

The Hidden Dangers of Lists

The Monday Morning Memo for June 22, 2015

I have a client who has a lot of marketing savvy. A few weeks ago he sent me a list of seven copy points and asked if this was our radio strategy.

I spent a lot of time crafting a carefully considered response, so I thought I might share it with you. Perhaps it will trigger a realization or an insight you can use.

There's an equally good chance, however, that you'll decide I'm wrong.

Here's the response I sent him:

You've asked for clarity on the issue of our radio strategy and you sent along a very well-crafted chart to illustrate your perception of it. This is obviously important to you.

I'm happy to help in any way I can, of course.

My discomfort with the list you sent me is rooted in the following question:

What is the purpose of this document? Is it meant to be a guiding document? Are we creating a standard by which ads are to be evaluated in the future?

If so, my experience has been that if I agree with this list, it will lead to the inclusion of too many claims being jammed into a single piece of copy. Within a year, I would likely be hearing,

"This is a good ad, but you didn't say this or this or this. We need to include those, remember? Didn't we agree on this list of seven things that our ads should accomplish? Is there any way we can include those other three things, too?"

A good ad makes a single point, powerfully. A bad ad sounds like a grocery list. The only person impressed by such an ad is the advertiser who wrote it.

If this document is meant to be a list of recurrent copy-points, it is incomplete. Consequently, the adoption of this list would put us at risk of focusing too much of our airtime on too few objectives.

Our strategy is to win not only the mind, but the heart as well. We need our prospective customer to *feel* good about us. This is very delicate and difficult and is not likely to be accomplished if we are constrained by a regimented list of intellectual copy points. My experience has been that such lists lead to the ad campaign becoming more structured and informative, but less persuasive.

You've mentioned on a number of occasions that you believe the strongest response we've had was triggered by an ad I sent you that was written in a very intimate,

confessional style. The effectiveness of that ad rose from the fact that it didn't speak to the listener in the style of an advertiser speaking to a customer. It spoke in the style of a friend speaking to a friend. That ad surprised and delighted the customer. It's hard to put surprise and delight on a checklist, but I know how important they are. Every fiber of me knows it. Thirty-seven years of attempting to persuade the public and then monitoring the results of those attempts has carved it into my soul.

It's perfectly natural for an organized person to want a document that summarizes the intellectual elements of their advertising, point by point. You have several years of experience as a CEO that has taught you the wisdom of this.

My experience as an ad writer has been otherwise. This is at the root of my anxiety, I think. The hidden danger of lists is that they lead to predictability.

If you continue to feel that you need a checklist, I suggest that we add the following to the top of it:

1. Be remembered.

We must be memorable. This requires us to surprise the customer in some small way in every ad. Without an element of surprise, there can be no delight.

2. Make them like us.

If we win the heart, the mind will follow. Our minds routinely create logic to justify what our hearts have already decided.

Add these to your list and I'm good with it. There will be times when these two points will be the only two things I attempt to accomplish in a script.

Thank you for asking for this clarity in such an elegant and respectful way. Your style of communication is one of the things I like best about you.

And it's one of the things our audience likes best about you, too.

Ciao for Niao,

Roy H. Williams