

Writing an advertisement



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.

1 The basics

1.1 Your most important decision is choosing the **right media** to reach your target market.

See Advertising strategy.

1.2 Before writing anything, remind yourself of your **objective**.

- Who are the individuals or businesses that make up your target market?
 - What are you trying to achieve?
 - 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?'

1.3 Your advertisement can have no effect unless it catches the reader's **attention**.

- A good headline is essential (see **2**).
- An illustration can add impact (see **3**).
- Big, colourful advertisements will catch the eye (but cost more).
- Good, clear design can also help your advertisement stand out from the rest (see **7**).

1.4 Your advertisement needs to carry the right **message**.

- After the headline has captured the 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.

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- 1.5** If the advertisement is intended to generate a **response**, make it easy to respond (see 5).

2 The headline

A compelling headline will draw the eye to your advertisement, so spend time getting it right.

- 2.1** 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.
- Contain news or be topical.
For example, 'Just launched'.
- Arouse curiosity.
For example, by raising 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'.

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

- Overcomplicated headlines are unlikely to grab attention.
- Avoid hackneyed phrases (eg '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 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 and could cause offence. 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 (eg that you are a restaurant — when the advertisement will be appearing in the 'Restaurants' section of the publication) is not interesting.
- A misleading headline (eg 'Martians visit Edinburgh') 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 7) should be designed to make the headline stand out.

3 Illustrations

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

- 3.1** 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.
- An experienced 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.

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

- Use a professional who has experience of your subject, as illustrators 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.

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

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

4 Body copy

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

► Advertisements should be 'legal, decent, honest and truthful'. If in doubt, you can ask the Committee of Advertising Practice's Copy Advice Service (020 7492 2100 or www.cap.org.uk) to check your ad free of charge.

“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

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

Possibilities for the body copy include:

4.1 Following on from the headline.

- For example, enlarging on the key benefit you offer.

4.2 Supporting your claims with facts.

- For example, explaining how you 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 must be able to back up any claims you make.

4.3 Explaining subsidiary benefits.

- Be cautious about creating a cluttered ad with a long list of unconnected benefits. If in doubt, leave it out.

4.4 Prompting a response (see 5).

4.5 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.

4.6 Reinforcing your main message.

- For example, ending the advertisement with a pay-off line that 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.

“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**

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, remember to brief them fully on what you are trying to achieve.

5 Response mechanisms

5.1 If you want readers to respond, make it **easy** for them to do so.

- Include your company's contact details in the advertisement as appropriate: name, address, phone and fax numbers, email address and your web address.
- Consider providing a coupon or a freephone number.

5.2 You can **prompt** readers to respond.

- Provide an incentive, such as a 'special offer' discount.
- Give a deadline by which your offer ends.

5.3 Devise a response mechanism that will allow you to **measure effectiveness**.

For example, use different coded coupons in each publication that carries your advertisements.

“A great advertisement takes a single benefit and makes it come alive in a compelling way.”

**David Mitchell,
Mitchell Devlin
Associates**

6 Check your advertisement

Before you design the layout of the advertisement (see 7), check the content. Look at it through the eyes of target customers.

6.1 Will the headline (and any illustration) grab the reader's **attention**?

6.2 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?

6.3 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?

7 Artwork

7.1 Choose clear **typefaces** ('fonts').

- Emphasise important text (eg the headline, your freephone number) by using large, bold type.
- Use type that 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.

7.2 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.

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

- Ask what size and format the publication needs your artwork in.
- Check if you need to provide a hard-copy version of the advertisement.

- Provide any photographs that are needed. Identify each photograph on the back. Do not use staples or paperclips.

7.4 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 impression of quality?
- Check a second time to make sure there are no typographical errors (eg 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.
- Do not let the finished advertisement go out of the door until you genuinely believe it will be effective.

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

8 Free help

8.1 The **Advertising Association** has an extensive website at www.adassoc.org.uk.

- You can download a copy of the booklet 'Advertising means business: a practical guide to advertising for small businesses'.

8.2 The **Committee of Advertising Practice** (www.cap.org.uk) offers free online advice to help ensure your advertisement complies with industry rules.

8.3 The **Scottish Institute of Practitioners in Advertising** (0131 473 2355 or www.ipa.co.uk), the professional body for advertising agencies in Scotland, provides a list of members.

- Its website also offers free guidance on choosing an agency.

Expert contributor

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