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How to Communicate Effectively

It's been estimated that of the \$1 billion that General Motors spends each year just to produce its advertising, nearly half, or \$500 million worth, is spent on the production of advertising that will never be seen by mass audiences. Why? Because, for one reason or another, about 50 percent of the advertisements (which include print ads, radio commercials and TV spots) fail to achieve reasonably acceptable "scores" in controlled test situations such as focus groups and closed-circuit theaters, or in limited, short-run media tests in small, carefully selected regional markets.

And what exactly is GM testing for? Is it the advertising's ability to sell and persuade? If readers and viewers will pay attention to it? If they even like it? Are they testing for brand recognition? The advertising's memorability? Degree of originality?

In a way, they are testing for all of the above, but only because it's en route to what GM really wants to know. Does the advertising communicate what it is supposed to communicate? And, just as importantly, will it communicate this to the majority of the people who are exposed to it?

The idea that communication effectiveness can be more important to an advertiser than the advertising's ability to motivate or "sell" usually comes as a surprise to those hearing it for the first time, but it's true. That's why the biggies test for communication effectiveness — first of all, because the stakes can be high; and, secondly, because they know that successful communication lays the foundation for successful selling.

Does your advertising communicate what you want it to? Listed in the box below are six things you can do to come a little bit closer to knowing you've got a focused and more effective piece of advertising communication.

Communication effectiveness is not a guarantee of advertising effectiveness. In fact, there are no guarantees of advertising effectiveness. But, effective communication, getting across what you've decided to get across, definitely minimizes the risks.

Six ways to make it better

1. Keep it simple
2. Make sure the advertising says only one thing
3. Always remember that words aren't the only form of communication
4. Make your ads truthful
5. Make your ads believable
6. Be consistent

Stephen Garey, "Communicate Effectively," *In Business*, July/August 1990

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