



Advertising A Service Business

The consumer revolt means that not only products but services must be offered on new and different terms.

By **John Frye**

ALATE afternoon thundershower had broken the end-of-June heat wave, and the doors of Mac's Service Shop stood wide open to welcome the cool damp air. Barney was glancing over the evening paper that had just been delivered while Mac made out a parts order. Matilda had already gone home.

"Hey, Mac," Barney said to his employer, "have you noticed a rather subtle change in advertising lately? Seems to me there's a lot less unfounded bragging about products and services and more down-to-earth talking with the customer."

"I've noticed," Mac nodded, "and I think it's a reaction to the consumer revolt, or whatever you call this new respectful look at the customer many companies are taking—with, it must be admitted, a little helpful prodding from Ralph Nader and some forceful nudging from declining sales. For the first time many manufacturers are seeing their customers as intelligent individuals to be reasoned with, instead of as a herd of sheep easily led or stampeded in any desired direction by the expenditure of enough advertising dollars."

"I know you too well to believe you're 'agin' advertising," Barney observed.

"That's right. I'm a firm believer in advertising to keep a business growing. But I think the age of the Big Lie in advertising is over."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I think it was Hitler's Goebbels who is supposed to have said that if you repeated any lie, no matter how monstrous, often enough and emphatically enough, people would believe it. For several years many advertising companies have paid a tacit tribute to this theory. Hitting 'the message' hard was the thing—much more important than the essential truth of the message. This is the kind of advertising that depends heavily on reiterated slogans and bold statements that may be paraphrased as: 'You can depend on Manufacturer X,' or 'Manufacturer Y's products are better because of constant research,' or 'Quality is a must with Manufacturer Z.'"

"All too often money that would have justified these claims had it been spent on quality control and quality-directed research was diverted into advertising on the erroneous theory that people really didn't appreciate quality and were more swayed by what they read and heard than by what they actually experienced with the products."

"I know how I feel when I hear a TV announcer sounding off on the sterling quality of the products of a certain manufacturer and recall having to return two defective percolators of that manufacturer before I finally got a good one, or remember returning a new electric can opener twice to his authorized service center because it simply would not open cans, and each time having it come back just the way it left. I finally had to repair it myself."

"I know I am not alone in my feelings. Today's consumer is much more sophisticated and much less gullible than the customer for whom this kind of advertising was designed. He does not believe that after the salesman has married

him to a product the two of them will necessarily 'live happily ever after.' He wants to know: What if the product is defective or later breaks down? What responsibility does the manufacturer assume and what provisions has he made for keeping the product working?"

"I've seen several examples of the new kind of advertising," Barney observed. "I read that GM was carrying on an experiment in Chicago for a limited time in which any purchaser of a GM car in that area who felt he was not getting satisfactory service on his new car from the local dealer could call the factory free of charge and discuss his complaint. And I'm sure you saw Whirlpool's TV advertisements in which Whirlpool washer owners anywhere in the U.S. were given a telephone number they could call in the event that they could not get proper service on their appliances locally. Avis took full page ads to invite their customers to 'Yell if Avis does something wrong' on a toll-free hot line."

"These straws in the wind have not escaped my notice," Mac said, "and I'm convinced the radio-TV service operator would do well to align his own advertising with these trends."

"Could be," Barney agreed, "but that will add another requirement to what I have always felt was a tough assignment: advertising a service business. We have problems not present in advertising a product. In the first place, we are trying to sell something intangible. We have nothing a customer can see, lick, sniff, hear rattle, or pinch. We can't take advantage of Wheeler's advice that 'the sizzle sells the steak' because service doesn't sizzle."

"You're right. In a sense we have to sell our customers a pig in a poke. Not only do we have to persuade them they need the pork, but we must convince them our invisible pig is better than any other pig they can buy. In short, we are denied any sort of sensory appeal and must rely on purely intellectual persuasion. Any advertising man worth his salt—and all women—know it is much easier to appeal to the senses than to appeal to the intellect."

"How can the service technician give his advertising this New Look?"

