

ad•vantage

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Let's Get It Started!

Welcome to the first issue of my business newsletter, ad•vantage. In my experience as a publishing executive and freelance copywriter, I've learned (often the hard way) that effective communication between partners is absolutely essential. The newsletter is just another tool I can use to communicate with my colleagues, clients, and prospective clients.

My goal is to publish a new issue of ad•vantage in the first week of each month. However, I must emphasize that this is a goal and not a blood-sworn oath. My projects come first, and the commitments I make to my clients and their deadlines are blood-sworn oaths.

You won't need to register or send me your email address to read the newsletter. Each issue will be archived on my Web site, and if you're reading this, chances are good that you know where to look.

If you'd like to receive a printed copy of ad•vantage, just send me an email with "Newsletter subscription" in the subject line. Make sure to include your name, company, and address, and I'll send you each issue hot off the press.

Teach Your Customers How to Buy (Part 1)

Is the art of salesmanship dead? I hear all the time that old-school salespeople and selling techniques are dinosaurs. The argument is usually that consumers have become too savvy for the hard sell: They can smell it a mile away and wouldn't touch it with a rented pitchfork (next month: "Making Mixed Metaphors Work for You!").

As with most conventional wisdom, there's at least some truth to this claim. As consumers, we've become oversaturated with product marketing. We're desensitized—and sometimes downright hostile—to it. A recent survey showed that 63% of respondents believe there are too many ads, and 47% said that ads spoil their media enjoyment. This shift in consumer attitudes has led to several interesting trends.

First, advertising seems increasingly concerned with entertaining the audience. The idea, I suppose, is that if your ad makes the consumer laugh, he'll go out and buy your product or service. Sometimes this strategy might even work. In most cases, you can't even remember the product your favorite advertisement was ostensibly advertising.

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Effective selling and a strong commitment to informing the customer go hand-in-hand at Richfield Bloomington Honda

Second, there's been an increasing emphasis on educating the consumer. Here, the tactic seems to be that if you go out of your way to inform your prospective customers, they may not notice you're selling them something.

This approach to marketing and advertising is potentially a very powerful tool. Consumers do want to make informed decisions. And they need reliable sources of information. If you don't provide it, your competitors probably will.

So, should you try to sell or should you try to inform? The key to real success in your marketing efforts is that you don't have to choose: The best marketing and advertising does both. (It also promises and cultivates a relationship with the customer, but that's a subject for another article.)

I worked with a local car dealership at the end of last year. There's probably no better laboratory than a car dealership in which to study the elements and dynamics of effective selling. I spent a lot of time with the sales managers and sales consultants; I needed to understand the dealership's sales philosophy, and I needed to know how the sales staff executed it "in the field."

Big surprise—I quickly learned that the dealership's sales philosophy was pretty much the same as any effective sales philosophy. It can be summarized as:

- Build rapport
- Find out what the customer wants and needs
- Present features and benefits that match them
- Ask for the sale

The real education was in the way the sales consultants went about executing this philosophy. The most successful salespeople took their title seriously; they considered themselves consultants and not just salespeople. They made an effort to inform and educate every prospect that walked onto the lot. They didn't just inform the customer, though; they informed them about why they should buy the product the dealership was selling.

Here's an example of how a typical "sales pitch" would go:

Consultant: Is safety important to you?

Customer: Of course. I have a wife and two kids.

Consultant: I know you said you're looking at other manufacturers. That's smart...you want to make the best decision for your family. Let me tell you about some of the safety features you should look for and the questions you should ask your salespeople.

Customer: Oh...that's great. I know I want a safe car, but I'm not sure what to look for.

Consultant: The first thing you want to look for is a car that's designed from the ground up to be as safe as possible in the event of a collision. Let's look at this Accord and I'll show you what I'm talking about. Every Honda vehicle is designed with something called Advanced Compatibility Engineering, which redirects the energy of an impact around and away from the cabin...

Later...

Consultant: Be sure to ask your salespeople about side-curtain airbags. They're absolutely critical, since studies have shown that side impacts are more common than head-on collisions. Every car these days has front airbags, but they won't do you any good in a side impact. Unfortunately, most cars in this class don't offer side-curtain airbags and many others only offer them as an expensive option.

Customer: So the Accord doesn't come with side-curtain airbags?

Consultant: Oh, no—all Hondas come standard with front and rear side-curtain airbags. Honda takes its commitment to safety very seriously. But it's something you'll have to ask about when you're shopping around. Of course, the best safety feature is the one that keeps you out of an accident altogether. Let me show you some of the Accord's performance and handling features...

The sales consultant is informing the prospective customer. He's giving the customer real and valuable information on some safety features to look for in a mid-size family sedan. But he's also informing the customer about why they should buy a Honda. No pressure, no old school hard-sell...plenty of good salesmanship.

So an informational focus and effective selling aren't mutually exclusive. How can you incorporate this high-powered fusion into your own marketing plans?

In Part 2 of this article (ad•vantage #2, May 2007), we'll explore three ways you can inform, educate, and sell your prospects and customers. The first is a technique you can use in just about any promotional and marketing effort; the other two are specific marketing tools.

Client Profile: Midwest Reporters

Midwest Reporters is a court reporting and legal videography service offering complex litigation support to law firms, insurance companies, and corporate clients in Topeka, KS and Kansas City, MO. The proprietor, Dana Burkdoll, began offering captioning services in 1995 and transitioned into full-time litigation support in 1999.

Ms. Burkdoll's business has been very successful, and she's done it without a Web site—indeed, with no real marketing at all beyond good-old-fashioned networking and word-of-mouth.



Teaching the customer how to buy.

Having built her business locally, Ms. Burkdoll wants to expand her coverage from Topeka and KC throughout the Midwest. To accomplish that, she's going to need to do some marketing. It starts with a Web site.

As Ms. Burkdoll told me, "My main goal for the Web site is to attract new clients and inform them about the services I offer." In keeping with this month's article, I'd add that we also need to inform her prospects about why they should use Midwest Reporters rather than a competitor.

I did a lot of research for this project—Ms. Burkdoll obviously didn't have a lot of background and existing promotional material to send me. The first thing I noticed is that few court reporters have effective, professional (which doesn't have to mean "slick"), and well-written Web sites. I took particular interest in the last point. In any case, it quickly became clear that strong stenography skills don't necessarily entail strong writing skills.

This is a problem for these sites. Even if stenography and the craft of writing have little to do with each other, my first impression is going to be, "This person can't write a clear, clean, and concise sentence—how are they going to quickly and accurately record the testimony in my depositions?"

Ms. Burkdoll is very good at what she does, and her work is critical to the expensive and complex litigation processes she supports. My approach to the Web site content is that it should positively ooze professionalism, accuracy, and reliability. I want an attorney's first and lasting impression upon visiting the site to be, "Hey, this person is every bit as professional as I am." I want the site to position Midwest Reporters as a valuable partner and highly skilled member of the litigation team.

Hopefully, with Ms. Burkdoll's permission, I'll be able to post a link to the site when the project is completed so you can judge for yourself whether or not I hit the mark.

Feedback

I'd like to close each issue of ad•vantage with letters, comments, and feedback from my readers. So drop me a line at greg@gregbenage.com and let me know what you think—good, bad, or neutral. If you put "Newsletter feedback" in the subject line, I'll assume your permission to publish your comments in this section. I look forward to hearing from you!

About the Editor

Greg Benage is a freelance copywriter with more than 14 years of experience in commercial writing and business communications. For more information, visit his Web site at www.gregbenage.com.



Let me know what you think!