part of your advertisement, so spend time getting it right.

- A** 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 (e.g. the vacuum cleaner with no dust bag).
- ◆ Contain news or be topical.  
For example, 'Launched 1 May'.
- ◆ Arouse curiosity.  
For example, 'How to stop snoring tonight', or a question which the advertisement can later answer.
- ◆ Offer value for money.  
For example, 'Children go free'.
- ◆ Provide an endorsement.  
For example, 'As used on Everest' or 'Recommended by dentists'.

- B** **Bad** headlines will fail to attract attention or will interest the wrong audience.

- ◆ An overcomplicated headline is unlikely to grab attention.
- ◆ Avoid over-used phrases (e.g. '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.  
So when advertising your 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.  
Humour is difficult to use effectively, so 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 (e.g. that you are a restaurant – when the advertisement will be appearing in the 'Restaurants' section of the publication) is not interesting.
- ◆ A misleading headline ('Martians visit Rochdale') may encourage interest – but 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 8) should be designed to make the headline stand out.

### 4 Illustrations

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

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

- ◆ A photograph showing the product in action, with happy and attractive 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.
- ◆ A good photographer or illustrator can usually come up with good ideas, and can make even boring or ugly products look interesting.
- ◆ If you have nothing to illustrate, do not include illustrations just for the sake of it.

- B** The **quality** of the illustration will reflect on your product.

- ◆ Use a professional.  
Pick one who has experience of your subject, as they 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 cheap, 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.

- C** An illustration will increase your **costs**.

- ◆ You usually have to pay for a photographer or illustrator, or for the right

"It is always worth bearing in mind the AIDA formula – attention, interest, desire, action. These are the things you are looking for."

*Mike Butterworth,  
Business Link  
for London*

"Advertising is a very expensive method of market research. Know your target audience before you write your ad."

*David Watkins,  
The Pink Elephant  
Training Company*

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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 will be much higher.

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

## 5 Body copy

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

For example, advertisements which 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 which the advertiser is confident the reader will want to know.

Possibilities for the body copy include:

- A Following on** from the headline.
  - ◆ For example, enlarging on the key benefit you offer.
- B Supporting your claims** with facts.
  - ◆ For example, explaining how you

### 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 is unlikely to 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 to help you, remember to brief them fully on what you are trying to achieve.

Do not let the finished advertisement go out of the door until you genuinely believe it will be effective.

managed to create a product with the benefit you have mentioned, or providing a third party endorsement.

- ◆ Precise figures are more believable than generalities.
- ◆ Even if you do not include the facts in your advertisement, you should be able to back up any claims you make.

- C Explaining subsidiary benefits.**
  - ◆ Be cautious about creating a cluttered ad with a long list of unconnected benefits. If in doubt, leave it out.
- D Prompting a response** (see 6).
- E Deterring** unwanted enquiries.
  - ◆ For example if your product is (deservedly) expensive, you may want to indicate how much it costs, to avoid time-wasting bargain hunters.
- F Reinforcing** your main message.
  - ◆ For example, ending the advertisement with a pay-off line which 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.

## 6 Response mechanisms

- A** If you want readers to respond, at least make it **possible** for them to do so.
  - ◆ Include all your company's contact details in the advertisement: name, address, phone and fax numbers, e-mail address and the URL of your website.
  - ◆ Make it easy to respond, with a coupon or a freephone number.
- B** You can **prompt** readers to respond.
  - ◆ Provide an incentive, such as a 'special offer' discount.
  - ◆ Give a deadline by which your offer ends.
- C** Devise a response mechanism which will allow you to **measure effectiveness**.  
For example, use different coded coupons in each publication that carries your advertisements.

- ◆ Advertisements should be 'legal, decent, honest and truthful'. If in doubt, you can ask the Advertising Standards Authority (020 7580 5555) to check your ad.

"Writing an advertisement should be as close as you can get to what you would say face to face to a prospect if you were selling door to door."

Simon Clark,  
Clark and Taylor

"A great advertisement takes a single-minded benefit and makes it come alive in a compelling way."

Len Barkey,  
Mitchell Devlin  
Associates

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## 7 Checking your advertisement

Before you design the layout of the advertisement (see 8), check the content. Look at it with the eyes of a target customer who is reading the publication it will appear in.

- A** Will the headline (and any illustration) grab the reader's **attention**?
- B** Is the body copy **interesting**?
- ◆ Does it tell readers something 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?
- C** What **effect** would the advertisement as a whole have on the reader?
- ◆ 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?

## 8 Artwork

- A** Choose clear **typefaces** ('fonts').
- ◆ Emphasise important text (e.g. the headline, your freephone number) by using large, bold type.
  - ◆ Use type which is large enough to be easily read throughout your advertisement. This is particularly important if your target audience is made up of mature readers, many of whom will need glasses.
  - ◆ 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.
- B** 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.

**C** Produce final **artwork** for the publication to print from.

- ◆ Ask the publication what artwork is needed (e.g. exact size).  
If you have prepared the advertisement on a computer, the publication may be able to accept your computer file, rather than conventional artwork.
- ◆ You can print black and white artwork yourself from your computer.  
You are unlikely to be able to produce suitable colour artwork yourself.
- ◆ Provide any photographs that are needed in a clear bag.  
Identify each photograph on the back. Do not use staples.
- ◆ The print quality must be high, so use high quality paper (e.g. 'repro' paper from an art shop) which will give a crisp print.

**D** Check a **proof** copy of your advertisement before it goes 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 or elsewhere in the same publication?  
Will it give the right overall impression of quality?
- ◆ Check a second time to make sure there are no typographical errors (e.g. 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.

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

## 9 Free help

- A** The **Advertising Association** has an extensive website at [www.adassoc.org.uk](http://www.adassoc.org.uk).
- ◆ The association publishes a useful free booklet called 'Advertising means business: a practical guide to advertising for small businesses'.
- B** The **Institute of Practitioners in Advertising** (☎ 020 7235 7020), the professional body for advertising agencies, can send you a list of members.
- ◆ It publishes a free guidance note on choosing an agency.

### OTHER BRIEFINGS

New Directors' Briefing titles are published every three months. Ask your distributor for the current titles list. Every briefing has a code. For example, the tax briefings have the codes TA 1, TA 2, etc.

### EXPERT CONTRIBUTORS

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