

9 Lessons Traditional Advertisers Should Learn from DRTV

(DRTV = Direct Response Television Advertising)

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Twenty years after their birth, infomercials (aka DRTV) remain the ugly step-child of the advertising business. Why? Perhaps because DRTV is best known for creative styles reminiscent of the National Enquirer investigating an alien abduction of Brad Pitt.

But brand marketers should pause in their condemnation of DRTV because these campaigns move astonishing numbers of consumers to action. And because *consumers choose to watch DRTV!*

What? Let me say it again: infomercials succeed because channel surfers stop and choose to watch the advertising.

Amazingly, massive numbers of consumers choose to watch. There are over 70 million DRTV viewers in the US, and they watch an average of 14 minutes each time. (Source: Electronic Retailing Association, 2003). And, infomercials drive retail sales so strongly that retailers ask manufacturers to create DRTV.

Lessons from DRTV

DRTV has moved well beyond its carnival barker beginnings and the creative house of horrors known as "yell & sell". So, what lessons can we learn from modern DRTV?

Lesson 1: Consumers want to make smart purchase decisions. In our research, consumers complain about the lack of information at retail stores. They laugh at the idea that traditional advertising helps them make purchasing decisions. And, while the internet offers a wealth of "information," it doesn't offer one very important communication: good demonstration.

Infomercials succeed by offering consumers what's important and meaningful to them — communication and demonstration they can't get anywhere else.

Lesson 2: Effective communication is a process. DRTV persuades consumers through a communication process. Each message uncovers a deeper understanding of the product — a bit like peeling an onion. And, each layer of communication "moves" the consumer to new understanding. Unfortunately, brand advertising often stops at the outermost layer — "awareness".

Lesson 3: Product understanding generates far more value than brand. Let's compare Ron Popeil's rotisserie grill with a hand blender from a major brand manufacturer. While people experienced in DRTV know Popeil instantly, most consumers don't. Still, Popeil's grill supports a retail price of \$100 to \$250 because the infomercial shows people the value it delivers. However, today's hand blenders — without value-building advertising — sell for less than \$30 no matter how good the brand. The handblender price is low, because there is no communication building value for the product. In the early 90's, though, handblenders sold for nearly \$100 with the price driven by Braun's handblender infomercial. Note that infomercials for Sharper Image, Apple, and Craftsman capitalize on both brand and understanding.

Lesson 4: Traditional creative approaches modified for DRTV don't make the phone ring. The history of DRTV leads to some challenging truths, because DRTV campaigns *only* succeed when consumers pick up the phone. So we've learned that humorous DRTV spots generally don't work. DRTV with great product messages

generate more phone calls than DRTV with lifestyle messages. And, storymercials generally fail. Why? While “big” creative ideas are essential, *advertising doesn't work when the idea becomes more important than the communication.*

Lesson 5: Don't “do” research — listen to it.

Focus groups aren't about verbatim transcriptions. And, they aren't about tallying up “how many said what”.

Focus groups are about understanding how your message affects the heart & soul of the consumer. You learn this by putting down your pen and watching consumers. Find out which messages bore them and which messages light them up. Learn how all of your possible messages come together to persuade the consumer. And find out which information is so compelling that people will want to hear it.

Lesson 6: Ask people to take action — directly.

Traditional advertising rarely asks consumers to take even the most minimal action. Sometimes it seems we avoid asking because we're afraid of the answer — maybe consumers don't want our product or maybe our advertising isn't useful. In a radical departure from traditional advertising, DRTV always asks consumers to take action — usually asking for an immediate purchase. Experience proves that with the right understanding of our product and the right offer, consumers will take the action we request.

Lesson 7: Add impact through merchandising.

Great DRTV merchandisers use offers to strengthen the message in addition to getting more people to take action. Traditional advertisers rarely use clever merchandising (perhaps because it asks people to take action). In a rare exception, one of my favorite Superbowl ads this year was Pepsi's downloader ad — not because it celebrated rebellious music downloaders, but because it offered free iMusic downloads.

Lesson 8: Don't take a campaign off the air too soon. Traditional advertisers cycle advertising quickly. With DRTV we have a unique ability to tell when a campaign stops working — when fewer people call. We find that campaigns with strong production values often produce the same phone results for years. How far should traditional advertisers take this lesson? I don't know. But clearly, traditional advertisers should take another look at the reasons they change campaigns.

Lesson 9: Positive messages are more powerful.

While infomercials are a positive art form, negativity thrives in the traditional ad business. Have we emphasized creative ideas over message so much that consumers have become numb to our ideas? And has this spiraled into negativity and crassness (ala the recent Quizno's fiasco) thinking that edgy negativity will overcome numbness? By contrast, DRTV experience suggests that advertisers get more value when they offer the right information about their product in positive (and creative) ways.

Conclusion

My point is NOT that traditional advertisers should copy the creative tonality of “yell & sell”. After all, DRTV's dirty little secret is that 19 out of 20 “yell & sell” campaigns fail.

But for years consumers have chosen to watch DRTV because even the earliest infomercials delivered valuable information consumers couldn't get anywhere else.

Perhaps we can look forward to the day when traditional advertisers overcome their prejudices to learn the lessons of DRTV — and when traditional advertising delivers so much value that consumers will watch it by choice.

Doug Garnett is founder & president of Atomic Direct — an advertising agency with a unique vision of how brand-name products can be advanced through DRTV. Doug's clients include Rubbermaid, the Drill Doctor and White's Electronics. He also teaches general advertising in the School of Business Administration at Portland State University.