

Shoptalk: No More Crappy Ads

By Mark Fitzgerald

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Given the alarming deterioration of advertising revenue that Jennifer Saba and I document in this issue's special report — a phenomenon that threatens to prove permanent where it once was simply periodic — this may not strike you, Mr. or Ms. Publisher, as precisely the moment to launch the crusade I'm about to suggest. But on the contrary, **I believe it's never been more important than now, at this most confounding crossroads in the industry's modern history, that newspapers pledge a solemn vow: no more crappy ads.**

No more junky, congested ads choking on words. No more ads illustrated with crude line drawings. No more ads with testimonials from "Mike T., Molina" and "J.W., Springfield." In fact, no more ads with "every" other "word" in "quotes."

And if you're the publisher of a Spanish-language paper, ¡por el amor de Dios!, say "no más" to ads for bogus Indio magic men wearing cheesy Halloween headdresses they probably picked up at a CVS in Elizabeth, N.J., who promise to exorcise everything from diabetes and alcoholism to unemployment and the evil eye of a love rival.

Crappy-looking ads are, of course, a great newspaper tradition, and a tribute, in a perverse way, to its power as the people's medium. Every mom-and-pop business can be its own Leo Burnett agency.

But during the course of the last quarter-century, the industry transformed the look and quality of its advertising as papers improved their reproduction and steadily added color pages. Much of the thanks goes to USA Today, which celebrated its 25th anniversary in September. From its start in 1982 — another grim year for newspapers, incidentally — it bravely insisted on ads suitable for slick magazines, even as critics sniped that Al Neuharth had birthed a comic book version of a daily, a McPaper.

Newspapers still insist on quality for such high-profile positions as the increasingly common section front and front-page banner ads. Inside, though, standards are slipping as newspapers, desperate for revenue, offer their real estate to anything that's accompanied by a check.

They're sneaking in everywhere. It happens even in The New York Times, for crying out loud, home to ads for such high-end merchandise as Gucci Aviatrix black

leather purses that go for \$2,390 a pop. Every once in a while, my Times edition in Chicago includes an ad for a workplace injury clinic that features a line drawing of a man, complete with lightning bolts firing from his aching back, that looks as if it were done by the most talented artist in Miss Moran's fourth-grade class.

I'm not the only one noticing. "There has been a deterioration in the caliber of advertising, mainly because a lot of it are these remnant or standby ads," says Toronto-based newspaper consultant Len Kubas. In the long run, he notes, that's a foolish practice, because it gets quality advertisers wondering why they should pay 100 cents on the dollar when another guy is allowed to junk up the page at fire-sale rates.

But it's not just advertiser reaction that should worry newspapers. The industry has known forever that it produces that rarest of mediums: one in which advertising messages are welcomed. But since the landmark Impact Study by the Readership Institute, we now know that people will spend more time with a paper and read more of it if they find the ads interesting. "In fact, editorial content was better read when the newspaper also had quality advertising content," the study concluded in 2000.

Newspapers would do well to take the approach Jerry Campagna did when he began to build Reflejos in the outskirts of Chicago into the most successful bilingual weekly aimed at suburban Latinos. Even in the struggling early days, when Campagna himself hauled bundles of the paper from taqueria to supermercado, he turned aside the repeated top-dollar offers to advertise by the local curanderos and others who prey on the superstitions or anxieties of newly arrived immigrants.

"I look at it like zoning a metropolitan area," says Campagna, who earlier this spring left the paper, now owned by the Daily Herald in Arlington Heights, Ill. "And I wanted a more middle-class neighborhood." So, it turned out, did his readers and advertisers.

Just as that unrepaired broken window of modern law enforcement myth can trigger the downward spiral of a 'hood, poor-quality ads beget more junk until the best thing a paper's got is that double-truck come-on for uncirculated gold coins.

Before it's too late, newspapers have to start picking up the cigarette butts on its property, cut the lawn, and weed the garden. All the many newspaper neighbors are watching, from the designers in the newsroom to the restaurateur pondering where to advertise his hip new spot.

**So stop the backsliding. Say it with me:
No more crappy ads.**

Mark Fitzgerald