

## **How to write advertising that works today**

### **Why last year's advertising won't work any more**

It is my view that in the last few years the way in which people perceive and react to direct advertising has changed radically. As a result, a lot of advertising that used to work doesn't work any more, simply because attitudes have changed.

I've spent a lot of time with my colleagues looking at this, and our conclusion is that the changes that we are seeing are not primarily a recession issue (although obviously the collapse of credit is having an affect). But we now believe that there has been a shift in the way people respond to direct advertising – a shift that is going to last for years and years and will affect direct advertising way beyond the end of this recession.

In my opinion people are now looking at advertisements in a completely different way, and I think the reason for this is that for the past few years they have been bombarded with a huge number of advertisements that were, quite simply poorly, thought through, poorly written and poorly presented. Because they worked for a while everyone copied everyone else, until one day the bubble burst.

We have now reached a point where any advert that looks as if it was produced five years ago will have a reduced effectiveness, simply because people at all levels of society don't want to buy something that looks like it has been tainted with the recent past. (Which suggests that an advert that looks like it comes from the 1920s could work through looking "quaint" but anything looking as if it is from the 1990s or early 2000s will not work.)

Worse, if you continue to use the style of the 1990s or 2000s you will not only find sales going down, you will also find that you start doing harm to your business and its reputation as potential customers start to compare your advertising unfavourably with more modern companies. Through your advertising you will cause yourself to be seen as “out-dated”

## **Ten factors that are to be found in old style advertising**

### *1. Talking at the customer*

Old style adverts say “NEW!” and “70% off!” and generally don’t try in any way to engage in any sort of conversation with the customer. They treat the customer as an object, or at best a very dim child who needs things said slowly, clearly and loudly. Subtlety is not part of this style. You shout (and if you don’t believe this, look at the number of exclamation marks in most adverts from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century).

### *2. Pretending to be pre-eminent*

The suggestion is often that this company, no matter how tiny or unheard of, is actually the lead organisation in this field, the one that everyone turns to, the one that everyone is using. Citations and recommendations from users are ok, but not to the point of claiming that the world uses this product rather than anything else.

### *3. Using meaningless phrases*

For many years it has been felt that meaningless phrases should be added to all adverts as part of the background. This leads to “It’s nearly Easter” and “with summer almost upon us,” not to mention “award winning” and “family-owned business”. The fact is that we have all seen these phrases so often that no one ever bothers to notice them any more. Here’s a tip: commonplace phrases and thoughts are... commonplace.

#### *4. Avoiding the real world*

Many adverts from the 1960s onwards were stylised and written without any reference to reality, while pretending to be a representation of reality. A typical example was the perfect mother in the perfect house with the perfect children, welcoming the perfect husband home from work having done the housework and cooked all the perfect food. While we might laugh at such 1960s excesses, this approach is still to be seen within advertising.

Take, for example, the letters sent out by the Nat West bank in March 2009 which said that in these hard financial times, having the best financial advice is paramount, and that the good people of Nat West are there to help.

What this advert missed was any semblance of understanding as to how business people dealing with the aftermath of the financial collapse caused by the banks might be feeling at that moment. It was not impossible to advertise Nat West in early 2009; it is simply that this unreality was not the way to do it. You might as well send out an advert saying the Mafia were there to help, and here's the number for Sicily.

#### *5. Forgetting how busy we are and how much stimulus is out there*

Many adverts simply don't bother to grab attention – they just assume that the reader is so excited at receiving a letter that he/she will read it. This is simply arrogant nonsense, and it comes across as such – and this is one of the biggest reasons why direct marketing has such a bad name.

We all see around 3000 announcements and advertisements a day (on shop fronts, on buses, in newspapers, on the internet...). We dismiss most of them, and we are good at dismissing them quickly and efficiently.

Treating the recipient as a person who is so bored, so lacking in anything else to do, that he or she will sit down and just read your advert all the way through, even if it is turgid rubbish, is plain arrogance, and it comes across as such.

