



Merchandising

► by Keith Evans

Don't kill that ad!

Great ads never die, they're just thrown away!

With apologies to the late General Douglas MacArthur, this paraphrase of the famous line from his retirement address makes a serious point for advertisers, particularly registered beef cattle advertisers.

If it's not broke ...

Advertisements with real selling power, unlike a car or tractor, almost never wear out. Instead they are too often killed and replaced by something new. The less a breeder knows about the basics of advertising, the more likely he or she is to commit this advertising sin — replace an effective ad or ad campaign with a new, untested one that may or may not provide equal selling power.

It is virtually a natural reaction. We get tired of ads as we go through the process of planning a program, creating the ads, proofing, making corrections, rereading and reproofing. Once we see the ads in print a few times they begin to look like old stuff. The common assumption is that everyone else is as familiar with the ads as we are, and it is time for a change.

Throughout the years when I managed breed association advertising, I occasionally had to fight with staff and board members who wanted an effective campaign replaced. One time I lost. The board voted to kill the most effective campaign I had ever been associated with while it was still in its prime. They were tired of seeing it and tired of hearing complaints from the competition.

The fact is that by the time you are tired of your advertising, it is just getting noticed and read by the people you want to influence most. Let me give you an example. National farm magazine publishes sometimes test a specific issue to see how well subscribers read and remember the editorial and advertising content. In one magazine, the best advertisement earned a "read most" score of 30. This means that 30% of the magazine's readers had read the ad's headline and most of the copy. The average score for advertising in the issue was 16%. Out of the 58 ads studied, 13 had a "read most" score of 10 or less. The worst was 2.9%. These scores are about normal for most readership results I have studied.

The value of creating outstanding ads

rather than average or below average ads is obvious. We can discuss this in a later column. The point I want to make here is that even the best ad in the magazine was read by only 30% of the subscribers. So, the advertiser would have to run the ad three or four times to get the message in front of a sizable majority of the magazine's subscribers. An average-scoring ad must be run many more times in order to achieve the same penetration. There is little hope for the ads that scored near the bottom of the test.

But advertising is not even this simple. Not everyone carefully reads every publication, for a variety of reasons. Some people never read a magazine thoroughly; they simply skim each issue looking for the most interesting things. As a result, these people may notice only the most interesting, attractive ads.

Readers who are in a hurry may notice a good ad, but not have time to read it. These people will likely read the ad the next time they see it. Most of us get behind in our reading and may never get to a particular issue before the next one is delivered to the mailbox. Because of these and many other factors, it is vital to produce powerful advertising and then run it enough times to achieve maximum results. The better the ad, the longer it should be used.

... don't fix it!

Another reason to keep running good ads time after time is that you don't advertise to a static audience. The readers of almost any magazine are somewhat like a passing parade. Each month readers drop out for a variety of reasons — death, retirement, change in business plans, etc. New readers who have never had a chance to see any of your advertising, let alone get tired of it, take their places.

Some magazines have a turnover of 10% or so each year. These new people have had less time to form opinions and are thus more open to respond to good advertising. Think about it — if you ran the same great ad forever, it would always be new to a significant number of people.

Look how pickup trucks are advertised. Advertising themes like Ford's "Built Ford Tough" and Chevrolet's "Like A Rock" have been used for years. For the most part, only the graphics change; the message is almost always the same.

At the risk of being dated, when I was a kid a man named Charles Atlas constantly advertised his Dynamic Tension method of bodybuilding. It was always a cartoon strip ad that appeared in the Sunday funnies, comic books, and men's magazines like *Argosy* and *Popular Science*. Each one, it seemed, involved a skinny young man who took his girl to the beach where a muscle-bound bully kicked sand in his face and embarrassed him in front of his girlfriend. In response, the skinny kid signed up for a Dynamic Tension course, built up his physique, then took his girlfriend back to the beach and used his new muscles to teach the bully a lesson in common courtesy.

The ads, with minor variations, ran for 40 years or more and made Atlas rich and a household name. People still use the term "kicking sand in his face" to describe the actions of someone who is trying to provoke another person, though they probably don't know its origin. Atlas may well have gotten tired of seeing these ads in print, but he had the good sense not to ask his advertising manager to come up with something new.

The next time you are tempted to toss out an effective ad for an untested one that is "new and different," think of Atlas and remember, great ads never die, they're just thrown away.

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