

Ultius, Inc.

Writing Samples

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The Main Elements of a Good Commercial

In the marketing world, designing a good commercial for one's product is an integral part of getting potential consumers to purchase one's product. This raises the important question, 'what make a good commercial?' The purpose of the present sample essay provided by Ultius is to delineate some of the main elements of a good commercial. Five main elements will be addressed. These are: developing a plotline, keeping it simple, subconscious messaging, achieving emotional connection, and being clear about one's product. Each of these elements will be discussed in turn; and by the end of the essay, the reader should have a clear idea of what makes a commercial good.

1. Developing a Plotline

To start, a good commercial is usually one that tells a compelling story within the context of the commercial itself. In the broadest sense, plotline refers to the actual arc action that is taking place within the commercial. Ideally, the plotline will be structured in such a way that the target product is integrated into the plotline in an effective and compelling way. For example, a commercial for beer may portray a plotline of young people having a good time, with the beer itself being one of the factors contributing to the good time; and viewers watching the commercial may decide to buy the product (i.e. the beer) because they also want to have a good time, like the people in the commercial. In general, the plotline should portray the product in terms of its favorable integration with the everyday lives of the potential consumers. The viewers

may then go ahead and consume the product because they have paralleled the plotline of the commercial with their own lives.

Related to plot is the concept of theme. As Berger, has written: "The plot of an advertisement may involve a man and a woman drinking but the theme might be jealousy, faithlessness, ambition, passion, etc." (point 9). Essentially, the theme is what the plotline is conveying at a human or emotional level. In general, the theme should be structured in such a way that the commercial conveys that, by purchasing the target product, the viewer's life will be enhanced in some way, whether that has to do with academic achievement, defeating a romantic rival, or whatever else (Mentis). Clearly, it would be counterproductive if the advertisement conveys that purchasing the product would make one a "loser" in some way. Rather, the theme contained within the plotline must convince the viewer that his life will be better, and that he will be more successful according to whatever success means to him, by purchasing the product. The best way to achieve this would be to tell a good story with a strong underlying meaning.

2. Keeping it Simple

What has been said above, however, must be complemented by awareness of the fact that the commercial occurs within a relatively short timeframe (usually no more than thirty or sixty seconds), and that it is thus essential for the commercial to get to the heart of the matter without excessive meandering or subtlety. This is how Bilal has put the matter: "The more you ask people think during an ad break . . . or the more you ask them to do, the more likely it is that your ad will flop. Free the ad of all clutter and stick to a single idea, a single pitch" (paragraph 14). Essentially, the commercial is not intended to resemble a work of literature; rather, it exists for one single purpose alone, and that consists of promoting its target product. To do this, it is essential for the viewer to absorb the single idea of the commercial that will potentially cause

them to make the decision to purchase the product. From a marketing perspective, investment in extraneous aesthetics would just be nothing more than a waste of money, pure and simple.

This element of a good commercial is somewhat paradoxical, insofar as it is also essential for the commercial to capture the attention of the viewer (Mentis). The main idea here, though, is that it is necessary of the commercial to capture attention in such a way that the viewer is specifically motivated to take action after viewing it; and given the timeframe of the commercial, this means that there is virtually no room for any elements that detract for this purpose or even just do not directly support this purpose. This means that the commercial should be kept simple: it should be driven by one single idea, and that idea should be related to the consumer deciding to buy the product. The kind of attention that the average viewer pays to a commercial is really not compatible with any other design.

3. Engaging in Subconscious Messaging

This is a somewhat shady and controversial point, but the fact is that some of the most successful commercials have generally engaged in some form of subconscious messaging. It is worth pointing out here that technically speaking, there is a difference between subconscious messaging and subliminal messaging. As Kolenda has written: "Subliminal messages are stimuli that lie below our threshold of conscious awareness. Because they fall below the absolute threshold level (ATL), we can't perceive a subliminal message, *even if we're looking at it*" (paragraph 7). There is considerable debate over whether there is any value in this kind of practice. What is much more clear, however, is that subconscious messaging is a valuable tool in the marketer's arsenal, and one of the elements of the most successful commercials. And success is good within this context, that would also make it one of the key elements of a good

commercial. Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind that in common parlance, subliminal and subconscious messaging are often used (even if incorrectly) in an interchangeable way.

