

How to do better creative work

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Let's start with a warning: producing effective work is more difficult than most people think. A lot more.

First, only a handful of your prospects care about what you have to say. The vast majority is indifferent. Some people are even hostile.

Second, you're competing with hundreds of agencies for the attention of these indifferent/hostile individuals. Indeed, as every pundit seems to delight in admonishing us, we're bombarding the average consumer in the UK with upwards of 2,500 marketing communications every day. Apparently, 24 hours later, this poor soul can remember only a half a dozen of them favourably.

Which means tens of millions of pounds are wasted each day by those who fail to catch their prospects' eye. Are you ready to fight tooth and nail against the best agencies and the biggest budgets in order to make sure that it's your work that's seen and remembered? If not, you're wasting your time.

You've got an even bigger fight on your hands

And that particular fight is the easy bit, because your real battle is not with other advertisers. You're going head-to-head with every form of content and communication that vies for the attention

of the reader, surfer, viewer, blogger or listener.

Like I said, most people are indifferent. No one buys their magazines for the free-standing inserts that drop out of them, even fewer log on for the overlays that invade their favourite website, and only a special kind of person goes to the front door each morning and exclaims 'Ah ha! Two pieces of unsolicited direct mail. I'll get a later train into work, pop the kettle on and have a good read.'

It's the same across all media.

Suppose, for instance, you've taken a 20 × 3 on page two of the *Daily Express*. You've spent £2,100 on the space and four weeks trying to come up with the right brief and an ad that grabs the attention and engages the reader. But are you saying anything that's more interesting than the feature that always occupies that same page and which many readers turn to automatically? Is your headline more compelling than 'Sunny periods, heavy rain later'? Not if the reader usually walks home from the railway station each evening and learns from the forecast that they should take their umbrella into work that day. The weather forecast is useful. Is your ad anything like as helpful?

And imagine you've splashed out £2,500 on a backlit billboard situated 30 feet high above a busy main road in the centre of town. Do you think the message you're beaming out from that poster is as interesting as the battered triangular tin sign on the pavement below, which tells drivers



Is your message as useful as this?

pelting up the main road that there are 'Roadworks ahead'? Again, it's unlikely that your message is as useful.

Or let's say you've persuaded your client to fork out for a rich media banner campaign. Is that campaign compelling enough to compete with the Popbitch subject line announcing: 'Royal in king-size sex-scandal'? Indeed, do you think you will ever write anything that's as arresting as 'Royal in king-size sex scandal'? I doubt it.

At this point you may feel your work will never be noticed by anyone ever again. But don't give up. People who are cleverer than you and me have suffered similar despair.

Why you need not one big idea but two

The great David Ogilvy was obsessed with selling. Indeed, to make sure that everyone who worked for him shared his fixation, he printed the words 'We sell, or else' on every piece of stationery

in each of his 140 offices worldwide.

David Ogilvy had reached the reasonable conclusion that he wouldn't sell a thing if no one noticed his ads. And it was he who told us this basic truth: 'It takes a big idea to attract the attention of

consumers and get them to buy your product.' He went on to warn us: 'Unless your advertising contains a big idea, it will pass like a ship in the night.' He identified the importance of the 'big idea' over 50 years ago and since then everyone, from the most callow creative course student to the most famous worldwide creative director, has made it their holy grail.

Problem is, like everyone else, they've assumed that the big *creative* idea was all they needed and that it alone will determine the success or failure of the communication.

But as the years have taught me, a big creative idea is not enough. Indeed, I believe that a big creative idea is virtually impossible unless it is preceded by a big *marketing* idea.

So what will this big marketing idea be about? Well, as we've seen, people notice things that are useful to them. So, if you're

going to get their attention and impress them you need to work out how the thing you are selling can help them. To be more specific, you should look for ways in which you can solve their problems.

Find this simple problem/solution dynamic and you'll have found your big marketing idea. Once you have that, you'll be on your way to producing something truly effective. You may even make history.

If you don't believe me, just think about the work you've always admired most, and you'll find that it proceeds from a simple problem/solution marketing idea. Here's proof.

The best TV spot ever was an exercise in problem/solution ...

The greatest commercial of all time is a basic exercise in problem/solution.

What better place to start than Doyle Dane Bernbach's *Snowplough* commercial. Here, the creative task couldn't have

been more difficult. In 1960 the trend in the USA was for glamorous, gleaming automobiles that could comfortably accommodate two kids, their dog and a bowling alley in the back. It was bad enough the Volkswagen was short, ugly and squat. But its origins made it almost unsellable. As George Lois, who worked at DDB in New York during its golden age, said, 'We were advertising a Nazi car in a Jewish town.'

Worried, the agency did the sensible thing and sent the team off to West Germany to try to find their big marketing idea. While on their tour of the production line, one of them stopped to enquire as to the role of the men in the white coats. They, he was told, were the people in charge of maintaining quality control. He then asked how many of them there were. The reply astonished him. Each day there were more people checking for quality than there were cars made. But, as his smiling German host pointed out: 'That's why they are the most reliable cars in the world.'

