

Why

do so many

**business-to-
business ads**

suck?

A Broadside from The Dave and Alex Show

Work. Dream. Succeed.

The best keeps getting better.



Let's be honest. In the world's harshest environments, all you need to support your mission-critical assets is innovation, expertise and hard work.

We are a global pioneer with thousands of impressive, striking new products.

As your one-stop total-solutions resource and strategic partner, we have a new vision for technology-focused design. Our commitment is to do what it takes to craft a program that's just right for your business.

If you want to play to win, dare to compare. Our quality will exceed your expectation. And much, much more.

Join hundreds of Fortune 1000 corporations positioned for the future. Call us at 1-800-555-7137. It's the smart approach. Everyone else just got voted off the island.

- **International quality certifications**
- **Beveled 6mm lug pattern resists snow build-up**
- **Clock generation module with PLL**
- **Ease of fleshing positively affects fertility in females.**



Business is our solution

For real? Sort of. The text is a composite of 29 verbatim excerpts from 29 real ads examined by our study. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

What the heck

is wrong with business-to-business advertising?

Why are the ads in business magazines—from the glossiest (*Fortune*, circ. 875,520) to the most esoteric (*Pig International*, circ. 17,536)—filled with gutless and predictable headlines, bad widget photographs and soporific language like this:

We provide consultative support to deliver a total solution for your entire Customer Life Cycle.

This name means business.

Put the pieces of the risk management puzzle together in an integrated solution provided by your global partner.

We're not saying *all* business-to-business ads suck.* Many achieve mediocrity, and a few** are truly excellent. But we find it truly surprising that businesses full of smart people produce so much advertising that isn't.

Why, then, is good business-to-business advertising so hard to come by? We've observed six formidable things standing in the way.

*We're saying 79.7% suck, according to our study, *The Creativity Crisis: A Pretty-Much Subjective Analysis of Quality in Business-to-Business Advertising*. Read more about it throughout this broadside.

**2.6%. *Ibid.*

THING #1

The Misunderstood Business Customer

*They are
soulless
automatons
with
parallel
processors
for brains*

and spreadsheets for hearts. At least that's what you'd have to conclude by looking at most business-to-business ads.

But the truth is, business customers are human beings.* Even engineers cry at the movies, sing in the shower and love their families. They respond in human, emotional ways to even the most rational sales proposition—whether it's for a multi-stage integral-gear centrifugal compressor or a can of soup.

People like to be intrigued and surprised and entertained. They are like you because they *are* you.

This is not to say there are no differences between consumer and business buyers. But we should never forget that business-to-business people are, above all, people.

*A debate rages in MBA circles about whether advertising should appeal to the emotional right side of the brain or the rational left side. The answer depends upon whether your audience has half a brain or a whole one. As we believe the latter case to predominate, we think advertising must appeal to both.

The Sales-Guy Culture

What's most important about business-to-business

marketing communications is not that it's business-to-business. It's that it's *marketing*.

Many business-to-business companies came late to the idea of marketing (if they came at all), and their commitment to its proven principles is half-hearted.

Consider this. Here is the résumé of Penny Price, a consumer-marketing VP:

2001–present **Marketing VP**
1998–2001 **Marketing Director**
1996–1998 **Marketing Manager**
1995–1996 **Marketing Assistant**

As in most consumer-focused companies, she came up through the marketing ranks, learning to apply advertising strategically toward specific, measurable ends.

Now let's peek at the résumé of her brother Peter, also a marketing VP, but at a business-to-business company:

2001–present **VP Marketing**
1998–2001 **Manager, Sales, South America**
1996–1998 **US Regional Sales Manager**
1995–1996 **Applications Engineer**

Peter is a sales guy at heart. Salespeople are go-getters, doers—no wonder senior management draws from their ranks to staff marketing departments.

But sales culture is often distrustful of marketing, with its wishy-washy segmentation analyses, arrogant ad agencies and strategic mud wrestling. That doesn't sell stuff—salespeople do.*

Sales-guy advertising often resembles sales-support tools like product brochures. And while product brochures have an important place in the selling process, that place is not sitting alone inside the front cover of the industry's most important magazine.

Advertising has to work harder than that. As hard as sales guys.

*They're right, by the way. Marketing simply makes their job easier.

Corpobabble

Are you leveraging your global assets

to provide your customers with innovative next-generation solutions for our global economy?

Who cares?

Somewhere along the line, we lost our ability to speak clearly and directly. Consider these verbatim quotes, unearthed by our business-to-business ad study:

Delivering a fully integrated, comprehensive suite of products and services from core data processing, check processing and imaging, EFT/ATM services, debit and credit card processing and data communications management, to a loan collateral management system, an online teller platform and regulatory reporting software, we are a true single source of advanced technologies for financial institutions.