"His first aim must be to narrow the credibility gap between what his advertising says and what the average customer believes about radio-TV service. Thanks to the admitted shady practices of some technicians and to the representing of these practices by newspapers and magazines as being typical of the whole industry, that credibility gap can use a lot of narrowing. The only way to make people believe you is to tell the exact truth as simply and unequivocally as you can without ever making an exception. That sounds easy, but it's not. I never cease to be amazed at how people can misunderstand a statement in which there is no intent to deceive if that statement is not written with crystal clarity."

"How's he going to get his message across? TV advertising is too expensive for the average service shop. Anyway, I've never seen a TV advertisement for service of any kind that impressed me very much—with the possible exception

of some of the clever, and I'm sure quite expensive, oil company ads. I am not much impressed by shots of the interior or exterior of the service shop, nor by a picture of the service trucks all lined up, nor by an obviously posed picture of a young housewife becoming almost as ecstatic about the radio-TV service she gets from you as she does about the way her laundry comes out when she uses Brand X detergent. None of this is very convincing."

"I agree. TV advertising is most effective when it can 'show the product.' That's why I think it is most worthwhile when it is used by a service organization to plug its emblem. Well-written spot announcements on local radio stations aired during programs popular with adult audiences can be quite effective in keeping your business in front of the public.

"But neither of these afford much elbow room to practice the new honesty-in-advertising technique we were discussing. Personally, I think the most effective means of doing this is contained in the weekly short columns in newspapers I notice several widely different businesses are using: automobile dealers, funeral parlors, real estate firms, and banks, for example."

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about."

"Well, these are usually boxed stories of a couple hundred words. Quite often a head-and-shoulders cut of the person whose name appears at the bottom is used at the top of the story. These stories are educational in nature and their title spotlights this feature. For example, one used by car dealers might be entitled *How to Buy a Used Car*, or *When Do You Need a Tune-Up?*, or *The Best Time to Trade*. In each case, to be effective, the story must be written so as to give the impression the author is genuinely interested in helping the reader."

"How do you picture us using this medium?"

"One way would be to acquaint our customers with the fairness of our charges. Take for instance the mark-up on tubes and other parts. Many people think we are crooks because our tube charges are higher than the wholesale prices they see in catalogues. We could explain such mark-ups are justified because we give time-and-place utility to the replacement items. We attempt to have them ready and waiting on our shelves when the customer needs them. Otherwise he would have to order the parts himself from a distant parts store, pay postage on them, wait for several days or even weeks for delivery, and return the parts for examination and possible replacement if they were defective.

"To avoid all these inconveniences for him, we tie up a lot of our capital

and expend lots of time and energy maintaining a large stock of parts. Quite often we suffer losses because items become obsolete on our shelves. If anything we sell is defective, we replace it immediately and then wrestle with the distributor about making it good to us. The mark-up on parts is a long, long way from being all pure profit. In fact, we simply cannot afford to absorb all the expense of maintaining a large parts inventory. The mark-up on parts is simply a means of making this operation pay its own way."

"I get the idea," Barney said. "We could do another column on What is and What is not Covered by our Service Guarantee and Why. This is a frequent source of misunderstanding. It should not be too difficult to make an intelligent customer see that if we replace one tube in a TV set we should be responsible for it alone and not for the other umpteen tubes in the set."

"You have the idea, but don't let's forget our primary aim is to instill confidence and trust in the customer's mind by showing that we have his interest at heart. Along that line other stories could be: TV Checks You Can Make Before You Call a Service Technician, How to Keep Service Charges to a Minimum, It May Not Be the Picture Tube, and How to Care for Your Tape Recorder."

"You know," Barney mused, "this new advertising approach may usher in a new Era of Good Feeling between manufacturers and their customers that will benefit both. If so, it is not coming a bit too soon. Growing distrust and cynicism on the part of customers had already reached the place where conventional advertising dollars were largely wasted. More and more advertising was regarded as pure propaganda aimed at moronic minds. It will take a while to erase that impression, but at least we're making a start." ▲

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