

Title:

It's Not Funny Unless it Sells

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718

Summary:

Does humor really work in advertising? Is it okay to get a few laughs when talking about your product or service? Does humor sell? A seasoned ad pro offers some sage advice and handy tips on the use of humor in advertising.

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Article Body:

We've all encountered humor in advertising. TV ads showing smart dogs fetching their owners a beer. Radio spots with aliens purifying our drinking water. Print ads with famous people wearing milk mustaches. Many use dry wit. Others are just plain silly. A few are in bad taste. And some, heaven forbid, aren't even funny.

Humor has its place

Does humor really work in advertising? Is it okay to get a few laughs when talking about your product or service? Does humor sell? There are no absolutes, no easy answers. What we do know is that, as in real life, humor has its place. In advertising, that place must always be clearly defined and understood. For humor used indiscriminately can be a disaster—for your product, your image and your sales. And that's not funny.

Making human contact

The object of humor is to make human contact and break the boredom barrier. This invisible barrier goes up the second your audience is exposed to any advertising. It's the result of tens of thousands of ads that confront us every year. For the human brain, it's a matter of survival. It simply shuts out what it sees or hears and says, "I know a sales pitch is coming, I've been bored to death before, I'm tuning out." Humor is one way to get through. Used correctly, humor leads your audience to a common ground of understanding. A feeling of "we're all in this together." Just like a speaker who starts with a humorous

anecdote to 'break the ice,' using a funny situation or character can make your audience more receptive as you segue into your selling message.

Tread lightly and cautiously

By the same token, an off-color joke or inappropriate comment about the audience or any individual member can be an instant turnoff and shoot that barrier right back up—maybe even permanently. The same holds true for humor that leaves a negative impression about your product or service. I remember hearing about one ad for a burial service with the headline: "We're the last ones to let you down." Sales didn't exactly jump through the roof. Most professional comedians know that the best humor is broad and even handed, reflecting universal truths or situations that apply to us all. They set up a character we can all identify with, then put that character through actions we may have experienced. A comedian once gave me an example of what's funny and what isn't. "A guy slipping on a banana peel isn't funny. A guy trying not to slip on a banana peel, now that can be funny."

It's not easy being funny, especially in print

Being funny in TV or even radio isn't easy, but it's even harder in print. There's no motion, no special effects, no silly animal tricks or goofy character antics—just a static visual and headline. Print is one medium where creative writers really have to work hard for the right result: humor that sells. For, in just one snapshot, you've got to establish the character, set up the situation, and payoff the punch line. It's like a comic strip with only one frame. It can be done, but it's not easy. And once you've broken the boredom barrier, there's still lots of work to be done.

Once the laughing stops, there's still that pesky product to sell

Too many advertisers forget that the object of any ad, funny or not, is to get people to try the product being advertised. It's okay for your audience to respond with, "That's a funny ad" as long as they also come away with, "That's a great product!" Humor should accent or showcase your product's identity or key features, not bury them in a laugh. Some really funny ads suffer from "generic identity." Your audience loves the ad, but confuses your product with your competitor's. Not funny.

One final thing to keep in mind about humor: it's not for amateurs. As any professional comedian will tell you, being funny is serious business. So even if you fancy yourself a master joke teller and life of the party, you should still leave creating funny ads to the pros.

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