

Time To End The War Between Direct Response And General Advertising

Most people in advertising are aware of the ongoing battle between direct marketers and general advertisers.

Like most conflicts, this one is based more on misunderstandings than reality. The fact that these misunderstandings have arisen is not surprising. Both general advertisers and direct marketers have, through trial and error, developed a set of rules, which when followed, increase the likelihood of producing effective advertising. What's fascinating is that the rules of direct marketing and the rules of general advertising are completely contradictory. Let's look at a few examples.

The Big Idea: General advertisers are usually searching for "the big idea". The big idea can launch a brand into the stratosphere, give it a personality, make people fall in love with it and help to distinguish it from its competitors. Slogans that capture the big idea so well include "We're number 2, we try harder!" and "You deserve a break today". Beautiful!

In direct response, success does not come from the big idea. It comes from the intelligent, disciplined use of proven direct response techniques, including *benefit driven copy*, *powerful demonstrations*, *a good offer* and *the audacity to ask for the order, now!* In DR, focusing on the big idea is usually a big mistake.

Less is more: General advertisers almost always think in terms of 30-second or 60-second commercials, or clever, concise print ads. And they have thought that way for so long, it's not surprising they find it difficult to conceive of anything different.

As direct response marketers, we know that the longer we can engage the consumer, the greater our chances of making a sale. That's why, with a few notable exceptions, 60-second DR commercials outperform 30-second commercials and 120-second DR commercials outperform 60-second commercials. And of course, 30-minute infomercials outperform them all.

When clients are introduced to the idea of doing an infomercial, one of the first questions that arises is "What will we say for 30 minutes?" Fortunately, once they start thinking about it, they usually run out of time long before they run out of wonderful things to say about their product or service.

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Focus! Focus! Focus! A by-product of the 30-second commercial is the need to always stay focused. General advertisers know they must find the most compelling benefit of a product and hammer it home. In a 30-second commercial, you better focus on your core benefit and forget everything else or you'll end up communicating nothing. The unavoidable result is that many salient sales points never get into the consumer's head.

On the other hand, if you are producing a direct response commercial, you want to give the viewer every reason to buy you can possibly think of, and then some. Direct response works by building a comprehensive and convincing case for purchase. The goal is to give the viewer *all* the information they need to make a purchasing decision. Explain every benefit, extend the benefits, answer all objections, repeat the key features and then repeat them again.

From these previous examples, you can see how someone familiar with general advertising would be confused by direct marketing and vice versa.

Direct marketers, trained to think in terms of “cost per order,” often think that general agencies are more interested in winning awards than producing effective advertising. General advertisers, in turn, often think that direct marketers don’t understand brand equity and wouldn’t know a good creative idea if they saw one.

The truth is we have a lot to learn from each other. And the first step to learning is to acknowledge what the other group brings to the party.

As direct marketers, we must admit that general advertising is extremely effective. No, it doesn’t **all** work and yes, it is often hard to distinguish the wheat from the chaff. But the fact remains that general advertising has been the single most powerful force in creating consumer demand for products and services. In fact, it could be argued that consumer demand is sustained by the imaginative force of general advertising.

We also have to admit that there are many products that simply cannot be marketed effectively through any means but general advertising. Can you imagine trying to create an effective DR campaign around the features and benefits of Pepsi? (Great sugar rush! Improves your relationship with dental professionals!)

And let’s not forget that many of the products we do market effectively through direct response (like automobiles and credit cards), are at least partially successful because of the incredible brand equity built up by general advertisers.

Likewise, brand advertisers need to recognize that there are other, equally effective ways to sell products than those they are familiar with; ways that are extraordinarily powerful despite the fact that they defy all the accepted rules of brand advertising.

When we have a better understanding of how our different disciplines work, we can apply this learning to improve our own advertising. You can see this principle in

action with direct marketing companies like **Sprint**, **Nordic Track** and **Yves Roche** who have successfully integrated brand awareness techniques into their DR commercials, thereby increasing the power and value of each spot they produce.

And you can see it with general advertisers like **Bell Canada**, **Bank of Montreal**, **MasterCard** and **American Express**, who have made direct response techniques an integral part of their brand advertising.

I’m not suggesting that we ignore the distinctions between brand advertising and direct response marketing. They are different disciplines designed to achieve different objectives. I am suggesting that our lack of understanding keeps us from growing and learning as marketing experts.

By understanding the techniques that go into making both direct marketing and brand advertising work, we gain a better understanding of how to motivate consumers to action. And that is ultimately what our clients pay us to do, no matter what we call ourselves.

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