

# Writing an advertisement

**Start your own business**  
[www.syob.co.uk](http://www.syob.co.uk)

**The basic dos and don'ts of advertising are fairly straightforward. You do not have to be clever or witty to be effective. Some people running small businesses take great pleasure in creating good ads.**

Advertising explains why you may choose to advertise and where to advertise.

This briefing explains:

- The elements that make up a good ad.
- The thinking process that leads to success.
- How to write advertising that works.

## 1 Outline of an ad

Start-up businesses tend to advertise in print – in newspapers, magazines or other publications.

Successful print ads are usually written around a few basic elements.

- 1.1 The headline** — a strong statement featuring the major selling point (eg cheaper, faster).
- 1.2 The illustration** (optional) — reinforcing the claim in the headline (eg showing how your product works).
- 1.3 The body copy** — the main text which persuades the reader to buy your product.
- 1.4 The tag-line** — summing up the product or the company's philosophy (eg 'Just do it').
- 1.5 The call to action** — telling the reader what to do next.

- 1.6 The company details** — name, address, phone and fax numbers, email and web addresses and logo (if you have one).

Look at the advertising around you. Decide what sort of ad would work best for your business and what would make the ad stand out.

## 2 What are you selling?

- 2.1 Be clear about what you have to offer.**

The major selling points of most good small businesses are:

- Specialist or expert.
- Convenient and local.
- Give excellent service.
- Offer value for money.

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**Click here for your free listing  
in Yellow Pages, Yell.com and  
Yellow Pages 118 24 7**

This is the sort of thing that will make customers want to buy your product — so this is what your ad should be telling them.

**2.2** If you have something **unique** to offer (eg your shop stocks the widest range of scuba gear in the North of England), emphasise it. You will automatically stand out from the competition.

**2.3** If your product has **no clear advantage**, you will need to work hard to present it in a unique way.

- If you cannot do that, perhaps you should not spend money on advertising.

### 3 How big and how often?

**3.1** The **size** and **style** of your ad should depend on the publication it is to appear in.

- For example, Philglas & Swiggot, a wine shop in London specialising in Australian wine, used a simple ad in the local paper to let people know the shop had opened. The launch ad (see page 4) said 'SUPERB AUSTRALIAN WINES ... at sensible prices', then gave the shop's address. It was large enough to stand out, but no more, and it told the readers exactly what they wanted to know.
- The same shop also sells special wines by mail order. To promote this, a series of ads was placed in Wine magazine. These were quite different. They aimed to create a stylish, sophisticated image and listed individual wines, using jargon only a wine expert would appreciate. The ads were large and attractive and included the shop's distinctive logo.

**3.2** The type of publication and the cost per ad will dictate **how often** your ad should run.

- Philglas & Swiggot's initial local paper ad was repeated for 20 weeks.
- The expensive ad in the monthly wine magazine did not need so many repeats, especially as many readers kept each issue.

### 4 The headline

**4.1** The headline is the first thing most readers look at, even before the picture. If it does not grab their **attention**, through arousing curiosity or making an offer, the ad will fail.

- Make the headline stand out. Use large, bold type.

- Say something of real interest to the reader.
- Make it easily understood.

**4.2** Bad headlines are often:

- The company name — it may mean something to you, but will it really grab the reader's attention?
- The irrelevant joke — which says nothing about the product, and therefore does not attract the right readers.
- The misleading headline — people may read on, but they will be irritated when they find out what you are really offering.

### 5 The illustration

**5.1** Use a good **picture** to improve your ad. But it will only work if it is relevant — if it reinforces or expands upon the headline.

- If you have nothing to show, do not feel you must have a picture for the sake of it.

**5.2** Bear in mind that a good photographer or illustrator can make the duller items look **interesting**. Do not assume your product is too unphotogenic to warrant a picture.

**5.3** One inexpensive option is using **stock shots** — library pictures (eg photos of unlabelled food tins) that can be used for a flat fee. Do not use a poor shot because it is cheap.

- The picture must be in black and white, unless you go for a full-colour ad.

### 6 The body copy

The headline and picture have won the reader's attention. Now you need some good copy.

**6.1** **Take** the practical example of writing an ad for your 'extra-sharp kitchen knives'.

- Start by enlarging on what is said in the headline. Just how sharp are these knives?
- Offer facts to support your claims. Why are they so unusually sharp?
- Explain other benefits — eg inexpensive.
- Warn readers that they will miss out if they do not buy the product — eg there is a special offer for a limited time only.
- Urge readers to find out more, or buy the product. Tell them how and where — eg 'Phone for details'.
- Close with a pay-off line relating back to the benefit in the headline — eg 'So sharp they'll cut your time in the kitchen'.

➔ The **Institute of Practitioners In Advertising** (020 7235 7020), the professional body for advertising agencies, has a free guidance note on choosing an agency.

➔ The **Advertising Association** (020 7828 2771) has an extensive website at [www.adassoc.org.uk](http://www.adassoc.org.uk), which includes the text of its guide 'Advertising means business'.

“Choose one selling point to major on and spell it out loud and clear. Trying to include too much detail only dilutes your message.”  
**Grier Palmer,**  
**Warwick Business School**

“Be careful not to make your ads all image and no information. Show the product in action where possible and try and make them sell.”  
**Dave Patten,**  
**Merry Marketing**

**6.2** It is essential to get the **tone** right.

- Readability — the ad should be clear, crisp and concise, and written in plain English.
- Sincerity — the ad must be confident, without seeming shrill.  
The best ads appear uncomplicated, but use phrasing their target audiences can relate to.

**6.3** Advertisements must be ‘**legal, decent, honest and truthful**’.

If in doubt, the Copy Advice Service (020 7580 4100) will vet your ad free of charge.

