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Issue Date: June 2008

Marketing Matters: Five Secrets of Beauty Ads

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The 2008 “Age of Naturals,” The Benchmarking Company’s (TBC) latest consumer-based beauty research Pink Report, disclosed that women respond more strongly to emotion than to scientific data. What’s new about that, one might ask? Plenty. The relatively new wave of natural/organic beauty products has a sidekick, and it’s skepticism—about “big beauty” and its seemingly harmful ingredients, about corporate social responsibility (does the beauty brand do animal testing on its products? use any parts of animals in its brushes? respect the environment and manufacture in a sustainable manner?), and about scientific claims in beauty brands, which themselves seem to demonstrate to women a lack of heart.

Emotion is Everything

A woman’s revved up skepticism doesn’t necessarily mean you should throw your clinicals out the window. Women still want to know and be assured that products work, but they want to feel passionately about a new beauty brand *immediately*. Just like the claims presented in “The Age of Naturals,” your ad’s headline must grab a woman’s heart and not let go until she’s on her way to her favorite beauty counter to buy your new product offering. No matter if your brand is natural, organic or traditionally made, use inspirational words that soothe or excite, but above all, make those words memorable.

Traverse the Real Woman Vs. Aspirational Tightrope

Dove’s beauty ads are groundbreaking in their depiction of women as (gasp!) real, with a few flaws. Whenever we (at TBC) survey women in a focus group or an online setting, we hear again and again that women “of a certain age” want to see women in ads that are their age, too; i.e., they want to see themselves reflected in ads that address them. To them, age sensitivity means truthfulness, and this can translate to a few more precious seconds of attention for your ad. It’s a fine line though, as women are always attracted to the aspirational model image, no matter what we say. Walk it carefully. If you’re aiming at the 35+ market with your product, it would behoove you to test your ads using both an aspirational model and a more age-appropriate model, to see which one women respond to better. You might be surprised at the result.

Leave Her With Something to Think About

“I just couldn’t get that ad out of my head!” We’ve heard this comment many times from women in our focus groups. One woman recalls a television ad, and suddenly there are smiles and wistful sighs. Every woman remembers how she feels when her emotions are triggered while engaged in an ad’s human story. Do you remember the old Folger’s Coffee ads featuring the woman whose son comes home from college? He’s in the kitchen making coffee one morning; she smells the coffee, knows it’s him and knows that he’s finally home. It gets you right in the heart! How about something a little more contemporary? The Dove ads featuring the little girl and the abounding pressures to be rail-thin are additional emotion-tugging ads. Sadness, happiness, anger, fear, love, a wanting to protect—these are the keys to a woman’s lasting memory. Construct your ad’s story with any of these central themes in mind, and it’ll be remembered.

Pictures are Worth a Thousand Words—or More

Ad people agonize over the copy, which is usually clunked on the bottom of a full-page print ad. In reality, women are looking at the pictures, trying, in less than three seconds, to extract the emotion and trying to understand what the ad wants from her. Revelation: Hardly anyone reads that fine print at the bottom. If your ad can’t convey your message in a simple header and subhead, with fabulous photography (including your product photo), it’s got problems. Instead of devoting endless time to tweaking a huge amount of text, concentrate on the grabbers and forgo the massive literature. Your target wants to feel it in a flash.

Give Confusion the Kibosh

Create an advertising message that is simple and direct. Sound a call to action (like Revlon's new "Get Your Own"). Offer a challenge. Provide your target permission to pamper herself (such as L'Oréal's timeless "Because You're Worth It"). Or leave her with a feel-good inspirational line. The direct and memorable approach can keep your ad in her thoughts even longer.

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