Bingo! They'd found the solution to pretty much every car owner's problem: the design and engine faults (and the built-in obsolescence) that, in those days, consigned most cars to the scrap heap three or four years after purchase.

The VW started first time, every time. Year after year. And, as the great *Snowplough* commercial demonstrated, it started first time, every time on even the coldest, frostiest mornings. In the commercial,



the VW is then seen making its way across ice sheets and upwards through a blizzard as the voice-over asks: 'Have you ever wondered how the man who drives the snowplough drives to the snowplough? This one drives a Volkswagen, so you can stop wondering.'

As the commercial ended, the snowplough roared past its driver's parked VW, and so began a campaign that ran for over 45 years. You may remember some of the wonderful commercials yourself that proceeded from that simple problem/solution dynamic, each one concluding with the wistful thought: 'If only everything in life was as reliable as a Volkswagen.'

... and that goes for the best direct mail ...

Let's move on to another classic. The American Express *Quite frankly* letter. Here it's important to point out that the problem and solution is not always a practical affair like having a car that starts first time. Indeed, the problem very often exists in the mind of the prospect.

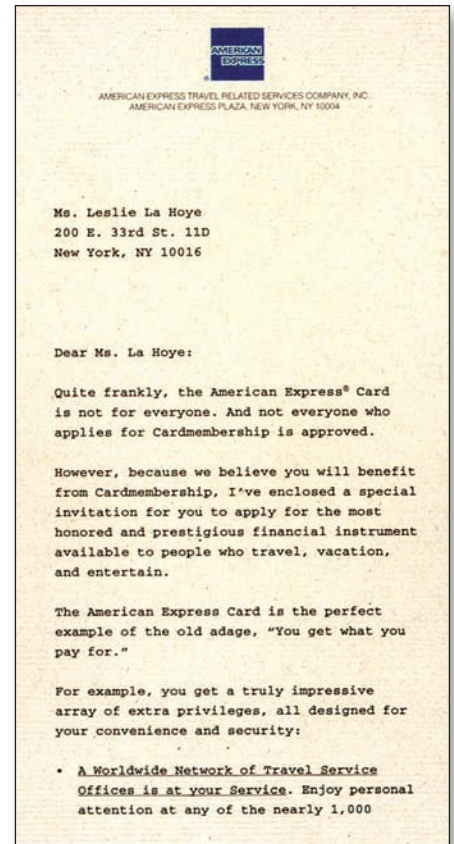
In the case of American Express there were other cards on the market that offered similar cash-free transactions. Moreover, those cards provided rolling credit, whereas Amex was a charge card that demanded repayment every 30 days. Also, the others were free, as opposed to American Express, which vetted applicants and charged an annual fee.

The big marketing idea, however, turned this last fact into the brand's advantage: anyone could carry a card that was free, but only the few would be accepted by American Express. Possession of the card became a badge of distinction. Indeed, it was the ideal status symbol in a competitive society.

With the big marketing idea already established, Bill Trembeth sat down one day at Ogilvy & Mather Direct, New York, and wrote this opening paragraph to the 1974 acquisition test mailing: 'Quite frankly, the American Express Card is not for everyone. And not everyone who applies for Cardmembership is approved.'

The next paragraph continued: 'However, because we believe you will benefit from Cardmembership, I've enclosed a special invitation for you to apply for the most honored and prestigious financial instrument available to people who travel, vacation, and entertain.'

Millions of people craved Amex's antidote for status anxiety. Which meant this most



This letter did more to establish Amex as a status symbol than any ad, poster or TV campaign, and proved beyond doubt that you can build a brand in an envelope.

basic exercise in problem/solution ran as the unbeatable control from 1974 to 1986. Indeed, it could be argued that this one mailing did as much to establish Amex's exclusive positioning as any of the brand's press, poster and TV campaigns. And not just in the USA because, ultimately, *Quite frankly* was mailed around the world some 280 million times.

... and the most famous digital work, too

Next is a piece of work that didn't take 12 years to get around the world. In the digital age things happen a lot quicker. However, the same principles apply. Find the problem experienced by the prospect and show them your solution.

For fans of fast food the problem was lack of choice. If you wanted to get hold of your comfort food ultra quick, you couldn't expect a huge range of options. But many customers were tired of the same old same old. So Burger King's brand strategy

evolved round the solution to that problem: 'Have it your way.' When this was applied to their chicken dinners, Burger King's big marketing idea was simply adapted to become: 'Chicken any way you like it.'

And the big creative idea that dramatised that? A viral featuring a chap in a chicken suit who would perform pretty much any command you typed into your computer.

