

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS:

Ten Obvious, Impossible-to-Argue-With Principles, and Why Advertisers Violate Them Every Day

by Allan Hayes

President, The Hayes Company

When advertisers and the people who make ads sit down together, everybody wants to make a great ad. Unfortunately, it's hard to make even a good one, and a surprisingly large number of the ads that actually appear, aren't.

It helps to remember that successful advertising requires 90% common sense and 10% flair. Granted, those great ads need all the flair and more, but without most of the common sense, it's impossible to do even an adequate one. Here's a checklist of ten eminently sensible principles. Each has a cautionary explanation of why that principle gets ignored every day, and each offers specific advice to help keep you from breaking it.

If your ad gets through all Ten Commandments without breaking any, it may not be great. But it probably has 90% of that 90% of common sense, which brings it a long way towards being good.

I. THOU SHALT NOT BORE PEOPLE

How do you go about boring someone? You drone on about something of great interest to yourself that your audience either knows already or has no interest in learning. In advertising, you can of course do this in tedious-looking ads filled with dull gray type. You can also do this in flashy TV spots for high interest, emotion-charged products. Year after year, we see glorious shots of beautiful cars splashing along mountain roads, and we tune them out, unaware of precisely which car is boring us this time. We're bored because we're not seeing anything we haven't seen

before, and we're not learning anything we didn't already know.

ADVICE: *If you tell me something I want to know in your ad, I'll pay attention.* Years ago, we ran across one of those dull gray ads for a title insurance company—about the dullest product category there is. The headline was, “Your First Home: Six Things You Should Know About Buying It.” When you think of the mixture of excitement and terror that runs through the mind of the first-time homebuyer, the promise is irresistible. If the text lives up to the promise, it's a superb ad, regardless of how “boring” it looks.

II. THOU SHALT GET TO THE POINT

Few ads ramble on at great length about irrelevancies, but it doesn't take great length to disqualify an ad. From childhood, we're conditioned to reject advertising as self-serving propaganda issued by people who want money from us. As a result, ads have two critical make-or-break points in their exposure. In the first half-second, an ad flashes before you, you decide between “There may be something here for me” or “Move on.” If you've given it the longer look, you decide in five seconds whether it's an “I might want that” or “No, I guess not.” Unless it passes both tests, it's forgotten.

ADVICE: *Show me something I like and tell one quick something I want to know about it.* And please, don't use an all-purpose headline that your competitor could run. We saw an expensive national ad for a major employment agency headed “The Future Is What We Sell.” You could write an ad to that whether you were selling brassieres or locomotive wheels.

III. THOU SHALT NOT MAKE THINE OWN COMPANY LOOK FOOLISH

In an ad, it's really easy to do. The most sure-fire method is to decide that, since you have an uninteresting product story, you'll start your ad with something you think is more interesting. You can do it even better if you dumb it down and add a little bad taste. At the most obvious level, it's ads for boiler caulk that show bikini-clad blondes. At a more subtle level, it's TV ads for auto insurance or instant coffee that set you up with unfunny 20-second sitcoms.

ADVICE: *Find your message within your product.* It doesn't have to be a dreary straightforward presentation. We remember a beautifully art-directed ad for a super high-priced whiskey that showed a freshly-broken bottle on clean pavement with a one-word caption: “Tragedy.”

IV. THOU SHALT NOT PUT THY PROSPECTS DOWN NOR TURN THEIR STOMACHS

When you're selling can openers door-to-door, you don't walk up, burp in your customer's face and say, “Wanna buy a can opener, fatso?” Yet, in their own way, ads do this all the time. Those TV

mini-comedies we mentioned in the last paragraph often portray their hoped-for customers as thick-headed nerds—objects of ridicule—yet expect you to identify with them. When charities show starving, diseased children in their ads, they may prompt a few of us to think, “Oh, the poor dear,” and whip out our checkbooks. But sadly, most of us feel guilty and inadequate to the situation and avert our eyes. Because it’s just an ad, all we have to do is turn the page or switch channels, and it’s gone.

ADVICE: *Show me something that makes me feel better.* Since we’re talking charity ads, we recall a United Way ad that told us “How we parlayed \$50,000 in contributions into half a million.” It went on to explain how they’d piled matching grants on matching grants and made you feel that a check to them meant a whole lot more than a check to anyone else.

V. THOU SHALT PORTRAY THYSELVES AS HUMAN BEINGS

In an effort to appear appropriately businesslike (and to avoid violating the Third Commandment above), advertisers often turn shy and bury their personalities. When they bolster up that shyness with pomposity, it gets work. Think back on the hundreds of ads you’ve seen with bottle and glass accompanied by stuffy wine-talk. Then, think of how often you’ve thought, “Gee, maybe I should go out and get some of that wine.” Then consider that, if you ever buy wine, every one of those ads that didn’t make you think that failed.

