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I'll Go Get Milk: What Trainers Can Learn from Advertising

Did you ever check your refrigerator before going out to see if you've "got milk"? Or, walk into a supermarket and "squeeze the Charmin®"? Or, start an exercise program just for the sake of "doing it"?

If you have, you're not alone. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are all influenced and affected by the advertising we see and hear. In both subtle and extreme ways, advertising *changes our behavior* – which is what most of us strive to do in the training programs we create and implement.

We can learn a great deal from the advertising agencies who create memorable campaigns. The techniques they employ and principles they follow are not only applicable to the development of training, but necessary to create training with impact.

Accept it: You're not wanted

The people who create advertising and those who create training have similar goals. Both groups are hoping to reach an audience, convey a message, and change behavior. Both

understand the challenges of such a daunting task, given the barrage of information that people must endure on a daily basis. The difference is in their attitudes. Only those in advertising accept the fact that people do not want them in their lives.

Think about your favorite television program. Would you rather watch it with or without commercials? How about the monthly magazine you read. Wouldn't it be more enjoyable if you didn't have to flip through 15 pages of advertising between articles?

Now, of course, some people – myself included – enjoy advertising (certain commercials are actually more entertaining than the programs they sponsor). For the most part, however, advertising is an intrusion. Yet this is the very motivation that inspires advertisers to create targeted and memorable advertising, thus fighting and scratching their way into our lives.

Training developers need to adopt a similar attitude by embracing one simple notion: *people don't want to learn!*

People may want to *improve*, but they don't want to learn. Does such a statement shock and offend you? Good. Is it extreme? Yes. Is it cynical? Absolutely. Is it true? That's debatable, but it's not the point. If you accept this fact as true, you will design training programs that are full of impact and relevance.

If you feel it doesn't apply, think about the last training program you developed. Consider the objectives you outlined at the beginning of the class. If you told the participants they could attain the objectives with or without taking your training, how many do you think would stay? I know it's difficult to admit, but doing so will result in better training.

Focus on the true personal benefits

Do you remember the product Static Guard®? You spray it onto your clothes to eliminate that pesky static cling. The commercials used to promote the product featured a woman walking down the hallway in an office with her skirt clinging to her stockings. She was mortified.

Why did they choose that image? Because they sold you on the benefit of the product, not the product itself. The fact that Static Guard eliminated static cling was not as important as being able to walk down a hallway free from embarrassment. The latter is much stronger than the former because it relates to us, many times drilling right down into our psyche and emotions. Such benefit-driven thinking can be applied to training in the objectives and the content.

When writing objectives, include both behavioral and benefit objectives. Benefit objectives convey to the participant “what’s in it for me”.

For example, my firm designed a training program for an Internet Service Provider (ISP) that allowed customer service representatives to better route incoming calls. The behavioral objective we wrote stated: Upon completing this course, you will be able to quickly discern if you can handle a call yourself or need to pass it on. The corresponding benefit objective stated: Upon completing this course, you will lesson the amount of time wasted with a caller you cannot help. Both objectives stated the same result, but with a different focus. The benefit objective related to the participant on a more personal level and, as we all know, people are motivated by what directly affects them.

Motivation is the key when writing benefit objectives. Think about what motivates people to work. Sure, there’s money, so one of the benefit objectives can always be about money (in our ISP example, by handling incoming calls more efficiently, the representative can possibly receive a better performance review and thus more compensation).

But people are motivated by all sorts of things they consider “benefits”, not just money. In his book, *Getting the Best Out of Yourself and Others*, Buck Rodgers writes, “the payoff for people comes from the experience, the accomplishment, the doing.” He identifies job satisfaction, recognition, security, and appreciation as important employee motivators. Other motivators include autonomy, challenges, and respect.

Think about all of these when you write your benefit objectives but also when you write the actual content of the program. Doing so will increase the relevance of and enthusiasm for the training.

A video rental chain knew its store employees tended to be movie buffs and loved talking with customers about films. So when the company developed a training program to promote a more efficient process at the check-out counter, the training emphasized to the employees that less time spent with a customer at check-out meant more time spent on the floor with them talking about movies - the part of the job employees found the most *satisfying*.

