

It's Time *for* Cost-Effective, Evidence-Based Furniture Advertising

A special preview of a timely new Furniture World article by

LARRY MULLINS

June was a horrible month for most furniture stores. But not all. One courageous entrepreneur called me for a special sale. He was up against numbers from a store closing and moving sale of last year. He and another store were given permission to depart from their big box corporate program and use my new stock reduction program.

The June results shocked everyone in the 100+ corporate chain. He not only beat his moving sale figures, he had his largest month ever. Both stores achieved record sales with a better than usual mark, and without radical price cutting or much item-pricing. Both stores had advertising costs of under 6%. Their ads were beautiful and were the talk of the town.

Why are my programs working when others are not? The “secret” is Evidence-Based Advertising. Read all about it in this article. Be ahead of the curve. Learn this principle before a competitor reads this article late this month in *Furniture World*.

LARRY MULLINS

Creative destruction has been unleashed on the furniture industry. As our economy is being reset, new winners and losers are rapidly being created. Furniture entrepreneurs who have the appropriate marketing strategy, and cash to survive, will achieve a bigger market share. They will reap huge benefits when the normal flow of business returns—especially those progressive entrepreneurs who grasp the idea of Evidence-Based Advertising.

Never before in history have furniture entrepreneurs had access to more information, on a more timely basis. Yet, recession seems to have hit furniture harder than virtually any other industry. “Never seen it so bad,” we hear constantly. We wonder: “How could so many big hitters, so many smart furniture people, be in such difficulty?” Many issues affecting our industry are beyond our control. But not advertising. And, during a time when home furnishings have never been a greater value, furniture and mattress advertising has never been so ineffective and wasteful.

Creators of home furnishings ads can fill white space with colorful, beautiful ads in a fraction of the time it took not so many years ago. But, the ads are impoverished of informational content. Home furnishings ad pros have awesome technical abilities. Yet they know nothing

of the reliable evidence-based standards that makes advertising work. Without such evidence-based advertising formulas they CANNOT consistently produce effective ads. This lack of training and knowledge is a failure of top management, as I will show.

And herein lies the opportunity for the independent furniture entrepreneur to recapture market share by adopting Evidence-Based Advertising.

Evidence-Based Advertising is a total media marketing approach based upon long-standing principles that have been tested and retested and consistently proven to be effective. Do they still work today? Definitely, I prove their timeless effectiveness every month. Times change, and the techniques of using media must be constantly modified, but the principles are as valid today as they ever were. Perhaps

more so, since good advertising stands out in the wasteland of glitzy, but hastily produced, content-starved home furnishing ads of today.

Where did the “evidence” come from? The tested advertising principles were originally developed by direct-response advertisers. Mail order, TV telemarketing, and now Internet marketing pros have one thing in common: they must get positive

unheard of pace.

The independent furniture entrepreneur at last has the advantage over the Big Boxes because it takes so long for a titanic corporate machine to change course. The failure of home furnishings advertising to be cost-effective for the Big Boxes is the result of too many crucial decisions that were based upon pre-recession market conditions. The original theory was: Just run more

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Internet experts have learned to use their medium to morph from a stranger, to an expert, to a trusted friend, and thus sell effortlessly to the tough consumer of today. In this article Larry Mullins shows how to accomplish this metamorphosis with content-rich advertising.



results or they will quickly go broke. Mail order and Internet pros can test headlines and layouts with micrometer-like precision. Either the appeal brings in returns or it does not. There is no room for alibis. Soon evidence accumulates as direct-response pros change a single word in a headline and the results multiply! This testing once took lots of time and expense but the Internet has revolutionized testing, and the results of multiple ad appeals can be evaluated at an

advertising than anyone else, and overwhelm the market with a geyser of print and TV. Expensive, but it did work for a while, when the use of slick color flyers was a relatively new idea. But, newspapers are now cluttered with flyers and the playing field has leveled. Moreover, the recession customer is tougher, internet savvy, and suspicious. So the big box tsunami of TV and print continues to drain more and more cash while producing less and less result.



A PORTION OF THE “EVIDENCE” ... MY TOP TEN ADVERTISING BOOKS

I pulled these books from my library. I possess several dozen other good books on advertising, but these are among my top favorites. These books span over 100 years of advertising theory. They are still in print, with the exception of the 1903 book: **[#1] *The Theory of Advertising*** by Professor Walter Dill Scott, who taught at Northwestern University. The principles of this book are still being used today.

[2]. *Scientific Advertising* by Claude Hopkins is another book still popular with advertising gurus.

