

# Merchandising

by Keith Evans



## Readers hate ad clutter

Time — there's never enough of it. Yet some people treat us as if we possessed it in abundance.

It happens with too many news and feature writers. They waste our time because they can't quickly get to the point of an article. With some writers you need to scan down several paragraphs to find out what they are trying to say. I don't know about you, but sometimes I just don't have the time or the patience.

Far too many advertisements for registered beef cattle have the same problem. The ads can't seem to get to the point, and some never do. Readers are faced with the decision of whether to sort through the confusion or to forget the whole thing and turn the page.

The decision is made in a matter of two or three seconds. That's all the time an ad has to attract readers' attention before they turn the page. People won't take time to deal with clutter.

We see ads that fail in every livestock publication. These are ads with two or more photographs surrounded by lines of headline type, with no central focus. They have no place for readers to start, stop or rest their eyes. If a benefit is offered, the reader must dig to find it. And the fact is that readers seldom dig through editorial material or advertisements to find information. There's too much else to do.

### Keep it simple

The heart of any good ad is simplicity. Good ads and good advertising programs are interesting, informative, easy to read and to understand, and simple. They make their points immediately, boldly and in easy-to-understand terms. The benefits one can expect from buying the advertised product or service practically jump off the page. They are obvious and enticing from the reader's first glance.

Remember that advertising deals with the fact that nothing has happened yet. The job of your ad — in fact, of every ad — is,

ultimately, to initiate action, to make something happen.

All of us will avoid a road that is muddy, crowded or full of potholes. It's the same with advertising. Your ad should be like a superhighway that zips the reader quickly and painlessly from the opening promise to the call for action. Only then can you expect

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readers to do what you want them to do. Little happens when advertisers continually place roadblocks in the readers' way.

The rationale that goes into the production of a cluttered, unfocused, confusing ad goes something like this: "If I'm paying good money for this page of color advertising, then give me my money's

worth. Spread colored ink all over the page, and fill every inch with photos and copy."

Certainly, colored ink can bring an illustration to life and highlight the important elements of an ad. By the same token, if it is spread from top to bottom and side to side without a good reason, it can become clutter. When some advertisers look at a page layout and see white space, it scares them to death. They order another photo to be dropped in to fill the void or more lines of bold headline type to cover it up.

A one-line headline that attracts attention and promises a solid benefit is worth far more than five lines of boldface type all stating something different. Big display type should be used sparingly. Too much of it scattered around the ad becomes clutter, which makes the ad more difficult to read. Headlines are like a shout saying, "Hey, look at what I have here."

If you shout several different things, from several different places, you only confuse the reader.

Three well-constructed paragraphs of copy in easy-to-read type — that explain the benefits in a clear, reasonable sales message — beat a page filled with single-sentence statements about a variety of things that

never deliver an interesting and thoughtful sales message. Good copy is not easy to write. That's why there isn't enough of it in livestock ads.

But it *is* worth the added effort and expense.

### Make the most of photos

A picture may be worth a thousand words, and sometimes it's worth much more. But two photos in an advertisement are not worth 2,000 words, and four are not worth 4,000. Usually the effectiveness of ad illustrations is inversely proportional to their number. If one photo is worth 1,000 words, then two are worth a collective 500 words, and so on down the line. So a page of photos the size of postage stamps would be worth virtually nothing.

Direction, focus and simplicity are essential to create hard-working, cost-effective advertising. Decide first what you want your advertising to accomplish, what direction you want to go and what action you want to initiate. Then focus on achieving those results.

Use only the elements that will help you reach your goal and remove everything that stands in your way. Make sure the ad grabs the reader's attention, introduces your sales message at a glance, then spells it out in detail and with such interest that the reader sticks with your ad to the end.

Work through this process and you will notice something almost magical happening. Your ad will come alive. The most important elements, such as the headline, illustration and body copy, will work together as a cohesive unit. The things that distract and discourage the reader will disappear.

When it comes to producing readable ads, remember that less is more. The less you make a reader work, the more effective your ad will be. People will thank you by reading your ads and understanding your message. And that's what advertising is all about.

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