

On David Ogilvy, Football, and the Real Meaning of Creative

By Gray Smith

After more than 30 years in the ad business, perhaps you'll allow me a few minutes of personal testimony. I've witnessed firsthand the effects of media deregulation and technical innovation – countless ownership changes, local staff eliminations, increased commercialization, content outsourcing, platform proliferation and audience migration – and the impact these changes have had on our industry.

Like many in our business, I'm a devotee of the early thought leaders of modern advertising. My library includes the classics from Al Ries, Roy Williams, Harry Beckwith and many others. As the media world – and consumers themselves – change at what seems like an ever-accelerating pace, I revisit these books to help maintain my focus during these revolutionary times. The one with the most wear, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, was written in 1963 by the “Thomas Jefferson” of modern advertising founders, David Ogilvy.

How did Ogilvy achieve this distinction? While much has been written about his work, I believe Ogilvy became an advertising giant because of his steadfast practice of two fundamental laws, which are even more important today. First, that the ad message must emerge not from the demands of the client, but from the perspective, emotions and beliefs of the consumer. Said Ogilvy: “The consumer isn't a moron. She's your wife.” Second, that no matter how “creative” an ad might be, it's a failure if it doesn't sell. In *Confessions*, he wrote, “I tell new recruits that I will not allow them to use the word ‘creative’ to describe the functions they are to perform in the agency.” This “Second Law of Ogilvy” bears repeating: **If it doesn't sell, it isn't creative.**



According to Wikipedia, David Ogilvy is “widely hailed as the ‘Father of Modern Advertising.’ In 1962, Time Magazine called Ogilvy “the most sought-after wizard in today's advertising industry.”

If it doesn't sell, it isn't creative.

A handwritten signature of David Ogilvy in black ink. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style, with the first letter 'D' being particularly large and prominent.

Which brings us to football – more specifically, to Super Bowl XLVII. What would Mr. Ogilvy say about the spectacle America has created around Super Bowl ads?

Communicus Knowledge Center recently released a major study based on extensive consumer research conducted before and after this year's Super Bowl broadcast. Here's an excerpt from the introduction: “Advertising should make people buy products, or at least build purchase interest. Judged against this standard, four out of five Super Bowl XLVII commercials failed to deliver.”

Four out of five – that's a failure rate of 80% for commercials that cost millions to produce and millions to place. Commercials that aired before an audience of more than 100 million people. Not only did the clever story lines, cute puppies and dazzling images fail to generate any increases in sales, they also failed to

generate any measurable increase in consumer interest in the brands. Consumers were entertained, to be sure. But not motivated to buy, or even attracted to the brand. 80% of the most costly, highly touted ads in the world failed to move the needle. Now imagine the impact of a low budget local ad buy.

Many on the client side have been surprised to learn that the advertising industry's most prestigious awards do not take into consideration the single most important issue – whether or not the campaign generated any results for the client. Instead, top honors in the ad world are selected by ad industry creatives, and bestowed purely on – you guessed it – the creative. It makes you wonder how many creative awards graced the hallways of Mr. Ogilvy's agency.

“Resist the temptation to write the kind of copy which wins awards. I am always gratified when I win an award, but most of the campaigns which produce results never win an award, because they don't draw attention to themselves.”
 – David Ogilvy

The explosion of ad platforms today has forever changed the methods by which marketers seek to connect with consumers. However, many modern marketers fail to consider the massive change in consumers themselves as a direct result of a 500% increase in consumer ads since 1980. 500% more ads now confront today's tech savvy consumers, in increasingly aggressive and intrusive ways. Nielsen's 2013 research reveals that technology allows consumers to avoid advertising like never before. According to Forrester Research's *The Consumer Advertising Backlash* report, “Consumers feel overwhelmed by intrusive, irrelevant ads. The result: a backlash against advertising – manifesting itself in the growing popularity of do-not-call lists, spam filters online ad blockers, and ad skipping on DVRs.”

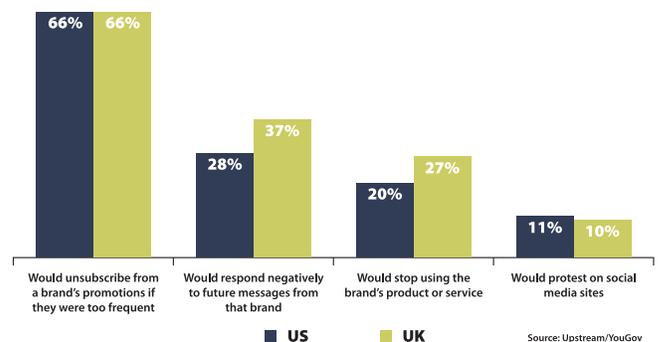
“The average family is now exposed to more than 1500 advertisements a day. No wonder they have acquired a talent for skipping the advertisements in newspapers and magazines, and going to the bathroom during television commercials... As a private person, I would gladly pay for the privilege of watching [television] without commercial interruptions.”
 – David Ogilvy

What's more, the credibility of a traditional ad with today's consumers has never been lower. Forrester Research asked consumers “Do you agree with the following statement: **Companies generally tell the truth in ads.**” **Those who agreed? 7% – a new low.**

So how have marketers responded to the increasingly elusive consumer? With even more ads. In *Understanding Advertising Clutter*, the Journal of Consumer Marketing reports: “It appears that advertisers' ‘solution’ to audience avoidance of their messages is to increase the number of messages, so even the effort of commercial avoidance becomes a source of audience frustration.”

