

The swearword in advertising

The veritable and wholly indisputable truth concerning the esteemed craft of copy in advertising

By [Pierre Mare](#) 15 Aug 2007

From time to time, I sit down with members of the advertising fraternity. Year after inevitable year, one of the most common topics of professional discussion is: how much copy is enough? It is a common topic simply by virtue of the fact that agency heads more often than not have a background or reputable experience in copy.

The reason the discussion emerges consistently is that copy is usually cut to a level that is nominal. Now, here are the facts.

Sometime in the late '80s or early '90s an advertising agency in South Africa made an advertisement using few words, that was targeting an illiterate market. This ad worked. Somehow, probably through the drunken braggadocio of a gleeful art director getting the upper hand, word spread and the idea became entrenched. Today, 'copy' has become a four-letter word, although it always was.

The common argument against copy is the fallacy surrounding literacy. The first argument that is advanced is that people don't read. Pure copy is only ever used in print. Unless you are advertising in a 'skin mag', the irony of the statement is that print media contains many, many words, so if the statement holds true, why advertise in a medium that is purchased for the purpose of reading? Why not advertise on television or radio?

Once this has been dealt with, the blame inevitably shifts to Namibians, who are singled out as evidence of pervasive illiteracy. The example that is generally tendered is 'newspaper sellers and cleaners'. Simple observation will prove otherwise. Given a newspaper or even a furniture brochure, my observation has been that a newspaper seller or cleaner will read the material from cover to cover, possibly even twice or thrice. The hungry consumption of words by these people might even indicate a higher level of literacy, if not greater appreciation for the printed word. And there are a number of figures from credible sources which state that Namibians have a high degree of functional literacy. According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2006, Namibia has a literacy rate of 85% in the 15-and-older group – and that's higher than literate India, and South Africa.

The final argument is that 'a picture speaks a thousand words'. This is easily countered by asking the individual who made the statement to write those thousand words, preferably in coherent sentences with full stops and capital letters in the right places. A really good picture may speak a thousand words, but art directors that inventive are few and far between, and the photography budgets are horrendous.

In fact, copy is hard to manage in the advertising process. Typography is one of the most difficult crafts and hard-won skills within the field of advertising. So it is easier to stay away from type or make it small and hide it out of the way on the layout, ultimately dismissing it.

The fact is that well-written copy that speaks to the reader is a definite selling proposition. A picture can illustrate it, though this may be optional. However, the copy must recognise the culture, language, attitude

and motivation of the reader. It must also use the logic of the reader.

So where does copy stand, if it does not teeter?

The craft of copywriting has become far more important than ever before, though evidently not in print media. If you follow current web practice, you will have noted the pronounced emphasis on terms such as 'organic content', 'contextual linking' and 'link baiting'. All of these refer to copy techniques to activate use of sites and lead browsers in desired directions. Although a picture may speak a thousand words, download times tend to frustrate to the point where people close the site.

On a final note, consider this. You have just read 651 words (including the headline and my byline) written in a consciously ornate style, proving that at least you have the power and perseverance to follow print.

In answer to the question, how much copy is enough? More is.

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