- You must be able to back up your claims.

## 7 Check your advertisement

**7.1** You have written a few draft ads, asked people’s opinions, and selected one. Now **check it** by asking yourself five questions.

- Will the headline — and illustration, if there is one — stop readers in their tracks?
- Is the copy interesting? Does it tell the readers something they want to know?
- Does the advertisement, overall, make the reader an offer or a promise?
- Does it encourage the reader to act? Does it make it clear what to do next?
- Are the special benefits of your product given the emphasis they deserve?

### Don’t spoil your chances

**A** Beware of **discounts**.

- Words like ‘sale’ and ‘discount’ can make your business sound tacky.

**B** Simplify **clutter**.

- If you cram in too many words and pictures, readers find ads hard work.

**C** Avoid **jargon** and wordiness.

- Obscure words and long sentences put people off. Keep it simple and direct.

**D** Don’t be **boring**. No-one wants to plough through a pile of statistics and facts.

- Decide what is important, say it clearly and stop when you have whetted the reader’s appetite.

**7.2** If you can look at your advertisement with the eyes of a **reader** — one of your potential customers — and answer ‘Yes’ to all these questions, you have a good ad.

- If not, it may be worth paying a specialist to write it for you, rather than wasting money buying space for an ad that will not bring you in any business.
- Advertising agencies are good at matching the style and content of an ad to the prospective customers for your product.
- If you cannot afford an agency, shop around for a self-employed copywriter and work together to generate ideas for ads.

## 8 Preparing artwork

The final version of the ad must be turned into artwork for the printer. Artwork can be typed, drawn or printed material — as long as it is in black and white, clean and sharply defined. Ask the publication what artwork is required.

**8.1** **DIY** artwork is possible. Wording and layout can be done on your computer, but the quality of the print must be good.

- Special ‘repro’ paper is advisable. For drawings, use ‘artboard’ from an art shop.
- Local printers will typeset text and prepare artwork. Or you can use an artwork studio.

**8.2** You can leave the preparation of your ad to the **publication** in which the ad will run.

- Layout and setting costs may be included in the price of the advertising space. This sounds like a bargain. But saving a little on design could cost you a lot in sales.

**8.3** **Check a proof** copy of the ad before the publication goes to print.

- Make absolutely sure that the wording, layout, typefaces and the contact details are correct. Once you have signed off the proof, any mistakes are wholly your responsibility.

➤ An advertising agency will have the expertise to produce an effective campaign and can help you judge the best publications to advertise in. As a rough guide, consider using an agency if your advertising budget is going to be at least £10,000. Expect to spend around 15 per cent of the budget on agency fees.

You can get free advice from your local business support organisation, and often from the publication you choose to advertise in — especially the regional press.

“Working with a good professional freelance copywriter can be very cost-effective. For a few hundred pounds, you may come up with enough material in a day or two to give you a series of advertisements that will last you a while.”  
**Clare Scott Dryden, marketing consultant**

## A GOOD AD

***SUPERB  
AUSTRALIAN  
WINES<sup>1</sup>***

...at sensible prices<sup>2</sup>

**Philglas & Swiggot<sup>3</sup>**  
Independent Wine Merchant<sup>4</sup>

21 Northcote Road  
Clapham Junction  
Tel: 020 7924 4494 <sup>5</sup>

Award-winning wines <sup>6</sup>  
Case discounts  
Weddings and parties  
supplied  
Free glass loan  
Ice and cool box loans  
Friendly and helpful advice

**SPECIAL OFFER <sup>7</sup>**  
Penfolds Koonunga Hill  
Shiraz-Cabernet  
£4.50  
during  
July

At a glance, the reader can understand what this ad is about and decide whether to read it.

1. The bold headline with its clear message attracts the reader's eye.
  2. A key selling point. The headline on its own would leave readers wondering whether the 'superb Australian wines' were affordable.
  3. The company's name is large and bold, so readers will remember it. As a start-up, you need to take every opportunity to make people aware of your company name.
  4. This explains who is selling the reader what.
  5. Company details.
  6. More selling points. Easy to understand.
  7. A special offer always helps. The time limit ('during July') prompts the reader to act.
- Note the use of different type sizes and areas of white space. These emphasise key points and make the ad seem clear, bright and attractive.

**Expert contributors**

Thanks to **Ann Murray Chatterton** (Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, 020 7235 7020); **Claire Forbes** (Advertising Standards Authority, 020 7492 2222).

**Further help**

There are other Start-up Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name, such as **Advertising**.

## A BAD AD

**SAVE MONEY BY BUYING YOUR  
WINE FROM US! <sup>1</sup>**

We stock an enormous range of superb wine from Australia (our home country)<sup>2</sup> and New Zealand, and our prices are sensible.

Choose from our specialist wines or save money by buying wine by the case. You can order wine by post. We also supply weddings and parties, including free glass loan and ice and cool box loan.

We offer friendly and helpful advice and unusual characterful good quality wines.<sup>3</sup>

Philglas & Swiggot <sup>4</sup>  
Tel: 020 7924 4494

The reader is put off straight away by too many words and the grey, cluttered look of this ad.

1. The headline does not stand out and gives the impression of a discount store, which is misleading. The wrong type of customer will be attracted.
2. Things that are of interest to you may not be of interest to readers.
3. The message is confused and the advertisement is untidy and overcrowded. There are good selling points, but they are buried in the text.
4. Who are Philglas & Swiggot? Where are they located? Where can I go to look at their range — or to complain if they sell me a disappointing bottle of wine?

Good ads need clarity and confidence. There must be one main point — and, whatever that is, you should be able to read it across the room.

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