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### The power of “advertorials”

After twenty years in this industry, I thought I knew everything about small businesses and advertising. When my wife and I opened a small used bookstore, I got the advanced course. I learned why business owners dislike salespeople (most of them are really bad) and why business owners always seem a little frazzled (running a small business is a lot of work). I also learned some valuable lessons about advertising. One thing my foray into the world of retailing taught me was the power and effectiveness of using “advertorials” to promote a business. The word “advertorial” is a mash up of “advertising” and “editorial.” An “advertorial,” as the name suggests, is paid advertising that uses a narrative editorial format. When I owned my bookstore, I advertised in the local Pennysaver and the newspaper. We ran ads offering specials and coupons. Occasionally the newspaper would run a special section or a promotion, which included an advertorial component. We quickly discovered that these promotions brought in considerable business and were particularly effective in attracting new customers.

#### **Advertorials are a Win-Win-Win proposition**

Advertorial advertising offers unique advantages to the reader, the advertiser and to your publications.

Readers enjoy having advertorials in the paper. Most consumers see advertising as “news you can use.” Advertising gives them the information they need to make informed decisions about the things they need and want to buy. A well written advertorial delivers this information in a format that is much more engaging and interesting than the typical ad. Readers find advertorials both entertaining and useful.

Advertorials are a powerful tool for advertisers. They put a “face” on a business, humanizing it and setting it apart from their competitors. Humans are a social species; we like to deal with other human beings rather than a company. Advertorials give a business a chance to introduce their people and tell their story. The narrative format also makes the customer’s message much more memorable. Dr. Dan P. McAdams, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University and the author of The Redemptive Self wrote, “People remember facts longer and more completely when they are part of a story. Stories communicate information in the most compelling and memorable way possible.” Stories not only help people to remember a business, but they also are a powerful way to motivate them to take action. In his studies

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Dr. McAdams found that, “People are persuaded more quickly and effectively when information and ideas are presented in story form.” Using advertorials to make the customer’s message more memorable and persuasive helps the client break out of the clutter and make their business stand out from the competition. Consumers find the content of a print publication more trustworthy than information found in other types of media. Advertisers can leverage this trust to enhance the reader’s opinion of their business. An advertorial in a paper is viewed by consumers as trusted content. This is especially important for service businesses or newer businesses that need to establish their reputation to attract wary customers. Advertorials are a powerful tool for professionals or others that offer technical services and need to express complex ideas. For example, my paper publishes a weekly “Ask the experts” column that provides a forum for medical doctors, dentists, financial planners etc. to explain a particular aspect of their businesses. Customers who sell goods or services that demand a higher price than similar products can use advertorials to position the value of their products. A restaurant that uses only organic Angus beef can use a story to explain the health and culinary benefits of their product in an interesting and compelling way. Advertorials tell not only what the customer sells, but explains why the consumer should care.

Advertorials also offer significant benefits to your paper. The obvious advantage is that an advertorial is by definition, paid advertising space. They can be used to increase both lineage and revenue. They can be sold as a stand-alone ad or as part of a program in conjunction with traditional advertising. My company uses advertorials to encourage advertisers to buy larger ads in special sections. For example, an advertiser that purchases a half page display ad earns a quarter page article and a full page earns a half page article with a photo. We build the cost of the advertorial space into the pricing of the ads. We also use these articles as a tool to sell “sig” or “gang” pages. For example if there are 6 businesses on a community page, we feature one business in an article each week. The advertisers are featured in rotation so each client gets a turn every six weeks. This adds value to the program and customers are less likely to drop out and “miss their turn.” Our classified manager uses advertorials to drive employment and real estate advertising with “Featured employer” and “Luxury home” sections.

In addition to driving revenue, advertorials drive readership. As noted above, readers enjoy advertorials, including them in your paper enhances its value to readers. Well-designed advertorials, which include photos and art, add visual interest to your paper, breaking up the monotony of advertising pages. I have also found that

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advertorials build customer loyalty. People like to see stories about their businesses. Giving them an opportunity to buy advertorials builds your relationships with clients. We receive very positive customer feedback on advertorials. Because advertorials engage readers, they often mention them while shopping, “I read about your business in the paper,” proving the value of your publication.

### **Writing effective advertorials**

The down side of including advertorials in your product mix is that they are time consuming to produce. I avoid allowing my customers to write their own pieces for several reasons. Pushing this task off on the customer makes them less likely to purchase a program. Even if business owners have a good command of the written word, they tend to use overly technical terms and to write about things that are much more important to them than to the reader. I find it is much better to handle this task for the client. If you have an editorial staff, this is a way for them to contribute directly to the bottom line. If you do not have staff writers, talk to your current sales, clerical and production staff. You may find someone who enjoys writing and who is competent. Another option is to hire a freelance writer (You can often find someone by contacting the English or journalism departments of local colleges).

Advertorials are not ads, they are stories. They should not simply rehash the items listed in the customer’s advertising. I write many of the advertorials published in our papers; here are a few lessons I have learned:

- Don’t try to tell the customer’s whole story. Focus on one interesting aspect of the business. How they got started. A special award they have won. A new service they are offering.
- Put a face on the business. Stories about people are much more engaging than stories about organizations. Feature stories about the business’s owners, their families, their employees and their customers. Try to include photos of the people you are writing about.
- Talk about things that will interest the reader. Articles that describe how the business helps their customers work especially well. This is an ideal format for presenting customer testimonials. I have found that a story about “Mrs. Susie Jones from Ourtown” raving about how good “Shirley’s Beauty Salon makes her hair look,” coupled with a photo of a smiling “Mrs. Jones,” standing next to “Shirley,” will produce a powerful response.

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- Make advertorials fun to read. Use simple, conversational language and avoid long sentences and long paragraphs.
- Use strong headlines and be sure to add a caption to every photo. Research indicates that even people who do not read an article will read the headlines and captions.

### **The ethics of advertorials**

It is important to ensure that the reader can distinguish paid content from editorial content in your paper. This not only satisfies legal requirements, but also protects the credibility of your paper. Simply noting “Paid Advertisement” in small type above the article is sufficient. In my experience, doing this has no effect on the effectiveness of paid advertorials.

### **A happy ending**

Including advertorials in your publication is a lot of work. Someone has to talk to the customer to gather facts and then write their story. This is admittedly a lot of work, but it is well worth the effort. As stated above, advertorials offer many benefits for the reader, the advertiser and for your paper. Virtually every media is currently using some form of “embedded content” where the advertiser’s products or brand is integrated into the programming. The reason for this is quite simple—it works! No media is more effective at transmitting information or telling a story than print. Advertorials are a terrific way to leverage our strengths to help customers and drive revenue. Help customers tell their stories in your paper and you’ll both experience a very happy ending!

*This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.*

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