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“Looking Good” in Print

By Jim Busch

Sales people know that the words they say are only one part of the message they send to their customers. Our attitude, appearance and body language are just as important as the words we use. The look of the ad is its “body language”, an ad that is unattractive or difficult to read will diminish the impact of the ad’s message. How you look speaks volumes about who you are as a person. The look of an ad sends a visual message about the quality of an advertiser’s business. It is our responsibility as advertising professionals to make sure the ads we create present our customers in the best possible light.

Putting the ad into context

Looking at a proof or a spec ad on a computer screen, or printed out on a sheet of white paper is very different from seeing the ad in your publication. On a page with editorial and/or other ads, the customer’s ad can be easily lost. Think about how the ad will look on the page. Most pages in print publications are large masses of black ink arranged in horizontal lines. A study conducted by the NAA (Newspaper Association of America) found that if a reader holds a newspaper page a foot or two away it tends to average into a 50% gray tone. To make your design “POP” you need to break this pattern.

Color

Research indicates that the addition of color in an ad increases readership by an average of 20%. This increase in readership more than compensates the advertiser for investing in a color ad. Use color boldly in large blocks for maximum impact. Avoid using color for small type, as the reduced contrast makes reading it more difficult. For the best effect, you want to make a bold statement when using color.

White Space

The most common sin of ad design, particularly in free and community papers, is putting “ten pounds of potatoes in a five pound sack.” Many customers want to put a full page of copy in a tiny one-column ad. This is driven by their desire to get the most for their money. They think they are buying space and they want to fill every square centimeter of it with copy. I’ve seen pizza shop ads that include every item on the menu and every topping on every pie in a six-point type. These ads are so difficult to read that the reader will pass over them. Customers need to remember that we are not really selling them space; but rather they are buying access to potential customers. White space is not simply the absence of copy, it is an element of the design to be used and manipulated like an image or photo.

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An ad that contains too much copy, making it impossible to read, is worthless. An easy to read light copy ad is far more effective than a heavy copy ad that dissolves into a gray blob when read.

An ad that includes a great deal of white space stands out from the solid gray mass that makes up most pages. This also makes the ad easier to read. This is an important factor because most readers are in a hurry and will simply move past ads that are hard to read. Most consumers like the clean look of ads with white space and this opinion will transfer to the business advertised. A clean white space ad creates an image of a clean, classy business. For great examples of the effective use of white space look through any copy of the Wall Street Journal.

Illustrations

Everyone has heard the old cliché, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” In advertising we could add, “A picture is also worth a thousand bucks,” because illustrations have a huge impact on the response rate of ads. One newspaper study found that when a visual makes up 75% of an ad, readership increased by an astounding 48%. With the prevalence of computer-generated images in our culture, using illustrations is more important than ever. An ad with a large compelling image coupled with one strong coupon or special can greatly enhance response rates. I recently worked with a customer who owned a Middle Eastern restaurant and was getting a poor response to her advertising. I replaced her “menu” ad with an ad featuring a large photo of a couple enjoying her food and a headline saying, “We love eating at _____’s restaurant.” The simpler ad design, which consisted of the photo, the headline, and a buy one/get one coupon, plus the address of the business, instantly quadrupled her traffic.

Photos, particularly color photos, produce a much better response than line art. I seldom use line art unless I am intentionally going for a “retro” feel. Photos of people are especially effective. Studies have shown that adding a photo of a person increases readership by as much as 25%. Forward facing, “eye contact” photos are the most compelling. Avoid pictures of buildings, signs etc. If you are going to show a business, show an interior shot with lots of people happily patronizing the customer’s business. No one wants to shop at a business that has no customers.

Free Form Design

Most page layouts in our publications look like a marching band on parade. Everything is lined up and going in the same direction. This predictable format means that no individual element stands out. You can break the monotony of the page by using the elements discussed above or simply by using a free form ad design. The simplest technique is to break the border of the ad, allowing an

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illustration to protrude through the edge of the ad. This breaks the grid of the page and often creates some white space between the ad and the surrounding text. This also has the effect of highlighting the illustration.

Since pages are generally designed along horizontal/vertical lines, incorporating diagonal and curved into your design can make your ad stand out. Using reverse type can further enhance this effect. Be careful, because reverse type can be a double-edged sword. Reverse makes the ad stand out, but can also make it hard to read if improperly used. Too much reverse type can make the ad appear dark. Small type is difficult to read when reversed. I have found that a square or slightly rectangular ad divided by a diagonal, or curved line with one side set in a reverse jumps off the page. Again, this should only be used with a light copy ad.

You can combine several of the techniques by setting the ad copy inside a circle or oval. This forms a frame, which makes the ad stand out on the page. The “frame” can be white space or dark ink.

Four Principles of Effective Ad Design

Flow

Your design should lead the reader through the ad. The natural flow is from left to right, top to bottom, following the path we use to read a page in a book. The smoother the flow the more likely it is that the customer will read all the way through the ad. An ad which has no discernable flow or which forces the reader’s eyes to jump around will not pull nearly as well as one with good flow. When you are designing an ad, think of the reader’s eyes taking a walk through the layout.

Focal Point

The ad should put emphasis on only one element to draw the reader in. Typically the focal point of the ad is at or near the top of the layout. By placing the focal point in the upper left hand corner of the layout, and then running lines of text from top to bottom, you make it easy for the reader to absorb your message. This focal point becomes the jumping off point for the reader’s journey through the ad.

Balance

In addition to flow, you should consider balance when designing an ad. Human beings are naturally drawn to balanced designs. Think of each part of an ad, blocks of type, illustrations, and logos etc., as elements of the design. The size and boldness of copy, the amount of reverse and screened type also affect the balance of the layout. Ads can be laid out in either a formal or static design with the elements placed evenly on either side of an imaginary line drawn down the middle of the ad. An informal or dynamic design places graphic elements to one side of the imaginary line in opposition to the text elements. One of the

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easiest ways to achieve balance when creating an ad is to print out the individual elements to scale and place them on a blank sheet of paper. Arrange and rearrange the elements until you find a pleasing balance with good copy flow.

Unity

Your ad should be a distinct unit set apart from the other ads and copy on the page. The reader should be able to easily know where that ad starts and finishes. The simplest way to do this is to surround the layout with some type of border. Even a fine line border can tie the ad together. You can also accomplish this by using the same font and or similar types of art to draw the ad together. Be careful that the art you are using does not take the reader out of your ad. For example an arrow pointing toward the edge of the ad or even an illustration of a person looking away from your copy may visually lead the reader away from the flow of the ad. Your goal is to create an integrated layout that is attractive and balanced with good top to bottom flow.

Ad Design Shouldn't Be Left to Amateurs

As advertising professionals our job is to give our advertisers the best possible programs. In addition to selling reach and frequency, we need to help our customers with well-designed ads that tell their story clearly and effectively. Sometimes we have to confront the customer and use our persuasive skills to convince them that they don't have to put everything but the kitchen sink in their ad. If you work hard to make our customers look good in print, you will look good to them.

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

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