



Creativity and Common Sense in Writing and Speaking

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 40

by Philip Yaffe

Editor's Introduction

Each "Communication Corner" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first essay "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan](#)," then read each succeeding essay.

A previous essay ("[What Advertising Can Teach Us About Effective Writing and Speaking](#)") posited what at first glance may have seemed to be a radical idea. And that is: However superficially it may appear, print advertising copy (text), which is designed to sell things, represents some of the best, most carefully constructed writing you will ever see. It must be, because to achieve its objective, advertising copy must say a world of things to the potential consumer in just a thimbleful of words. With this fundamental idea as a foundation, we can now explore this fruitful subject more deeply.

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As a reminder, let's begin with a brief reiteration of the introduction to the preceding essay because it is an idea well worth repeating.

"I know that half the money I spend on advertising is wasted. The problem is, I don't know which half."

The significance of the observation is nothing short of astounding. These are people whose business is investing and harvesting financial assets, yet when it comes to advertising, they freely admit to wasting at least half of their money!

But the observation can be turned on its head. Viewed from this perspective, it means that these same extremely clever and resourceful marketers believe that the power of advertising is so great, even at only 50 percent effectiveness they still get their money's worth. This is equally astounding!

The value of advertising can most easily be seen with mass marketed products. For example, a breakfast cereal launches a major advertising campaign; within a few days to weeks the sales figures will reflect the impact of the campaign. With technical and industrial products, the picture is not quite so clear. Few people buy a car or a piece of industrial equipment on impulse. They build up to it over a long period of time, so that the cause-and-effect relationship between advertising and sales is virtually impossible to evaluate.

Nevertheless, advertising is indispensable. So the question is, is it possible to construct advertising that will assure the best return on investment (ROI), even when that return cannot be directly measured? Likewise, is it possible to write a text or construct a speech that will have the best ROI (your effort to create and deliver it) even when that return cannot be directly measured?

The answer is both yes and no. It is "no" if you believe that advertising (writing and speaking) by nature is more of an art than a science. It is "yes" if you believe that advertising (writing and speaking) is a combination of both art and science, and act accordingly.

It is certainly true that advertising has a major “art” component, i.e. that people who have a “feel” for it are likely to produce better, more effective advertising than people who don’t. Unfortunately, this verity has led to the false conclusion that advertising is predominantly art, i.e. a matter of taste.

When advertising is viewed as largely a question of personal preference, the rational component of the exercise takes second importance. Worse, it often degenerates into a kind of pseudoscience of rules and regulations with no scientific justification.

- Be positive: no one likes negative advertising
- Avoid simple, straightforward headlines; headlines should “tease” readers into the ad
- Use big, bold visuals; people are impressed by pictures
- Show the solution, not the problem: this is reassuring to potential buyers
- Limit body copy to no more than 15–20 words of body copy; no one reads body copy anyhow
- Make payoff lines (slogans) clever and memorable, not explicit and to the point

The summation seems to be: Advertising is entertainment. If you can attract attention and put on a show, then you will sell.

Advertising may have elements of show business. But if it is only show business, it will fail. On the other hand, if we are more detached in our analysis—i.e., if we put the art of advertising and the science of advertising into better balance—we may learn some valuable lessons, not only about advertising, but also effective writing and public speaking.

I have done considerable work in pharmaceutical marketing. Doctors are perhaps the most difficult targets in the world because what you “sell” them is ideas and information, which later on they may or may not turn into prescriptions for their patients. Thus, while the following examples relate specifically to doctors and medicines, the underlying communication principles are universally valid.

Facing the Facts

David Ogilvy, one of the most highly regarded gurus of consumer advertising, asserts: “Very few advertisements contain enough factual information to sell the product. There is a ludicrous tradition among copywriters that consumers aren’t interested in facts. Nothing could be farther from the truth.”

If this contention is valid for housewives, how much more valid must it be for doctors!

