

Developing a Great Print Ad

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First and foremost, let me say that I am not a huge fan of print advertising for most clients. Print has definitely lost its effectiveness over the past 2 decades, but there are still situations in which it makes a lot of sense. I disagree with experts who advise clients to play it safe and simply mimic the competition with a twist. Take calculated risks, put in the effort to stand out, and you can reap big rewards.

These 10 tips will help you create an effective print ad on a budget:

1. Decide what you're selling before you develop the ad.

Are you selling a specific product, a service, or the company as a whole? You need to figure out what makes your offer valuable to the reader. Don't brag – nobody buys it anymore. Forget 'we're the best!' or 'the largest selection!' or 'the most experienced!' unless it's quantifiable or has been touted by a 3rd party. For instance 'voted best in Chicago 5 years in a row!' or 'the highest volume Honda dealer in Colorado' will get you noticed. Remember that you aren't really selling the actual company, product or service – you're selling the primary benefit of what you're advertising. Tell the potential buyer what's in it for them if they purchase from you. As an example... DON'T advertise this: 'Reliable, Trustworthy Financial Planning' DO advertise this: 'Our Clients Average a 25% Higher Return on Their Investments after Switching to XXX Financial. You can too.'

2. Come up with a great headline.

The headline you use in a print ad is extremely important. If it isn't intriguing enough to get the reader to pause and peruse your ad, then you won't sell anything. The headline must grab attention and inspire interest. Have the headline clearly reflect what your ad is about, such as 'Free Digital Cable for a Year'. In the body of the ad you can offer more details or add whatever conditions you want to attach. Also, headlines do not have to be cute, or rhyme, or use fancy words, but they absolutely must hold the audience's attention and stop them from moving on.

3. Formulate a concept for your ad design.

Once you know what you are selling and what the headline will be, you are ready to formulate a complete concept. Marketers typically suggest that you examine several competing companies' ads and do something similar, but with a unique twist. I politely disagree and suggest that you think outside the box and thoughtfully set yourself apart. Don't create a crazy design just for the sake of being different or freaking people out, because your concept ultimately has to make sense. Consider proven advertising success stories to get you beyond the norm. 'Got milk' doesn't show milk or cows – it shows celebs with milk moustaches. The new Dove 'Campaign for Real Beauty' broke out of the trend of using professional models and leveraged everyday women to sell millions in product. Be smart about appealing to your demographic, but don't get stuck in a rut.

4. Write the copy for the ad.

Even as a professional, I find copywriting very tough. Everybody thinks they can do it and in reality most people stink at it – especially when writing for their own business. This area of the process is truly best left to a professional, but if you insist on tackling it yourself here are a few things to consider. First, people don't really read ad content – they only skim it. Use as few words as possible to get your point across. Second, remember not to talk about how great you are. Just emphasize the value to potential buyers. Third, stay on point. You have already decided what you are selling, so stick to that one thing and don't verbally meander off into the bushes.

5. The ad should have a call-to-action.

Think of something compelling for your target readers such as 'act now to receive an additional \$10 off', 'spaces are limited', or some sort of pitch that will get the person to actually make the buy immediately. 'Sale ends Friday' lets the reader know that after that time they have missed the boat. Avoid generic phrases that are totally overused like 'act now', 'call today' or 'while supplies last' because they have no real sense of urgency and mean nothing to people.

6. Design your graphics and images.

Graphics should support the message, not distract from it, so don't have images, squiggles or dots just to have them. Sometimes a photo can tell the whole ad story, and if that's the case just let the image stand out and have the text back up the graphic rather than the other way around.

7. Put the complete print ad design together.

I cannot stress this enough – USE WHITE SPACE. It can actually be any color, but the point is to leave some space clear of copy or graphics because cluttered ads turns people off and seem too daunting to bother reading. The more white space you have, the more likely people will read your ad and respond. Make sure your headline, graphics, photos and copy all tie in and flow well together. The name of your business or your logo doesn't need to be enormous either – it's tacky.

8. Submit your ad.

As a general rule... the bigger the ad the better. When you read a magazine or look at a newspaper do you take the time to actually look at all those tiny ads clumped together on pages with no content? Probably not. I don't. Your ad should be large enough to get noticed by every reader, and that means a quarter-page ad at the least. I usually recommend to clients that if they do print advertising at all they pony up and do it right! Big ads with good placement are expensive, but they are also more likely to be read and responded to. Placement does matter, by the way, and you should negotiate hard to get premium space on popular pages that aren't too ad heavy. Contracts with publications can help keep costs down by allowing you to agree to a certain frequency or number of ads in exchange for a discount.

9. Repeat your ad.

You should always run a print ad multiple times. Advertisers expect their doors to be blown off after one publication and print advertising doesn't work that way. Repetition is the most important factor in getting readers to buy from you. Frequency matters too. You don't want to run 3 ads a year in a weekly publication because you won't make a repetitive, strong impact on regular readers. Talk to the publisher about frequency and the right number of repeats for your unique strategy.

10. Evaluate effectiveness and revise your ad.

If you have run an ad 3 or more times and you haven't gotten a single call there is probably something wrong with the ad or the publication you picked. If buyers start to trickle in after several runs the ad is probably working and will work even better over time. Change your ad out periodically to keep things exciting and make new offers, but keep enough continuity that people recognize your style and placement when they see it.

That's it! As always, it's better to hire a professional to help you with marketing if you can, but if you need or want to do it yourself these 10 simple tips will help immensely.