



“We’ve got to fight every day to keep mediocrity at bay...”

Van Morrison 2005

Well, ain’t THAT the truth....

...especially in this crazy business...

Never before have words had more power in the communication arena.

“Words are the true currency of business these days. The right words can bring you success and all you want in life. The wrong words will bring you bad results and failure”

Spot on. Yet, I would wager that even though the vast majority of you reading this would agree with the above, you will almost certainly not be giving copy the respect it deserves.

In these tough times, no one believes anything anymore. We have over 5 decades of television advertising to blame for that. (...when was the last time you saw an ad on the box that influenced you to go out and buy something...?)

Unfortunately, direct mail and off the page advertising now seem to be doing their very best to match the abysmal standards we have had to endure on the box in recent years.

They’re getting there too...here are a couple of ads that I saw in the Emirates inflight magazine a few weeks ago, on the way to Dubai...



This is a quite astonishing bit of work. Here we have a very strange young lady practising her karate moves in a field, with her hand on one of the most incredibly ugly bits of furniture you will ever see. And, there's a pretty big rhino charging up behind her and that horn looks like it could bring a few tears to her eyes...

Now all of this is accompanied by a headline that says " You can't beat the feeling..."

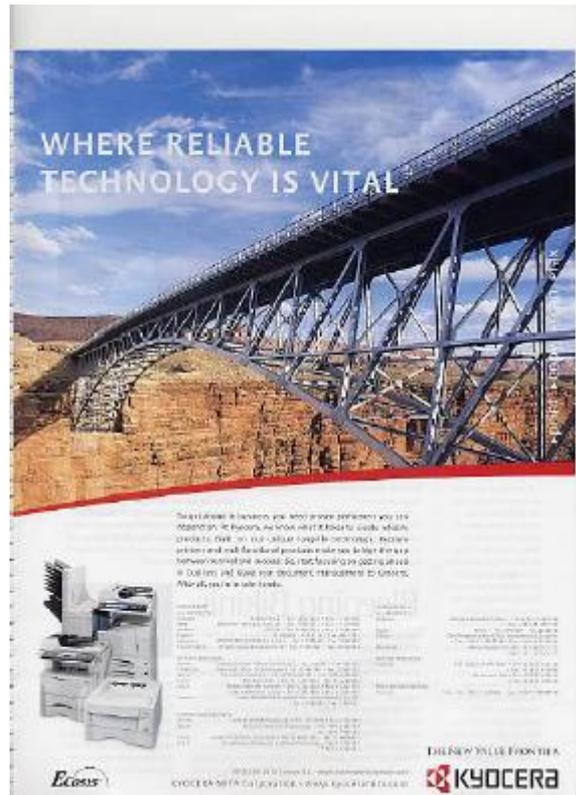
What on earth could the creator of this ad be trying to say? Beats me, I can tell you, but I think it's one of the funniest things I've seen in a long, long time...

However, it wasn't supposed to be funny. It was supposed to sell.

Very little chance of that.

Those of you that have been reading this article for some time, will have remembered the previous ad by these people, that had the headline "We go both ways"

I give up...



Here we have a picture of a bridge. I suppose it's a nice bridge, as bridges go.

And the headline – useless as it is – states the bloody obvious. Yes, we do understand that bridges need to be reliable. But wait. There's more. This ad is selling printers.

Perhaps the bridge is made out of old printers. Or perhaps this company build bridges. Quite honestly, no one will care, because the ad will be ignored.

Look at the 4 words on the right hand side of the ad. So much wrong with this bit of work, it's incredible.

Remember, somebody calling him/herself a creative person has come up with these two efforts and someone calling him/herself a marketing person has signed them off...

I can't believe it, but the communications that are purporting to be selling messages are actually getting worse. And it hurts me enormously to say that...

Because of this ever-increasing torrent of garbage, the vast majority of people out there – our audiences – have pretty much switched off.

This is reflected in a continuous downward trend of response rates in all media. And, an extraordinary increase in applications to join 'do not call' lists and MPS files all over the place. People just don't want to hear from us. Period.

And who can blame them?

Because of this situation, it takes something special for a sales message to rise above this morass of crap. It requires both great skill and knowledgeable technique to

create communications that create attention and sell.

But, that isn't easy. And, let's be very clear on one central point.

Pretty pictures don't sell. Not now, not ever. I wish this would get through to some of the creative charlatans out there...

Words sell. They always have and they always will. The right ones, anyway.

Word and picture combinations? Well, you won't be surprised to know there's a skill in putting those together too. But that's an entirely different discussion, perhaps for a later article...

Here's a fascinating real life example of how the right words (emotional, of course) transformed a basic selling situation...

This is a true story. Related to me at a recent conference in Athens.