“Bad advertising can unsell a product.”
 – David Ogilvy

Madison Avenue researchers now measure the harm being done to brands by overly intrusive, aggressive ads. Ironically, the type of ad most rejected by today's consumer is the one that's being most vigorously pursued by the ad industry – digital. According to a 2012 report from CMS Wire, 66% of US consumers would stop using a company's products or services entirely as a result of receiving too many online advertising messages.



Why is someone from public radio telling you this?

Over the same period of time that brought about the dramatic erosion of traditional audiences and the rise in commercial ad avoidance, the public radio audience in this market has grown from 75,000 to 184,000 weekly users, making our audience one of the largest and most demographically appealing.

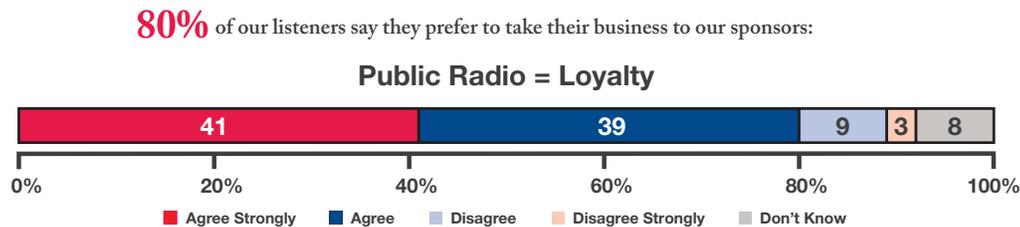
The same phenomenon has occurred nationally, with growth from five million to almost 40 million weekly users over the past 20 years.

In addition, public radio leads all major media in our market in user loyalty – more than twice the loyalty and time spent listening than that of commercial radio – and receives more than \$1.6 million per year

in voluntary contributions from tens of thousands of devoted listeners – for *free* content.

Here’s why that’s good news to today’s marketers. Remember the failure rate of those Super Bowl ads?

Public radio offers marketers an entirely different take on 80%:



“When price and quality are equal, you prefer to buy products from companies that support public radio.”

Jacobs Media Underwriting Research Review

In addition, 88% of public radio listeners say that their opinion of a company is more positive when it supports public radio. 88% positive – that’s second only to “recommendations from people I know” in trusted forms of advertising. No other medium offers this “halo of credibility” that connects our listeners to our clients.

Does your creative brief process automatically limit your media options to only those that carry traditional ads? On what door in your agency does the “Creative” sign hang? Maybe it belongs on your agency’s *media department*. In today’s ultra-fragmented media environment, the new “creatives” should include your media buyers. Have you empowered them to find the best, most attentive audiences for your clients’ products, wherever they may be? Do your copywriters know how to take advantage of the opportunity that public radio provides?

“It is easier to sell people with a friendly handshake than by hitting them over the head with a hammer.”

– David Ogilvy

20-year media researcher Tom Webster writes in BrandSavants: “I can certainly confirm that the public radio halo effect has a tangible brand impact, both in terms of public perception and at the cash register.”

Senior men and women have no monopoly on great ideas. Nor do creative people. Some of the best ideas come from account executives, researchers, and others. Encourage this; you need all the ideas you can get.



“The sad truth is that despite the sophisticated apparatus of the modern agency, advertising isn’t getting the results it used to get in the crude days of Lasker and Hopkins. Our business needs massive transfusions of talent. And talent, I believe, is most likely to be found among nonconformists, dissenters, and rebels.”

– David Ogilvy

I believe Mr. Ogilvy would be pleased at the way his fundamental principles apply to marketing on public radio. Clients’ messages on public radio are straightforward, factual, and acknowledge the intelligence of the listener. Messages on public radio, which many of our users have described as “elegant,” “concise” and “informative without being obnoxious,” work because they are believable, and create the emotional connection with today’s consumer that no commercial ad can match, no matter how “creative” it may be.

“If all advertisers would give up flatulent puffery, and turn to the kind of factual, informative advertising which I have provided..., they would not only increase their sales, but they would place themselves on the side of the angels. The more informative your advertising, the more persuasive it will be.”

– David Ogilvy

On public radio, the message works because your client’s brand stands for the same values that our listeners do. Public radio works because we provide a return to the fundamentals of effective advertising – a simple, highly credible message delivered to a large, loyal audience in an ultra-low clutter, high integrity environment.

some of whom have been with us for decades, regularly report that their campaigns on public radio are the most responsive of all of their marketing efforts.

We offer your clients a double win – the opportunity to grow brand and sales, while simultaneously contributing to the quality

“If you can make yourself indispensable to a client, you will never be fired.”

– David Ogilvy

After spending the last 17 years on the local, not-for-profit side of media, I can honestly report that the halo is real. Public radio is the most responsive medium I’ve ever seen. Hundreds of businesses, large and small, entrust us with their precious marketing resources. Many of our clients,

of life of more than 180,000 of their grateful neighbors. That’s the kind of creativity that I believe Mr. Ogilvy would most appreciate.

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