Anticipating the millions of connections your network will support, we deliver a Business Optimized Infrastructure that provides explosive scalability, eliminates capacity issues and enhances application performance at the lowest total cost of ownership.

Could you slog through them? Can you tell them apart?

And how did it get this way?

We see two possibilities: The first is that no one made the effort to isolate a single meaningful message. If you don't know exactly what you want to say, the answer is often to say everything—and nothing.

Second is an inability to differentiate an ad from a technical manual or an RFP. Those important documents have entirely different jobs to do from advertising.

The only other possibility is that someone, somewhere, thinks that this is how humans actually talk. May you never find yourself seated next to that person at a dinner party.

Lazy Agency Syndrome

*We can't
tell you
why an ad
agency
would be
lazy,*

but we can tell you what happens when it is:

Clichés and analogies.

How many handshakes and mountain climbers and globes have you glossed over in business-to-business ads?

How many companies have declared “We mean business”?*

This is not to say clichés and analogies have no place in advertising. If you have something that cannot otherwise be explained, a familiar short cut can be a helpful last resort. If used in a new and clever way. *Maybe.*

Clichés and analogies turn advertising into wallpaper. Expensive wallpaper. Ugly, expensive wallpaper.

*Thousands. An Internet search on that particular phrase turned up 18,800 results (including, ironically, a particular computer company that professes to “think different”). Among the first few pages of results, we found:

“Why We Mean Business”

–Marketing services company

“Together We Mean Business”

–Venture capital network

“When We Say Internet We Mean Business”

–Telecommunications company

“We mean business when it comes to water.”

–Water purification company

“We mean business in space”

–Aerospace engineering company

“Bail is our Business and We Mean Business”

–Bail bond company

And plain old **“We mean business”**

–A state economic development authority, an Internet services provider, 15 chambers of commerce, 19 ad agencies, one Pacific Rim country, a business TV show, two language schools and a dude ranch

Marketing Schizophrenia

“I want
to be
unique,”

one marketing manager told us, holding up his competitor’s ad. “Just like them.” A classic case of marketing schizophrenia.

The problem stems from two conflicting drives in the head of every business-to-business marketer:

The need to be unique. *Positioning, branding, the so-called USP—all of these marketing principles hinge on being different from everyone else.*

The need to be the same. *Credibility and security come from belonging to a group, from being like everyone else.*

Which need usually wins out? Guess. And the resulting advertising is just another anonymous penguin on the iceberg.

There is only one time when “me too” is a smart strategy: When you aspire to be considered among a different category of players from the one you’re associated with. In that case, go ahead, emulate the behavior of the desired group. Climb aboard their iceberg.

Then, once you’re on, use advertising for what it’s supposed to do: *Differentiate* you.

Business reasons demand that you strive to be unique. Figure out what makes you distinctive and then use your advertising to celebrate the hell out of it.

Trying Too Hard

*That guy
at the party
with the
lampshade
on his head,*

you've probably seen the ads he creates. They're so frantically determined to win your attention, they'll mesmerize you—for about a second and a half.

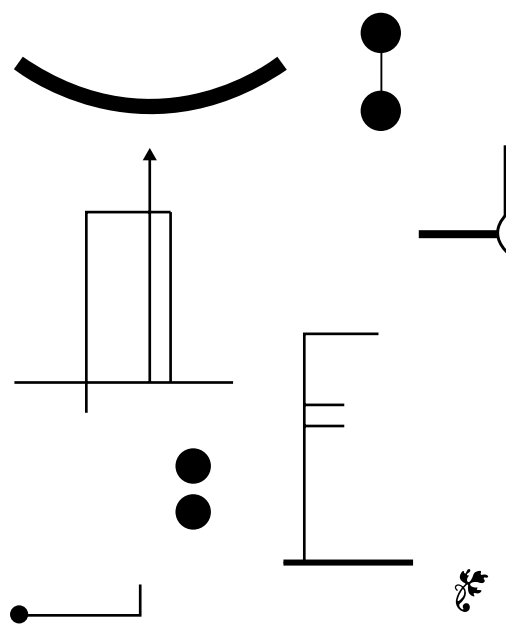
At which point you'll realize you don't really get it or don't really care—and blithely turn the page.

Ads like these often rely on borrowed interest. Dogs, race cars and spokesmodels are popular. Our study turned up all three, plus a naked pregnant woman.

