

# Writing an advertisement

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The basic dos and don'ts of advertising are fairly straightforward. You do not have to be clever or witty to be effective. Some people running small businesses create great ads.

This briefing explains:

- The elements that make up a good ad.
- The thinking process that leads to success.
- How to write advertising that works.

## 1 Outline of an ad

Start-up businesses tend to advertise in various media — in newspapers, magazines, posters and online.

Successful print ads are usually written around a few basic elements.

- 1.1 The headline** — a strong statement featuring the major selling point (eg cheaper, faster).
- 1.2 The illustration** (optional) — reinforcing the claim in the headline (eg showing how your product works).
- 1.3 The body copy** — the main text which persuades the reader to buy your product.
- 1.4 The tag-line** — summing up the product or the company's philosophy (eg 'Just do it').
- 1.5 The call to action** — telling the reader what to do next.
- 1.6 The company details** — name, address, phone number, email and web addresses and logo.

Look at the advertising around you. Decide what sort of ad would work best for your business and what would make the ad stand out.

- Pay per click advertising follows the same principles but will usually be much briefer.

## 2 What are you selling?

**2.1** Be clear about **what** you have to offer.

The major selling points of most good small businesses are:

- specialist or expert
- convenient and local
- give excellent service
- offering value for money
- reliable and conscientious.

This is the sort of thing that will make customers want to buy your product — so this is what your ad should be telling them.

**2.2** If you have something **unique** to offer (eg your shop stocks the widest range of scuba gear in the north of England), emphasise it. You will automatically stand out from the competition.

**2.3** If your product has **no clear advantage**, you will need to work hard to present it in a unique way.

- If you cannot do that, perhaps you should not spend money on advertising.

## 3 How big and how often?

**3.1** The **size** and **style** of your ad should depend on the publication it is to appear in.

- For example, a new local shop might place a simple ad in the local paper to let people know the shop is opening. The advertisement should be large enough to stand out, and it should tell the readers exactly what they need to know — what they are selling, their location, opening date and opening times.

**3.2** The type of media and the cost per ad will dictate **how often** your ad should run.

- An advert in a local paper or on a website might be repeated for several days or weeks.
- An expensive ad in a monthly magazine might not need so many repeats, especially as many readers tend to keep old issues.

Another major factor will be how often your product or service is purchased.

## 4 The headline

**4.1** The headline is the first thing most readers look at, even before the picture. If it does not grab their **attention**, through arousing curiosity or making an offer, the ad will fail.

- Make the headline stand out. Use large, bold type.
- Say something of real interest to the reader.
- Make it easily understood.

**4.2** **Bad** headlines are often:

- The company name — it may mean something to you, but will it really grab the reader's attention?
- The irrelevant joke — which says nothing about the product, and therefore does not attract the right readers.
- The misleading headline — people may read on, but they will be irritated when they find out what you are really offering.

## 5 The illustration

**5.1** Use a good **picture** to improve your ad. But it will only work if it is relevant — if it reinforces or expands upon the headline.

- If you have nothing to show, do not feel you must have a picture for the sake of it.

**5.2** Bear in mind that a good photographer or illustrator can make the duller items look

**interesting**. Do not assume your product is too unphotogenic to warrant a picture.

**5.3** One inexpensive option is using **stock shots** — library pictures (eg photos of fresh food) that can be used for a flat fee. Do not use a poor shot because it is cheap.

- Make sure you check the copyright rules in any stock photo you're intending to use.

## 6 The body copy

The headline and picture have won the reader's attention. Now you need some good copy.

**6.1** **Take** the practical example of writing an ad for your 'extra-sharp kitchen knives'.

- Start by enlarging on what is said in the headline. Just how sharp are these knives?
- Offer facts to support your claims. Why are they so unusually sharp?
- Explain other benefits — eg inexpensive.
- Warn readers that they will miss out if they do not buy the product — eg the offer only runs for a limited time.
- Urge readers to find out more, or buy the product. Tell them how and where — eg they could phone or check your website.
- Close with a pay-off line relating back to the benefit in the headline — eg 'So sharp they'll cut your time in the kitchen'.

**6.2** It is essential to get the **tone** right.

- Readability — the ad should be clear, crisp and concise, and written in plain English.
- Sincerity — the ad must be confident, without seeming shrill. The best ads appear uncomplicated, but use phrasing the target audiences can relate to.

**6.3** Advertisements must be '**legal, decent, honest and truthful**'.

If in doubt, the Copy Advice Service (020 7492 2210, [www.copyadvice.org.uk](http://www.copyadvice.org.uk)) offers checklists and advice.

- You must be able to back up your claims.

## 7 Check your advertisement

**7.1** You have written some draft ads, asked people's opinions, and selected one. Now **check it** by asking yourself five questions.

- Will the headline — and illustration, if there is one — stop readers in their tracks?

► **The Institute of Practitioners In Advertising** (020 7235 7020, [www.ipa.co.uk](http://www.ipa.co.uk)), the professional body for advertising agencies, offers a searchable directory of agencies on their website.

► **The Advertising Association** (020 7340 1100, [www.adassoc.org.uk](http://www.adassoc.org.uk)) publishes a booklet called 'Advertising means business'.