The main idea here is that an advertisement can include subconscious cues and insinuations that may not fully register on the radar of the viewer's conscious awareness, but which may nevertheless subconsciously affect how he feels about a given product or the associations that he has with it. As Love has put the matter: "So do advertisers consciously choose to include subliminal messages in their ads? Can they harness subliminal power to associate their product with sex and power?" (paragraph 8). For example, if an advertisement for a product that has nothing to do with sex is nevertheless associated with a pretty woman who is using a provocative tone of voice, then the average male viewer may subconsciously associate the product with sex and thus have favorable feelings toward a product that has nothing to do with sex. This is subconsciously relative to overtly telling the viewer to think about sex when thinking about the product.

4. Achieving Emotional Connection

Related to some of the other points that have been made above is the point that for a commercial to be good, it absolutely must achieve an emotional connection with the viewer. In terms of classic rhetoric, a good commercial is far more about pathos than it is about logos (Rapp). That is, the point is not to make a rational argument to the viewer—which would neither be possible within the timeframe of the commercial nor compatible with the state of the average viewer's attention. Rather, the point is to quickly speak to the viewer at a visceral and emotional level; it is to make him feel that he is understood, and that his life will get better if he purchases the target product of the commercial. A consideration of the moral implications of this fact would fall beyond the scope of this present essay. Rather, the only important point within the

context of the present discussion is the pragmatic one that this is what is most likely to enable a commercial to succeed in achieving its objective.

A good plotline and theme can surely help with the achievement of emotional identification. It will, however, also involve a careful consideration by marketers of available demographic data. Essentially, marketers should make their commercials compatible with the mindsets and lifestyles of the target demographic for their products. For example, if a commercial for a restaurant features a bunch of elderly persons eating at a table, then this would be counterproductive if the target demographic of the restaurant consists of Millennials. A Millennial viewer would likely not emotionally connect with the advertisement (except perhaps in an ironic way, if the commercial is done right) as he does not think of himself as the sort of person who his being portrayed in the commercial

5. Being Clear about the Product

This may seem like an obvious point, but many commercials these days seem to miss it: the commercial is worthless, if the viewer does not have a clear idea of what product the commercial is advertising. There have been several occasions where one viewer has seen a commercial while watching television with other viewers, then look at each other and wonder, "What was that for?" If this question is left in the viewer's mind, then the commercial is essentially a failure, as the entire point of the commercial would be to send a strong message to the viewer to consume a certain product. There is a certain irony, here. It is as though in their effort to captivate the viewer's attention with fantastic plotlines and special effects, the companies draw attention away from the product itself, to the point that several commercials begin to seem like just simple entertainment with no actual marketing value behind them.

As Frozen Fire has suggested: "Represent your brand clearly. Using both verbal and visual cues, your brand's name, logo, and perhaps even the product itself should be conveyed throughout the commercial. Don't be secretive and wait until the end of the ad to show your brand's face" (point 1). One of the most basic principles of advertising is that the viewer must feel compelled to act and buy the product after viewing the commercial for that product; but for this to happen, the viewer would first of all have to know what product the commercial is trying to advertise. Again, it is deeply ironic that this should even be an issue at all. But in trying to stand out from the crowd, companies have begun to neglect the basic purpose of commercials in the first place. This could only even potentially work if one's brand is so strong that the primary purpose of the commercial would be to entertain viewers. (A company such as Coca-Cola comes to mind, here.) But most companies clearly do not have this kind of luxury.

Conclusion

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of some of the main elements of a good commercial. The main elements that have been discussed here are: developing a plotline, keeping it simple, subconscious messaging, achieving emotional connection, and being clear about one's product. A caveat that should perhaps be included in this conclusion, though, is that at least some of this advice is contingent upon the level of self-awareness present within the viewer. For example, a given viewer may be relatively immune to subconscious messaging, insofar as he is lucidly aware of the fact that such messaging is going on—in which case it would no longer be subconscious for that viewer, anymore. The discussion above has been based on assumptions regarding the nature of the average commercial viewer, and the average state of his attention while he is viewing the commercial.

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