

Create your own print ad

1. Decide on your communication objective

The communications objective is the essence of your message. If you want to tell people not to eat rutabagas because it's cruel, then that's your communications objective. A word of caution: though perhaps the most important of your 8 steps, this is also the one that beginners tend most to neglect. A precise and well-defined objective is crucial to a good ad. If your objective isn't right on, then everything that follows will be off as well.

2. Decide on your target audience

Who is your message intended for? If you're speaking to kids, then your language and arguments will have to be understandable to kids. On the other hand, if you're speaking to high income earners (for example, if you're writing an ad to dissuade people from wearing fur coats), then your language will have to be more sophisticated. So define who your target audience is, because that will decide how your message is conveyed.

3. Develop your concept

The concept is the underlying creative idea that drives your message. Even in a big ad campaign, the concept will typically remain the same from one ad to another, and from one medium to another. Only the execution of that concept will change. So by developing a concept that is effective and powerful, you open the door to a number of very compelling ads. So take your time developing a concept that's strong.

Typically, an ad is made up of a photograph or a drawing (the "visual"), a headline, and writing (the "copy"). Whether you think of your visual or your headline first makes little difference. However, here are a few guidelines worth following.

4. The visual

Though you don't absolutely require a visual, it will help draw attention to your ad. Research indicates that 70% of people will only look at the visual in an ad, whereas only 30% will read the headline. So if you use a visual, then you're already talking to twice as many people as you otherwise might. Another suggestion is to use photographs instead of illustrations whenever possible. People tend to relate to realistic photographs more easily than unrealistic ones. But whether you choose a photograph or an illustration, the most important criteria is that image be the most interesting one possible and at least half your ad whenever possible.

5. The headline

The most important thing to remember here is that your headline must be short, snappy and must touch the people that read it. Your headline must affect the reader emotionally, either by making them laugh, making them angry, making them curious or making them think. If you can't think of a headline that does one of these four things, then keep thinking. Here's a little tip that might help: try to find an insight or inner truth to the message that you're trying to convey, something that readers will easily relate to and be touched by. Taking the rutabagas example once again, it might be tempting to write a headline like: "Stop Exploiting These Migrant Workers." However,

with a little thought, a more underlying truth might be revealed - that Migrant Workers are as human as we are, and that our actions do hurt them. From that inner truth, you might arrive at the headline: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Of course, the headline doesn’t have to be biblical, though that in itself will add meaning and power for many people. Finally, whenever possible, avoid a headline longer than fifteen words. People just don’t read as much as they used to.

6. The copy

Here’s where you make the case. If you have compelling arguments, make them. If you have persuasive facts, state them. But don’t overwhelm with information. Two strong arguments will make more of an impression than a dozen weaker ones. Finally, be clear, be precise, and be honest. Any hint of deception will instantly detract from your entire message. Position your copy beneath the headline, laid out in two blocks two or three inches in length. Only about 5% of people will read your copy, whereas 30% will read your headline. By positioning your copy near your heading, you create a visual continuity which will draw more people to the information you want to convey. Use a serif typeface for your copy whenever possible. Those little lines and swiggles on the letters make the reading easier and more pleasing to the eye.

Subheads

If you have lots of copy, break it up with interesting subheads, as we’ve done in the graphic above. This will make your ad more inviting, more organized, and easier to read.

The signature

This is where the name of the organization belongs, along with the address and phone number. If you don’t have an organization, then think of a name that will help reinforce the message you’re trying to convey. Perhaps “Citizens for Fairness to Migrant Rutabagas Pickers” would work for the example we’ve been using. This isn’t dishonest. Your organization doesn’t have to be incorporated or registered for it to be real.

7. Some mistakes to avoid

The single most common mistake is visual clutter. Less is always better than more. So if you’re not certain whether something is worth including, then leave it out. If your ad is chaotic, people will simply turn the page, and your message will never be read. The second most common mistake is to have an ad that’s unclear or not easily understood (haven’t you ever looked at an ad and wondered what it was for?). The best way to safeguard against this is to do some rough sketches of your visual with the headline and show it around. If people aren’t clear about your message, then it’s probably because your message is unclear. And however tempting, don’t argue with them or assume that they’re wrong and that your ad is fine. You’ll be in for an unpleasant surprise. Proofread your ad, then give it to others to proofread, then proofread it yet again. Typographical errors diminish your credibility and have an uncanny habit of creeping into ads when you least expect it.