If you wanted the chicken to dance, he danced. If you wanted him to hop, he hopped. If you wanted him to ... no he wouldn't do that, I'm afraid. Anyway, this was *Subservient chicken* and, as the much-respected creative director Tim Delaney said, it 'probably did more to introduce clients and agencies to the profound change that technology can make to brand communications than all the seminars and hoopla of the past few years'.

Everybody's favourites are an exercise in problem/solution, too

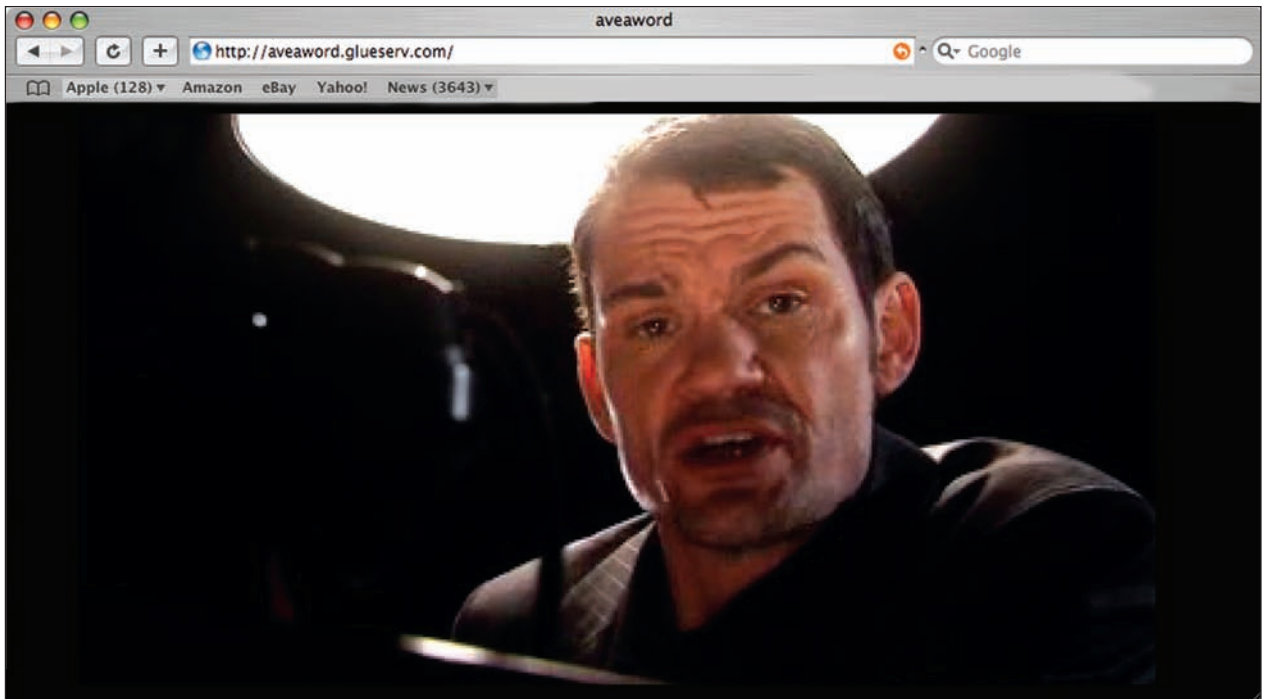
Perhaps the most celebrated TV spot of all time, Apple's *1984*, simply dramatised the coming of the Mac and how it would liberate the office worker from the conformist drudgery of working on a PC.

The universally acclaimed *Nike+* programme is basically the solution to the problem faced by all serious runners: theirs is a lonely calling and they crave companionship, encouragement and competition.

Subservient chicken. This work did for viral what *Snowplough* had done for TV commercials over 40 years earlier.

YouTube





That other massive global success, the Dove *Campaign for real beauty*, is aimed purely (both literally and figuratively) at reassuring women of all ages, shapes and sizes, whose problem is their 'body image and self-esteem'.

Problem/solution lies at the core of another multi-award-winning worldwide campaign: Lynx (known as Axe in some markets). This deodorant range has little to do with stopping young men from smelling bad. It's much more fundamental than that. The problem being solved here is how to get laid.

Similarly, perhaps the best viral yet done in the UK, glue London's 'Ave a word for the Mini Cooper S, had nothing to do with

getting the laddish audience from A to B. It was, instead, about how the car could help these young men affirm and assert their masculinity.

And what of the greatest UK poster campaign of the past 20 years? Clearly, all David Abbott and his colleagues at AMV BBDO have been offering is *The Economist's* solution to those who are having trouble climbing the corporate ladder.

Now I may be straying here into the bit about big creative ideas – which comes in Chapter 5 – but as you'll see I've shown one of David Abbott's classics: 'I never read *The Economist*. Management Trainee, Aged 42.' I've picked this because it's an excellent example of an

The Mini Cooper S had an answer to that most basic of young men's problems: how to assert their masculinity.