SOME DOS AND DON'TS OF SUCCESSFUL ADVERTISING

Ken Skarien

You've heard the saying "behind every successful man there's a good woman". I think we can twist this around today to say "behind every successful company there's some good advertising". And just like that persistent little lady behind that successful man, that successful advertising has been on the job continuously. So the question is not "should I advertise" but rather "how, when, where and how much?"

A lot of advertising men can throw formulas at you and darn near prove that advertising is an exact science. But it's not an exact science because it deals with human emotions. There are so many variables that make us tick like we do that you can't apply a formula and say "this is going to sell everybody who reads it or hears it". It just ain't so.

Here's how they louse up the formula: You take a big ad in the Monday paper on a special price, special shipment of fertilizer. Farmer Jones is ready, ambitious to make a good crop and smart enough to figure the NPK values per dollar; and he's got his pickup truck backed up to your loading dock before you can get your afternoon coffee. Farmer Brown read the ad, but he's a putter-offer and he won't come in and ask about it until the shipment is gone. Farmer Black saw the ad but had bought his fertilizer elsewhere, but came in and bought a lot of seed and a drum of pre-emergence weed killer---because the ad reminded him you were still in business. Farmer Smith saw the ad but was still mad at you over the sale of a milk bucket that leaked which you sold him 7 years ago---he wouldn't buy from you if you gave it away. A lot of fellows were reminded it was time to fertilize. Lots of them bought from you, some for the first time; and a few of them bought it from your competitor in the next town. A few didn't seed the ad for various reasons.

Did the ad payout? If you had a reasonable markup on the fertilizer, I think it did. You sold out the special shipment quickly to make room for other merchandise. Your dollars turned and got in and out of this particular fertilizer shipment in let's say a couple of weeks. You sold some other merchandise to fellows who came in for fertilizer. You got several new fellows into the store who saw that you had seed, pesticides, feed, block salt, farm and garden tools they'd be back to buy later---IF the ad and the treatment they got in your store gave them confidence in you and your merchandise.

The psychologists say sex and self-preservation are the strongest of

1/ Mr. Skarien is Publisher and Advertising Manager, Seedsmen's Digest, San Antonio, Texas.
human urges. I have a hard time figuring out a sex appeal angle for selling fertilizer, bug killers or hybrid corn seed—but maybe I'm just getting old. I believe the self-preservation motive applies very well in the case of advertising to farmers in these times—and to a lesser degree to city gardeners who derive well-being and better health from outdoor puttering and perhaps growing healthful vegetables.

But getting this self-preservation into less drastic terms of self-betterment, you've got something that has appeal right across the board to nearly everyone. Everybody wants to get the job done better, more profitably, easier, more economically. Let's see what appeals the seed store merchandise has to tempt these basic urges. Adapted, vigorous, pure seed to produce a bigger, more profitable crop—packed in easy-to-handle 50-pound bags with a zipper type opening—delivered to the farm or loaded quickly from a loading dock with plenty of parking. You've got some sure appeals to talk up in the advertising. Most of your farmer customers want more production for more profit; and the ease and convenience of getting the job done faster with less effort. And what about the know-how you can dispense along with your merchandise? People still hate to read the fine print on labels; and they make little effort to remember procedures from year to year. Let them know in every possible way that you and your personnel KNOW the latest recommendations on varieties, culture, etc., on growing things.

What I've been getting at, going the long way around, is this: You've got to know what motivates most people to buy if you're going to appeal to them successfully with your advertising. You can't sell people on the basis of your own motive, which is this: Buy from me because I owe the bank money for a mess of inventory. Put yourself on the other side of the counter. Try to see the customer's reasons to buy or not to buy; and you'll do a lot better job of advertising and selling. If you ever sold a man a post-hole digger, you probably thought he bought it because he wanted a post-hole digger. Well, he didn't want a post-hole digger at all—he bought it because he wanted a bunch of post-holes. Analyzing this a bit further, he really didn't want post-holes either—he bought the thing because he wanted to keep the cows out of the corn field. Since that was the real motive, you might have done him a bigger favor, saved him a lot of work and turned a bigger profit for yourself if you'd sold him steel posts, insulators and an electric fence kit.

Advertising, with the exception of the mail order variety, doesn't actually take orders. It is intended to just make people want to buy—to make them want to buy it from you. All your advertising should give a good impression of your business as a reliable and pleasant place to buy; and even if your prices are the highest in the county that the merchandise,
service and reliability add up to the best value. If your advertising and salesmanship can concentrate on the image of better results instead of the bag of seed or the can of insecticide, the price becomes a minor consideration. Keep your eye on "keeping the cows out of the corn" instead of that "post-hole digger". Of course, if your trade contains some fellows who are connoisseurs of fine post-hole diggers, better brush up an advertising spiel on oak handles and case-hardened steel.

Where to advertise locally? First of all, and too often neglected, make your store attractive and convenient. Make yourself and your help capable, helpful and courteous. All the advertising in the world isn't going to hold business that is driven away by repulsive, inconvenient premises and sorry personnel. Your advertising was an invitation to visit you---it's up to your premises, your personnel and your merchandise to make them feel welcome. This is basic. Your advertising in the future will not succeed unless people have confidence in it.

On that point of confidence, be sure above all that your advertising is believable. People have been subjected to so much untruthful, bait type advertising that they can spot a phoney at 50 paces. If you advertise a special purchase or unbelievably good deal, better explain WHY OR HOW you are able to do this. Nobody will believe you're a good Joe giving away merchandise; they'll stay away in droves wondering all the while what the catch is.

