

Writing good advertising copy (Part 3)

 By [Chris Brewer](#)

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This week we're going to continue to remind ourselves of what kinds of advertising copy works better than others. You may very well know all this, but being reminded of the basics every now and then is good for the soul.

For example, it is easier to **recognise** a product than to remember it.

Use plain and simple Anglo-Saxon English (if your audience is English-speaking of course, if not then still stay with simple everyday expressions). David Ogilvy once ran an ad with the word 'obsolete' in the headline, only to discover that 43% of readers didn't understand what the word meant.

A well-known South African company, trying desperately to sound sophisticated, introduced a 'corporate pledge' into their advertising – which many thought was a variety of furniture polish

In addition to simple language, use short sentences within short paragraphs. Most of the longer and complicated words are derived from Latin and Greek. So stick to Anglo-Saxon wherever possible – it's easier to read and understand.

Don't exaggerate (too much). Be colloquial and use the present tense. Treat the reader as an intelligent **friend** and give him or her nothing to argue about or disagree with. In other words, be honest and credible.

Humour – when to use it and when not to

Claude Hopkins said, “Never seek to amuse. People don't buy from clowns.” I don't subscribe to that particular point (and I'm guessing his offices weren't exactly “fun” places) but he does have a point. A huge number of ads are made with a humorous slant and, very often, the concept is remembered vividly whilst the product is forgotten – and that's bad.



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Also, humour doesn't travel well – what's funny in New York may not create so many smiles in Johannesburg. Furthermore, translating a funny line from Afrikaans to Zulu is almost certain to fail.

It's hard to be a comedian.

Of course you have to be careful with all styles of creative approaches. Avoiding being patronising is difficult, trying to be believable is harder still – as is authenticity. Humour is the highest risk, but can produce highly rewarding results.

Just be careful – especially these days, as it appears you can offend anyone for just about anything at the moment.

Knocking copy

Unlike many countries (particularly America), we have self-imposed regulations which deny the option to “knock” someone's copy – it means to ridicule and/or criticise the advertising of a competitor.

Note that this is not the same as “comparative advertising”.

It does happen of course, we're just a little more subtle than other countries. Overall, it's a bad idea.

Honesty and credibility

The consumer isn't interested in your advertising – at first. But he can quite easily become very interested once you tell him things he really does **want** to believe.

And he will believe you, provided he has no relevant experience to dispute or disagree with what you're saying. And this is where honesty is often the best policy.

For example, give him a good reason *why* you've reduced your prices. Not many people do this – they still use tired lines like “March Madness” or “the boss is away so we've slashed prices” – those sort of headlines. They mean nothing to the consumer except, perhaps, feeling slightly offended because you think they're so gullible.

You don't always have to try and convince the consumer that your product is better than your competitor. What you have to do is tell him **why** it is so good (and give him reasons). It won't take him long to work out for himself that your product is better – and he'll like you even more because you're being respectful.

Treat your target market as you would like to be treated yourself. Be open, honest, friendly and credible.

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