

seems to get anyone's attention. The
road. If we want to build and strengthen
recognize a fellow bike geek. 

guesteditorial

Bicycle Retailer & Industry News, autumn, 2001

How To Recognize Bad Ads; How To Make Them Better

BY RICHARD ROSENTHAL

There is only one meaningful standard by which to judge whether an ad is good: sales.

No matter how brilliant, clever or creative an ad is, if it doesn't increase sales, it's not a good ad. Advertising is selling, pure and simple—but, to judge by the way it is often practiced in the bike industry, maybe it's not so simple.

Mere unsubstantiated assertion of superiority is not advertising. Glibness is not advertising. Joke telling is not advertising. Bombast is not advertising. Empty posturing is not advertising. And attitude is not advertising.

Equally bad is generic advertising—advertising that is so lacking in reference to the product being advertised, the same ad could be run by its competitors.

Example: "It takes millions of years to create a mountain. It shouldn't take that long to climb one." Duh. The body copy was equally generic. Was there nothing the company could say about its bike? Did the copywriter even know the product he was advertising? He sure didn't have to.

When a company thinks it's sufficient to use generic images and copy in its ads rather than specifics related to its prod-

uct, it is saying potential customers don't want information and don't make informed decisions.

When you are looking to buy a car, stereo or computer, what do you want in an ad for it? Amusement and swagger or a reason to buy the product?

How's this for a provocative headline? "Rims and Components." That was in an ad by a manufacturer of, what else, rims and components. That has all the interest, all the attraction, all the drama, surprise, news, information, promise, excitement and memorability of, say, Kellogg's running an ad with the headline: Cereal.

Think about your product. What's distinctive about it? What differentiates it from the competition? Why should people buy it?

Whatever the answer is, that's your U.S.P.—your Unique Selling Proposition. Use it. If there is something unique about your product, state it. If you can claim some superiority, claim it—but substantiate it.

Tioga's headset ad, More Balls, is a good example.

But what if there is nothing distinctive about your product? Then your ad people must create a distinctive aura for it

and make that your U.S.P.

But remember, this is an ad, not a catalog. Your ad should have one or two salient points. That's all anyone is going to remember. If you put in more, people are going to remember less. . . if they read it.

In our post-linear society (a polite way of saying people don't read) people are actually put off by the mere appearance of a great deal of type. Short is good. Shorter is better. Bulleted points or call-outs in larger numbers work.

Make your ad easy to read. A bad example is a brochure for a lighting company that uses sans serif black type on a dark brown background—mind you, this is from a company selling visibility.

Grunge and hard-to-read type comes from self-indulgent art directors who think having fun with their computers or calling attention to themselves is more important than achieving maximum sales for their clients. It looks cool—but when it impedes, rather than facilitates, communication get rid of it.

Does this mean your ads have to be dull, boring and look old-fashioned? They damn well better not. Does this

mean they can't be imaginative, attention-getting, engaging, witty when appropriate, dramatic, emotional, surprising and memorable? They damn well better be.

If they are not, you need more than new typefaces. You need new faces on the people making your ads.

Too often the people who make ads for the industry offer enthusiasm for cycling and their knowledge of a computer graphics program or how to write a sentence in place of knowledge of sound advertising fundamentals and broad, major advertising experience.

I suspect they get away with what they do because they intimidate their bosses who live in fear of being thought of as unhip and uncool. Or, just as likely, the bosses don't know any better themselves.

Start with this: ask your would-be ad guy what positioning is. If he says it has something to do with sex, keep looking.

Richard Rosenthal created advertising at major New York ad agencies for high-profile clients before specializing in creating advertising for cycling. You can reach him at BikeAdman@aol.com. 