

Producing an Effective Television Commercial

By Elizabeth A. Grant

The most challenging element of producing a television commercial that works is not finding good talent, shooting the footage, or editing the video. It is in discovering a creative way to convey a unique message so that it achieves maximum impact.

What is that message? Every company has a fundamental question that needs to be answered through its advertising. (Am I eligible to join the credit union? What's in it for me? How is the credit union better than my current bank?)

Once that message is determined, an array of creative and production choices are available, and which choice is right depends upon many factors.

The Creative

It's easy to come up with branding ideas for fast food restaurants and soft drinks. Gorgeous models sparkle as they take a refreshing drink of cola. A catchy jingle gets stuck in our heads — exactly the desired outcome.

Branding credit unions effectively can prove more challenging. However, it is certainly not impossible. The key is to think outside the box. This writer was once presented with the daunting challenge of writing a commercial for a duct cleaning company. How does one present such a dirty, mundane service in an entertaining, eye-catching way that creates an immediate need for the consumer?

The fundamental question that needed to be answered in that case was, "Why should I have my home's ducts cleaned?" Through a little research, it was discovered that along with dirt and dust, duct cleaners routinely find all kinds of lost articles: jewelry, toys, even teddy bears. So a tagline emerged: "You never know what might be in there!"

After the fundamental question and the tagline were determined, a script could be developed. The spot featured a mother looking into the camera as she explained the guilt she felt because for years, the family golden retriever, Buddy, had been blamed for dozens of tennis balls going missing. Once the ducts were cleaned, it was discovered the balls were actually caught in the home's ventilation ducts. "Poor Buddy," she said, wringing her hands. "We just didn't know." The camera cut to a quick video shot of Buddy holding a tennis ball in his mouth. Video was also included showing dust being removed by an industrial vacuum, making the viewer wonder: just what *is* in there? The commercial was attention-grabbing, entertaining, and could be shot on a minimal budget.

If a catchy, memorable commercial can be written for something as mundane as a cleaning service, branding a credit union presents many more creative opportunities. Before choosing an ad agency or independent production company to write and produce a

commercial, make that “fundamental question” clear to each creative team. Try to have at least one first-rate, original idea from in-house marketing staff to present as well. Make it clear to potential producers and agencies that more is expected than a boring commercial touting the credit union’s customer service and low mortgage rates. There is no reason a credit union’s commercial can’t grab the viewer’s attention, make people laugh, or be as memorable as a soft drink commercial with its catchy jingle.

The Production

There are four options for producing a television commercial: in-house, a television station, an independent production company, or an ad agency.

Going Direct

Most credit unions will not have the option of producing a commercial in-house, so the least expensive option will be to approach a television station directly and negotiate a credit toward the cost of production based upon spending levels. In many cases, it may even be possible to obtain free production. However, unless the buy is substantial, keep the advice “you get what you pay for” in mind. If the station gives a production credit of five hundred dollars, very little time and energy will be spent in creating and producing an effective commercial.

How large does a television buy need to be to obtain free production? It depends upon the size of the market. In a smaller market, spending only five thousand dollars with a station might warrant free production. In a major market, the figure might be more like twenty-five thousand. However, nearly all television stations are anxious to negotiate. Stations love “direct” clients because it gives them more control over relationships.

Diane Hannes, Vice President of Creative Service with NBC5 Chicago, suggests gauging the time of year shrewdly to get the most out of a negotiation. Approaching a station in mid-December, for instance, might mean upcoming excess inventory, resulting in lower rates. Luckily, it also might bring a slow time for a station’s creative staff — in between the rush of December retail advertisers and producing promo spots for the spring programming launch. Always negotiate, be flexible, always ask for more, and never settle for boring creative.

Using an Independent Production Company

Another option is to hire an independent production company. Most production companies offer a menu of services ranging from full creative consultation and production services to a simple shoot and edit.

One advantage to using an independent production company is that it often results in a higher quality concept and finished product than free production from a television station. Also, it will usually be less expensive than hiring an ad agency. Shop around and consider hiring high quality companies from small markets. For instance, according to

Adam Carney, owner of Red Noise 6 in Des Moines, Iowa, his company is hired by firms from all over the U.S. due to its high quality work and low, non-union fees, which are difficult to find in larger markets. Even with travel expenses, organizations can often come out ahead by expanding a search geographically.

Many independent production companies now offer output choices ranging from DV (digital video) to HD (high definition) to 16mm and even 35mm. Insist on viewing samples of firms' work and obtain solid bids from several producers as a routine part of the decision-making process.

Hiring a Full-Service Advertising Agency

The final option is to hire an advertising agency to produce the commercial. Many ad agencies have brilliant creative staff and can provide a comprehensive approach, from putting together a full marketing plan that includes various media and Web design to creating a solid branding message. Marlene Byrne, president of Celtic Advertising in suburban Chicago, sums it up by saying, "You don't use an ad agency to do any one thing."

Ms. Byrne believes the best approach in choosing an agency is to "match an agency to your size. Match personality and style as well. Make sure you find out who will actually be working on your business." Often, junior-level players are assigned to accounts after the sale, especially with large agencies. Ms. Byrne does not recommend seeking out an agency that specializes in banking clients. "Going the other route will provide you with fresh ideas," she says.

Agency production costs vary widely. Savvy negotiations are imperative. Production services may be included in the commission charged (traditionally 15 percent), or an hourly fee or flat fee might be charged (or all of these). As with any commercial, cost will depend upon how complicated the production is. According to Ms. Byrne, it's important to think about what makes sense to spend on production given how much is being spent in ad placement. It makes no sense to pay \$20,000 to produce a commercial if only \$50,000 is being spent on the television buy.

Do Your Homework and Stay Involved

Whether a spot is produced by a television station, independent producer, or ad agency, it is vital to stay involved, to make sure the creative is top-notch, and that total costs — including talent — are clearly understood up front.

Many options are available in producing a television commercial. Decide what "fundamental question needs to be answered" first. Review budgets and come up with an overall media plan. Then decide which production option is best, based on the budget, marketing plan, and the creative that is chosen. Challenge writers and producers to think outside the box. Stay closely involved with the production. Then, watch your message

brought to life with sight and sound. With the right creative and media placement, the desired result *can* be achieved.