

AdErrors

When Good Ads Go Bad

We're surrounded by horrible advertising. Every day. All the time. So why include more here? Because deconstructing ads to figure out why they've gone bad is one way of figuring out how to make ads good. As you'd expect, advertising can falter in many ways and at different points in the process. Sometimes it's the smallest detail. Sometimes it's a sweeping mistake. A single bad ad can contain many errors. But all it takes is a single error to undermine an ad's effectiveness.

Here are 13 classic AdErrors that block communication, diminish interaction, and essentially turn an expensive media buy into wallpaper. The problems are pretty common. But this will give you the language to critique work that you just knew in your gut was bad. Once you've got these 13 errors down, you can look at every stage of the process and determine what went wrong, how to fix it, and when to just toss the work in the trash.

AdError One: The Headline and the Visual Are Redundant or Disconnected

An effective headline does many things; reiterating, explaining, or describing the visual is not one of them. That's what we'd call "see-say." On the other hand, make sure that the headline doesn't ignore the visual, as though the two were totally separate entities. Magic happens in the interplay between headline and visual. No interplay, no magic. Be on the lookout during the concept stage, although it's most apparent in the executional stage.

Example: Cask & Cream

This ad is a great example of art and copy redundancy. The scenario depicts a couple of hounds delivering slippers and a newspaper to their master as he sits in a big, comfy leather



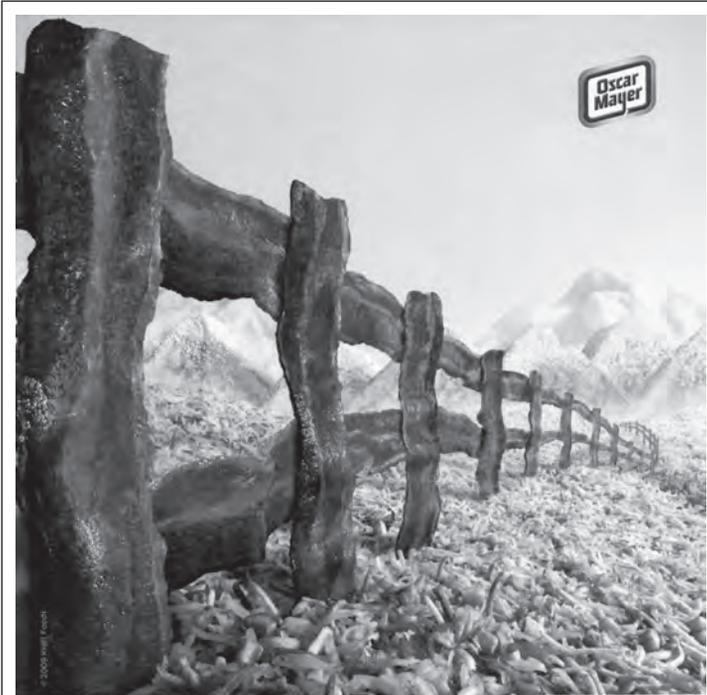
chair sipping a Cask & Cream on the rocks. It's the classic cliché of indulgent, decadent living. The visual couldn't be clearer; there's no room for misinterpretation. But rather than work off the obviousness of the visual, the headline simply repeats it: "Seem a bit indulgent?" The worst part is, the ad includes a subhead just in case we couldn't figure it out: "Now you're catching on" (nudge, nudge). It's a quintessential see-say followed by an insult!

Here's a simple rule: Don't do this. Instead, do this: If you don't feel that your visual is communicating what it needs to, then change the visual. The purpose of the headline is to work *with* the visual to create meaning. Don't make the mistake of using the headline to "fix" the communication. Don't treat the headline as just an afterthought. Once, my Art Director joked that my words were ruining his ad. It was a joke. We laughed. Then got back to the serious business of making art and copy synergistic.

AdError Two: Meaningless Gimmicks and Borrowed Interest

We all want people to stop and look at our advertising. But if that stopping power has no connection to the product that we're selling, then that power is fleeting, ultimately ineffective, and perhaps even a turnoff.

Borrowed interest means that an ad is using a compelling communication element or detail from somewhere other than your product or strategy. A meaningless gimmick means that the attention grabber doesn't have anything to do with the message. Bottom line: Work harder to figure out what's interesting about your product and make that the central communication. Usually a conceptual problem, but could happen in the execution or even the strategy.



The advertisement features a black and white photograph of a rustic wooden fence. The fence is uniquely constructed, with the vertical posts and horizontal rails made from thick, dark strips of bacon. The fence stretches across a field of what appears to be more bacon strips, leading towards a range of snow-capped mountains in the background. In the upper right corner of the image, the Oscar Mayer logo is visible. Below the photograph, the text reads: "We go to great lengths to bring you America's best bacon." followed by a smaller line of text: "Oscar Mayer bacon is carefully selected, hand-trimmed and naturally hardwood smoked for hours. Because there are no shortcuts to that one-of-a-kind Oscar Mayer flavor America says is the best." In the bottom right corner, there is a small image of a stack of Oscar Mayer Bacon packages. At the very bottom of the advertisement, a dark grey bar contains the text "For the love of bacon."

