

How to write an advert that really really works: the complete answer.

By Tony Attwood, Creative Director, Schools.co.uk

Every year hundreds of thousands of people in the UK determine to take up a new activity.

That might be going to a gym, joining a book club, learning a foreign language, cooking more quality meals rather than buying so many ready meals, learning to dance or maybe play the piano, doing voluntary work, hiking across the Andes...

And, of course, most years the vast majority of these people stop after a little while.

As a result many don't achieve what they could have achieved and quite a few waste their money. They've paid for a year's gym subscription, or bought a guitar and a self-teaching book, they've gone to Spanish classes but done no homework...

I don't think too many people actually decide by way of a resolution that they will work on writing adverts that bring in more sales, but that actually could be a very good idea. For if you could produce advertisements that got better sales that would then bring in money – which you could spend on gym membership, learning a foreign language, and cookery courses.

So why don't people do this?

One of the big problems is that with such things as learning a new language, being a cook and so on, there is a set of absolute rules which are undeniable. If you are learning a language and start speaking it, but no one understands you, that's pretty much your fault.

Likewise if you are down the gym but not getting fitter and not getting slimmer, then it means either you are doing the wrong exercises, or not

doing enough of them, or all the pounds you are shedding are being put back on because you will insist on going to the pub for a few drinks afterwards as your reward for all the time spent in the gym.

And this is the key point. Just going to the gym isn't the answer – it is using the gym in the right way that is the key. Likewise, just going to the cookery class is no good if you don't put what you have learned into practice when you cook at home. Going to the Spanish course is no good if you don't do your homework.

What you have to do in each case is build the habits of healthier living, more adventurous cooking, speaking Spanish...

But what about a totally different type of resolution? One that involves writing advertisements that get better response rates? Can that be a resolution that you can follow?

The answer is yes, you can. But the resolution comes with the same sort of problems that are part of the resolve to lose weight by working out in the gym, learning how to cook more adventurous meals, learning Spanish or anything else. You have to keep going, and you have to invest a bit of time in the project.

Plus there is one extra issue. Getting fit is easy to measure – you can track your weight, how far you can run without collapsing, what weights you can lift, etc, etc. Speaking a language is easy to measure simply by seeing if you are understood. And cooking a meal is easy to measure by noting whether the food tastes good and others like to accept your invitation.

But writing advertisements?

One obvious question and answer is “Does the advert sell the product?” But the problem is that if it doesn't you might have several different reasons why. For example, it might not be a product that teachers currently want. Or it might be that the price isn't right. Or it might be that there is a rival product that teachers are already buying and they see no reason to change to your version.

Or, most difficult to deal with of all, it might be that you have written the advert in a way that looks perfectly logical and reasonable to you, but which actually doesn't work.

That's a bit like the fact that you could be going to the gym regularly but you are not losing weight simply because you are doing the wrong sort of exercise. Yes, exercise is always better than no exercise, but not all types of exercise are equal.

If you have been writing your own advertisements before, then suddenly changing the style is going to be a challenge. Building new habits takes time. Indeed a study in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* estimated that the establishment of a new habit takes between 18 and 254 days – depending on how much you do it and how entrenched the old ways are.

Which is why most people fail.

Because writing adverts is a bit like going to the gym. OK you don't have to get up and drive off to the gym, and do stuff and then have a shower and drive home, but you do have to set aside time, and you do have to work according to the rules.

And you can't just do it once and then expect it to happen. If it were that easy everyone would be able to do my job of writing adverts that get better sales figures than the pieces written by most other people.

Plus here's another thing. Not every advert will work, so you need to be determined to make it work. I've been writing adverts for 30 years and some of mine don't work. But the advantage I have is threefold. First, I've written a lot of adverts so I do have a fairly good idea of what works. Second if an advert doesn't work, when I come back and look at it I can usually make a fairly good stab at the reason why, and then write another advert that avoids that problem, and does work. Third I'm accountable. I can't just say, "oh sorry, it didn't work," because my reputation is at stake. Of course, sometimes I come across products or services that I just can't get

to sell at all – I can never give 100% guarantee that I can sell a product. Just like someone who has learned Spanish occasionally gets stumped by a phrase or a regional accent, or a person who has been on a cookery course creates a meal that just doesn't taste right, or indeed the person who goes to the gym finds that this month, the weight has been put back on rather than lost.

Mostly however I do get it right, but there are a few products and services that I just can't find a way to sell. Not many, but some. It's a sad fact of life. But I do make myself accountable. And on the few occasions I fail to get the sales, I don't charge.

Of course you can do the job yourself. But if you want to have some outside input here's a way forward that a) won't cost you anything b) doesn't oblige you to anything and c) could make you some money.

First, you email my colleague Steve Mister with details of what you sell. You can send anything you like, although the best approach is to include a) details of the web page that describes your product, b) a copy of a recent advert, c) a list of the benefits that you see are related to this product or service, d) details of who the product or service is aimed at (for example, "maths teachers in secondary schools" or whatever is appropriate).

Second, do remember to send us no money.

Third, if from the information you have given me I can write you an advert, I will do it. If I can't I will tell you what else I need to know, and if you wish you can supply it to me.

And, of course, all this is done in absolute confidence.

Now I know people can be a bit suspicious on occasion, and may wonder why this service is offered for free.

Quite simply the answer is that there are a lot of products and services which are not being advertised to schools because the developers, manufacturers or retailers of the products have tried advertising to schools,

but got the advertisement wrong in some way, and concluded that “schools simply aren’t buying.” So I have to find a way to convince people that this is not the case. That’s why we have this service.