- Is the copy interesting? Does it tell the readers something they want to know?
- Does the advertisement, overall, make the reader an offer or a promise?
- Does it encourage the reader to act? Does it make it clear what to do next?
- Are the special benefits of your product given the emphasis they deserve?

**7.2** If you can look at your advertisement with the eyes of a **reader** — one of your potential customers — and answer ‘Yes’ to all these questions, you have a good ad.

- If not, it may be worth paying a specialist to write it for you, rather than wasting money buying space for an ad that will not bring you in any business.
- Advertising agencies are good at matching the style and content of an ad to the prospective customers for your product.
- If you cannot afford an agency, shop around for a freelance copywriter and work together to generate ideas for ads.

## 8 Preparing artwork

**8.1** Choose **clear** typefaces (fonts).

- Use either the font of your letterhead or logo, or one that will be easy to read and reflects the image you want to project.
- Use large or bold font to emphasise the important information such as contact

details.

- Avoid mixing too many fonts, using ornate fonts that are difficult to read or excessive use of reversed-out font (white on black).

**8.2** Lay out the ad with plenty of **white space**.

- Avoid clutter and excessive text.

**8.3** Produce **final artwork**.

- Check what format the artwork should be submitted in.  
Do you also need to submit a hardcopy?
- Provide digital images and make sure they are clearly identified.

**8.4** Check a **proof** copy of the ad before it is published — online or in print.

If it is a colour ad, make sure you check a colour proof.

- Make absolutely sure that the wording, layout, typefaces and the contact details are correct. Once you have signed off the proof, any mistakes are your responsibility.
- Ask yourself if the ad will stand out from the others in the publication, or on the same page or website?  
Will it create the right impression? Does it convey the message or impression you want to get across?
- Check that the images are sharp.
- Do not sign the advert off until you are completely happy with it.

► An advertising agency will have the expertise to produce an effective campaign and can help you judge the best publications to advertise in. As a rough guide, consider using an agency if your advertising budget is going to be at least £10,000. Expect to spend around 15 per cent of the budget on agency fees.

You can get free advice from your local business support organisation, and often from the media you choose to advertise in — especially the regional press.

### Don't spoil your chances

**A** Beware of **discounts**.

- Words like ‘sale’ and ‘discount’ can make your business sound tacky.

**B** Simplify **clutter**.

- If you cram in too many words and pictures, readers find ads hard work.

**C** Avoid **jargon** and wordiness.

- Obscure words and long sentences put people off. Keep it simple and direct.

**D** Don't be **boring**. No-one wants to plough through a pile of statistics and facts.

- Decide what is important, say it clearly and stop when you have whetted the reader's appetite.

## A GOOD AD

***SUPERB  
AUSTRALIAN  
WINES<sup>1</sup>***

...at sensible prices<sup>2</sup>

**Philglas & Swiggot<sup>3</sup>**  
Independent Wine Merchant<sup>4</sup>

21 Northcote Road  
Clapham Junction  
Tel: 020 7924 4494 <sup>5</sup>

Award-winning wines <sup>6</sup>  
Case discounts  
Weddings and parties  
supplied  
Free glass loan  
Ice and cool box loans  
Friendly and helpful advice

**SPECIAL OFFER <sup>7</sup>**  
Penfolds Koonunga Hill  
Shiraz-Cabernet  
£4.50  
during  
July

At a glance, the reader can understand what this ad is about and decide whether to read it.

1. The bold headline with its clear message attracts the reader's eye.
2. A key selling point. The headline on its own would leave readers wondering whether the 'superb Australian wines' were affordable.
3. The company's name is large and bold, so readers will remember it. As a start-up, you need to take every opportunity to make people aware of your company name.
4. This explains who is selling the reader what.
5. Company details.
6. More selling points. Easy to understand.
7. A special offer always helps. The time limit ('during July') prompts the reader to act.

Note the use of different type sizes and areas of white space. These emphasise key points and make the ad seem clear, bright and attractive.

## A BAD AD

**SAVE MONEY BY BUYING YOUR  
WINE FROM US! <sup>1</sup>**

We stock an enormous range of superb wine from Australia (our home country)<sup>2</sup> and New Zealand, and our prices are sensible.

Choose from our specialist wines or save money by buying wine by the case. You can order wine by post. We also supply weddings and parties, including free glass loan and ice and cool box loan.

We offer friendly and helpful advice and unusual characterful good quality wines.<sup>3</sup>

Philglas & Swiggot <sup>4</sup>  
Tel: 020 7924 4494

The reader is put off straight away by too many words and the grey, cluttered look of this ad.

1. The headline does not stand out and gives the impression of a discount store, which is misleading. The wrong type of customer will be attracted.
2. Things that are of interest to you may not be of interest to readers.
3. The message is confused and the advertisement is untidy and overcrowded. There are good selling points, but they are buried in the text.
4. Who are Philglas & Swiggot? Where are they located? Where can I go to look at their range — or to complain if they sell me a disappointing bottle of wine?

Good ads need clarity and confidence. There must be one main point — and, whatever that is, you should be able to read it across the room.

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