

Did we say “free?”

Freecreditreport.com does. It says it's free. And says that if you don't know your credit score, you could be up the creek, without a paddle. Trouble is, freecreditreport.com is not free. You have to enroll to get your report, which by the way, you could get free from annualcreditreport.com. The US Congress passed a law a few years ago allowing consumers access to their all important credit reports, for free, on a yearly basis. As an aside, you still have to pay for your FICO score. Regardless, freecreditreport.com still advertises itself as free, even though it isn't. And it has a bunch of different commercials, all with catchy jingles about what could happen to you if you don't know the score. My favorite is the one where the guy ends up working at a tourist fish restaurant. So tragic. Read about the campaign here, courtesy of MSNBC. And remember, free isn't always free. So much for truth in advertising.

Undermining character

Warning—this is a political commentary.

We are in full swing into the political campaign season and for sure we will be seeing many ads tagged as “I am (fill in candidate's name) and I approved this message.” In the past few days I have seen many anti- Obama ads approved by John McCain. About a month or so ago, McCain said he would steer clear of personal attacks and talk about the issues. So now, he is attacking Obama personally. There is a story on Yahoo about this. The question is whether this tactic will backfire. To me the question is why McCain has chosen this route. We

will probably always see attack/negative ads during political campaigns. But to me, it is a mark of desperation. McCain's campaign knows that Obama has more personal appeal than McCain, and they also know that people are not always convinced by the issues but more by personality. McCain's attack on Obama highlights what I have been noting about the Republican candidate—he's a bit rough around the edges.

For those who are 100% in McCain's camp and/or are Obama haters, these ads will serve to bolster their position. They will feel even better that Obama is whatever adjective they want to use. However, for those that are undecided, this tactic is so old-fashioned that I do think it will backfire. It doesn't give anyone reasons to think McCain will have better policies.

Online reputations

A few months back I wrote about companies that check on what is being said about them online. I had written a post about Comcast and their lack of customer service and I myself got a comment from Comcast. I theorized that this was a new outreach program for them, and today's New York Times has a story confirming this. They compare it to a sort of outbound customer service department, trying to fix things before they get out of hand. I will give kudos to Comcast simply for acknowledging how important blogs, social media and other online forums have become and how they can affect reputations.

Reputations are perceptions and thus changeable. We've all heard of sterling reputations, and we should all aim for that. Bad reputations can be damaging in a very real, economic way. This blog will always deal with companies and never with

individual reputations. However, this new online world order can damage individual reputations as well. I saw a story on TV not long ago (I can't remember which TV news show or I would link to it) where an individual had the same name as a famous rock star. Clearly, his online reputation would be somewhat buried because 99% of mentions referred to the rock star. He went to create an online reputation agency that charges lots of money to clean up companies' (and individuals) images. In any case, this is an ongoing issue and one that more companies will be expending effort to deal with.

Truth in advertising

Yeah, it's Comcastic! If you are a Comcast subscriber you have seen these commercials, extolling the wonders of cable versus the slow DSL service of the phone company. You've seen the Slowskys, a family of turtles who much prefer DSL. Funny, yes. Accurate, not really. Apparently, one of the problems with "Comcastic" service is the LACK of service. The Washington Post wrote a story about how Comcast's growth has come at the expense of its customers.

Identifying (with) the competition

Alltel is competing with all other cell phone providers, but particularly with Verizon. I know this from the commercial that Alltel is currently running, featuring a family in an RV

discussing cell phone plans with representatives of all other wireless networks, prominent among which is the Verizon “rep” with the company name inscribed on his red shirt (red also being one of Verizon’s colors). Quizno’s “meaty” sub is far meatier apparently than a comparable meat sub at Subway. They told me so.

We see this side by side comparison frequently in political ads but not as often in product/service ads. Why? Because it is risky. First, there is the risk of libel. If you say anything really bad about the rival, especially something unfounded, then you can be sued. Second, you place yourself in direct competition with something particular, practically begging for people to compare and contrast. As an advertiser, you have to be supremely confident in your product/service to attempt this. Remember the cola wars? Pepsi and Coke challenged people to taste tests!

Another issue with mentioning your competition by name is that you are revealing to the competition just who/what you consider your biggest competitor. For Quizno’s, it is Subway. Subway knows this. A while back, Subway started offering “toasted” sandwiches. Quizno’s is known for their warm offerings.

I understand why you would challenge your competition. You want to prove superiority. However, this strategy can backfire in some cases.

And the Emmy goes to...this

gread ad!

