RAB RADIO ADVERTISING BUREAU

RAB Guide to Writing Great Radio Copy

Developing a great creative Radio campaign is crucial to getting results for your client but the big question is how do you do it? On the following pages you will find a 10 step plan that will help guide you through the challenges, demands and pitfalls of the copywriting process. Don't be afraid to use Radio's creative potential to the fullest and take the time needed to create great-sounding and brilliant campaigns.

STEP 1: FIND OUT WHAT THE CLIENT WANTS

I know it sounds simple and obvious but so many stations and agencies make the mistake of not listening to what their clients really want and hope to achieve with their campaign. And without understanding the real reasons behind why a potential client wants to go on the air, the commercial campaign — no matter how humorous or clever — is doomed.

STEP 2: ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

So to find out what the client wants, you have to ask some questions. Some call it a Client Needs Analysis. And even though this isn't the most exciting part of the creative process, it is crucial to your success. Here are some samples:

1. Is there anything you would like to feature?
   Maybe your clients just got in a huge load of widgets and they need to sell them fast! Or maybe a certain item has a higher profit margin and it would make sense to push that product.

2. Who is your best prospect?
   This question will allow you to get into demographics and find out who they are targeting. Is it male or female or both? What percentage? Average age? Income? Profession and education level? If you represent more than one station, then these questions can help steer your client to the right "position on the dial."

3. Why do customers come to you?
   This question and others below that are similar, allow the client to tell you their story. Keep in mind that perception is reality and you should consider getting different viewpoints from co-workers, family and friends.

4. What is your single greatest competitive advantage?

5. Do you have a positioning statement?

6. What do you feel is your unique selling position?
   The USP or unique selling position (or point) is a marketing concept that allows a company to differentiate themselves from their competition.

7. What is your primary business image?

8. What's the biggest misperception you feel people have about your business?
   Sometimes this misperception can be used in the commercial to help overcome objections. For example, perhaps customers think a popular brand will automatically be too expensive. Or perhaps the potential customers feel that the location is too far away when in reality it's only a 10 or 15 minute drive.

STEP 3: HELP POSITION YOUR CLIENT

Most clients on local Radio expect a measurable response from their investment on your station. Whether it's an increase in phone calls, more traffic to their store or simply more hits on their website, advertisers want something to happen. Now that you have already done your Client Needs Analysis, use that information to effectively help your client separate themselves from the competition with proper positioning.

1. Know the competition
   Who truly competes for your client's business? There may be 3 women's shoe stores in town, but if each is targeted at a different group of customers (teens, discount and upscale) then, except for some minor overlapping, they can be said to be non-competitive.

   However, if there are 3 athletic shoe stores and each carries the same brands of shoes, then all three compete directly with one another.

   Write down each competitor and a list of their perceived "strengths" or selling points such as:
   - Discount or competitive prices
   - Excellent service
   - Superior quality/variety of goods
   - Convenient locations/hours

2. Know Thyself
   Apply the same criteria when evaluating the perceived position and strengths of your client — just as you did for competitors. Remember that it may be difficult to get an accurate description of the perceived position of your client from your client. So do an informal survey with your friends, family and co-workers. Try to get a good sense of how the client is already received by customers to help you determine how you can change or enhance that image.

3. Define the Differences
   Most successful products or stores have established a very definite, easily explained and easily recognized position in the marketplace. By writing down crucial differences between competitors, you can arrive at a focal point for a commercial. After all, sometimes it's the little differences that can make a person choose one store or product over another.

STEP 4: GETTING IT ALL TOGETHER

There are several "style" categories of commercials. Don't get bogged down by always using one style for your client. Get creative by varying the elements and determining what works best for the advertiser.

1. Straightforward
   Sometimes the simplest approach works best. Imagine one effective voice delivering a well-written narrative message. This direct approach works particularly well when a positive image has previously been established and a specific event is being promoted, like a sale. In these cases, you can simply expand on or enhance the positive feelings that are already in place.