Some advertisers defend their adverts by saying, “It tells them everything they need to know” without actually thinking that no one is going to bother to read it. That is the arrogance that is now passé. Do it and you not only lose your audience, you also find that they really don’t want to know you in the future. (Do you want to talk to people who insult you?)

*6. Pretending that all the work on the psychology of perception never actually took place.*

Studies in the psychology of perception have been with us since 1940 and tell us interesting things, such as where the eye goes when the reader first sees a page of print, how the brain decodes pictures, what happens when a picture sits next to a piece of text, what happens when the brain is presented with a colour picture.

All the evidence and information you need to create advertisements that are completely in tune with the way the brain works are there (you can read it for free on [www.theory.bz](http://www.theory.bz)). But instead, advertisers have decided to stick with the notion that direct marketing is not scientific at all, but is common sense and that since we all have common sense anyone can write an advert. Clearly this is untrue – because if it were true we’d all write brilliant adverts.

The notion that there is something scientific underlying how the brain takes in an advert has therefore been disregarded, and as a result most advertisements look just like a mess to most readers, response rates have collapsed, and people have stopped reading.

### *7. Being remote*

The best direct marketing pieces are written to an individual by an individual. When you get such a piece you feel that you are the person the sender has written to.

But direct marketing has become so centred on mass selling and treating everyone like a number that you can find direct mail writers who actually say, “Now some of you will know that...”

Last year I met an advertiser who boasted that he was going to set up an automatic email system in which he stored the names of all his potential customers and five letters to send them. They would get the letters in turn – each directing them to an online shop. All automatic, nothing else to do, no human contact at all. He was sure it would work.

It didn't.

### *8. Pretending that you are all knowing, and ignore the customer*

Maybe you are God's gift to whatever product or service you sell, but a little humility never goes amiss. No one likes talking to a know-it-all. Be self-effacing. Be modest.

### *9. Using the same boring pictures as anyone else*

There are millions of catalogues out there, and lots of them use the same pictures as everyone else – pictures supplied by the manufacturers of the products that the catalogue companies resell.

What is the point? How are you differentiating yourself from every other company if your products look the same as theirs? Maybe there are tiny differences in price, but that is not going to do you much good. Some will notice

the differences, but most won't. Most will think – it is just the same as everyone else's catalogues. This applies to the travel industry as much as to the office furniture industry.

#### *10. Existing out of context*

Pictures and text need a context in order to have a meaning. Put up a picture of a desk on its own and it has no real meaning. It only has a meaning in an office with people nearby. Likewise, clothes only mean something on a real person. But so removed from reality have most advertisers become that they think it is good to be isolated, alone, removed from all human experience. It isn't.

### **The new style**

Companies that are now doing well have realised that suddenly direct marketing has changed. The old approaches need to be thrown away. Suddenly, with the collapse of much of the western economy, has come a dramatic change in the way many people see business transactions.

Here's ten ways in which new advertisements are being written.

#### *1. Ask interesting questions*

Do not use questions like, "Would you like more money?" or "Would you like more spare time?" Those are pointless obvious questions that have been commonplace in the past. Instead ask interesting questions like, "What is the simplest and most cost effective way to process the company's monthly salary account?"

*2. Stop suggesting that everyone else has got it except the reader. Share in the quest and be a partner*

Use phrases such as “One of the biggest problems I’ve found in handling my company’s databases is...” You become a partner in solving the problem not Big Brother (in the 1984 sense) on high, handing down the solution.

*3. Make it a conversation*

The phrases I’ve used above are the openings of conversations. They are ways of saying, “you and I, we’re in this together, now, how do we solve this...” Think how you would talk to the customer if you met him or her, not how you would traditionally write.

