

GS Insight

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Creativity — Finding The Right Balance

Creativity. Everybody says they want to do something new and different, something that has never been done before. The question is *why*? If the answer is for better results, you're on the right track. A dash of creativity can always cut through the clutter and leave a lasting impression.

All too often, though, the objectives of business communications are lost during the quest for creativity. The results can be stunning, hilarious or memorable, but does pure creativity sell? No! In fact, creativity can easily detract from your key message, a reality that escapes many communicators today. At the heart of the problem? Understanding when creativity makes a selling message memorable, as opposed to when it overwhelms your selling message, delivering creativity for the sake of creativity. This is a common problem in all facets of business communications.

Creativity that detracts...

Many national advertisers fall into the trap of empty creativity. After two seconds of the "all-star endorsement" or "the spectacular slam dunk," can you honestly remember who the advertiser was? Or better yet, what was the message they were trying to communicate?

One such ad that comes to mind featured former Boston Celtic great Larry Bird and Chicago Bulls megastar Michael Jordan. The two are involved in a game of "horse," a one-for-one shooting match. After the confines of the gymnasium prove unchallenging, the game takes on galactic proportions. As both float weightlessly in space, Jordan calls his last shot, "Off of Jupiter, around Mars, nothing but net." You remember the ad, but can you name the product? Was it Nike? Coke? McDonald's?

Memorable? Yes. Effective? Not if you remember the advertisement, but not the product.

As pioneer ad man David Ogilvy wrote, "a great advertise-

ment should rivet the reader's attention on the *product*. Instead of saying 'What a clever advertisement,' the reader says 'I never knew *that* before. I must try this product.'"

Empty creativity is a problem in PR as much as in advertising. A great example of a creative PR idea that just didn't float came from the 1997 Detroit Auto Show. As the much anticipated and newly-redesigned 1997 Corvette was introduced to members of the press by an illusionist who floated the car in mid air, one veteran industry editor was overheard saying to another, "What ever happened to just driving the thing out onto the stage?" Indeed, large companies often stage impressive, costly stunts such as this at their press briefings, mostly for their *own* entertainment. The press couldn't care less. They can't use these stunts in their stories. Creativity in PR must be balanced with the basic need for information.

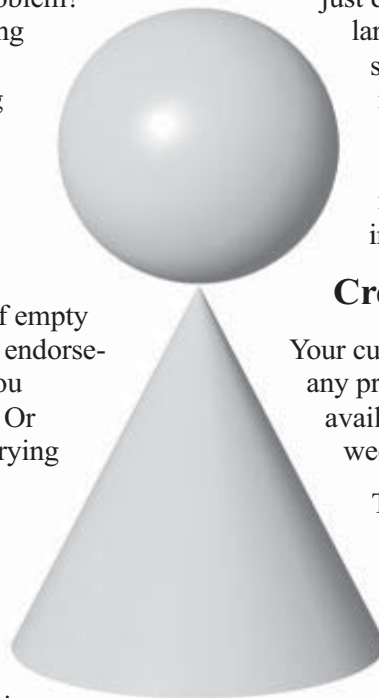
Creativity in an info-hungry age

Your customers are information-savvy, more so than any previous generation. Access to information is available globally, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The relative speed and convenience through which information can be obtained has created an era of customers who make more *informed* decisions, and fewer emotional ones. They don't want information clouded by too much flash and fanfare.

This goes double for reporters and editors today. They want only the facts, and most of them don't have time for fancy lunches or corporate junkets.

Results from an editor survey conducted at a recent scientific trade show prove that today's editors and today's customers are looking for the same thing. When asked what they want in a media kit, editors responded that *content* was by far the most important criteria against



which they judge a release. Delivery of that content should come in a very traditional way. None of them care what the press kit cover looks like, or the type of paper on which a release is printed. A significant number voiced opposition to receiving press materials as electronic files saved on a floppy disk.

Advertising is also chasing this information trend. Ads are generally more informative these days, and sometimes topical. The recent breakthrough in genetic cloning brought about a number of memorable ads that leveraged the news. Cannon said of their copiers: "Big deal! We've been making perfect copies for years!" Moderately creative, but memorable and product-focused.

Creativity is still important

All this is not to imply that creativity is dead. Far from it! But, more than ever, it needs the correct focus to yield the desired results.

One of our clients wanted to differentiate themselves as environmental leaders in a crowded marketplace where competitors were making the same claim. Rather than rely solely on media, G&S recommended an industry forum as a way of side-stepping the "clutter" and influencing the influencers. An annual symposium allowed them to successfully focus in on the issues—a perfect augmentation to the more traditional PR tactics they had in place. The result? Today, this annual symposium is a premier forum for industry leaders, government officials and influencers to gather and talk about where the industry is headed environmentally. The key message delivered? Our client is an industry leader in touch with tomorrow and has the technology to get there. Creative tactic, yet a factual delivery of information. Success!

Be wary of technology disguised as creativity

Sometimes we are too eager to use technology simply because we can. Remember the resounding "no" to press materials on disk by science editors? This might change over time, but right now there are few editors who are interested.


Here's another tip: watch out for e-mail. One editor recently gave press releases via e-mail a thumbs down. Think about it: half of the time, documents cannot be retrieved due to compatibility problems. If sent as text, after printing the document, the recipient has a page or two of black-and-white text with no company logo, no distinguishing color, and no address. On a messy desk or in a jammed briefcase, your news release—the one that has the power to influence your customers—is completely unrecognizable. A recent survey conducted by G&S of nearly 900 trade and consumer editors showed that only 17 percent of respondents preferred to receive press releases via electronic mail. E-mail will no doubt become increasingly important, but for now it is still "too creative" in many cases.

Of course, there are some noteworthy instances when creative use of technology can increase your chances for exposure. We have one client that takes advantage of the trade show floor by linking attendees with technical service representatives via video teleconferencing. Now, several product experts have the ability to come onto the show floor "virtually" to answer product questions on the spot—high-tech that works!

Contrast this with the wave of office-to-office video teleconferencing that swept the country a year or so ago. The result of this technological boom? As social creatures, we all want to meet and conduct business face-to-

face. We've found that the human element cannot be replaced by a camera and monitor—at least not yet. Maybe when this technology improves to the point where those jerky delays are eliminated we will see an increase in its usage.

Purpose is the key

The bottom line is this: creativity can be a powerful friend, and can help get your message through the information overload if it has a purpose. Those who can use creativity to this end are sure to benefit. Those who use it with no real purpose spend a lot of time and money, but may wind up with few results to show for their efforts. 

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