2. Music
   The use of music in commercials can be powerful since music can evoke an emotional response and create a positive feeling that transfers to the product or service. Music can also be used to tie together a mixed media campaign (TV or Internet) while aiding in recall. Music also means jingles and when done right, jingles can cut through the clutter and stick in the mind for years.

NOTE: Remember that copyrighted music that plays on your station may not be used for a recorded commercial for your client unless they pay the publisher for the rights to use that music. (That means even though that trampoline client would love to use Van Halen's "Jump" as an intro to their spot, they need to acquire the rights to that song before the commercial airs. See BMI.com for more information.)

3. Slice of Life
   The "slice of life" approach allows the audience to relate personally to the commercial elements. Overhearing bits of real life conversation — between lovers, spouses, parents, neighbors — make the potential customers an active albeit silent participant instead of just a passive listener.

   If the actors in the spot strike a responsive chord, the listener is much more apt to be open to the client's offering.

   The major drawback in writing and producing slice of life spots is that they must be done extremely well to be effective. Talent must be believable and likeable or you lose credibility with the listener. Poorly written dialogue or wooden delivery will turn off the audience and have them reaching for the dial.

4. Humor
   Humor engages the listener, creates emotional responses and provides entertainment. But there are pitfalls in trying to be funny. Have you ever heard a really funny commercial that you enjoyed and when you went to tell a friend about it, you couldn't remember the product being advertised? Make humor part of the selling point.

   Also, what's funny to you, may not work for your target audience. Try to stick with universals- situations that revolve around family or intimate relationships work because these problems have the same human elements. Don't be afraid to exaggerate for comic effect. A precise true to life retelling may not be that funny but exaggeration can make people laugh and identify with the situation.

5. Testimonial
   The testimonial can be very effective in persuading a customer to try a new product or service. Affirmation by other customers can be a convincing argument and Radio is the best media for "word of mouth" advertising. Testimonials are fairly easy to produce but make sure you get your talent to relax and take their time in telling about their experience. Also, remember that a testimonial from a personality on your station is a premium spot and should always cost extra to the client.

STEP 5: OVERCOMING WRITER'S BLOCK

It's every writer's nightmare and every deadline's biggest obstacle. But there are several techniques that you can employ to overcome this looming monster. In fact, one of the first things that you can do is go back to Step 1 in this article and do your homework, ask the right questions, find out the clients wants and needs, etc. The commercial could possibly write itself once you are done. However, for those times when you can't get out of the starting gate, Jeffery Hedquist from Hedquist Productions offers these tips and tricks:

1. Sound Effects
   Randomly choose a sound effect from the production library and give yourself 2 minutes to write a commercial for your client using that effect even if it doesn't seem appropriate. Try another and do it again. Limber up your imagination and make connections between ideas that might not seem related at first. If you don't have commercial gold at this point, purposely choose a sound effect that would not normally be associated with the advertiser. For example, if the client sells office products, don't go with keyboards clicking or copy machines humming, try something different like a fire engine or a baby crying. Then, working

with a 2 minute deadline, force yourself to come up with some copy using that sound effect along. Once again, your mind will stretch to connect those two disparate parts of the equation and start stringing words and ideas together to bridge that gap. If you work at it, a commercial will emerge usually built around an analogy or metaphor. For example, the sound of a baby crying can represent the way we all turn into out of control babies when the office equipment doesn't work and we can't fix it. Or the fire engine could be an example of what it's like when emergencies arise in the office. Sound effects can quickly communicate and reinforce problems and solutions and create a shortcut to the minds of your audience.

2. Silence is golden
   Don't overlook the power of silence and quieter sounds. Silence can grab your attention and serve as powerful contrast to bombastic sound effects. It can also be used to highlight a solution or relieve tension.

STEP 6: GET DOWN TO BASICS – FOLLOW THESE COPYWRITING TIPS

Here is a basic list of tips to get you started:

1. Goal – Start by writing down the goal and one main point you want to get across. This step will be a huge help in deciding how you will create the commercial and what form or style it will take.

2. Elements – Next, write down the elements or information that must be in the commercial. For example, store name, address (physical and/or web), image to convey, description of merchandise, benefits to consumer.