Medicine is a serious business. When doctors read a medical journal, they are looking for medical information. Otherwise, they would be reading something else. It therefore follows:

Advertising in medical journals that gives real medical information is likely to attract more attention and achieve better results than advertising that doesn't.

If this seems self-evident, medical journals bear witness to the opposite. The majority of ads tend to fall into two categories:

- Lots of words, but little real information (lack of a focused message).
- A clever headline, a pleasing picture—and no information at all.

The excuse for the first kind of advertising is often: "It is a new product; we need to create a personality for it." It is hard to imagine how an empty personality, based solely on errant prose, will result in positive promotion.

The excuse for the second category of advertising often is: "It is a well-known product; this is simply a reminder." Certainly, it makes sense to remind the doctor that a medicine exists. But it makes even more sense to remind him of her why they are using it, if they are already using it. Or why they should be using it, if they aren't.

The 80/20 Rule

The objection will now be raised: Doesn't this emphasis on factual information necessitate long body copy? Does it make sense to write long body copy when no one reads it anyhow?

Let's examine this contention in reverse order.

For every 100 people who read the headline and look at the visual of an ad, let's say only 20 will actually read the body copy. Does this represent an 80 percent wastage? Emphatically no.

The 80/20 rule is a fundamental tenet of industrial and technical marketing, i.e., in general 80 percent of sales come from 20 percent of customers. The same principle applies to advertising.

Readers who just look at the headline and visual, then turn the page, at that moment are not the real customers for the product. Those who remain to read the body copy are the real customers for the product. This is the ideal moment to tell them about it because this is when they want to know about it. Otherwise, they too are likely to turn the page and an excellent selling opportunity will be lost.

Body copy is important, in fact vital, because it is your only real chance to persuade the reader to your point of view. But how long should that body copy be?

This is like asking how long is a piece of string. You don't answer this question by counting the number of words. Rather, you consider the value of the words. The best guide is:

If the body copy contains one word more than needed to deliver the message, it is probably too long; if it contains one word less than needed to deliver the message, it is definitely too short, regardless of how many words are used!

Of course, it makes no sense to simply inundate your target audience only with a lot of detail, just as it makes no sense to do so in more general writing (and public speaking). As Bill Bernbach, a legendary practitioner of consumer advertising has written: “Be certain that your advertisement says something to the consumer; that it informs and renders a service. Then be certain that it says what it has to say in a way no one has ever said it before.”

Notice the balance in this advice.

1. **First:** “Be certain that your advertisement says something to the consumer.” This is advertising as a science. Determining what you want to say about your product and what you ought to say about it are two different things. This is why most good advertising starts with market research. And never lets anything go to press before it has been thoroughly tested.
2. **Second:** “Be certain that your advertisement says what it has to say in a way that no one has ever said it before.” This is advertising as an art.

And both are a function of good writing. In fact, not just good writing, but superior writing, because the cost of getting those words in front of potential customers can be substantial. So, every word counts.

Structuring Creativity

How an ad expresses its message, both visually and verbally, can vary dramatically depending on who is saying it. The total impact the ad will achieve intimately depends on the talents of the art director and the copywriter, the so-called “creatives” of the business.

“Creativity” is probably one of the most abused and misused words in English or any other language. What is creative to some is outlandish, offensive, or obtuse to others. But isn't seeking creativity exactly what Bill Bernbach is exhorting advertisers to do?

Not really. Stripped of mythology, saying what you have to say in a way that it has never been said simply means: Put forward the essentials of the message in such a way that they cannot be ignored—on the first exposure and on subsequent exposures.

So much emphasis is placed on attracting attention and conveying a message on the first exposure that little thought seems to be given to what will happen, if anything, on the second, third, and subsequent exposures. This is the concept of “wear-out. After how many exposures does the ad stop having any useful impact?

Unlike supermarket advertisements, ads for prescription pharmaceuticals seldom appear only once (“Buy now before supplies run out; Special discount prices, stock up now”). Instead, they usually run for at least several months, and often a year or longer.

True, few doctors read the same ad more than once, but they cannot help seeing it more than once. They will certainly see it much more often than they will see the pharmaceutical representative who visits them to tell them about the product.