Understand your audience

The video rental chain would have never known to include such a benefit in its training if it didn't do the research to discover that particular trait of its employees. Information about the audience is critical in creating advertising and should be for training. How you design your training, from the look to the instructional methods, should be developed with the audience in mind. This goes beyond statistics you might gather about the participants such as 46% male, 72% with undergraduate degrees and an average age of 38. It means trying to understand them. In other words, don't just ask yourself, “Who is my audience?” Ask yourself, “What is my audience *like?*”

To use an advertising example, companies who market tires know that women predominantly make the tire purchasing decision in the family because it's more often the woman who is home during the day dropping the car off at the shop. Instead of stopping there, however, they further researched that women consider their children a top priority. The result? Advertising for tires that focuses on protection and safety, such as the Michelin® “baby in the tire” campaign – a winner among the targeted audience.

Considering such “personality traits” of your participants when you develop training will aid during every step of the process, from deciding whether or not to use flashy graphics in a CBT, to knowing if your audience has difficulty comprehending complex relational questions.

For instance, an instructor-led sales training program we designed for a telecommunications company was a great success during the pilot. We had done our homework and found out that most of the salespeople in this company were older males. So, we designed our content with that in mind, making references to sports, making it “low-tech”, and including a compensation-oriented benefit objective. The final assessment, however, was met with moans and groans from the pilot group – and produced low results. The problem was that the assessment was paper-based and most of the salespeople did not even like writing memos – they had their administrative assistants write most of their communications. Imagine their response to taking a paper-based test! When we reworked the program after the pilot, we changed the final assessment to a “live”, oral assessment. It took slightly longer to assess the group, but the enthusiasm for the course – and the higher results - were evident.

Frame your training in a concept

Gaining insight into your audience will also help you create a *concept*. The concept is the idea that “frames” the training. It determines the look, the interface, the tone and pace, as well as how the training is supported by graphics and interactions.

In advertising, the concept is the main idea. Some examples of famous concepts include: a guy seated in a chair gets blown away by the sound from an audio tape (Maxell®); an old woman asks “where’s the beef?” (Wendy’s®); two talking frogs discuss beer, among other things (Budweiser®). The list could go on and on.

Formulating a concept for your training requires substantial creative thinking. Most trainers are familiar with the most common creative techniques (brainstorming, word associations, mapping, etc...) that might lead to such thinking.

Remember that a creative training program doesn’t mean it has to be weird or wild. Too many times people mistake perversion for creativity. The most creative concepts are the ones that don’t necessarily seem different, they just seem right.

No matter what the subject, a good concept relates to the audience and helps move participants through the training. In a way, it brings together all of the principles we have discussed.

In one program for a large consulting organization, for example, the participants needed to learn about the global investment funds industry. It was to be a six-hour web-based training course. We knew that given this length of time, we needed a strong concept to break down the information overload and keep participants interested.

We studied the audience and determined that it was made up of fairly young analysts with above-average intelligence and a propensity for global thinking. They were eager to get ahead

in the firm but also anxious to travel and see the world. With that in mind, we decided to make the training a tool for learning about the industry but also world travel. We knew they would find it beneficial if they knew a little something about the countries they might be visiting.

The concept: participants took a trip around the world without ever leaving their offices. They were able to pick spots on a map to “visit”. While there, they interacted with fictitious people in the investment funds industry and learned the content. They also had the opportunity to “sightsee”. This meant learning about the local country itself, which had nothing to do with the content. The program was a success because it spoke directly to the participants, related to their situation and provided a benefit.

Use a creative director

Creating an effective concept is not easy. In advertising agencies, creative teams (normally made up of a writer and graphic artist) work together and are led by a Creative Director. The Creative Director is normally a senior level writer or graphics person who provides direction to the team (but never stifles creativity or operates in a hierarchical system) and acts as a liaison between the team and the client, whether an internal or external client.

In a training environment, the Creative Director should be a senior level instructional designer, writer or graphics person. It should not be a project manager or client, but rather someone who is intimately familiar with the development process and understands the possibilities and parameters of the project.

Establishing a Creative Director is advantageous for several reasons. It helps champion the use of the aforementioned principles. It provides direction to the process and assigns responsibility for the creative aspects of the project. Most importantly, however, it validates the value your team places on creating a training program that will fulfill its goals.

With a Creative Director in place, your audience research complete and your concept developed, you're ready to create a training program that breaks through to its participants, provides them with real benefits and ultimately changes their behavior. Pretty soon, they'll be walking around hoping they'll "get training".

For more information:

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