

## The possum principle of advertising

*The possum that ambles down the center of the road soon meets its demise. Advertising that plays possum and hugs the center of the road soon dies.*

*Glenn Jamboretz, a Saint Louis, Mo., advertising executive, labeled the "Possum Principle" of advertising. Some 80% of all advertising, he claimed, stays near the middle of the road, dangerously near to or in possum territory. This advertising is lost in the clutter of all the other look-alike advertisements and trampled by the advertiser who dares to be innovative and different.*

### Herd mentality

Jamboretz probably never read a registered horse, hog, sheep or beef cattle magazine. But if he had, he would surely have found that 10% or less of all the ads are far enough from the center to escape the possum classification.

The truth is, most livestock advertisers appear to love to run with the possums — they seem to strive for conformity. Many breeders obviously are satisfied with ads that look like the rest of the advertisements in a publication. Knowingly or not, they subscribe to the possum principle. It's a shame.

It is no secret that too many ads for registered seedstock feature the standard illustration — a side view of a bull or cow. Sometimes an ad will feature three, four, five or more of these illustrations. I have seen as many as a dozen small photos of this description crammed into a one-page ad. Say what you want, these ads don't do the job of attracting readers.

Why do so many breeders use this kind of photograph to illustrate ad after ad? The only answer is that everyone else does it, and virtually every cattle photographer is willing to oblige rather than to suggest a creative approach.

### Where's the message?

Most ads don't feature attention-grabbing headlines that promise the reader a solid benefit. Instead, a slogan or the animal's name is placed at the top of the ad in place of a real headline. Whole ads are peppered with randomly placed bold display type that pulls the reader's eye from one spot on the page to another, without presenting a message to remember.

Body copy! What is that? An

advertisement is supposed to present a sales message that will make a reader want to learn more about what the advertiser is selling. Most ads don't contain a block of body copy that presents a compelling, well-reasoned sales message.

It is the lure of the possum principle — the feeling among advertisers that the majority can't be wrong. "If the most successful breeders use this kind of advertising, then it must be the right thing to do," the reasoning goes. Thus one advertiser after another hugs the center stripe, oblivious to the pack of uninspired advertisers that surrounds them, shielding them from exposure to customers and sapping the strength of their marketing program.

### Some survive

But not all possums die on the highway. If enough of them walk the center stripe, some will get through. Likewise, not all middle-of-the-road advertisements fail. Some of them get results. Advertisers with large budgets can run enough ordinary advertising to create top-of-mind awareness in a satisfactory number of potential buyers. Send out enough possum ads and some will survive.

But what about the small-scale breeders with limited budgets and high expectations for success? They are at a disadvantage in this game. For them, there usually isn't

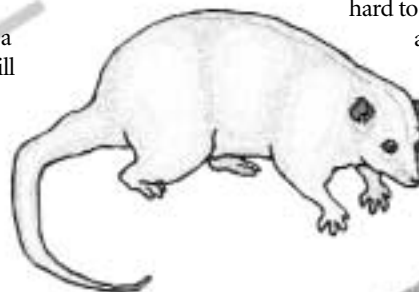
enough money available to achieve sufficient recognition using the possum advertising approach. Advertisers who must run smaller ads and/or advertise less frequently must make every dollar count. Each ad must work harder than those in the middle of the road.

Good advertising isn't easy to produce, which is why there is so little of it, no matter where you look. For example, look at the automobile and SUV ads that you see on television. They look amazingly alike. It is

hard to tell one brand of car from another with all of them racing at illegal speeds along a beautiful highway without another car in sight. And which brand of SUV is slamming through the mud, wheels spinning and the driver beaming with delight? Yet car advertisers' problem isn't lack of money; they make a conscious decision to do what they do.

Likewise, every registered breeder must decide for himself. Improvements to a possum program will come when individual breeders demand that their advertising attract more attention and bring in more potential customers. In the improvement process, don't be discouraged if every ad you produce is less than perfect. Once you become a better student of advertising, and more critical of the ads you pay for, you will never be completely satisfied. Success comes not from achieving perfection, but from the never-ending pursuit of it.

Each time you design an advertising and marketing program think of the lowly possum. It will help direct you away from the center, into the fast lane of marketing success.



*Keith Evans*

E-MAIL: [evans34@ccp.com](mailto:evans34@ccp.com)