Therefore, a truly efficient ad should have an impact each and every time it is seen—whether it is read each time or not. This is why the fundamental structure is so important. And why it is well worth spending all the time and energy necessary to get it right.

If wear-out is a key concept in advertising, how is it relevant to writing and public speaking in a more general context?

When you are writing or saying something, you probably hope that it will have a major impact the moment your audience reads it or hears it. And it might very well have such an impact. However, once they put the article down or you have finished your speech, how long will that impact last? Unless it has one or more key “hooks” in it, very rapidly your message will probably be shoved to the back of the mind, and then submerged entirely, i.e., it quickly wears out. So how do you write and speak so that your message has greater longevity?

Let me once again return to the world of medical advertising for some help.

In general, any ad that communicates the product name and main selling proposition in a flash should continue to work if the underlying strategy remains the same. The assumption is, each exposure—even if it is only as long as it takes to turn the page—reinforces previous impressions of the message in the medical journals, symposia, mailings, etc. Ads that rely on “teaser” headlines or other indirect approaches are problematical. It is far more likely that the doctor will perceive this kind of advertising as promotion rather than information and will turn the page with no reinforcement of the selling message at all.

A truly effective long-life ad may not always appear smashingly striking at first sight; however, if it is well constructed, i.e., contains compelling messages (hooks), it will grow and gain strength over time. By contrast, an ad that is extremely striking at first sight—this being its major attribute—will probably lose power over time. Sometimes overnight.

Likewise with an article or speech. Your audience may not ever reread your article, and almost certainly never again hear your speech. However, if they are constructed around well-targeted hooks (key ideas that cannot be easily dismissed), then your efforts are likely to bear fruit long after the article is read, or the speech heard. Indeed, any time the subject of your article or speech comes up in any other context.

Developing advertisements, articles, and speeches that “sell” on first and subsequent exposures admits of no hard and fast rules. Indeed, a superficial analysis of the short- and long-term effects of an ad, article, or speech is likely to be very misleading, with very expensive consequences.

For example, here are the descriptions of three advertisements I produced when I was creative director of a specialized medical communication agency. You may not fully understand the products but look closely at the description of each advertisement.

1. Product: Vasodilator

Objective: Increase prescriptions by repositioning it as the first product of a new, more effective therapeutic class

Headline: “6 Actions on the Blood and the Vessels to Combat Claudication and Its Premonitory Symptoms”

Visual: 6 symbols in the form of a rectangle representing the 6 modes of action

Body copy: factual, moderate length

2. Product: Benzodiazepine

Objective: Stabilize leadership position/market share in an anti-benzodiazepine marketing environment

Headline: “My Conditions for Prescribing an Anxiolytic to My Patients”

Visual: Intelligent, serious-looking general practitioner speaking the headline

Body copy: factual, short

3. Beta-2 mimetic bronchodilator

Objective: Maximize prescription potential by overcoming market prejudice to using oral beta-2 mimetics in the treatment of nocturnal asthma

Headline: “Asthma: Night Is the Enemy”

Visual: Artist’s impression of the experience of a night-time asthma attack, painted by an asthmatic artist who suffers from such attacks.

Body copy: factual; extremely short

At first glance the vasodilator and benzodiazepine ads might appear uninspired, even banal. They are unlikely to win any awards for advertising “creativity.” On the other hand, the asthma ad is exactly the type that could win a creativity award.

Despite their superficial differences, fundamentally they are quite similar. All three ads achieved very high awareness and credibility scores. One of the so-called “banal” ads was so well received—and had such an impact on sales—that when we proposed a more “imaginative” version, the product manager, originally unconvinced by it, growled: “If you touch my ad, I’ll break your arm.”

Conclusion: All three ads were extremely creative in the real sense of the word, because they:

1. Clearly reflected the nature of the product
2. Precisely addressed the needs of the market
3. Elicited the desired response (won prescriptions).

About the Author

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA’s daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 30 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.

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