

Marketing Insights:

Advertising Your Program

Often considered a necessary evil for marketing seedstock, advertising requires a plan to be an asset rather than a financial drain.

by Eric Grant

Few people have spent more time — or enjoyed more success — in seedstock marketing than Deb Norton. Norton, who owns and operates Graphic Arts of Topeka, an advertising firm based in Topeka, Kan., has developed more ad campaigns during the last three decades than just about anyone in the business.

She shares her thoughts about what works in advertising, what doesn't, and why producers should take a careful look at the overall effectiveness of their advertising programs.

Why should a seedstock producer advertise or not advertise?

Norton: A seedstock producer, like any other business with a product to sell, needs advertising to position and brand their operation or product. For many, advertising, as a component of a marketing plan, is a necessary evil. A producer with a clear understanding of the market, current customer base and a target for the future will likely find success in advertising.

A producer should not advertise if he's not in a position to make a long-term commitment to the process. The producer must have the capacity to objectively evaluate his product and its place in the industry. If those questions cannot be answered, my recommendation is to save the money and to spend it somewhere else.

What's the first step in developing an advertising program? What are the subsequent steps to executing this program?

Norton: The first step in developing an advertising program is commitment from the advertiser. Although there are hundreds of pages of advertising sold each month industrywide, a very small percentage of ads reflect an organized, strategically planned campaign or program.



Deb Norton

Many advertisers simply are responding to the fieldman's sales call and truly have little input into ad content, much less the strategy necessary to launch an advertising program.

Subsequently, the same long-term commitment is necessary through the course of the campaign from both the advertiser and the agency. Many producer ad programs are doomed from the beginning simply because of unrealistic goals and the impatience to allow the program or campaign to produce results.

What doesn't work when it comes to advertising?

Norton: That is a really simple question on the surface, but quite complex in reality. After 30 years in advertising and marketing, I'm still baffled by what 'works.' Some of the most successful ad campaigns have literally broken all the rules in terms of design, color,

etc., while some of the most unsuccessful campaigns seemed to have contained all the necessary ingredients for success.

In traditional business-world advertising, media exposure is rated in degrees of saturation. In livestock advertising we rarely, if ever, reach saturation level or that level at which ads have the opportunity to realize full potential.

Recognizing that reality, it is difficult to accurately predict what will work. However, I believe one of the most graphically flawed ad campaigns in our business has been arguably the most successful simply because it has not changed for over 15 years.

What are the key elements of an advertisement?

Norton: The key elements of an ad, in my opinion, are headlines. In the age of advertising overload, the first goal is to get the reader to stop for even a nanosecond. If we can capture the reader's eye for a moment and follow with interesting and relevant copy, then the ad has a chance to do what it was designed to accomplish.

Certainly graphics, headline and copy all psychologically work in tandem to produce desired results, but something must stop the reader's eye first. In the world of livestock advertising, we have an even greater challenge than many traditional business publications, since the average advertising-to-editorial ratio is about 65%-75% advertising to 25%-35% editorial, which is much higher (more advertising) than in other industry publications.

What used to work in this business but doesn't anymore? In what ways has advertising changed?

Norton: Certainly the look of advertising has dramatically changed. Color is much more affordable, and we can produce ads in

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a short time frame that literally were impossible to produce 10 years ago. Yet the advances in technology have produced a cottage industry of nonprofessional designers with little or no respect (or understanding) of typography or the fundamental elements of design. In addition, digital photography and the capability to manipulate the images leave us faced with significant fundamental issues of honesty and integrity with regard to product representation.

What's the most important thing someone should know before launching an ad campaign?

Norton: There is no such thing as an overnight success. The ad is simply one element in a strategic ad campaign. Equal attention must be paid toward all elements in the campaign (i.e.: supporting material, ranch brochures, public relations, etc.). In the world of livestock advertising, collaboration with the producer is paramount.