[3]. Clyde Bedell (of the Furniture Hall of Fame) wrote ***How to Write Advertising that Sells***, and it remains the best method-approach to writing effective copy. **[4].** Bedell’s 15 Part Series, ***How to Convert White Space into Copy that Sells*** condenses his ideas into an easy to follow, step-by-step course, and is a minimum essential for any serious student of advertising. (The advertising samples in these older books are dated, of course.

However, the principles remain as valid today as ever.)

[5]. *How to Create Successful Catalogs* by Maxwell Scroge is the bible for direct mail pros, and any individual who creates flyers should become intimately acquainted with its contents.

[6]. *Tested Advertising Methods* by John Caples was called by David Ogilvy “The most *useful* book on advertising I have ever read.”

[7]. *Ogilvy on Advertising* is one of my top five picks for great ad books.

[8]. *Advertising Secrets of the Written Word* by Joe Sugarman is engrossing and content-rich from cover to cover.

[9]. The *Guerrilla Marketing* series by Jay Conrad Levinson is unequalled in the concept of *relationship selling*, with the possible exception of:

[10]. Jay Abraham’s smash hit: ***How to Get Everything You Can Out of All You’ve Got***.

The time is ripe for the independent home furnishings entrepreneur to review the proven, evidence-based principles about advertising and put them to work. (More on this later.) Resolve to start creating messages that are content-rich, and develop a media plan to deliver them. As to media, there is a new kid on the block, the Internet. Make friends with it. When integrated with your other media, the Internet is definitely a game-changer. The Internet is in dynamic flux and new marketing possibilities for retail are constantly emerging.

Experiencing the Internet on Another Level

I have written about using the Internet, especially how progressive merchants are enhancing their websites. (See *Furniture World* online article Monday, May 8, 2008, www.furninfo.com). But, things are happening so fast I recently began a more intensive study of the Internet. My Internet higher education continued with a three-day seminar in Phoenix. For a seasoned 30-year pro who learned the basics of advertising from the great Clyde Bedell of the Furniture Hall of Fame, this training seminar was a revelatory experience. I was surrounded by fellow students who spoke a different language (*Internetese*) and who knew much more about the Internet medium than I did. Everyone at these seminars seemed to understand what was going on better than me, a humbling, but eventually an immensely rewarding experience. The first thing I learned-and you must also understand-is this:

1. Advertising can work effectively on the Internet because it has a great potential to be engaging and persuasive rather than being intrusive and impersonal. Traditional intrusive advertising, especially poorly crafted

advertising, is becoming less and less believed, and thus less and less effective. A couple of years ago we could view the Internet as a medium for the younger prospect. No longer. Older people are checking company websites before they go shopping.

The next thing I learned about the internet was something I already knew to be true about ordinary advertising. It's something Clyde Bedell and all the advertising pioneers of old taught. Today it's still being proclaimed by brilliant gurus such as Jay Abraham and Jay Conrad Levinson (of Guerrilla Marketing notoriety). These experts teach the same principle I teach, but too many furniture entrepreneurs are still not getting the message and applying it to all their advertising communications:

2. Prospects just don't believe empty claims that are not supported by an effective, plausible, evidence-based story written by someone they accept as a credible expert who is also a trusted friend.

Did I say trusted friend? Yes, I did.

How is it possible to position oneself as a credible expert who is also a trusted friend? I'm going to tell you exactly how to do this in this article. But first I want to establish a third principle about the Internet that you must know to revive your overall advertising effectiveness.

3. To gain a substantial competitive advantage, those furniture entrepreneurs who are still standing must learn to apply evidence-based, proven advertising principles to all their print, mail and air media and marry them to an effective presence on the Internet.

As we rebuild from the rubble of the



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“What's in it for me?
What will I get out of it?”**

Clyde Bedell

current catastrophe, now is the time for furniture entrepreneurs to adopt an approach to marketing that will enable them to convert expensive, weak efforts into productive, cost effective advertising. The technology and motivations are in place to implement “Evidence-Based Advertising “ as never before. This will result in a substantial competitive advantage to those who rigorously adopt it.

Internet Experts are Adopting Evidence-Based Advertising

One of the first pleasant surprises I got during my continuing Internet training period was that the most successful Internet practitioners are learning and applying traditional principles very similar to the ones taught by Clyde Bedell and all the great ad gurus who preceded and who followed him. These principles are based upon Bedell’s famous premise:

There is only one language of advertising. It is the universal language of the prospect.