*4. Offer more than the product*

Starbucks sell coffee, but lots of people go into Starbucks to read the paper, review the latest print-out of their doctorate, chat up the guy from the office ten doors along... OK, you sell training programmes; talk about the world of training in a broader sense, become a centre for information, be open, don’t just pretend you are the only training company that there is. No one will believe that, so why pretend? Talk about the real world.

*5. Treat the potential customer as a busy, intelligent, thinking person.*

Grab attention, hold the customer’s hand and go on a really exciting stimulating journey. If that means nothing to you, I am not getting my idea across. If that’s the case try [www.copy.ac](http://www.copy.ac) where I try to explain my thinking in a different way.

But here’s one thought – sometimes people see these new style letters and say, “What rubbish! No one will ever read all that!” And of course they are mostly right (although actually some people do read a complete 300 word letter). But

they get a subliminal message – a message that says what you want to say, a message that is hidden in those short paragraphs that they don't ever read.

*6. Become an individual (as salesmen and people in corner shops were).*

Express your individuality. It is utterly irrelevant to what I sell, but quite a few people know that I go and watch Arsenal FC most weekends, have just written a book about the club, and have a life-long devotion to the music of Bob Dylan. Does that have anything to do with my job? No, but it makes me real. I am not a number, I am a copywriter. A real person. Most of us remember real people much more than people who only exist on the phone.

*7. Don't be afraid of light, gentle, ironic humour or even surreal stories.*

Being slightly amusing, quirky or odd is not a bad thing. This is not about telling jokes, it is about being different – but in being different it is about being even more human than before. It is difficult, but it is possible. My own company did this with a six year long campaign in which our sales letters told stories about the Toppled Bollard – a mythical pub. A year after the series had stopped we still got people phoning up saying, "Of course I don't read any junk mail at all, but I quite liked your story about the Toppled Bollard," and I would say, "You don't read junk mail, and you are not a customer of Hamilton House, and you have just told me the name of a non-existent pub that appeared in my sales letters which stopped a year ago. What does that say about the power of direct mail when written in the new way?"

*8. Use multi media*

Stop thinking about direct mail or email or news stories or blogs – use them all. And if there are different direct mail approaches or different email approaches for your industry, use them all. Collect the email addresses of your customers and email them – but also in between the emails, write to them.

### *9. Use the psychology of perception*

The psychology of perception is an academic study stretching back to the 1940s which tells us exactly where the eye goes when a reader picks up a piece of paper. Surely it is helpful to know this and to stick the main headline there!

### *10. Be different from everyone else*

Being different is a key factor. Unless you are incredibly lucky you will be in competition with other firms that sell either the same product or something similar. So start from the premise that you have to be different. It isn't as hard as you think.

### **What can Hamilton House do for you?**

If you find these ideas ring true, please give me a call. If I am not in or am on another call, do talk to my colleagues Stephen or Laura (they tend to wave their arms about less than me – which means they get to the point quicker). We can work with you to reform your advertising and get you back to the response rates that you possibly experienced five years ago.

We can do this on an ad hoc basis (you pose the question and we offer a solution) or as part of a regular monthly contract in which we don't wait for you to ask the questions, but rather we aim to raise the issues first, and supply the answers as well. (The programme's called Velocity.)

We can also undertake research into how your customers think about your product (which tells you how to advertise it) and what your competitors are doing. We can also look at your sales materials, supply mailing lists, offer warehouse facilities, and (if you get me rather than my colleagues) talk about Bob Dylan and the Arsenal. (Laura is a Villa fan, and Stephen has daughters who support Man U).

Hope you found this interesting. Our general website is [www.hamilton-house.com](http://www.hamilton-house.com) Our phone number is 01536 399 000, and our email is [Sales@hamilton-house.com](mailto:Sales@hamilton-house.com) (You can email me on [tony@hamilton-house.com](mailto:tony@hamilton-house.com) although sometimes I am out of the office, and occasionally go on holiday so I don't always reply straight away).

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