ADVICE: *Connect with me in human terms.* All things being equal, people would rather buy from a pleasant person who understands them. If you want the principle underscored, just think about how you feel about voice-mail phone trees.

VI. THOU SHALT BE BELIEVABLE

It’s possible to lie and get away with it, at least for a while. On the other hand, it’s equally possible to tell the exact truth in such a way that nobody believes you at all. Again, there are some sure-fire ways to do this, and much of it traces straight to the words that you say. Build your copy around your own good opinion of yourself and fill it with opinion adjectives like “beautiful,” “important,” “ultimate” and so forth, and your credibility goes down the drain. Yes, what you say in your ads comes mostly down to your words, but those words can be your worst enemies.

ADVICE: *Tell it to me straight. And, even better, show it to me.* It’s a lot tougher to argue with pictures than it is to argue with words. Never underestimate the tremendous communication power of visual language. If you’re selling a beautiful home, don’t tell me it’s beautiful. Show me a beautiful picture and put it in a beautiful layout, and I’ll understand the home is special. Show me a pedestrian photo in a clunky layout, and I’ll assume the opposite. It’s quite true that a picture is worth a thousand words, so be sure exactly which thousand words that picture is saying.

VII. THOU SHALT TELL THY PROSPECTS WHAT THEY WANT TO HEAR, NOT JUST WHAT YOU WANT TO TELL THEM

We all have our pet theories on right and wrong ways to communicate, and two attributes that normally top the list are “positive” and “direct.” The problem is that those two attributes can lead to terrible ads. Example from an old novel about advertising: an executive changes a camera ad headline from “Ten easy ways to ruin a swell picture” to the far more positive and direct “A new standard of excellence.” The original negative headline, of course, promises useful information, while the new, improved one merely offers the client’s own inflated opinion.

ADVICE: *Find out what I want, then show me how what you’re selling delivers it.* So many ads, when you peel away all the production values, are just memos from the client instructing the world how to think and behave. When your ad’s core message is, “Buy our product because we say it’s good,” you’re doomed.

VIII. THOU SHALT UNDERSTAND THY MARKET

Think, for instance, about insurance. What we really want is a company that won’t hassle us when we put in a claim and won’t charge an arm and a leg for premiums. So why do we have a beloved advertising campaign built around a duck quacking the name of the company? It works because it lifted that particular insurance company from the category of “anonymous” to “well known,” and well-known companies sell more insurance than anonymous ones. But does it talk to the real issues? No, and ultimately yes. It’s much easier to build recognition than it is to build credibility, and the people who did the Aflac campaign decided that recognition was Job #1. The minute better-respected companies start reversing Aflac’s growth, the duck better start thinking about a new message.

ADVICE: *I may not sit still for your full message, so just tell me enough to get me started.* Unless we’re talking infomercials or direct response coupon ads, nobody actually buys anything from an ad. Otherwise, all ads can do is to move the prospect to the next step in the buying process. Make sure your ad carefully sends your buyer to the next step, not two steps down the road.

IX. THOU SHALT KNOW THY PRODUCT

This includes knowing what’s in your product, how it’s made, where it sits in the marketplace and what your competitors have that makes you uncomfortable. It also includes knowing whether a product feature really makes life better for your customers. There’s a great temptation to present a laundry list of all the wonderful things your product can do, but before you do that, consider the other side of the argument. A friend of ours who wrote a book on design came to the grumpy,

near-luddite conclusion that, “A feature is a design flaw. A well-designed product does what it’s supposed to do and nothing else.”

ADVICE: *Tell me the one thing you do well. Then shut up.* Those of us who’ve tried to figure out how to work our new PCs will thank you.

X. THOU SHALT ASK FOR THE SALE

There are all kinds of reasons to run an ad. To make a public relations point, to boost your stock, to increase your recognition, to rebuild your image. The problem is that, without overwhelming exposure, almost none of those reasons will accomplish much. Everybody over the age of five can recognize an ad, everybody over the age of ten has most likely been burned by one,* and, as a result, we do our best to ignore the message in any ad we see. Not that we’ll necessarily ignore the ads themselves. We’re perfectly willing to let them entertain us. It’s just that we forget who the ad was for and why we were supposed to buy the product.

ADVICE: *Ask me to do something I want to do.* Ad messages only stick if we act on them. If an ad makes me pick up the phone, go to a Web site, send in a coupon, go to a showroom or pick up a package at Safeway, I remember it. If your ad doesn’t make me do something, it didn’t work.

© 2004 The Hayes Company, Sausalito CA

* We surveyed some mothers of five- to ten-year-olds, and they disagreed mildly with this statistic. The consensus was that because of the current performance characteristics of free toys in fast food restaurants, everybody over the age of *five* has likely been burned.