We go to great lengths to bring you America's best bacon.

Oscar Mayer bacon is carefully selected, hand-trimmed and naturally hardwood smoked for hours. Because there are no shortcuts to that one-of-a-kind Oscar Mayer flavor America says is the best.

For the love of bacon.

Example: Oscar Mayer Bacon

Whoa. A bacon fence. This certainly does attract your attention. But to what end? Perhaps the headline holds the answer: “We go to great lengths to bring you America’s best bacon.” Hmm. Oh, now I get it. The fence is long. So this represents “great lengths.” Actually, no. I don’t get it. Do I now know more about Oscar Mayer and its expertise as a result of this ad? Isn’t that what the strategy wants me to know? If so, then this ad falls way short. It does get my attention. So kudos to the food stylist who put this together for the photo shoot. But an effective gimmick should not only grab your attention but also deliver on strategy. If it doesn’t do both, the creative team has a lot of explaining to do.

How do ads like this happen? Usually because the creative team can’t find anything interesting to say about the product. They fear that no one else will be interested, either. So they try to find something, *anything*, that will make the reader look at the ad, such as a bizarre gimmick, borrowed interest, or bacon fences.

Did You Hear the One About the Traveling Salesman and the Meaningless Gimmick?



A gimmick is defined as a "trick or device intended to attract attention, publicity, or business." While I don't defend using trickery in advertising, there's nothing wrong with trying to attract attention to your product or service. Indeed, that's our job. But advertising has to work harder than merely attracting attention. Here's an illustrative story about a traveling salesman. . . .

Years ago, long before television pitchmen and infomercials, many products were sold door-to-door by traveling salesmen. One product that lent itself to this form of selling was the vacuum cleaner. But as with any product sold door-to-door, the biggest hurdle was getting people to not slam the door in your face. One gimmick that vacuum cleaner salesmen used was to knock on the front door with a handful of dirt. As soon as the "lady of the house" opened the door, the traveling salesman would throw the handful of dirt onto the floor. Naturally, the housewife would be shocked. While a dozen thoughts may have raced through her head, the prevailing one would be: Clean this mess up! Of course, the salesman would have the perfect solution. He'd take out the vacuum cleaner that he was selling and suck up the dirt faster and more effectively than she could have ever imagined. She'd be impressed. Her anger would turn into curiosity, which might eventually turn into a sale. Amazing, huh? We can probably all agree, then, that this is an effective gimmick. It got the customer's attention and led to a purchase.

But not so fast. Let's say that this traveling salesman was not selling vacuum cleaners but toothbrushes. The gimmick of throwing a handful of dirt into the foyer would have still attracted the housewife's attention. Her initial response would have been the same: Clean this mess up! Unfortunately, all the salesman would have to offer was a toothbrush and the promise of cleaner, whiter teeth. She would've slammed the door in his face or sent her husband out to punch him in the nose. Or both.

Same gimmick. Two results. In the first case, the gimmick was closely tied to the product and the selling message. It worked. In the second, the gimmick certainly attracted attention, but it had no connection to the product and failed to hold the consumer's attention. Not only was the sales objective not achieved, but there's a good chance that no one in that household ever answered the door for a traveling salesman again. The lesson is clear: Gimmicks can be great, but if they're not meaningful, you'll not only fill the world with worthless gimmicks but end up eating dirt.

AdError Three: Using Spokespeople Who Are Irrelevant to the Product or the Message

Don't have an idea? Put a celebrity in your ad! The irrelevant use of celebrity is a toxic combination of meaningless gimmickry and borrowed interest. Plus it's so overdone that the impact is often nil. Qualifies as an AdError when it masquerades as an idea . . . but it's really just an idea-less execution.



Example: Sub-Zero

Okay, I admit it. This is the ad that inspired my quest to identify the most common errors that sabotage advertising. When I came across it in a magazine, I practically fell off my chair. Aside from the nice portrait of Amelia Earhart, there is nothing good about this ad.

