

When ads annoy

I had the radio on to my favorite rock station and suddenly, I was exposed to one of the most annoying radio commercials I have ever heard. The main “character” was a woman jabbering on about her free trip she got from getting an oil change. She kept going on and on in the world’s most annoying voice. It was a one sided conversation, as if we were overhearing her on the telephone. Surely, one of the most annoying things in life is to be forced to listen to a one-sided phone conversation at inordinate volume.

In sum, I had to turn the radio off. If I hear the hint of this commercial again I will switch stations. Yuck!!!!

Have you ever had that happen? When you can’t stand a certain ad? Well, of course, not every ad is universally accepted and liked, but I am sure certain ones get on lots of people’s very last nerve. And that creates backlash. You refuse to patronize the establishment, purchase the service or the product. And you do what I am doing now—complain about it.

Ads should not annoy—in my opinion, it is not a good tactic. Cajole, tempt, demonstrate, appreciate, yes. Make listeners/viewers upset, not so much.

What makes you special

In marketing, what makes you special is your unique selling proposition or USP. You are supposed to find it and exploit it, because it is what sets you apart from your competition and defines you to the public. It should be specific and it should be real. Lots of products claim they are “improved” or

“best” or “new.” Those aren’t USPs—at best they are qualifiers. If your product is a skin lotion, what sets it apart from the 100s of other lotions on the market? Does it have more of one ingredient? Is the only product with a certain ingredient?

The truth is many products out there just don’t know what their USP is or actually don’t have one. That is why we see so many boring ads for products that don’t motivate us to buy. (OK, I know sometimes the boring is also a creative problem but I have to stay on topic here.) So first step in any marketing campaign is to figure out what makes you special. Perhaps unique is no longer attainable, but you have to figure out what your single biggest strength is and exploit that.

A company that has figured it out, finally, is the US Postal Service (USPS). Believe it or not, their latest campaign is a stroke of genius. It exploits their true USP. This USP is that they don’t have fuel surcharges. It seems insignificant until you look at the fact that the other delivery companies such as UPS and FedEx are charging an additional fee for fuel. Have you shipped anything lately? It ain’t pretty. So here is the good old post office, trying to make headway into the overnight delivery market, and boom, they found their USP against the other guys—they don’t charge for fuel. It is a cost-savings for the consumer and a check mark for the USPS. In fact, it is a USP check mate.

Political Ads Analyzed

I found this in-depth article, analyzing the presidential candidate’s tv ads on Salon.com and wanted to share with you. Kathleen Hall Jamieson is a well known expert in the area of

political advertising, something I was very interested in when I was in graduate school. In fact, I looked up many of her articles to do my Master's project, which was a marketing campaign for a third-party candidate. But enough about that.

This campaign is going to play out across two electronic arenas—television and Internet. I have said before that I think McCain's ads are not going to help him, as long as he continues a personal attack against Obama. I know McCain has to discredit Obama, and especially, he has to strike at the issue of experience. The truth is that Obama does not have much national experience, and McCain does. However, the generation of voters that will make the difference in this election, in my opinion, is GenY. And they certainly don't care about experience per se. I think they are idealistic and don't tend to think that the older you get, the better you are.

On the Internet, Obama has shown prowess in collecting money. He has a well thought out social media and Internet marketing campaign. This will help with GenY voters. Recently, it was reported that McCain is not very astute on the computer. This is such a strike against him. So of course, McCain's main tactic will be to portray Obama as inexperienced. They will also try to make him out to be "foreign." This was reported yesterday in the media...it was one of the tactics offered to the Clinton campaign, and which was wisely ignored. McCain certainly can lay claim to the patriotic mark—after all, he fought in Vietnam and was a POW. The question remains, is it sufficient to win over hearts and minds?

The All-American Beer is Not

As no doubt you have read or heard, Anheuser-Busch, parent of Budweiser beer, has been bought by an Belgian-based company, InBev. The news spawned lots of hand wringing about what this would do to the “all-American” beer and could red-blooded Americans drink a product owned by (pause) Belgians. Well the answer can be seen in the newest Budweiser/image commercial, which is airing during the Olympics. The new commercial is about all things American, you know, Nascar and the Statue of Liberty. I may have seen a slice of apple pie somewhere in there. Clearly this ad is designed to celebrate America and to make sure to make the connection between Budweiser and America (and Americana). It makes sense. If anything, Budweiser has always had very good commercials (how else to explain the appeal of this most watered down of beers). This one deals with the issue at hand—the company is no longer American-owned. But the beer is still the “Great American Beer.” In one word, the commercial is patriotic. It’s meant to build on people’s patriotism while watching the greatest of international sporting events, the Olympics, but in reality, it is meant to address head-on, any concern Bud consumers may have about the new ownership, or even to obfuscate the change.

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.

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>BBDO 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>

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.