

## **Advertising's Most Important Word**

If you had to guess the single most important word in advertising what would it be: free, special, discount, sale, new, improved, bigger, or better?

So many words have lost their meaning or been corrupted by misuse or abuse that it is not an obvious choice. The words luxury, exclusive, and world class have been rendered meaningless after being applied to everything from eight hundred square foot condos to restaurants that serve microwave frozen dinners. We can't even rely on light, diet, or low carb to actually describe what's inside a package.

What advertisers have done is create a hyper cynical marketplace, where the audience for whatever you sell has lost faith in what is being said. The Web with its emphasis on content gives advertisers an opportunity to redeem themselves and to deliver meaningful information to its audience.

## **All Content Is Advertising, All Advertising Isn't**

Some may cringe at the thought but in the final analysis all content is a form of advertising. Content is rarely if ever neutral, even if it doesn't overtly promote a product or service; content always has a point to make, or an idea, concept, or position to advance. If content doesn't provide some perspective, some meaningful knowledge, then does it really qualify as content? The same can be said for advertising, if it doesn't explain, enlighten or engage, it is just noise.

## **What Is Advertising's Most Important Word?**

My vote goes to the simple innocuous word "like:" a nondescript word that carries with it all the conceptualization power you need to create a business identity, to form a brand personality, and to position your product or service in the mind of your audience. A previous article of mine "A Website Without Video Is Like..." uses the power of metaphor to illustrate how this little four-letter word can crystallize an idea in the mind of an audience.

## **Metaphor + Analogy + Stories: The Adman's Best Friends**

A metaphor explains complex concepts and hard to comprehend processes by comparing them to common everyday knowledge. We use metaphors everyday without even realizing we're doing it. We 'race' to the office. We work like 'dogs.' And we all know, it's a 'jungle' out there. Metaphors are critical to the way we communicate with each other and to the success of our marketing communication and advertising.

Metaphors can be extended into analogies, and analogies into stories, and stories into campaigns; and campaigns developed in this manner have a higher probability of achieving the elusive status of meaningful content that embeds your message in your

audience's collective consciousness. There is no better way to overcome a client's objection than to put that objection into perspective with an appropriate allegorical story.

### **Overcoming Objections: How Long Is Too Long?**

We've all heard the constant bellyaching from impatient Web users about how long they have to wait for everything on the Web. Every time I hear this from somebody, I am reminded of the story (perhaps apocryphal) of the early introduction of the Polaroid Land camera.

Before the days of one-hour photo shops, digital photography, and instant video feedback, people had to wait up to a week for their pictures to be developed by the local pharmacy or camera shop. When Polaroid came out with a camera that delivered a finished photograph in sixty seconds, people were amazed; the era of instant gratification had begun.

So the story goes, a group of adventurers traveled deep into the Brazilian Rainforest to learn about the indigenous people. When they came across a tribe who had never seen outsiders before, they befriended them and took pictures of them with the Polaroid cameras they brought along. The natives loved the pictures since they had never seen anything like this before, but they did have one complaint, 'why did it take so long for the pictures to develop?'

The problem is not technology; the problem is one of perception. Like the natives who perceived the sixty second developing of photographs to be slow, so to do many Web-users perceive the Internet to be slow when in fact it is an incredible technological achievement where anyone with a computer and Internet connection can access information from all over the world in seconds or, heaven forbid, minutes.

### **The Better The Story, The Better The Communication**

The solution to the problem is better communication, making yourself and your message instantly understood. People who are truly interested in what you have to say will wait for your Web page or video to load. What gets them frustrated is when they wait, and instead of getting a meaningful message, they get a bunch of nonsense that is irrelevant, self-congratulatory or completely incomprehensible.

A video or audio message on your website is more easily grasped than a page full of densely written text or cryptic bulleted points. But you will lose your audience quickly no matter what the form of your message if it's confusing, muddled, overly complex, or buried in b-school platitudes and industry jargon.

You need your message to be understandable, engaging, and memorable and one of the best ways to convey that message is to compare it to something your audience can relate to. It's like teaching your kids a life lesson by reading them one of Aesop's Fables.

## **Finding Your Metaphor**

Some people have a knack for expressing things in a way that an audience will instantly grasp and more importantly remember. For those of us in the communication, marketing, advertising, and creative development businesses it is a necessary skill learned over the years. But for those in the day-to-day grind of business's nitty-gritty it is rarely an ability that ever gets developed.

Creating a Web video campaign that your audience is going to watch, remember, and pass on to colleagues requires a commitment of time and money, and you want to make sure it communicates your message effectively. Rather than using your traditional approach concentrating on features and facts, try something different; try developing a campaign based on a metaphor that delivers your brand's personality and emotional value-add.

Where to begin? You need to set yourself free from the concrete, and concentrate on the conceptual. If this seems like a difficult thing to wrap your head around, then start with baby steps.

## **Concentrate On The Conceptual**

Any effective marketing campaign whether it's a series of Web videos, direct emails, magazine display ads, banner ads, outdoor billboards, television and radio spots, or any combination there of, will only work if it focuses on a single message.

At the heart of all advertising is the promise you commit to delivering to your clients. No matter how clever or memorable your marketing, if you fail to deliver on that promise, you will fail.

Learn a lesson from the politicians. The general public's opinion of politicians is about on a par with having a prostate exam. Politicians can't help themselves, they promise the electorate what the electorate wants to hear, and then fail to deliver on promises that can never be kept. Consequently, people become cynical and distrust everything politicians say.

Failure to deliver on your promise to be the cheapest, the best, or the guy with the most features, is like a politician promising no new taxes. Read my lips! Those kinds of promises are a prescription for marketing disaster.

Taking the conceptual approach requires a certain degree of confidence and an understanding that you are going to have to give something up to get something in return. If you present your identity as the Timex of widgets, inexpensive and ubiquitous then you are giving up the audience looking for the Rolex of widgets, expensive and exclusive.

## **Audience Resonance: It's All About Striking A Nerve**

One of the most memorable commercials ever to appear on television was the 1985 introduction of the Apple Macintosh computer. The anti-big brother message said nothing of bits or bytes, or anything else computer related, but it did establish Apple's character and personality with its allegorical message, a message that is still valid today.

If your marketing message lacks this kind of power and personality, if your advertising is getting lost, or drowned-out by the competition, try finding a metaphor that instantly tells your audience who you are and why they should care.

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