

Dick Maggione: Advertising's big question is whether to entertain or inform

By [Dick Maggione Special](#) to The Canton Repository

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Every ad person wrestles with the conundrum whether advertising should focus more on entertaining or more on informing.

Do we do a disservice if we aren't helping our clients' customers learn more about why they should buy? Or is it more about super clever productions that make people laugh or cry at silly or sentimental situations?

It's a fine line. But when it's all said and done, [great advertising](#) is all about delivering messages that sell.

Great advertising can be — and often is — both entertaining and informative. Great advertising often is provocative to the point where it almost literally shouts, "Look and listen!" Once we get your attention, then we can tell you more.

The "greats" in our business built their reputations on their ability to inform customers in a manner that was clever enough to provide "ah-hah!" moments. That's entertainment that sells.

Bill Bernbach, renowned founder of Madison Avenue ad agency DDB in the 1950s, ushered in advertising's creative revolution. His softer-sell approach, often sprinkled with humor, produced many memorable and successful campaigns.

Bernbach's "Think small" advertising campaign for Volkswagen was positioned against the "vulgarity of Detroit cars in those days, thereby making the Beetle a cult among those Americans who eschew conspicuous consumption," ad man David Ogilvy has been quoted as saying.

What might be Bernbach's most cunning campaign was for car-rental company Avis. The headline read, "When you're only No.2, you try harder."

How was No. 1 Hertz supposed to respond? Were they to say, "We try hard, too!" Nope. Hertz was stuck. Avis moved from fifth place to second place in the car-rental category.

Another advertising great was Leo Burnett, headquartered in Chicago. His agency created some of the most beloved advertising icons of the 20th century, including Charlie the Tuna, the Lonely Maytag Repairman, The Jolly Green Giant, The Keebler Elves, Tony the Tiger and many more. Leo believed there is inherent drama in every product, and advertising's job was to capitalize on it.

Leo Burnett also created The Marlboro Man, catapulting Marlboro to the No. 1 spot it still holds today. The image of the cowboy on a horse struck just the right chord with boys and men — great for Philip Morris, but not for our health.

Another creative giant, Lee Clow, creative director at Chiat/Day in Los Angeles, is credited with Apple's 1984 TV commercial "1984" that ran during the Super Bowl to introduce its new McIntosh computer. The spot ran only that one time more than three decades ago and it's still revered by many as the best TV commercial ever produced.

Some agency folks believe in a different approach, the harder-sell, pioneered by the earlier advertising copywriters, many of whom started with door-to-door selling and direct mail.

Claude Hopkins convinced millions of women to remove the film from their teeth by using Pepsodent. He wrote a full-page magazine ad with very long copy. It worked.

The harder-sell philosophy was popularized by the aforementioned ad man David Ogilvy and his firm, Ogilvy & Mather. They positioned Dove as the bar for women who want softer skin by contrasting it to all other soaps, "Dove doesn't dry your skin the way soap can." They invented the subcategory of a moisturizing bar that cleans.

Harder-sell agencies believe their primary duty is to communicate effectively, not to be entertaining. They believe in measuring everything. They believe in testing the copy. They popularized A/B split testing. They will tell you, for example, that five times as many people read the headline as read the body copy.

This analysis pushed ads to higher and higher response levels. The goal of advertising, after all, is to sell more stuff. These folks likely favor the logical left side of their brains, as opposed to the creative right side.

For many, the debate rages on in the advertising industry. Should the appeal be focused more to the head or the heart? We believe the answer is yes and yes. The method to the head is through the heart.

There have been three major advertising shifts in the last century. They are print, broadcast and now the internet. Each medium has demanded different ways to think, in terms of both strategy and tactics. But some things don't change.

Great ad writers are rare. Great ad writers have brains that are wired a little differently than the rest of us. Interestingly, many of the best ad writers are great salespeople.

While they had their differences, Bernbach and Ogilvy both believed it is the quality of the idea and the excellence of the execution that is the alpha and omega of successful advertising.

As communicators, we should be most interested in the basic drivers of human behavior. What are the core motivators? If we have a good understanding of these factors, we'll be less swayed by the popular and ever-changing fad du jour.

Ogilvy pointed out it need not be all that difficult: "When you advertise fire extinguishers, open with the fire."

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