

How to Write Ads That Build Brands

By Roy H. Williams

Keep these five tips in mind when developing a campaign to cement your brand image.

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Before we get started, let me warn you: This is going to hurt a little. Creating branding ads that resonate with your audience is certainly not the easiest thing you'll ever do. However, following my tips will help you simplify the process.

Having read hundreds of mission statements, I remain convinced that they're worthless as a source of brand essence. If you peel back the idealism and happy talk, you'll find that what companies say in their mission statement is quite different from what they actually do on a daily basis. This is also why most branding ads don't work. To be successful, your brand must be built on what you actually deliver.

Look at your policies, procedures and daily management practices: What behaviors are you measuring and rewarding? Examine your purchasing and pricing practices; these impact your brand far more than anything you might say in your ads. Finally, look at your décor and lighting through the eyes of your customers, and listen to the sound of your store through your customer's ears--you'll begin to glimpse the truth of your brand. Examine the soul of your company through your daily actions, not your beliefs, and you'll soon write branding ads that will ring like a bell.

The keys to successful brand writing are these:

1. Find out what your customers are saying about you. Bad ads are filled with phrases you like to say about yourself. Good ads are filled with what your customers say about you when you're not around. To be successful, your branding ads must sharply echo "the word on the street" about your company. Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon, got it right when he said, "It has always seemed to me that your brand is formed primarily, not by what your company says about itself, but what the company does." You'll discover the truth behind your brand when you can explain why customers come back to you.

2. Substantiate your claims. Overstatement is passé. Today's customers are equipped with a sensitive hype-meter whose needle jumps at the slightest sign of "big talk." So be sure to offer proof to back up what you say, even if that proof lies only in the customers' past experience or in their long-held assumptions. Branding isn't just about the facts: People buy brands with their hearts as well as their heads. Brand loyalty is built on the fact that our purchases remind us--and tell the world around us--who we are.

3. Double the verbs; whack the adjectives. Search for evocative words. Sniff out overused phrases. Stimulate customers' minds with thoughts more interesting than the ones they were previously thinking.

Count the verbs in this famous branding ad I wrote a few years ago: "You are standing in the snow, five and one half miles above sea level, gazing at a horizon hundreds of miles away. It occurs to you that life here is very simple: You live, or you die. No compromises, no whining, no second chances. This is a place constantly ravaged by wind and storm, where every ragged breath is an accomplishment. You stand on the uppermost pinnacle of the earth. This is the mountain they call Everest. Yesterday it was considered unbeatable. But that was yesterday. Rolex believed Sir Edmund Hillary would conquer Mount Everest, so for him they created the Rolex Explorer. In every life there is a Mount Everest to be conquered. When you have conquered yours, you'll find your Rolex waiting patiently for you to come and pick it up at Justice Jewelers. I'm Woody Justice, and I've got a Rolex for you."

4. Link your "first mental image" and "last mental image." The psychological principles of primacy and recency mean that in any list, the first few words and the last few words will be the easiest to remember. Great ads focus on a single point and contain that point in both the opening and closing statements of the ad. When possible, link your last mental image to your first mental image, and you'll elevate customers' ability to recall your ad. The Rolex ad was focused on you and your accomplishments. The watch was merely a symbol of those accomplishments. "You are standing in the snow...I've got a Rolex for you."

5. Be consistent. The consistent use of the same colors and fonts is often called "branding," but true branding extends far beyond a visual style signature. The brand essence you've translated visually must now be translated into an auditory style signature in your radio and TV ads, as well as throughout your store. Does the auditory style signature of what your customer hears while "on hold" agree with the balance of your brand essence?

Brands are built on consistency, and the roots of consistency are patience and attention to detail. It's going to take a lot longer to build your brand than you feel it should. Here's the bottom line: If you think you're going to be able to measure brand progress at the end of 12 short months, you're dreaming. Brand development isn't measured in months, but in years. Twenty-four months is the soonest you can hope to begin seeing fruit from any brand orchard you might plant today.

Hey, I told you this was going to hurt a little. (Notice how the last mental image-pain--is linked to the first mental image in this column?)

Good luck with your brand.

Roy Williams is the founder and president of [The Wizard of Ads](#), a company serving the advertising and marketing needs of business owners around the globe. Williams is also the author of [The Wizard of Ads](#) and [Secret Formulas of the Wizard of Ads](#).