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What makes you think you're so special?

Developing and using USPs to get results for advertisers

I grew up in a working class family that took a lot of pride in learning your trade and doing a good job. When I took my first job in the industry some twenty five years ago, this mindset led me to read every book on advertising in the Pittsburgh library. One of the writers that I found particularly valuable was Rosser Reeves, (Reeves by the way was the primary inspiration for Don Draper, the lead character in the TV series Mad Men). I could identify with Reeves' belief that the purpose of advertising was to "sell something." Throughout my career, I have used Rosser Reeves' ideas to help my customers and to close sales. One of Reeves innovative concepts was his use of the USP (Unique Selling Proposition). The USP is a tool that is as useful today as it was in Reeves' era.

Reeves was one of the pioneers of applying research to the practice of advertising. In the 1940's Rosser Reeves commissioned a study of successful campaigns. He was interested in programs that excelled in two areas:

1—Penetration

Did the program get the reader's attention and inspire consumer recall.

2—Usage pull

Did the advertising generate a response and motivate the reader to buy the product in the ad.

Reeves' research discerned a pattern common to the programs that performed well in these areas. He found that the most effective programs made a proposition to the reader. Rosser Reeves said that ads "must say to each reader, buy this product and you will get this specific benefit." He found that effective propositions were unique; they offered benefits that the advertiser's competitors could not or were unwilling to provide. The third quality of an effective proposition was that it must move consumers to make a purchase. Rosser Reeves believed that a well crafted USP was the key to building a successful advertising campaign and to establishing a client's brand identity. A classic example of one of Reeves USPs is the slogan that he developed for M&M's, "Melts in your mouth, not in your hands". This simple slogan has been in use for well over half a century.

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The concept of USPs developed by Rosser Reeves in the 1940's for national advertisers is still important to our local advertisers today. Most local ads consist of a "laundry list" of the products and services offered by the advertiser. They try to cram everything they sell into their ads. The ads are full of the "what" of their business, but usually do not include the "why". They list everything they have to offer, but fail to tell the reader why they should do business with their firm. They do not differentiate their business from their competitors. Most people go into business believing they can offer consumers something that they can not get from anyone else. If they do not tell consumers how they differ from their competitors, the difference ceases to be an advantage.

Here is a case in point. Some years ago I was asked to accompany a rep on a call to a pizza shop that wanted to cancel their advertising. The customer told us that his ad was no longer pulling for him. I asked him what had changed, and he told me a franchise shop had opened up down the street and was taking "his business." We looked at his ads and his competitor's ads, both ads gave a long list of the products available and the price for each. I noted that the competitor's prices were significantly lower, which set the shop owner off on an emotionally charged rant. He explained why his pizzas were worth every penny, they were larger, made with better quality ingredients and much better tasting. I asked the customer why he didn't include this information in his ads and he couldn't provide an answer. I offered to release him from his contract without penalty, if he would let me redesign his ad and would go with my program for a month. I headlined his ad with "How to build the perfect pizza" above a "blueprint" showing the taste and quality advantages of his products. Below this were three coupons for his products. At the end of the first week he saw an increase in his business and by the end of the month his business was better than it had been before the competitor moved into his town. He continues to use the phrase "The Perfect Pizza" and to keep his ads focused on quality to this day.

Developing a USP

A USP is a statement of the value created by a customer's business. It is the reason why people choose to spend their money with the customer's business. To develop an effective USP you must determine what criteria shoppers use when making a buying decision. Do they base their decision on price? Do they consider product quality? Is service important? Once you know the criteria that effect consumer's buying decisions, look at the advertiser's business and determine which of the consumer's needs they can best fill. For example,

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Wal-mart's USP is "Always low prices" and they seek to satisfy the consumer's need to save money, on the other hand, their competitor Target's USP is "Affordable style" and seeks to satisfy the consumer's need to make their surroundings pleasant.

To develop a powerful USP you must have a good understanding of the customer's business. Using good questioning technique is critical. You need to know the following:

- What do you do—what products and services does your business offer. Do you provide anything that no one else offers?
- How do you do business—what value added services do you offer that sets your business apart from the competition?
- Who are your customers—who are you trying to reach?
- What do your customers want—what do shoppers want from your business? Why do your best customers keep coming back?

I have found that some customers have trouble putting what makes their business unique into words. When asked what sets their business apart, they shrug and say something like "we're just like any other..." Here's a question that I use to draw a USP out of a customer: "Imagine that I'm the most annoying comparison shopper in the world and I have you and all of your competitors around a table. I ask everyone tell me why I should do business with you? What would you tell me?" I've found that when asked this way, most customers will have an answer that can serve as the basis of their USP.

Putting the USP to work

Once you have determined what differentiates the advertiser from their competition, use the information to write a phrase or slogan for the customer. Incorporate this phrase prominently in every ad you design for the client. Repetition will associate the customer's business with the USP and create a "brand" for them. Selling this concept will also help you to secure long term commitments from your advertisers. Encourage your advertiser to use their USP in all of their marketing, including ads in other media and in their signage. The advertiser described in the story above answers their phone, "Thank you for call Mama Giovanni's, home of the perfect pizza!"



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You should also think about your own USP, what makes your publication unique. Why should advertisers choose to run their ads with you? Defining this and using this information in your presentations will lead to increased sales. As a salesperson, I always tried to provide my clients with the best possible service. I would go out of my way to provide them with information that would help them run their business. My USP was, "I am the advertising rep who genuinely cares about the success of your business."

Conclusion

Advertising is communication. To communicate a message clearly, it is important to clearly define what you want to say. A USP is very simply a statement of what is important for the customer to communicate. By taking the time to define a strong USP for a customer and making it an integral part of their program, you will enhance the response to their ad. Customers who get results are loyal customers.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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