

How to get readers to believe

If teachers don't believe your advertisements then they are not going to buy your products or services.

But how can you get teachers to believe?

Just because you tell teachers that your product or service is going to be of benefit to them, that does not mean they are going to believe you. After all, thousands of other advertisers are currently telling these same teachers that it is THEIR product or THEIR service that is the one they should buy.

And this is an interesting point because of two key factors.

First, if the reader of your advertisement doesn't believe what you are saying you have no chance of getting a sale.

Second, if you are not believed you may well find that you have alerted teachers to an issue that is of interest – but not offered them a product or service that they believe could help them with that issue. Which means that thanks to your advertisement, they might well go and buy elsewhere. The worst outcome for any piece of advertising!

Now this question of belief is of particular interest to writers of advertisements because surveys of consumers show that 42% of consumers distrust brands and 69% distrust advertising in general. And while we don't call teachers "consumers", when buying they do indeed behave as consumers (just like the rest of us) in their normal everyday lives. And because buying products and services is for most of them just one small part of what they do, they tend to do it like consumers rather than as specialist buyers working for a business.

To this situation we must add the growing distaste among consumers for brands (37% of consumers trust brands less than they used to according to the latest survey; only 7% trust brands more) meaning that there is a big opportunity for new or relatively unknown companies and products in any market.

And the first thing newcomers or relatively unknown companies should do is avoid any temptation to try to pretend to be a brand when in fact they are simply a modest-sized commercial operation.

In terms of advertising in general, 43% of respondents to questionnaires claim they trust advertising less than they used to, compared to only 8% who trust it more than they did previously.

So trying to appear to be bigger than you are by being a company with a distinctive personality is probably going to fail. Branding is often about not standing still – but the mood among many teachers is that standing still is exactly what they would like to do just so they can recover from the years of cuts and the austerity programme.

What teachers also don't like is the arrogance of brands which suggest they know exactly what teachers want – and indeed that the advertiser knows exactly what is going on in the classroom.

Indeed, many teachers perceive the rest of the country to be unaware both of what schools are like these days and what teachers are trying to do in the most difficult and trying of circumstances. They perceive themselves as the experts, and they perceive both brands and advertising as disconnected from their lives.

Unfortunately this does not mean that the old claim to be a long established family business is any better when it comes to teacher perception, because teachers are also often aware that the families they serve on a daily basis can be equally disconnected from the reality of school life.

In reality most suppliers are distrusted by those who work in schools – at least until they prove themselves. And because many teachers have not worked in a commercial environment and thus are not fully familiar with the daily pressures that businesses are under, this means that neither side actually understands the world-view of the other.

So, teachers also often appear to see suppliers as pushy in their advertising as well as out of touch with classroom reality. At the same time social media continues to be the least trusted of media channels; but social media is nonetheless being used as a way of gaining information on specific topics if that information appears to come from an expert.

So how can a company selling to teachers work in such a situation?

First, you do need to get teachers to believe in what you are saying, and there are two key issues that can be very helpful here. One is for you and your colleagues to study other people's advertisements and debate whether you believe them. If you don't then avoid that approach.

Second, develop your understanding of lying – which may seem very challenging, but please do stay with me a little longer – there is a point in this.

It seems that very few companies that don't employ psychologists in their marketing departments do either of the above – they don't study other people's advertising and they have not considered the whole issue of lying (something that teachers tend to face every day when dealing with children and teenagers).

Studying one's rivals' advertising is obvious. The adverts of your rivals are there for all to see, and through studying them you can not only see the offers they are making but also the features and benefits that they are promoting. Even if you can't get to see the emails they are sending out, you can see their website – and there you should be looking for two pages. First the page that a teacher using a search engine to find a product is going to land on, and second the page that a reader of an email advertisement might be directed to as a follow up (known as the "landing page").

The only problem with this approach is that you can make an emotional response to a rival company's advert (as in "I don't like the look of that") simply because it is not an advert that

you have created. This response, along with, “I just don’t think it looks good,” can be very misleading for it might not look right to you, but it could be exactly what a teacher in a hurry is going to be influenced by.

And this why we have the second part of this exercise, which is rather alarmingly called “Understanding lying”.

I am not suggesting that lying is a fundamental part of advertising – indeed it can’t be because today’s teachers tend to be very active in demanding refunds for products and services that don’t do what they claim to do in the advert.

But rather I am focussing for the moment on the fact that telling fibs is a very human activity which most people engage in – even if they do so just to avoid hurting another person’s feelings.

Research from the British Psychological Society suggests that a minority (39% of the population) when asked reported that they had told no lies in the last day, while at the other extreme, a very small number of people turn out to be persistent and regular liars. These persistent liars felt they were good at lying and got away with it.

There’s no evidence as to whether people who write advertisements are more likely to be “persistent and regular liars” but everything I know about advertising tells me that lies in advertisements are really not a good idea and tend to get found out very quickly.

Good liars (i.e. those who get away with their lies) are shown in psychological surveys to have a clear tactic for lying - “Keeping the statement clear and simple” is reported as the most popular strategy, “telling a plausible story” comes next, while “being vague about details” is third.

Curiously, these approaches are also sometimes cited as being the way to write advertisements that sell!

In the report it is also noted that, “Prolific liars rely ... a great deal on being good with words, weaving their lies into truths, so it becomes hard for others to distinguish the difference, and they’re also better than most at hiding lies within apparently simple, clear stories which are harder for others to doubt.”

What is interesting here is the revelation that proficient and good liars combine lies with the truth in order to weave a story that is hard to unravel.

Now again I must stress that none of this is leading towards me suggesting that you might want to lie in your advertising – certainly not. Lying in advertising tends to result in one having to take up a lot of time dealing with complaints and a total lack of repeat orders.

But if your rivals are lying in their advertising – even if they are lying just a little bit – that can really mess up the market for you since it can encourage people not to believe anything. Worse, you can’t even hint that your rival is making false claims as to the effectiveness of

their product or service. So the only solution for you is to find a different benefit, a different style, and a different approach to that of your rival.

And here the nature of lying comes to your aid, because most people who lie (whether it is in advertisements or in their daily lives) tend to tell fibs about features. People who habitually lie tend to tell lies about the details of their lives. Truth tellers talk about benefits.

Consider these two statements.

“I’ve got a 5 bedroom house; it’s valued at over £2m now.”

“I live in a very simple house overlooking the meadow. No noise, no traffic; I’ve never felt so relaxed and well in all my life.”

The first statement is seen as a commonplace bit of boasting by most people and probably an exaggeration – which is a polite way of saying, it’s a lie. The second, however, is much more interesting – and this is because it focuses on benefits.

If you stick to benefits in your advertising you therefore get a double bonus. First benefits sell better than features because far fewer advertisements stress benefits rather than features, and second your advertisements move into areas that any rivals who might be telling untruths in their advertising are not touching.

You don’t have to worry about the possibly untrue claims of rivals because you have moved the focus into new territory. And that is how you get teachers not only to notice your advertisements, but also to believe them.

In summary, read your rivals advertisements, don’t ever be tempted to lie, head always towards benefits that your competitors are not mentioning.