As I understand it, it happened in New York. A guy, getting on in years and down on his luck, was sitting on the sidewalk of a busy street and had a box in front of him, collecting change.

The box had a sign in front of it with the following message... *"I'm blind..."*

A writer happened to be walking past and bent down to speak to the guy.

He said *"I notice you here most days and your box does not seem to contain many coins. Things must be tough for you"*.

"Yes, the guy said. It's been pretty tough for months. I don't get the same amount of money from passersby that I used to. I figure it must be tough for them too these days and they can't afford to help"

The writer listened to this and looked more closely at the sign. *"I think I can help you"* he said. *"I am a writer. I think I can improve your sign, which may get you a little more money. Will you let me rewrite it for you...?"*

"Sure. I could do with any help right now."

The copywriter took the sign and he only added 3 words. He placed the new sign back in front of the guy, put a few coins in the box and said his goodbyes.

He waited and watched.

Out of the next 6 people that approached the guy and read the sign, 4 of them placed money in the box. Our friend smiled and went on his way.

Those 3 words made such a difference. After his changes, the sign read...

"It's Spring - and I'm blind..."

Same as everything. It's simple when you know how...

James Webb Young was one of those great people in our industry, that knew how.

Yet, staggeringly, 9 out of 10 creatives working these days, wouldn't even know who he is.

James Webb Young was Vice President of J.Walter Thompson Advertising in the 1940s. He was a hugely talented man, very successful and responsible for many award-winning campaigns.

One day an advertising manager of a well-known magazine came to interview him to find out how advertising works. His question was...

"How do you get your ideas?"

It was a devastatingly simple question...

James thought for a minute and then said, *"I don't know"*.

"But come back tomorrow and I'll give you an answer."

The next day, the reporter returned. James gave him a dozen sheets of paper he had written the previous night.

He called it, "A Technique for Producing Ideas."

These notes were turned into a 48 page book, which is still available today. Please locate it and buy it. It is a classic. And it will only cost you pennies...

This small book has a foreword from the great Bill Bernbach, which gives you some idea of how valuable it is...

I have owned at least 6 copies of this book in the last 10 years. I keep giving it away to friends - and, of course, I never get it back.

I've just bought another copy 3 weeks ago. This one is for the rocking chair. So, don't ask me for it. Anyway, to summarise, James's answer was this:

He said, *"An idea is nothing more, nor less, than a new combination of old elements"*

What's very interesting about that, is Picasso said exactly the same thing, but in a different way. He said *"All art is theft"*. I remember Drayton saying to me at one of our very first meetings *"there is nothing new in our business"*.

Knocked me sideways for a few months I can tell you, until I saw the light...

In Webb Young's book he goes on to explain the process of how you come up with a new idea.

- 1. Gather the raw materials (the brief, the collateral, opinions, thoughts, -anything that might be relevant, however small)**
- 2. Work over these materials in your mind.**

3. Let the subconscious take over. (Alcohol helps too...)
4. Give birth to the idea
5. Shape it, hone it, develop it and finalise it.

This sequence applies to writing copy as well. Because, after all, to a copywriter, the solution to the brief - the finished draft - is in simplistic terms, the idea.

The solution to the problem.

One of the main reasons most copy fails these days in my view, is the writer's inability to connect to the reader. This, I am convinced, is directly due to a complete absence of understanding on how the writing process works.

How the writer addresses the challenge...

Here are 2 letters I recently received, that underline the point. I am just showing you the openings of the letters. The rest of the copy is even worse, but, of course, no one would get that far, as both would be in the bin within 10 seconds.

Both talk about themselves, which is *death* for a selling letter. What's more, they both contain headlines that offer no benefit at all.



When it comes down to it, there are only 3 types of writers.

1. Those who write without thinking
2. Those who think while they write
3. Those who think before they write

There are literally millions of the first two categories, as we all know to our cost...

There are but a handful of the third. They are very rare indeed. Those are the ones you want. The reason is simple. The talented and knowledgeable few in that category are the ones that will produce copy that sells...

...and sells...*and sells*...

If you write, you *really* want to be like them. In these tough times, there is no other alternative...

Keep the faith...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andy', with a small dot at the end.

See you next month.

If anyone would like complete copies of any letters reviewed here, please contact Andy direct at andyowen@aol.com or copydeskUK@aol.com

About the Author

Andy Owen is Managing Director of Andy Owen & Associates, a leading International Strategic Marketing Consultancy specialising in all aspects of contemporary direct marketing. The company has offices in UK, Middle East & North Africa, with Associate Offices in Europe & The USA.

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Don't forget to check out Andy's superb new DVD on Copywriting called "*How To Write Copy That Really Sells.*" To find out more and see excerpts from the DVD, visit <http://www.andyowen.co.uk/buy-online.html>