

The Broadcast Copywriter's Expanding World

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In an age of sudden breakthroughs in solid-state technology and whirlwind leveraged buyouts, it is easy to perceive of the broadcast/cable industry as a realm ruled by and for engineers and financiers. The importance of these two groups must not be underestimated, but their activities have sparked wide-ranging changes in other branches of our field as well—changes that, in and of themselves, are having a profound impact on the shape of the entire electronic communication enterprise.

These transformations are especially significant in the practice of broadcast copywriting, where technical and fiscal changes bring new potential and demands. Today's copywriter must service an increasing inventory of message types while juggling a burgeoning checklist of copy considerations. More specifically, seven key factors now influence copywriter workloads and responsibilities.

Spot Lengths

For decades, the continuity wordsmith has been employed almost exclusively in the preparation of 30- and 60-second messages, with an occasional 10-second billboard or ID thrown in. This comforting predictability of length enabled the writer to develop a kind of sixth sense as to what could be covered in the typical broadcast spot. Thinking in 75- or 140-word messages became almost second nature. But that cozy commonality has been stretched beyond recognition—and in both directions.

On the one hand, split thirties (and their resulting "stand-alone" fifteens) require TV copywriters to be even more streamlined in communication design. In fact, some experts warn that "moving billboards" (such as two 7-second spots in a 15-second wrapping) are not far behind as yet another cost-saving effort. Though not yet a factor in radio (where time costs still tend to be measured in dozens rather than thousands of dollars), these mini-messages may take hold there if cost effectiveness is

demonstrated in television.

On the other hand, cable networks and the new UHF stations have greatly accelerated the move to longer spot forms as these delivery systems seek to peddle their commercial availabilities. Chief among such long-form messages is the *infomercial*—an extended product/service discussion that might be as short as ninety seconds or as long as eight minutes. Sometimes referred to as "short-form programs," these commercials place the copywriter in the unaccustomed role of programmatic creator with all the attendant questions of message pacing, multiple point presentation, and scene-to-scene bridging.

Today's copywriter is also expected to master and refine techniques for linking the separate messages in "piggyback" formats. Through threats of legal action, packaged goods manufacturers have secured clearance of these "double spots" over the clutter-conscious objections of broadcasters. Units of 45/15 and split-thirty (15/15) are becoming increasingly common.

Psychographics

Broadcast copywriters used to address commercials to "all you folks out there in radio land"—in short, to anyone who might be listening. With more stations and audience segmentation, sophisticated marketers began to target spots to specific demographic groups. In the computer-delineated market of the Eighties, simple demographic delineations (age, sex, income level) are no longer enough. Now, copy platforms must reflect writer cognizance of *psychographics*—lifestyle patterns and preferences that both transcend and take precedence over conventional demographic pigeonholes. Using such tools as SRI International's VALS (Values and Lifestyles) or Doyle Dane Bernbach's more proprietary "Contentment Climate" system, today's marketers (and their copywriters) shape messages to conform to

the gratifications that the aimed-for audience is most intent on fulfilling. The copywriter must imbue that message with the cues calculated to mesh with consumers' self and world views. Sometimes this means writing five or six versions each skewed to push "hot buttons" of prospects in different, yet related, psychographic cells.

Continuity Acceptance

Beginning in 1937, the broadcast industry wrapped itself in a security blanket known as "The Code"—broadcaster-derived programming and commercial policies that, with the network Standards and Practices offices, set the parameters for on-air acceptability. Stations, copywriters, and even the Federal Communications Commission came to rely on these National Association of Broadcasters documents as objective arbiters that determined both commercial quantity and content. But in 1982, the Radio and Television Codes were dismantled via anti-trust litigation.

This development left stations and copywriters in an unaccustomed policy vacuum. Many decided to continue adherence to former Code practices but there was no longer the tacit assurance that the outlet down the street was doing the same. Other stations derived their own codes. Especially for the advertising agency copywriter, who creates messages to be aired on several stations, this divergency in acceptance standards causes uncertainty. Not infrequently it has been necessary to produce multiple versions of a spot to accommodate different broadcasters' standards. As the Codes fade further into history, many believe that station self-regulatory policies on commercial length and subject matter will become even more varied. Copywriters, as a consequence, will have to become even more facile in handling unconventional spot lengths and topics.