**“What’s in it for me?
What will I get out of it?”**

Here, with a few of my own personal embellishments and modifications, are Bedell’s Six Cardinal Principles of Good Advertising:

1. All good selling is serving ... meeting the prospects’ needs and exceeding their expectations.
2. People buy only to acquire benefits that are more valuable to them than the cost of the product or service being offered.
3. These benefits must be logically supported by specific product features.
4. When a sufficient amount of adequately supported benefits accumulate, they credibly promise to fulfill the aspirations of a prospect. (Not for product like a sofa, or a mattress, but for a more beautiful, comfortable home ? or for the renewed health and energy resulting from more restful sleep.)
5. Prospects are hungry for information and will read, and often reread, any amount of copy if it is interesting, vital, and addresses the specific need they are seeking to fill or problem they are seeking to solve.
6. Top management, beginning with the CEO, must understand, believe in, and enforce these cardinal principles that make advertising

productive and maximally cost-effective, or they will be crushed and lost under the weight of ignorance and prejudice.

On the Internet you only have a few seconds to persuade prospects that they are on the right page. Just as in your print advertising, you need a killer headline that quickly persuades them it will be worth their while to read the next bit of information. **NOTE:** When interviewing an ad department, I often test ad people with the question: “What is the purpose of a headline?” The answer may surprise you: “To get the prospect to read the next line.” And, what is the purpose of that next line? Ditto, to get them to read the next line, and on and on. Keep in mind, although the impatient Internet prospect likely came to you (for free) out of the blue, they are nonetheless precious.

Many of the Internet gurus are multi-millionaires. They have low overhead and virtual offices with very few employees. Although they are generally unaware of the brick and mortar world of retail, in the cyber world they are masters. They have acquired the simple three-step formula that today’s furniture entrepreneurs understand and honor on the sales floor, but have forgotten in advertising.

The Internet experts have learned to use their medium to morph from a stranger, to an expert, to a trusted friend, and thus sell effortlessly to the tough consumer of today. I promised to explain how they do this, so read on.

Use Your Advertising to Establish Your Expertise

The first task of your media communications is to establish yourself as the preeminent expert on home furnishings in your community. This is not so difficult, since

competitors have left an information void for you to step up and fill. Ask yourself: What are customers looking for when they come to my website? Or when they pause to look at one of my print efforts? Or when they are induced to open my direct mail appeals? Or when they walk in the door of my showroom?

Information. More than that, they are looking for expert information that is trustworthy. You, or your representative, are a stranger. Every good salesperson knows this. It would be unthinkable for a salesperson to greet prospects by screaming something like: “Incredible Fourth of July Sale!” Yet this is exactly how most home furnishings websites greet customers.

Each medium is different, but the principles hold. In a print ad or flyer there is more display area and more time to engage the customer’s fleeting eye. In a one-on-one encounter, a low key confidence conversation sets the sales sequence into motion. But on the Internet, the prospect is usually much more impatient and has come to you for fast information to solve a specific problem. The first thing you need to do is to establish that they have come to the right website—and next—that you are the preeminent expert in home furnishings in your city. You do this by providing them with free information they can use. There is an art to doing this on the Internet, no less than on the sales floor or in a direct mail piece.

Content is King, Period.

There is a saying among the Internet devotees: **Content is King.** The websites and advertisements of most furniture stores, even the Big Boxes, are pathetic when it comes to supplying information. The prospect wants to know: *WHO are you? Why should I believe you? How long have you been in business? Are your sales consultants trained? WHAT do you*

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offer that is better than your competitors? Selection? Service? Expertise? Guarantee? WHY should I buy from you? ... and on and on. Ask your top sales consultants to come up with ten questions they are most frequently asked. Offer free stuff ... downloads rich with information, free decorator clinics, free house calls. Make sure your ads mention your website and your website ties in appropriately with your other advertising.

Unfortunately, once a website is up and running, it is usually abandoned by top management. The CEO, especially, rarely visits his or her own website. Too often the only new information on a website is the current advertisement. Prospects are not greeted by content-rich presentations developed by the preeminent expert on home

furnishings in their city (you), but rather by some bombastic, faceless stranger.

Advertising is nothing more or less than professional selling multiplied by a medium. A top-level professional ad person is one who has mastered the body of knowledge about advertising and communicating content-rich messages. This person knows how to use traditional mainstream media and the Internet in a synergetic manner to maximize advertising effectiveness to a new level.

A complete discussion of the development of an effective website is beyond the scope of this article. But I strongly suggest you review the May, 2008 article in Furniture World about how Wendell's Furniture is using short web videos on his website to engage prospects. For a hundred dollars or so you can buy a web camera

and create your own video. You can greet your website prospects with an easy-to-access video rather than a boring “About Us” tab that no one reads. Over 60% of web surfers are viewing videos.

