

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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The Bad Sandwich

I came expecting to get a sales pitch. What I heard was a lesson in business wisdom.

Jay Wallace is a Vice President of Media Services for TOMA Research, a company that criss-crosses the country doing advertising seminars. TOMA stands for Top Of Mind Awareness, and local media outlets pay Jay's company to do telephone surveys to hundreds of random residents from the phone book, and ask them simple questions about the first name that comes to their minds when a business category is mentioned. Jay then comes to town and holds a free seminar to reveal the results to interested business owners and decision makers.

One of the objectives of the host newspaper, of course, is to sell more advertising. But Jay has a deeper objective: to teach the most effective method of advertising in general, which is the repetition of a simple, compelling message over time.

"Too much ad copy gets lost in a sea of sameness in the newspaper," says Wallace to a mixed group of advertisers. It's an early morning seminar, and the 50-or-so attendees look on with interest. "Your message must be clear, direct, and uncomplicated."

Wallace shows several PowerPoint slides of shots of half-pages of a local newspaper. "Which one of the ads on these pages is the one that captures your attention?" The group sees several ads on the slide, but the clean, bold METFAB HEATING & COOLING ad practically leaps off the page. Its simple message, "Zero Interest Heat Pump Loans," is legible from a good distance.

"The first part of the formula for advertising success is to boil down your message to the simplest of benefits," says Wallace. "Then make sure your ads utilize lots of white space, bold fonts, your logo, and short descriptions."

The second part of the formula, he says, is the repetition of that message.

"Some products have a long sales cycle. You only buy a mattress once every 10 years or so, but it's important that people recognize your brand before the need arises. You must adopt the notion of 'Know Us BEFORE You Need Us', and repeat a simple, clear message consistently over time."

I figure this is where the sales pitch is coming for the newspaper. I'm wrong.

Jay says, "I'm a big fan of repetition in advertising, but it doesn't have to be in the newspaper. They have a deal for you today, but many of the businesses we've studied have used radio, billboards, TV, and many other media. You need to decide which is best for you, and do it right."

Way to go, Jay, I say to myself.

“And there’s one more thing to remember. A great ad will only sell a bad sandwich once. Advertising calls attention to what you do, but it’s the quality of your product and the service you deliver that will make you ultimately successful.”

Wow. A home run.

Jay Wallace did a great service to all of the people in the room that day. His job was to help the newspaper sell more advertising, but he did much more than that. He told them how to advertise more effectively no matter what medium they use. And he told them the universal truth of all business: that advertising alone will not determine whether or not a company will succeed.

To further illustrate his point, Jay told the story of Les Schwab, the Tire King of Prineville, Oregon. Les started his tire business two generations ago with a single location. There were other tire shops in town, but Les chose the best products on the market. He began a 50/50 profit-sharing plan with his employees. He would fix any tire that’s brought in to his shop for free, regardless of where you bought it; the technician was trained to tell the customer that when it’s time for new tires, to just remember Les Schwab.

Based on those principles, Les Schwab Tire has grown into an empire of 250 stores throughout the Northwest. A recent TOMA survey put them at an astounding 90% top-of-mind recognition in Bend, OR, and in the 70 to 80% ranges in several other nearby cities. *The Oregonian* recently reported that more than half of the tires bought in all of the Pacific Northwest are sold by Les Schwab, with a 60% market share in Portland alone.

Les Schwab does a lot of very simple advertising, and his message is clear. “If we can’t guarantee it, we won’t sell it.” Les is now 80 years old, and he’s as sharp as ever.

Sell good stuff. Serve your customers memorably. And advertise simply and consistently.

Jay Wallace is an advertising expert, but he said exactly the right things about running a good business. You can always improve your advertising, but if your product and service are sub-par, even a great ad won’t sell a bad sandwich twice.

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