3. Approach – Decide on how your main points and information will be communicated; how will the ideas be strung together into a coherent work of creative art?

4. Opening – Grab their attention or lose them forever. Entertain, enlighten, amuse or cause anticipation. Don't temp the listener to tune out.

5. Simplicity – Don't use extremely complex language. Keep dialogue conversational, not stilted. Write for the ear, not for the eye. Read copy out loud.

6. Clarity – At the end of the commercial, your audience Will understand exactly what you've tried to say. Don't be overly clever or you might lose your clarity. Limit the big idea to ONE per spot. No clutter.

7. Active Language – Stay away from passive verbs. If you want people to act on your commercial, choose action words.

8. Credibility – Listeners tend to follow your advice when they believe you and identify with the circumstances presented in your commercial. Write in a realistic manner, unless you are employing exaggeration or fantasy. Keep the voices credible and the talent believable.

9. Product Mention – There is no rule concerning how many times the client's name must be mentioned. Make the spot and selling process memorable.

10. Editing – You have a limited amount of time (usually 60 or 30 seconds). Write the copy and then edit it once, deleting all unnecessary words. Then, go through it again and edit even more tightly. An economy of words is essential in the commercial.

11. Group Efforts – Get a group together and try some brainstorming. Even useless ideas can spur successful attempts. Group thought can overcome any writer's block.

    Another good checklist you can go through includes:
    - Define the advertising objective — the goal of the campaign
    - Define the commercial objective — the goal of the commercial
    - State specific benefits — what's in it for the customer
    - Make a specific offer — to get measurable results focus on one offer
    - Issue a call to action — explain how/when to take advantage of the offer
    - Support material — extra details needed about the product or client
    - Closure — tie up loose ends and include a strong last impression

STEP 7: MAKE SURE YOUR MASTERPIECE PASSES THIS TEST

Before you do a final production of that work of art you've just produced, run through this checklist of "Copywriting Deadly Sins" provided by creative consultant, Dan O'Day.

1. SIN 1: Did you fail to attract the listener's attention?
   Think of how many commercials you hear on the Radio that do not command the listener's attention. Now make sure that your commercial isn't one of them. Just think of it this way: the most important part of a print ad is the headline. In a Radio commercial, the opening line IS the headline.

2. SIN 2: Did you fail to appeal to the listener's self-interest?
   The listener doesn't care about the advertiser. The listener cares about what the advertiser can do for him or her. Most copywriters make the mistake of writing about the advertiser instead of the potential customer. Make sure you have identified a need or a problem that will be filled or solved by the advertiser.

3) SIN 3: Did you fail to paint a picture?
   If you think about it, Radio is actually a visual medium. Listeners convert the sound of your commercial into a mental picture that can inspire and motivate them to act upon your words. Choose those words carefully to paint a picture that will get results for your client.

4. SIN 4: Were you so clever or creative that you forgot to sell?
   It happens to the best of us. A good commercial is not one that makes people laugh; it's one that motivates them to act. Make your message clear. Don't bury it in a clever idea.

5. SIN 5: Did you forget to give the listener a reason to act now?
   As mentioned before, most local Radio clients are expecting tangible, measurable results from their campaigns. The copy should reach active customers who are looking for that particular product or service as well as passive customers who might be in the market soon. "Hurry to the sale soon" just doesn't cut it. Be creative and find a new way to express the offer.

6. SIN 6: Did you use clichē-ridden copy?
   Commercial clichēs are trite and empty and don't communicate anything to the listener – don't use them. Find a way to say it fresher. It may take a little bit of time, but it's worth it to keep people from tuning out. Some common ones to avoid:

   - "Now is the time."
   - "They won't last long..."
   - "Savings throughout the store..."
   - "The sale you've been waiting for..."
   - "Conveniently located..."

7. SIN 7: Did you write too much copy?
   Avoid this common pitfall by getting in the habit of reading your copy aloud and timing yourself. The trick is to read it in a normal conversational pace. If it takes YOU seventy-five seconds to read it aloud, what makes you think your production person can do a good job with the same copy in just sixty seconds? Remember, too many words crammed into one fragile minute can be fatal.

