

B2B ADVERTISING: Changing Misperceptions, One Client at a Time

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As any first-year business student can tell you, selling to a company is certainly different than selling to a consumer. However, when you have been in the advertising game for over two decades, you realize that some clients hold fast to marketing beliefs and principles that can easily derail a solid creative strategy.

Several months ago, I had a meeting with a new client that had hired us to help position his firm as a leader in their highly specialized sector. We presented several concepts that were distinct, compelling, and that would stand out among the boring ads in their targeted media outlets. Typically, when an agency is presenting some new creative, you can pretty much tell how the pitch is going by studying the looks on the clients' faces. I could tell fairly quickly that this one wasn't going as well as we had hoped.

When we wrapped up our presentation, the room was uncomfortably quiet until the client's designated marketing leader finally spoke up. Since he was the team member who handed us this particular assignment, he began to explain how the campaign would accomplish the stated objectives. He thought it was different. He thought it was bold. And, above all, he thought it was smart.

A few minutes had passed before one of the other members of the team weighed in. He agreed that we were on the "right track" and had something to work with, but quickly "suggested" a few changes. He didn't want the campaign to be too attention-getting. He thought it should feel more appropriate to the ad environment currently found in the trade publications. He was afraid that coming out with such a captivating appeal (like the one we had presented) wouldn't be direct enough for a highly-technical readership. Oh, and he wanted to include more body text and close-up product photos. In other words, he wanted a typical B2B ad.

Much to the chagrin of creative directors across the country, this is a common occurrence that happens in conference rooms every day. It's not that there's anything inherently wrong with additional copy points and product shots, but there often seems to be a powerful gravitational pull towards the bland in business-to-business advertising. The reasons, I believe, are because of a handful of tightly-held misperceptions that have taken root and have clouded the judgment of today's marketing executives. Here are a few of these myths:

B2B is different than other marketing. I hear this argument all the time...that somehow the rules of everyday marketing don't apply in a true business-to-business context. It's true that selling to a company is different than selling to a consumer. But in each case, you're trying to win over a unique group of people who all come to the party with an existing array of preconceptions and a distinct set of needs. No two B2B or B2C marketing assignments are alike, yet every assignment is subject to the same fundamental and unchanging principles.

Information is more important than emotion. If you've spent any time working in a B2B marketing environment, the chances are good that you've heard this phrase (or some variation of it): "Make the product the hero," or "Just get right to the point," or "Please make sure it has a strong call to action." It's almost as if the people who read B2B ads don't buy iPods, go to the movies, or shop at the mall on weekends. Or if they do, they miraculously disengage the right sides of their brains when they return to work on Monday mornings.

That's not to say that product-specific information isn't important, and especially so when you're dealing with purchases that can cost a company a large amount of money. However, in most B2B environments, larger investments necessitate a longer sales cycle.

In most advertising—consumer as well as B2B—it's the job of the ad to open the sale, not close it. And just because you want your prospects to know something doesn't mean they necessarily want to hear it. At least not at first. There's an old line that I heard years ago: "People don't care how much you *know* until they know how much you *care*." This is also true in advertising. First you must demonstrate that you understand the challenging environment in which your prospects live, and then perhaps they will be more willing to listen to your specific sales pitch.

Creativity isn't critical. This is why so many ads in trade magazines tend to be riddled with bullet points and comparison charts. It is the job of the agency to remind the client that there's nothing wrong with making advertising for even the most boring products impactful, appealing and memorable. Even people who spend their days crunching numbers enjoy a fine wine, a well-done movie, or a gorgeous piece of art.

Companies buy things. I've been in the advertising business for over 20 years, and not once has my company bought anything. Nor have we ever sold anything to another company. Companies don't buy things, *people* do. You might need to convince a committee to approve a large investment, but even these committees are composed of people. And, in almost all instances, there's one person on that committee who holds the power of approval—someone with thoughts, emotions, opinions, hopes and dreams. If you can reach this person with a smart advertising message, he/she might be captivated and motivated to vote in your favor.

Over the years, my agency has struggled with the dampening effects of B2B myths like these in countless client presentations. But we have also shared our creative enthusiasm with many forward-thinking clients who can see beyond the limits of their peers. If you would like to spend some time with our team discussing how B2B advertising can work for your company, please feel free to contact me at any time. jgorab@turchette.com