Then there are the ads that are simply too hard to decipher. Some we came across demanded we read the entire ad in order to grasp the creative concept that was supposed to get us to read the ad in the first place. Entirely self-defeating. Others were completely inscrutable. We're still wondering about the two guys riding the shopping cart across the banking software ad.

Saddest of all are the ads, some of which evince a sparkle of creativity, that are killed by their own hyperactive art directors. The murder weapons: Illegible type. Graphic gewgaws crammed into all available white space. A chaotic swirl of fonts and colors sure to suffocate any message that might have been there in the first place.

If you notice the ad instead of the message, it's standing in its own way.



Gewgaws: Actual examples of graphically gratuitous elements, excised from ads in our study.

Business-to-Business Advertising That Doesn't Suck

It's easy to criticize (and fun, too). But there are also a lot of business-to-business advertisements that don't suck. Exactly 20.3%, according to our study.*

Wait—this doesn't mean they are great. In fact, a huge majority (86.8%) of the ads that didn't suck achieved nothing more than mediocrity. Among them were excellent ideas killed by bad execution, bad ideas lifted by good execution and those that were just plain so-so in both regards.

But enough of that. Let's focus on the *positive*: 2.6% of the ads were truly excellent—ads we wished we'd done. What went right that 1/38th of the time?

*Our study *The Creativity Crisis: A Pretty-Much Subjective Analysis of Quality in Business-to-Business Advertising*, examined 187 full-page or larger ads (none of them ours) in a representative selection of six business magazines. Want a copy? Visit our web site, www.thedaveandalexshow.com, or e-mail us at info@daveandalex.com.

When we laid all the excellent ads side by side, we observed these five things in common:

Clarity: *One, and only one, easily apprehensible message to take away.*

Creative indivisibility: *Cover the headline or the visual and the ad made no sense.*

Restraint: *They weren't tarted up with gratuitous decoration or drowned in self-aggrandizing blather.*

Acceptable production values: *Photography and illustrations were competent at least.*

And finally, most important of all, there was the **knorr**.

The *knorr*?

The knorr. (Pronounce the “k”—it’s Swedish.) It’s the curl, the twist. The aspect of the ad that captures you and wins you over.

The knorr turns a magazine page into a smart bomb of novelty, surprise, humor or drama.

This is an elusive quality. In our study, 24.6% of the ads turned to tired analogies and clichés—basically a guarantee of knorrlessness. Another 6.4% completely (if valiantly) overreached for their knorr and fell on their faces.

But here’s the shocking part: 23% *didn’t even try!* They aspired to suck from the very start!

This is bad news for them but good news for you. In an environment like this, your good work will stand out like a peacock among turkeys. And while great advertising doesn’t guarantee business success, it does guarantee you something you can’t succeed without: an audience.

In this broadside we’ve told you why we think so many business-to-business ads fall short.* But why do they *have* to?

We think an 80% failure rate is not acceptable. It...well, it sucks. In most industries, this would constitute a crisis. But in the self-congratulatory world of advertising and marketing, not a peep.

We applaud your great work. But as for the rest of it, raise your standards. Demand better.

Refuse to suck.

*And yes, okay, in some cases we’ve been speaking from experience. We admit to some clunkers over the years, too.

THE DAVE AND ALEX SHOW

is a full-service marketing communications agency with offices in New York City and Redding, CT.

Our team of writers, designers and account directors has produced award-winning work in every medium, from print and broadcast advertising to interactive media and marketing materials.

We're also known for our work in branding and positioning development.

The Dave and Alex Show was founded by Dave Goldenberg, a senior creative executive with such respected agencies as Chiat/Day and Anderson & Lembke, and Alexander Isley, a designer and art director with an international reputation who began his career at the influential M&Co.

For more information on our agency, please visit www.thedaveandalexshow.com or send an e-mail to info@daveandalex.com.

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Selected Clients

American Express
AOL Time Warner
Arm & Hammer
The Boston Company
Cadbury Schweppes
Canon USA
Champion International
CoStar, Inc.
Court TV
Daimler Chrysler
Discovery Communications
Dow Chemical
Equity Marketing, Inc.
Estée Lauder
First Capital
First Financial
Forbes, Inc.
Gilbert Paper
Giorgio Armani
Gravely International
Greenfield Healthy Foods
iVillage
JobDirect
Lend Lease
L'Oréal
Lowe's
MasterCard
Modem Media
MTV Networks
The Nederlander Organization
Nestlé
Netmarket
The New York Times
Nickelodeon
Polaroid
Prodigy.com
PTC
Reebok International Ltd.
Rockefeller Properties
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ScreamingMedia
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The Smithsonian Institution
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Steelcase
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