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Creativity — Can it Affect Readership?

Discussing creativity in print advertising is a little like handling mercury at room temperature. It can be a very slippery commodity. Everybody interprets the benefits of creativity differently.

However, there are certain aspects of the creative process that can be quantified and discussed in terms that have broad application. Ad size, color vs. black and white, design elements, photos vs. illustrations, headlines and copy length are all part of the creative whole and the subject of much ongoing research.

Ad size

Generally speaking, larger ads have higher readership and pull more leads than smaller ones. In one case, a tabloid page ad outpulled a standard page by 377%, even though it cost only 43% more to run. Another example shows that ads first run as standard pages, then enlarged to tabloid pages increased sales leads by 115%.

In a 1991 analysis of ads from trade magazine, *NEW EQUIPMENT DIGEST* (NED), the average black and white, 1/9-page ad drew 89.9 leads while the average black and white full page ad produced 120 leads.

Laboratory of Advertising Performance (LAP) confirms these findings. They report that readership of a two-page spread was more than double that of a 2/3-page ad for both four-color and black and white executions.

The use of color

NEW EQUIPMENT DIGEST also commissioned a seven-year Hagen Research, Inc. study, tracking readers' attention to individual advertisements. Of the one hundred top scoring ads, none were black and white, 3% were two-color, while 97% were four-color.

Other major trade publishers report that four-color ads can receive nearly 40% higher readership scores. In one publication, the same 1/3-page ad ran twice in the same issue...one in four-color and the other in two-color. They received identical placement on the page. The four-color version outdrew the two-color ad by over two to one.

Design elements

Some design elements, such as reversing type (white type out of a dark background) or placing type over a photograph can affect readership. While the issue isn't clear cut, numerous studies indicate that most readers prefer black type on a white surface. Of the best pulling ads, very few had white type on black or type over a photograph. Even fewer placed white type over a complex background.

Photos vs. illustrations

Usually photographs are more effective than illustrations. Readers want to see an actual product and, therefore, photos add a sense of realism. On the other hand, if there is a complex or highly technical point to make, line drawings, engineering illustrations or exploded views of a product can be more effective.

Headlines and copy

In headlines, strong benefit statements almost always outdraw headlines that deal in generalities or make ambiguous attempts to be clever. One LAP study concluded that the more specific the promise made in a headline, the more likely the reader would go on to read the body copy of that ad.

Concerning headline and copy length, there is no convincing evidence that says length has any real effect on the number of leads or ad readership. The rule of thumb...always keep it simple and use just enough words to tell your story effectively without cluttering the ad unnecessarily.

Does creativity work?

There is solid evidence to suggest that the way your ad is designed has a lot to do with the results it generates. The many advertisers who have lowered their cost per inquiry using creative approaches keep proving this point with every insertion.

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