I did not know, until today, that there is an Emmy for Outstanding Commercial. Now I will have to investigate this further. Although the ad industry gives out Clios and Addys, I think an Emmy is well deserved. After all, a good commercial is entertaining, and it is competing with the (supposedly) very entertaining TV we are watching. As those who work in ad production know, putting together a commercial is akin to making a small film. Casting, special effects, location scouting, and more are all involved.

The nominees for the Emmy this year are:

Brother Of The Bride – Hallmark <i>PYTKA, Production Company</i> <i>Leo Burnett, Ad Agency</i>
Carrier Pigeons – FedEx <i>MJZ, Production Company</i> <i>BBD0 New York, Ad Agency</i>
Delivery – Travelers <i>MJZ, Production Company</i> <i>Fallon, Ad Agency</i>
It's Mine – Coca Cola <i>MJZ, Production Company</i> <i>Wieden + Kennedy, Ad Agency</i>
Swear Jar – Bud Light <i>Hungry Man, Production Company</i> <i>DDB Chicago, Ad Agency</i>

Marketing doesn't operate in a vacuum

Literally! You may remember a few months back I bought a Bissell vacuum, basically because price being equal, I believed its tagline: Bissell means clean. Well, my experience has proven otherwise. The vacuum is hard to handle and seems to have lost suction power already. Based on this experience, I'd be hard pressed to recommend Bissell. Which leads me to my topic—marketing should be more than great taglines and fun ads. It should be more than a great media relations campaign or unified branding. It should be about products and services that are good, that work as described, that do offer the goods. Unfortunately, many times marketing DOES operate in a vacuum. Marketing people are relegated to their offices, and most of their dealings are with agencies and other marketing affiliates. How many marketing people actually visit a production line or test a product? I would bet not many. Sometimes, marketing people are the last to know about changes or production timetables. Years ago, when I worked at an ad agency in Boston, we had put together a media buy for the launch of a laptop computer. Guess what? The computer was not going to be available by the time the ads were scheduled to run. That hurt both the agency and the product. We had to scramble to change or cancel buys, and the media weren't too terribly impressed by our client.

In a sense, companies undervalue their marketing departments, but marketing departments sometimes are not quick enough to get involved with the overall operations of a company. I am sure Bissell loves its tagline—its great after all. But the truth is that marketing something that doesn't deliver its promise is a mistake. In my case, Bissell means not so clean. There is a saying, the proof is in the pudding. Let's make sure the pudding is always really yummy (and preferably

chocolate).

Ads on board

A couple months back I wrote about the in-flight advertising I encountered, and apparently it is a growing trend. Here's an article from the New York times about it. In a nutshell, the airlines are trying to raise revenue in whatever way they can, so we can expect to see more and more ads and offers while on board. I would rather they plaster the cabin with ads as long as they stop charging for checking suitcases and other odds and ends. Why don't beverage companies have promotions on board? Try our new beverage (for free of course) and get a coupon or whatever. This is an area that the airlines have paid attention to but haven't been terribly creative with. After all, all transit systems in the US seem to use advertising as a way to offset costs. Metro here in Washington certainly stepped up advertising availabilities when they needed more money, and they have a long way to go to match other transit systems. Buses have had ads on their sides for years! It makes sense...generally, these ads are geographically targeted (on specific bus routes) or have captive audiences (inside the bus). In any case, we should certainly expect to see ads on everything the airline gives us (if they still give us anything).

Making insurance interesting

It's no easy feat. After all, insurance is one of those burdens in life, something we need but don't necessarily want. Lately I have seen some funny commercials for Nationwide, but the humorous trend goes back to Geico. Geico has had great ads for a long time and their tag line "15 minutes or less could save you 15% or more on car insurance" is ubiquitous. Unlike other insurers, they run several advertising campaigns at once. You might see ads featuring the Gecko, the Cavemen or the Celebrity Spokesperson. It keeps it fresh. If you've ever wondered where these ideas came from, here's an interview with Geico's marketing VP, from today's Washington Post.

When perception can be dangerous

According to an article in the New York Times, people perceive diabetes as a disease that is not as serious as heart disease or cancer. Apparently this perception is wrong and can be deadly. Diabetes is very serious and has many ill effects on the body.

The story illustrates just how important communication can be in educating people about disease and treatment. But it also shows that some diseases face a branding problem. Diabetes has not been properly "branded" as a deadly disease. We all know cancer is serious, but we don't feel the same about diabetes. I will be interested to see what the American Diabetes Association does, from a communications standpoint to communicate the seriousness and change this misperception.