In-Station Promos

Station promotional activities used to be limited largely to bumper stickers, client

parties, and an occasional on-air contest. This scenario changed in radio when FM came to parity and then surpassed AM in listener drawing power. This development alone more than doubled the number of feasible competitors for audiences' attention and even the old-line powerhouse facilities had to scramble to retain public recognition. A similar condition has occurred in television as cable and satellite technologies combine to offer tiers of new choices to heretofore complacent, network-affiliate-conditioned audiences. Even within their core markets, TV outlets find themselves on unfamiliar ground as they are often assigned cable channel numbers that do not correspond to their long-established location on the over-the-air dial.

Given these realities, station promotion departments have been upgraded to "Creative Services" or even "Marketing" divisions with a copy production volume that mirrors this enlarged role. Some stations, whose advertising agency derived business obviated the need for in-house writers, now find themselves hiring fulltime copywriters solely to meet their self-promotion needs. Other stations have upgraded copy positions from part to fulltime status with a consequent rise in both pay and competency expectations. These writer employment opportunities have yet to be fully serviced due to the shortage of adequately trained professionals.

Retail, Co-op, and DR Advertising

Led by the Radio Advertising Bureau and the Television Bureau of Advertising, stations are making new overtures to retailers, manufacturers, and direct marketers. No longer willing to concede retailer business to the newspaper establishment, broadcasters are using more aggressive research, backed by well-fashioned "spec spots" samples, to woo print-oriented advertisers to the microphone and picture tube. Prospects are enhanced through "co-op" funds, where the cost of the airtime can be partially underwritten by the manufacturers of the local merchant's goods. Meanwhile,

companies that sell directly rather than through local stores are finding the availabilities for DR (direct response) advertising very much to their liking. All three of these activities—retail, co-op, and DR—provide significant new opportunities for broadcast copywriters that, until recently, were the nearly exclusive property of print. And though it is a much newer enterprise, advertising on local and interconnected cable systems shows potential for additional growth in these copy areas. This in turn holds out the possibility of an entirely new group of copywriter employers—the cable systems themselves.

TV Graphic Enhancers

Rightly or wrongly, television message creation has been perceived as a high stakes game in which only the big agencies, their clients, and the production houses could afford to take part. Local spots were considered second-rate endeavors and comparatively meager production time and equipment tended to make that expectation a self-fulfilling prophecy. Innovations in low-cost, micro-processor-driven video switchers, editors and special effects devices permit local TV copywriters to employ a variety of sophisticated video techniques.

This is a mixed blessing. The enhancement of technical capabilities demands a narrowing of the difference between minor and major league writing. The television copywriter has a lot more to learn about production mechanics and far fewer situations will provide an "apprenticeship."

In addition, easy access to these electronic marvels poses temptation to write spots that emphasize visual effects rather than products. Such wizardry is still only a means to an end—and that end is the construction of persuasive, client-centered messages.

Crisis and Controversy Advertising

The immediacy of broadcasting (radio in particular) has long been an attribute some advertisers wish to take advantage of, especially when they find themselves in the

midst of sudden crises that can only be defused through quick response. Whether it be cyanide sabotage of a headache remedy, reports of razor blades in hotdogs, or questions about the stability of a savings and loan association, broadcast copywriters have recently been called upon to use their skills in damage control, reassurance, and rebuttal. Copywriting for radio and television has always been a time-bound endeavor, but the success of "crisis" advertisements has established new tasks and expectations.

In like manner, controversial campaigns are securing greater exposure as station and network policies prohibiting their acceptance are determined to be less financially or legally tenable. Sometimes these controversies are the outgrowth of crisis situations. In other instances they result from long-term social or regulatory readjustments like the widespread discussion of contraceptive devices or the consumer fallout from the AT & T breakup. Whatever the case, topics formerly reserved for the extended and often parochial environment of print are now finding their way into the abbreviated and wide-spectrum world of broadcast advertising. This, of course, provides greater employment for radio/television copywriters—but an employment that could be likened to the chance to take faster and more frequent strolls through more heavily planted minefields.

In short, the broadcast copywriter's world is more wide-ranging, propitious, challenging, and dangerous than ever before. It is a world in need of increased numbers of workers—but workers possessing far greater skills, knowledge, and flexibility than were required in the past. The composing of concise and compelling electronic communication is now less of a trade and more of a profession. And like any profession, it demands specific and sequenced instruction if its future practitioners are to be properly molded.

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