

Advertising -- The Front End Of The Selling Process

It's probably fair to say that most of the advertising in the graphic arts supply industry performs very poorly.

There are some great looking ads to be found in trade publications, that's true, and any number of artistically beautiful brochures and catalogs. But the bottom line is this...are they selling anything? That's the criteria by which all advertising ultimately has to be measured.

Four Capabilities

When you come right down to it, advertising has four basic capabilities. It can convey information. It can project an image. It can solicit and generate leads for a salesforce. And it can sell on it's own. Advertising can do all of these things, but—and it's a big but—it can't do all of them at one time.

That's a major part of the reason why I think most of the advertising in this industry performs poorly. You don't get great performance from your advertising unless you think your way through to an understanding of exactly what you want it to do, and design your advertising materials accordingly.

Active/Passive

Most of the advertising material I see seems to be of the informational or image projecting variety. The ads apeak about products, or about the companies that sell those products.

Now there's nothing intrinsically wrong with this sort of advertising, but you have to recognize that it's essentially passive. It tells the reader something, but it doesn't always ask—or motivate—the reader to do something in return. If your need is only to “keep your name out in front of people,” that's fine. But if your objective is to actively stimulate greater sales activity, this image or informational advertising is unlikely to be enough.

Depending on how your company and/or your sales effort is structured, a better choice to meet that need would probably be lead-generating or order-generating ads. Lead-generating ads should feature a response device—either a mail-back response card or a telephone number to call—and the whole thrust of the ad should be *here's a little bit of information about our company or one or more of our products. If you are interested in what you see, and want us to actively get in touch with you and tell you more, respond and let us know.*

Obviously, you only use lead-generating advertising if you have the capability to follow up on those leads. In most cases, that means an outside salesforce. Many companies, however, have chosen to make all or part of their sales effort without utilizing a traditional salesforce. They employ direct marketing techniques, which essentially asks the advertising to sell on it's own.

The two-part key to this kind of advertising is to clearly state the offer...what you're trying to sell, the price, terms, and ordering procedure; everything, if fact, that a customer will need to make a decision and place an order. The other half of the secret is the list of people you send this offer to. You avoid waste in this sort of direct marketing by sending your offer only to people who will have some interest in it, and who realistically will be potential buyers.

Leads From Orders

I'm you can see how lead-generating advertising serves as the “front end” of the selling process. It identifies some level of interest from the prospect, and a salesperson goes out to “close” the sale. You should understand, though, that image and informational advertising can also support the sales effort if they're used properly. That might mean that the salespeople carry reprints of trade magazine ads with them on their calls. They use those ads to build a “recognition bridge,” connecting the salesperson to the company and products behind him. The salesperson might also reference the ads in appointment-getting phone calls...*you've probably seen our advertising, Mr. Jones.*”

Even stand-alone order-generating ads can function as the “front end” to the long-term sales process. Remember that your first order may come through an order-generating ad, but further customer development—read that sending a salesperson out to follow up—could result in much deeper account penetration.

Plan And Profit

Don't let your advertising let you down. Give some thought to the exact purpose and objective of your advertising efforts, and make sure that the ads themselves are consistent with what you're trying to accomplish. Make sure that your advertising efforts are in synch with your sales strategy, and you're well on your way to advertising that creates profit!