

Wilhide & Company

3019 West 43RD Street
Minneapolis, MN 55410

Hope you're enjoying the abundance of autumn. Here's a little food for thought.

OBSERVATIONS

September 2004

A Journal Of Things We Find Interesting

What We Do When We Do Advertising

"Truth well told" is how the McCann Erickson agency defines (or used to define) advertising. It's a powerful, pithy statement but not without its problems.

What is truth and does advertising tell it? Apart from philosophical debates about the meaning of "truth," it's difficult to determine what the truth of, say, a McDonald's commercial is or the truth of a picture. Advertisers, of course, tend to present their products in the best possible light, to tell the positive part of the truth. Is part of the truth still true?

A good definition is not only accurate, it's unique to the term being defined. Yet "truth well told" can apply to anything from a Hemingway novel to an elegant mathematical proof to (many would argue) the Bible. Few would argue that the Bible, while it may be truth well told, is the same thing as advertising.

"Salesmanship in print," is how legendary ad man Albert Lasker defined

advertising. Actually what he said was "salesmanship in print driven by a reason why." This sounds good to managers and marketers who like to think they are savvy about selling. But it also has problems. Modern advertising appears in printed magazines and newspapers but also on billboards, in buses, on television, at the movies, in the mail, at the mall and in the ether of the internet and email.

Salesmanship is also now "salespersonship" or some such gender-neutral term. While managers like the idea because they want their ad dollars to increase sales and their ad people to provide proof, a lot of advertising is intended less to sell product than to build brand and reinforce a market position. The term "reason why" is also freighted with complexity. Steven Fox wrote a whole book (**The Mirror Makers**) describing a century of cycles



Ah, summer! Dontcha miss it already? This is the view from a cabin on the northern tip of Madeline Island, looking past birch trees (and feet) across Lake Superior.

between "reason why" and what he called "image" advertising.

Less succinct definitions of advertising abound. The best-selling text in the field, William Arens' *Contemporary Advertising*, uses this one: "Advertising is the structured and composed nonpersonal communication of information, usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature, about prod-

ucts (goods, services and ideas) by identified sponsors through various media.”

That’s a mouthful and, in fact, it takes Arens much of a chapter to do an exegesis on his definition so we can understand its subtleties. Even after much study, I still have difficulty with the idea that advertising is “nonpersonal.” We encounter ads on a very personal level, one-on-one, in our own minds — either as imaginative possibilities or as information to make rational decisions. To call advertising “nonpersonal” seems to me the same thing as calling it ineffective.

There’s another genre of definitions that highlight a cynical view of advertising. This one comes from a web site called jonathan’scorner.com: “Advertising (n) (1) The fine art of lying to consumers about what is actually being sold. (2) A notable amendment of capitalist theory, whereby the market comes to favor, not the producers who sell the best product, but those who sell the best image. (3) A substantial misallocation of economic resources, whereby a tremendous portion of the economy which could do something useful, is wasted...(etc.)”

There are also definitions specific to certain groups. A lawyer’s association defines advertising (rather circularly) as “the laws relating to advertising, whether in publications, on billboards, by direct mail or by broadcasting on television or radio.” The Canadian government defines it as the “process to inform the public of important meetings and other public matters, as specified in provincial regulations.”

The Latin root of the word is “advertere,” which translates literally as “to turn toward.” The implied meaning is to direct someone’s attention to something. This can mean anything along a spectrum from providing information to persuading. Sometimes that spectrum is pretty short: providing information can be a kind of persuasion. (This seems less true

Defining Advertising

with current political advertising, where image and ignorance seem to trump information and reason much of the time.)

I like this notion of turning people toward something. For one thing it’s not nonpersonal; it has the feel of putting one’s arm gently on the shoulder of a prospect or customer (or voter) and guiding him or her toward the product or idea.

For another, it emphasizes the real purpose of most modern advertising which is to change perception. We live in a cynical world that is, paradoxically, set in its ways. If we want to change brand preference, or change the way people live or work by getting them to use a new product, we can’t be shy about running ads. It’s amazing, when you think of it, that we now use Scotch tape instead of string and write on computers that don’t print anything until you hook them up to some other machine. We wouldn’t be doing either without advertising.

Turning people toward our product (our purpose, our truth) also is a way of including all the subdisciplines of persuasive communication. PR, direct mail, promotion, electronic marketing, brochures, sponsorships, events — all of them fit into this broad definition of advertising.

Turning people toward something also has a certain ring of optimism -- another defining characteristic of advertising. We don’t run ad campaigns if we think there’s no future in the business. We run ads because we expect to be here, successfully, tomorrow and the day after that.

And, finally, turning people toward something requires confidence. When we advertise we are saying that we know something that may be of benefit

Observations is an occasional publication we put out when we feel like it. We provide creative services and consulting for marketing communications. If you have a project we could help with, please contact us. If you’d just like to shoot the breeze about some of this stuff, we usually have time for that too.

Doug and Jean Wilhide

to you. Come to our sale, try our new and improved product, let us help you with our service, believe in our candidate. As advertisers, we cast ourselves as visionary leaders, offering people a greater range of choices, turning them toward new possibilities.

Maybe that’s pushing it. But the next time people ask me what I do, I plan to take them gently by the shoulder, turn them toward a quiet corner, look them directly in the eye and say, “I’m in advertising.” The rest of the conversation can flow from there.

I’ve been cleaning old files recently and came across a couple of my favorite ads. One was for a dental clinic that had opened new offices in the city skyways of Minneapolis. the headline: “Do Your Teeth Work Downtown?”

The other was never produced, but remains one of my favorite concepts. It was for a trucking company that offered much more reliable delivery times than the competition. The picture was a close-up of a load of fish. The headline: “If you think ALMOST on time is good enough, scratch and sniff.”

Yes, We're Available

We’re looking for new projects.

We offer copywriting and art direction for ads, ad campaigns, brochures, direct mail pieces and campaigns and a wide range of other marketing communications.

We also offer consulting services to help make your advertising, direct mail and marketing communications efforts more effective.

Call us. 612-926-3939. Or email: wilhide@skypoint.com