

Strategic Advertising: Sell Yourself with Your Antiques

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“The business that considers itself immune to the necessity for advertising sooner or later finds itself immune to business.”

-- Derby Brown

Far too many antique dealers view advertising as a necessary evil. Show dealers place ads in the show sections of trade newspapers or in show programs because those ads are required by contract. Other dealers advertise in the trade papers or glossy antiques magazine if their cashflow permits. A handful of dealers advertise consistently. Overall, few dealers will tell you that they have an advertising “strategy” (let alone a budget), and virtually all advertising in the antiques business is driven by a single approach: sell the object pictured in the ad.

Object-Driven Advertising

Object-driven advertising isn't necessarily a bad thing, especially if you actually sell the item you've advertised. But it is a limited approach. It leads one to evaluate the effectiveness of the ad based solely on whether the object sold or on how many inquiry calls were received. (In the latter case, dealers frequently complain about the nuisance calls they receive from their ads – people wanting to know how much the item pictured costs in order to compare it with something they already own, for example – and they stop advertising because the annoyance factor is too high.)

While the number of calls in response to an ad is one legitimate way to evaluate an ad, there are other, less tangible, things to consider of which image building is the most important. Advertising can and should be about more than sales; it should be part of a long-term marketing strategy. First, the impressions created by print advertising over the long term are as (if not more) important than the sale of a single object. And second, the

echo effect (the impact of an ad that isn't realized until much later) is tough to predict: I recently sold an object from an ad that was over 12 months old.

Strategic Advertising: More Bang for Your Buck

Thinking about advertising more strategically does not mean abandoning your efforts to sell objects through ads. Remember, besides trying to sell an object, a good ad should also do the following:

Create an identity: One of the best reasons to advertise is to create name (or "brand") recognition. In order to do this, you need to make sure that your ads stand out – and are immediately recognizable, and recognizable as *yours*. Think about how most people read the trade papers: they skim quickly through pages and pages of ads. You want them to notice you – over and over again. If you haven't invested in a logo, do so. Think Coke. Or Nike. Or McDonalds. The same principle applies to you.

Design for success: Spending money to place an ad and then designing it poorly is akin to buying a great antique and then leaving it in a dark corner. Unfortunately, most dealers leave design considerations to the overworked production staff at the publication where their ad is going to run. With all due respect to the folks who do the bulk of the design work (and they are, for the most, very competent graphic designers), they are being paid by their employers, first, to produce the publication, and second, to churn out as many ads as the sales reps bring in. (And remember, you procrastinated until the last minute in deciding to run that ad in the first place; imagine the workload on the graphic designer who has to produce all of those last-minute ads.) These designers cannot possibly give each of your ads your "look," rather they will design in the style of the publication.

If you cannot bring yourself to pay for a graphic designer for each ad, consider hiring someone to create an ad template that can be used over and over again. The expense will

be spread out over multiple ads. At the very least, provide some design direction to that overworked graphic designer. Your ads must consistently look like yours, and nobody else's.

For those of you who are graphically challenged, here are a few simple guidelines you can follow:

1. *Focus on your business, not the object for sale.* What's the most important thing in your ad? Your name, of course. This doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be in the largest typeface, but your name needs to stand out (color, a different typeface, and white space can all be used effectively to highlight it). It should also be at the bottom of your ad, so that people leave your ad with your name in their minds.
2. *Show the reader who you are, not just an object for sale.* Many antique ads contain a random selection of objects. Consider grouping objects into categories – advertise lighting one month, furniture the next, hooked rugs the next. Remember, you are trying to create an impression about your business. Random selection doesn't really appeal to most buyers.
3. *A picture is worth a thousand words.* Nowhere is this maxim truer than in the antique business. Fuzzy, out of focus, dark, grainy pictures send a message: you didn't care enough about your ad to take the time to take a decent photo. If it's a black-and-white newspaper ad, pick an object that can be portrayed effectively in black-and-white and which does not require a great deal of detail to be interesting.
4. *Make your contact information easily visible and readable.* At a minimum, always include your name, phone number, email and website address. Unless you have an open shop with regular hours, your address is much less important. And if you are a regular show dealer, mentioning upcoming shows (within the period that the magazine or paper will be available) is a good idea.

Shop around: If your budget is limited (and I'm assuming it is), consider which 2 or 3 publications will work best for you by asking the following questions:

1. *How frequently is each published?* A weekly publication gets you out to your audience more quickly, but the shelf life of weekly publications is much shorter than monthlies – and glossy color publications with substantive content tend to hang around on coffee tables and bookshelves longer than publications that contain primarily ads and press releases.

2. *How is each distributed?* By subscription to dedicated readers? At shows that you'd like to exhibit at but can't? In high-traffic group shops?

3. *How many copies are distributed (not printed)?* Compare the cost of advertising to the distribution numbers to get a feel for the cost per thousand readers, remembering that the quality of the readership is as important (if not more so) than the number of readers.

Repeat your exposure: Frequency is critical to effective advertising. It is far better to run six ads in one publication than to run one ad in six different publications. Regardless of whether you sell an object or get a call from an individual ad, putting your name in front of your target readers over and over again is key. (Remember the marketing rule of 27 impressions before someone remembers your name.)

Analyze: Finally, take notes over the course of the year and reevaluate your strategy every 9-12 months. Remember that everything counts, including the casual "I see your ads in XXX" when you meet people at shows or in the shop.

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