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Commonsense Direct Marketing

Dedication

*This book is dedicated to my Mother,
who can succeed at an age when
most other people have stopped trying.*

Commonsense Direct Marketing

Fully Revised Third Edition

Drayton Bird



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Eagle Star How I saved £50 in five minutes

Kathie Webber

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Compaq

American Express Shades of no

Felix

Robert Hayes McCoy Fan of letters

Jetstream before and after

British Telecom

Amex

Avon

Help the aged

Banco Commercial Portuguese

Quality Paperback mailings

1

Beginnings

'Learning teacheth more in one year than experience in twenty.'

Roger of Ascham

'The only purpose of advertising is to sell; it has no other justification worth mentioning.'

Raymond Rubicam

Founder, Young & Rubicam Advertising

'When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.'

Dr. Johnson

In 1957 my situation was bleak. I was making £7.00 a week editing a small trade journal. Even in those dear, dead days when cigarettes cost the equivalent of 10p a packet this would not support a wife and child even in the two-up two-down cottage with outside lavatory we lived in. I had to do something.

At the time, I was much taken by a smooth aristocratic friend who worked in advertising. He seemed to be making pots of money without too much effort and advised me to become a copywriter. It took six months using all my reserves of servile flattery to find a willing employer.

I had three qualities to offer, apart from desperation.

First, I was brought up in a northern pub with a widely varied clientele. Encountering very different kinds of people after they have had a few drinks is splendid education for life. One minute I might be serving a pint of best mild in the vaults to Alec, whose party turn was describing how his wife had gone out one day for a loaf of bread and never returned. The next I would be listening to a mottle-faced cotton magnate in the American Bar lamenting the Socialist Government's determination to part him from all he possessed.

Second, I could write. You may consider this essential for the job I sought, but this is not apparent to many would-be copywriters. An alarming number cannot spell, punctuate or write long sentences let alone tangle with such niceties as 'it's' versus 'its', 'compliment' as opposed to 'complement' and so on.

Third, I had read every book on advertising in Manchester Public Library and enrolled in an evening course on the subject. You may also see these preparations as obvious, but not all agree: when I finally entered the industry, I discovered few of my colleagues had taken the trouble to study the subject, or were even clear about the *purpose* of advertising.

This ancient ignorance has yet to be entirely dispelled. Over 80 years ago the first and best definition of advertising 'Salesmanship in print' (still valid if you allow for broadcast media) was formulated. However, this fairly simple thought has not penetrated the skulls of many practitioners or their clients to this day. You find this hard to believe? A 1980 survey of senior British marketing people revealed that 80 per cent thought advertising had some primary purpose *other* than selling.

Many see this as a comfortable state of affairs. If nobody knows what advertising should do, how can the content (or results) be evaluated? Under such circumstances it is relatively easy to make a fair living in the industry if you have a quick mind and an ingratiating manner.

The Amateur Approach

I had imagined this amateur approach to be peculiarly British until I read a piece headed 'Ignorance is bliss' in the December 21st 1992 issue of America's *Advertising Age*. It revealed that 1,003 senior executives had been tested on their knowledge of marketing principles with results so abysmal that they would have done better if they had answered 'Don't know' to every question. Over the years I have interviewed hundreds of prospective employees. I almost invariably ask: 'What books have you read on direct marketing or advertising?' A significant percentage have read none; few have read more than one or two. The following account gives you an idea of the problem.

Bird: 'What books . . .?'

Young (but not inexperienced) art director: 'Well none, really. I don't believe in theory. It kind of, well . . . I don't like to restrict my imagination.'

Bird: 'Really. Then how do you learn about the business?'

AD: 'Well, you know, you kind of pick it up by being around. You know, reading *Campaign* and that sort of thing.'

Bird (getting agitated): 'What sort of thing?'

AD: 'Well, working in a good agency, and watching what happens.'

Bird (restraining certain violent tendencies): 'Would you expect to pick up brain surgery by standing around the casualty department at University College Hospital?'

AD: Well, no. That's different, isn't it?'

Bird: 'Yes. *Everything* is different. But that doesn't mean you don't have to learn it properly.'

(Interview breaks up in disorder.)

Depressing, isn't it? Especially if you're trying to build up a business. You have to *educate* your staff before they become worthwhile to you by which time, I might add, they have become rare and coveted commodities on the employment market.

The Difficult Approach

Returning to my early experiences, I soon discovered that some clients had very clear views on advertising. That was because their businesses depended on it. Either they were mail order companies seeking agents and customers or they were selling products door to door, soliciting inquiries from potential purchasers.

They were often difficult people. They wanted *replies* and lots of them. Their advertisements tended to be bloody, bold and resolute; intent on results at the right cost. They would tell you very quickly (and sometimes quite offensively) whether their advertising was working.

Few of my colleagues were keen on working for them. They preferred clients with vaguer objectives like 'spreading our good name'. Even better were those who simply spent the agreed advertising appropriation every year in the way they always had. Such clients assessed their advertising quite simply: did they like it?

To this day many advertisers spend enormous sums in the same slapdash way. They and their agencies may claim their efforts increase sales, but it's not always easy to discover by what alchemy that happy result occurs. So many other factors intervene like what your competitors are doing in terms of advertising, price and distribution that establishing how sales are affected by advertising is very tricky. This fact gives occasion for many fanciful alibis on the part of agencies and marketers when the sales curve goes down instead of up.

A senior marketing man with one of the world's largest companies recently told me they advertise simply to create *awareness*. Sales were somebody else's problem, I gathered. Many regard their advertising in isolation in this way; they 'uncouple' it from the rest of the marketing process.

If you ignore the matter of sales, you can discover many valuable things about your advertising. Did people notice it? Did they read it? Did they understand it? Did they remember it? Did they like it? This last question in particular can mislead. Some advertising is so likeable it obscures the merits of the product. Thirty years ago, a New York beer company called Piels ran commercials so popular the public demanded they be recalled when they were taken off. Unfortunately, every time they did so, sales went down.

A Puzzle

Why then, you may wonder, are so many still unwilling to use the only foolproof way of measuring whether a message makes people act? Namely a reply device, a coupon.

It is a bit of a puzzle, isn't it? It's a shame, too, because research conducted by Daniel Starch & Staff in the USA indicates that putting a coupon in your advertisements actually increases readership. All advertisers, no matter what their views, agree this is desirable.

There has been a remarkable amount of ill informed comment about coupons and response devices. In particular some benighted members, of the art

directing fraternity believe that a coupon spoils the ad's image. This poisonous myth has been demolished for all time by excellent research produced in the UK on how customerseither business or consumerreally feel about response devices.

I am encouraged in my views by recent research from Telelab on what consumers and business people think about response devices. There were 801 respondents. 38 per cent of consumers and 48 per cent of business people claimed they had responded to advertisements to