Effective Print Advertising
An Overview of the Influence of Size, Placement, and Design

A Whitepaper by Richard Wood

From the blog The Ins and Outs of Print Marketing
What makes for effective print advertising?

Like any promotional method, print advertising has strengths and weaknesses. When done right, it can boost brand awareness and recall, generate purchase intent or sales leads, and deliver key messages with clarity. When done poorly, it can be ineffective, waste money, or, worse, damage your brand.

When it comes time to create and place your print ad, you may wonder about the best practices for making it effective. This white paper will give you a brief overview of some of the strategies that have been put forward with regards to three much-debated aspects: size, placement, and design. We’ll look at what the research has to say, specifically when it comes to magazine advertising.

**Size**

If you listen to my interview with Steve Hutchinson from Treehouse Media you will hear him say that he does not buy fractionals, which are any ads less than a full page. This “go big or go home” approach is very common and has several advantages.

There are no other ads or editorial content on the page to distract the reader. You have space to include detailed messaging — important if the ad is for a complex buying decision, such as in the B2B space. It often gives you access to a full bleed, which can be an attractive design element. The biggest downside is cost; a full-page ad can be beyond the budgets of smaller companies, especially in magazines that command a sizeable audience.

Generally, research does support that larger ads command more attention, though size is less of a factor when it comes to influencing behaviour, such as purchase intent (Hanssens & Weitz, 1980). Han (1992) found that the influence of ad size was tempered by the consumer’s level of involvement; thus a low-involvement purchase would be influenced more by frequency than by ad size, whereas a higher involvement purchases would be influenced more by ad size,

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*Photo by Britta Jackson via Pexels.com*

*Many a small thing has been made large by the right kind of advertising.*

*Mark Twain*
In an interesting piece of research, Pornpitakpan (2004) looked at the effects of ad size and repetition on attitudes in Germans, Americans, and Singaporeans. In Americans, they found that negative attitudes and reduced intent to purchase were associated with large ads that were repeated often, but that the effect was different for smaller ads, where low repetition was seen as more favourable to moderate repetition. In Germans, low and moderate repetition of small ads produced the level of positive brand attitude and purchase intent. For Singaporeans, high repetition of large ads was the most effective.

**Placement**

When I sold print ads, clients often requested placements that sometimes seemed based on superstition than logic. Some insisted on verso (left), some on recto (right). Some near the top, others near the bottom. Near the front or near the middle sequentially in the magazine. Many wanted to be the only ad on the page, next to (good) editorial content. Research is mixed on how ad placement alters an ad’s effectiveness. There is a strong argument for fractionals being placed on the left-side of the verso page, which are similar to the arguments for how web designers place the home button in the top left of the screen. In Western countries, that’s where we start reading.

Some argue for a bottom right-hand placement, or the anchor position, which is where we finish reading (Bruce, 2016). Readers often pause here with their eyes before moving to the next spread.

In their summary of finding of a study by Starch Advertising Research, the Rochester Institute of Technology (2016) reported that left or right-hand placement had no effect on readership of the ads. Neither did placement next to certain kinds of editorial content. What they did find was that placement near the table of contents, near editorial content (as opposed to other ads), and toward the front half of the magazine did increase readership of ads.
Design

It seems obvious that a well-designed advertisement will perform better than a poorly designed advertisement. However, how specific design elements affect performance can vary from situation to situation so much that there is no blanket statement that can be made on what constitutes a “well-designed ad.” Colour or black and white? A single image or lots of text? Font choice? Illustration vs. photo?

Take the research of Bebko et al (2004), who used eye-tracking technology to measure responses to non-profit advertising intended to solicit donations through an emotional appeal. They found that creating ads that quickly moved the viewer to text and logos, but that then brought the viewer’s attention to the image of a face frequently and for long total duration, were the most effective at motivating the viewer to recommend a donation.

Compare this to a B2B ad. Lohtia et al (1995) looked at 34 aspects of ad content, including such things as number of smiles or frowns, metaphors, telephone numbers, and so forth. They found that elements such as a clear explanation of a product and its benefits, a smaller font, images feature smaller groups of people, and presenting information in a logical manner can increase the effectiveness, at least most of the time.

Conclusion

The size, placement, and design, of an advertisement in print matters. But how much each influences the effectiveness of an ad, and in what way, depends on context, the product or service being promoted, and the target audience. In other words, it is complex enough that generalizations are impossible to make.

The takeaway: Be flexible with your advertising so you can adapt the size, placement, and design to make the most of each situation.

Your best bet, after doing your own research, is to ask your ad sales rep. You may think they have a conflict of interest, motivated only to get you to buy bigger ads more frequently, as well as premium placements and full colour. But reps want to build long-term relationships, as it is easier for them to sell to an existing customer than to seek out and acquire new ones. Thus, they are also motivated to meet your needs, which means selling you the ad that will deliver you the results you seek, such that you will continue to advertise in future issues.

Reps know their publication, they know their audience, and they know what works in terms of placement, size, and design. Their insights that will make your decision easier and help your ad perform better.

Advertising is fundamentally persuasion and persuasion happens to be not a science, but an art.

William Bernbach


