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Book Reviews

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Print Matters: How to Write Great Advertising Copy

Randall Hines and Robert Lauterborn

Racom, 2008; £12.53; 200 pp

ISBN: 13-978-1-933199-10-8

Common-sense instruction

Well, here's a turn-up. This is a book published last year, written by a pair of American academics, which manages to dispense common sense and instruction in the matter of writing copy without resorting to bluster, pomposity or self-regard. It could have been written in 1955, and I mean that as a compliment and not a sneer.

Its thesis is bold, wide-eyed even. Print, they argue, is the purest form of advertising, the most powerful means of selling. 'You can't hide emptiness behind a mesmerising glare of glitzy TV production or trade on the familiar voice of a spokesperson to make a connection for you'. Wide-eyed, as I say. But the enthusiasm for language is genuine, and the instruction offered is truly valuable.

Classic ads

Indeed, some of it is like re-living one's professional youth. The USP is paraded and updated into a Unique Buying Proposition. There's Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, VALS, the Pareto Principle and a dozen other familiar acronyms and mantras. David Ogilvy's classic Rolls Royce ad about the electric clock makes its rightful appearance and a page later there's the equally classic 'Think small' ad for VW.

Do's and don'ts

And there is nothing cool or knowing about the authors' style. What you get here is instruction, explanation, 'do's' and 'don'ts'. 'Shun all-cap headlines' they say; 'Avoid most punctuation marks', 'Use the active voice'. Fittingly, there are very few wasted words in the book's 200-odd pages.

Chapter on typography

The chapter on typography is a particular blessing in a world where design and choice of typeface has become a matter of desktop symmetry and convenience. Reversed-out headlines? Caution is suggested. Column width? Vary it. And I never thought I would ever again see a section in a creative textbook that dwelt on kerning. You don't know about kerning? Go to page 84.

Direct marketing

Direct marketing gets its own chapter wherein familiar topics are discussed and reported with the same precision. Should you have a message on the outer envelope? What price the PS on the letter? What is special about catalogue (sorry, catalog) copy? Again, the instruction is worldly and highly useable.

E-mail

The book is up-to-date too — in the same enthusiastic way. E-mail is touched upon and online advertising gets a couple of pages. There is even a mention of David Beckham on page 41!

A tract for a verbally indolent generation

All in all, a surprise. There's no modish banging on about brand strategy or tone of voice (although the latter is implicit in many of the chapters). But this is a straightforward, well-argued guide to writing better and more successful copy. If it seems at times a rather old-fashioned tract, then that's a judgment on our own verbally indolent generation rather than on the authors. Wide-eyed this book may be, but it still imparts knowledge and inspires thought, analysis and imagination. Which is as much as you can ask of a slim volume.

George Smith F IDM

Understanding Digital Marketing: Marketing Strategies for Engaging the Digital Generation

Damian Ryan and Calvin Jones

Kogan Page, 2009; Softback, £19.99; 276pp

ISBN: 978-0-7494-5389-3

Understanding Digital Marketing declares on its cover that it will 'demonstrate, in a practical and comprehensive way, how to harness the power of digital media and use it to achieve the utmost success in business, now and in the future'. The preamble continues, 'Provides readers with tools to utilise the power of the internet to take their company wherever they want to it to go'.

Out of recession, one is tempted to suggest.

A tall claim....

Can this unassumingly designed and rather plain little book really live up to its own billing? Search marketing, affiliate marketing, e-mail marketing, creative online executions and digital marketing strategies are all purported to be 'explored in detail'. But against the myriad practical texts already in the marketplace — the list being headed by the near-assembly line output of the prolific Dave Chaffey *et al.* — that's a tall claim.

...not sustained

Despite some rather tame points of merit, it's a claim that ultimately is not sustained. With just 33 novel-sized pages on search marketing, 15 on e-mail marketing, eight pages on affiliate marketing and 11 on digital media creative, it cannot possibly deliver such detailed exploration. And therein lays my biggest gripe about such titles. In reaching for sales, publishers are forced to present such works as being everything to every person. Comprehensive. Insightful. Seminal. Life changing!

Whatever happened to a simple, smart and compelling unique selling proposition?

Is there a USP?

So I continued my journey through this book asking myself, is there a USP, and if so why have the publishers overlooked telling me the