Now back to WHERE should a local dealer advertise? This is something you'll have to find out for yourself because local advertising mediums vary so much. Do most of the folks you want to reach take and read the local newspaper? Or has the nearest big city daily got the local sheet down to running nothing but the county legal notices? Does the paper have a regular, localized farm or garden page that people read? If so, I'd have at least something advertised on it regularly.

How about local radio? Do they have times that most farmers listen? Or for garden supply advertising, when are most of the housewives listening? If television isn't too expensive, how many potential customers would it reach---and what time would be best? Local newspaper and radio and TV people can give you a lot of help on this---and remember, they had better do their best for you because they want to keep on selling you. You could also survey your customers on what they read, watch and listen to---on store questionnaires or return post cards.

Now you've decided on where to advertise, so the next question is "HOW?" First of all, advertise regularly. Do your heaviest advertising during peak sales seasons; and try to anticipate this by stepping up your advertising ahead of the season. Get them thinking about you before they're actually ready to buy. Use this advertising to build the image of your store as a pleasant dependable place to do business and having good stocks of the finest merchandise to help them to a more profitable season. And when they're
buying, pour it on heavy---but keep in mind they aren't buying seeds or fertilizers or weed killers---they're buying PRODUCTION. If you were looking ahead last year, you took some pictures of particularly good crops that used your merchandise. Use some of these pictures in your printed advertising---with details on who, where, and how much yield, and of course it was planted with your X-75 seed, fertilized with your Bin Buster fertilizer and protected with your Killer Diller pesticides and showed Farmer Black $57.23 per acre clear profit. Be sure you include that 23¢---it's a lot more convincing than saying he made nearly $60. It shows that it was figured out rather than being a loose and perhaps biased estimate. Show a real local benefit and prove it.

Another good advertising angle too often overlooked by seedsmen, is the business of telling the world about their service and know-how. Advertising works by bringing people in or making them want to come in. Do you have a library or charts of best varieties, seeding and fertilizer application rates, etc.? Do you have someone on your payroll who can test soil? Identify plant diseases or insects---and prescribe cures? If you haven't you should. If you have, and aren't plugging these services in your advertising, you're missing a big bet. What about custom processing and treating or inoculating of seed? Use a few of the alarming statistics from drill box surveys in your ads to sell your processing service; or figures on the yield and stand benefits from treating or inoculating seed. If a farmer can bring in his seed easily and get the job done while he gets a haircut and take the processed seed home with him---tell him so in your ads. Whether you're using newspaper, radio, television or direct mail pieces, make the advertising interesting and believable and timely.

Do you do some advertising every month or week even in off seasons? You should. For one thing, regular advertising lowers your rate on the seasonal pushes. More important, it keeps 'em from forgetting you. Since your rent and a lot of other expenses go on year-around, you had better stock some merchandise or have some services for every season of the year---and feature them in your advertising. How about livestock remedies, lawn furniture, barbecue supplies, toys, fishing tackle, or any of a wide range of things to take up time and space that would be wasted during slack seasons. You know your community, or should, and can figure out what would work best. I've seen a lot of combinations.

But that's getting into store management instead of advertising. I'm not against these ads that say "Seeds, Feeds and Fertilizers, Joe Blow Seed Co." because they're better than nothing. But you can make ads do so much more if you keep changing them and make them interesting and informative. Most of you can get a free ride on this co-op advertising where the supplier pays part. Big ads are cheaper per inch than small ads. Why not add your own space to some of this co-op stuff and make a big, interesting splash? Your local advertising people will help you on layouts and wording---or on radio or
T. V. stuff. Your printer can be talked into giving a lot of help on planning mailing pieces. And once again, stress the benefits instead of merely showing a bottle of Dr. Blooey's Pill Bug Punisher and the too-familiar "on sale at Joe Blow Seed Store". If life isn't pleasanter without these bugs, the manufacturer ought to turn his toxic talents on some other critter.

I know somebody is ready to ask "how much should I spend for advertising?" A Dun & Bradstreet management survey a couple of years ago showed that seed, feed and farm supply stores were about the tightest bunch of retail operators when it came to letting go of an advertising dollar. They averaged .3% spent for advertising and a gross margin of 15.9% on the merchandise handled. Contrast this with the furniture down the street. According to D & B they spent 4.6% of their gross on advertising, but sold their merchandise at a 38.8% gross margin.

In my opinion a seed, farm supply or garden supply dealer could profitably spend 5% of his gross on advertising IF he followed it with such real livewire selling and service that he could get a higher gross margin. Some dealers are doing it very successfully; and all their advertising and merchandising is selling the benefits so clearly that customers aren't thinking about whether or not the seed or fertilizer can be purchased a dime cheaper elsewhere. This gets off on merchandising again, but I've heard dealer after dealer talk himself down on price when the customer is much more interested in a lot of other factors. These fellows didn't have to sell on price---they were the ones that insisted upon this as their only sales point.

Of course not all advertising is newspaper, radio or TV. You ought to work a good telephone list and a regular post card mailing to good customers and prospects. Phone or write them to alert them to special or timely shipments of merchandise they need. Tell them you're going to advertise it next week but wanted them to have opportunity to book it before the rush, etc. And by all means, get out and visit them in their fields periodically---know something of their farms and their problems and suggest merchandise and service that would benefit them. With farms getting fewer and bigger, I think this is becoming a real necessity.

But don't neglect your advertising. It makes a lot of calls you haven't the time to make---at less cost than you can make them in person. And it reminds customers and prospects that you're in business with good merchandise and service of benefit to them.