STEP 8: LEARN HOW TO SELL YOUR IDEAS AND WIN SUPPORT

Now it's time to share your brilliant ideas with your client but there are few things to keep in mind when selling the creative and promoting the unique marketing abilities of your staff and station.

1. Don't produce a lousy spec spot.
   Sure you can hear how great it's going to sound in your head but the client is going to have a hard time hearing that "leap". In other words, don't produce a "speculative" spot unless you are certain it can sound great. Instead, present copy only and describe the commercial. If it's based on an already proven idea, play that commercial as an example of what you would like to accomplish.

2. Explain your assumptions and manage their expectations.
   Present the rationale behind your ideas. Explain why you picked that music or that announcer or that approach because you have the client's goals and expectations in mind.

3. Sell a marketing strategy, not a commercial
   This may involve the production of a campaign instead of one spot. It's important that your client understand that you are interested in increasing their sales, not just yours. By presenting a complete plan, in which creative plays an important part, you become a member of their staff and are perceived as a hard-working player on their team.

4. Use testimonials before and after a sale.
   Provide stories of satisfied customers. These are most often in print form but you can also interview advertisers in your studio asking how the campaign or spot worked. These interviews can be edited (with permission) into great audio success stories that can be used on sales calls, presentations or possibly on air!

5. Involve production people in sales.
   Everyone benefits by seeing how the other side works. Take a production person on a sales call. Get their input and reward their productivity. In these days of consolidation, many production people can feel overworked and underappreciated. Some restaurant trade, concert tickets or even a handwritten thank you note can go a long way.

STEP 9: TIPS AND TRICKS IN TECHNICAL PRODUCTION

Technically speaking, the days of reel to reel and razor blade splicing are gone. Today's computers and audio programs are helping production directors create more spots in a shorter amount time with sound effects that would be virtually impossible a few years ago. However, faster is not necessarily better and Production Director Robert Diaz offers these tips:

1. Don't Skimp On Tools
   A great read full of emotion and enthusiasm can become lousy with a bad microphone. The good thing is that most Radio stations have decent equipment because the quality of sound is the key aspect of being "on-the-air."

2. Musical Choices
   A varied production library is a key component in creating great Radio commercials. "Sound-alike" music keeps you out of trouble when that sub sandwich client wants to use "Yellow Submarine" as their theme song. Also a library of sound effects will be handy when trying to create the right atmosphere. Keep in mind that single royalty-free tracks can now be downloaded over the Internet and all those production music files can be stored on a hard drive for easy access.

3. Stay Focused
   Finally, remember to encourage production people to stay focused and really understand what you want to convey. If they don't understand the effect you're listening for or the message you want to convey, the commercial or campaign will go nowhere-communication is essential.

STEP 10: TAKE PRIDE IN YOUR WORK AND SELL COMPETIVELY

By now, you've put in the time researching your client, learned about his or her needs, determined the message that needs to be expressed in the commercial and thought of the perfect way to do it. So now it's time to present your masterpiece.

Why not present it that way to the client?

Someone once said that a sale is a transfer of ideas. Present your idea in an exciting way and get the client excited about the sale! Position it as an answer to the client's problems or goals. Remember the creative work that you have done can literally determine the success of an account and reinforce your relationship with a client.

Nobody said it was going to be easy.

This one you know already. The challenges of developing, writing and producing great creative are many – but you can do it! There's no doubt that the key to successful creative is doing your homework and the RAB is here to help. As a member, you can check out RAB.com for more great information like Instant Backgrounds, recent articles, even "Gold Digger" reports that allow you to dig deep into demographic and lifestyle groups. Plus, there are great creative examples in our MP3 audio archive and over 2000 scripts in our commercial library just waiting to get your creative juices flowing. And the newly revised Creative Resource Directory has nearly 100 professional RAB-recommended agencies or production houses that are ready to help you get your client's commercial to the next level.

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