Yes, there is much, very much to learn and do. But if you spend an hour a day working on your Internet marketing expertise, in a year you will have accumulated over nine forty-hour weeks of study. If you work at it, when prospects hit your city name and “furniture” or “home furnishings” you will be

near the very top of the Google list. Don’t leave such critical issues to a computer technician whom you never even talk with. Learn to talk his language, let him know you are engaged and challenge his work. Teach him the tested and proven principles of effective advertising and orchestrate a synergy with your mainstream advertising efforts. While your competitors are still frozen like a deer in the headlights, get ahead of the curve with Evidence-Based Furniture Advertising. These actions will put you well ahead of all your competitors.



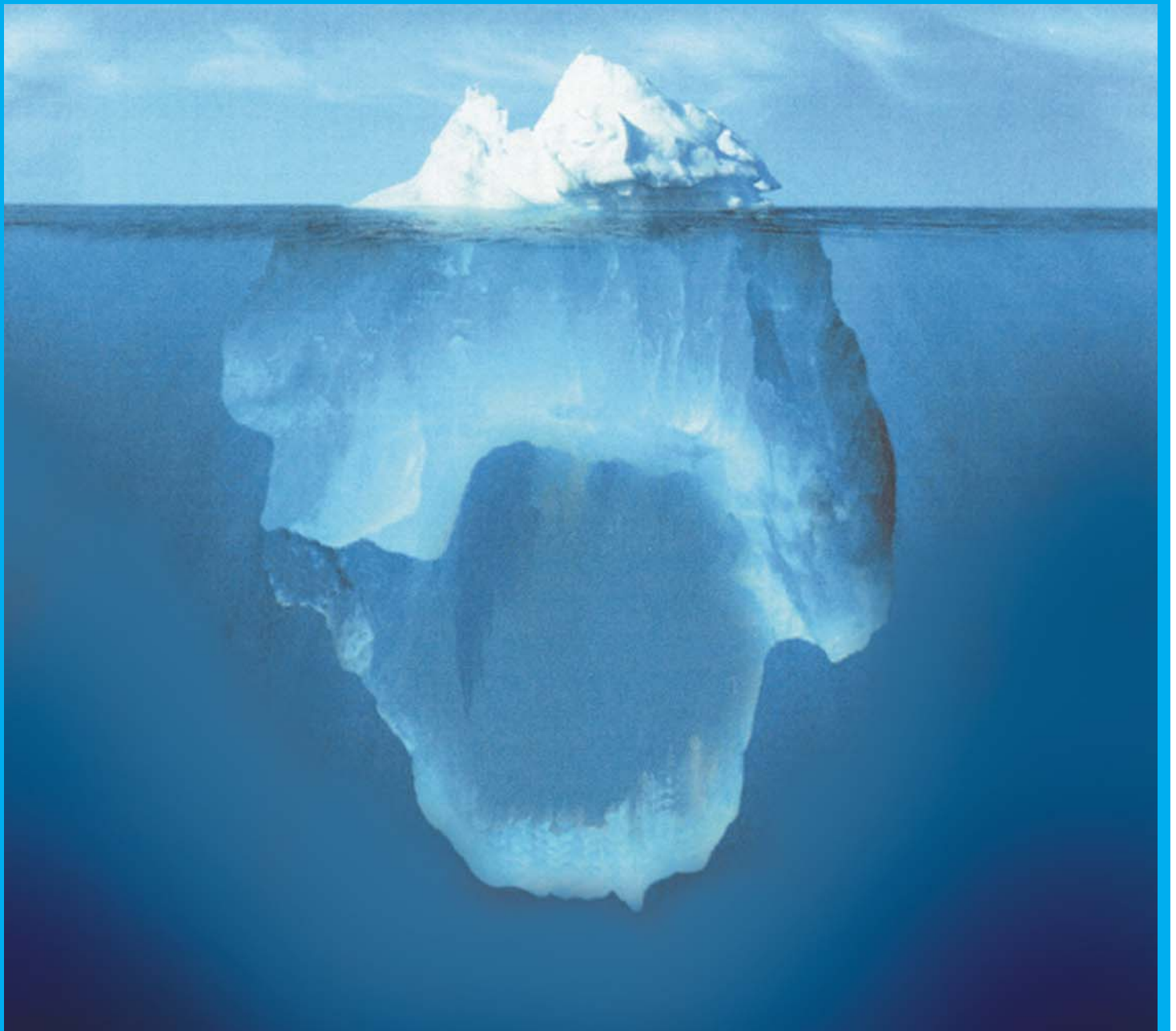
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“Do not underestimate the potential of your organization. Your vision for it can help it achieve new levels of performance. However, it will rarely exceed what you believe to be possible.”

Larry Mullins