My mistakes in advertising are way too numerous to mention. I finally came to realize that mistakes are a fact of life in the business of advertising and marketing. Think about it: If we set type on a catalog, given the scope of data included today, we will literally make hundreds of thousands — if not millions — of keystrokes. So, in reality, the challenge becomes how to minimize mistakes and implement quality control systems to prevent errors.

In terms of strategic planning and advertising, product history is full of researched, well-planned, very creative attempts to sell or market products that have failed miserably. The business of advertising is not an exact science. We, as advertising professionals, must use as much information as we can gather, mix it with a bit of common sense and logic, and ultimately, the consumer determines whether we succeed or fail.

How do you work with an advertiser in developing an ad campaign's goals and strategies?

Norton: First and foremost, we make certain the advertiser is truly ready for an ad campaign. Many think they need to advertise, but have little understanding of the commitment required from them to position an operation or market a product. Once we feel the commitment is genuine, we then proceed to gather information, determine budget issues, time frame, and goals and objectives for the campaign.

With all the advertising in this business, how does an advertiser get his ads noticed?

Norton: If we refer to the average industry publication, my response is, "Less is better." Month after month, we see single-page ads with more information than the reader can digest in three months, much less the small window of seconds to a minute or two.

An ad that can provoke thought, is graphically interesting, communicates a message and does it all in about 50-100 words is almost like an island in a sea of too much type, too many photos and too much whiz-bang Photoshop.


In addition, objectively analyzing the demographics is important, yet it is most often overlooked. For instance, if a producer's customer base reaches no further than 150 miles from the ranch, does it seem prudent to allocate the majority of the ad budget to national publications?

What's the most difficult thing about advertising?

Norton: One of the most difficult things about advertising is dealing with the incredible intimidation factor experienced by most men. Many have a sense of the need to advertise, but are quite intimidated by the process and reluctant to participate at the level necessary to achieve their goals. As a result, most have squandered a lot of dollars on ineffective advertising done as a last resort.

When the producer acquiesces to 'needing' advertising rather than satisfying the fieldman, he's already convinced advertising doesn't work. Our first challenge is to sit down with the potential client and answer every question as honestly as possible and make assurances it is reasonable to expect results, then begin the process of quantifying those results.

We are cautious when working with a client and are inclined to establish conservative goals and realistic timelines. Again, we must emphasize the importance of client commitment in both time and resources. Most producers are conditioned to thinking about an ad campaign in the context of an annual production sale or roughly a 90-day window of advertising.



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In doing so, all advertising expenses are placed against the sale gross and 'justifiable.' However, when we explore a strategic ad campaign or marketing plan, there will be activity and expenses throughout the 12 months.

Many times, the average producer is not prepared for the cash flow requirements of an organized ad campaign.

How will advertising be different in five or 10 years compared to today?

Norton: Obviously, the internet will play an even greater role than today. I believe specific product information will be much more relevant in the future. There will likely always be a place for image ads, but the internet provides a better forum for advertorial type ads with more specific product information. Although I anticipate breed publications will experience a transformation, print media will still be important as a communication vehicle. As our industry becomes more vertically integrated, I expect to see much more joint breed advertising.

Generally speaking, the beef producer has had a difficult time buying into the concept of 'consumer marketing.' For many years, the producer has failed to make the connection between his operation and the retail beef consumer. In the future, the producer must come to grips with the fact that he is simply where the process of a retail purchase begins.

If the beef producer were in the 'widget business,' he would be the guy that poured the widget in the mold. If the producer produced a faulty batch of widgets and the consumer made the connection to that brand of widgets, the retail customer, albeit down the line, would likely choose another brand of widgets in the future.

The producer, much like the 'widget maker,' must accept appropriate responsibility for the quality of the end product. As the beef producer accepts more responsibility with his "raw product" contribution to the food chain, advertising strategies and ad content will change, and the producer will be more involved in the overall marketing strategies of beef.