It's filled with so many errors that it's hard to isolate them. However, the most obvious is its misuse of celebrity. What does this fallen aviator have to do with an upscale refrigerator? Maybe my confusion can be explained away by the headline: "Because I want to." Hmm. I had actually just purchased a Sub-Zero for my home, so this message was especially puzzling to me. The Sub-Zero is a very expensive, very impressive piece of machinery. It's so impressive that calling it a kitchen appliance would be an insult. Purchasing this piece of equipment for your home requires much more consideration than just because you want to. So the headline doesn't clarify anything. Totally baffled, I have now shown this to my students every semester and asked for their help: What do they think the connection is between Amelia Earhart and Sub-Zero? So far, we haven't come up with anything definitive. This ad is so befuddling that even the suggestions sound like questions: She was a renegade and so is Sub-Zero? She never returned from her last flight, but Sub-Zero is always there for you? If she were still alive today, a Sub-Zero would be her appliance of choice? Opening a Sub-Zero is like flying a doomed airplane? My favorite response is pretty far-fetched but just as plausible as anything else: She's dead and maybe this would be a great place to store her body? Send your suggestions to me. We'll crack this puzzle yet.

AdError Four: Lack of Focus

Variety may be the spice of life, but it's the death of an ad. The more information you cram into a single ad, the less ANY of it will be absorbed. For impact, you need power. For power, you need focus. Focus. Focus. Think narrow, not wide. Think pithy, not verbose. When's the last time you got talked into *feeling* something? This flaw can often be traced back to the strategy, but lack of focus can dull any stage of the process.



Example: Kitchen Basics

Hey! I've got a good idea! Let's run a bunch of messages of equal value up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes. Wrong. That's a bad idea. And the ad above is a really, really bad ad. Let's list all the discrete pieces of information that this ad wants us to know: "Rich & Dark,"

“Heart Healthy,” “Like Homemade,” “The key ingredient to many recipes, such as: Risotto, Chicken Sauté, Classic Pot Roast, Turkey Chili, and Carrot Soup.” That’s a lot of stuff. But if you read the body copy, there’s even more: “Why settle?” “11 great tasting flavors,” “New in 2009! Heart Healthy! The American Heart Association has certified three of their flavors”—hence the Heart Healthy logo on the carton, in case you didn’t already know. There’s so much info going on in this ad that it doesn’t even speak in full sentences, just a lot of bullet points. Of course, the clients love its product. And well they should. It’s great. In fact, this is the brand I use to make *my* risotto. However, the agency does not do it justice by simply using the page to park a litany of product attributes. Combine this with perhaps one of the blandest visuals of a product imaginable, and this ad is a waste of money. It’s so out of focus that it’s invisible.

AdError Five: The Page Is Overdeveloped and/or Poorly Planned

Yes, the page is expensive. But it's like real estate—its value goes *down* when overdeveloped. An ad's competition is not just the clutter other ads but editorial content. What could possibly stand out more than restraint and simplicity? Also, have faith in the attraction of good design—an ad that's attractive *attracts*. And remember: White space is power. Blame this one on the layout, although the execution sometimes instigates it.

New Hair Fasteners from **Velcro USA Inc.**

Wow! Nothing, but nothing, grips hair better—especially the ends—rolls up more securely, mostly without clips, is cooler to the touch, styles as perfectly as a professional hairsetter and is faster to work with than **The New Easy Holding Hairsetter by Conair.**

Look! That's because it's the only hairsetter with 20 rollers—medium 3/4"s, large 1"s and jumbo 1 1/4"s with great grip that won't slip—and roll up and roll out again easily with amazing Hair Fasteners from **Velcro USA, INC.**

Save \$5.00
with the purchase of one Easy Holding Hairsetter from Conair.

Conair® Only, use a mail-in rebate form is redeemable per person per household and only on selected products. Can not be transferred, sold, exchanged or reproduced to obtain your rebate. Proof of Purchase is required. Please include:
 • Your name and address on a RPS index card • A dated original sales receipt for the Conair product (Your original mail-in rebate forms will be accepted)
 • Your responsibility for lost or misdirected mail

Mail this form with the required Proof of Purchase as listed below to:
 Conair Rebate Dept. 802,
 PO Box 3726, Louisville, CT 06087-5726
 Your rebate will be mailed to you.
 Please allow 8-12 weeks for delivery.

CONAIR
 MAIL-IN REBATE EXPIRES 3/30/99

CONAIR[®]

For info on any Conair Product call 1-800-3-CONAIR Or visit us on the web at <http://www.conair.com>

Example: Conair

Simply a mess. There's so much stuff crammed into this 8.5 × 11-inch ad that the eye doesn't know where to go. Even that coupon isn't enough to hold your attention. It's easier to just turn the page, which is what you're about to do right now. . . .

AdError Six: Sacrificing Clarity for Cleverness

Being clever is mandatory. But when it comes at the expense of clear communication, it's not good advertising. This can usually be straightened out in the execution unless an over-reaching concept is at fault.



Example: Birds Eye

This ad is working very hard to make a fairly mundane product interesting. The problem is that the visual is too clever for its own good. It gets in the way of clearly communicating what Chicken Voila! is: a frozen pasta and vegetable dinner that includes chicken. The headline acknowledges this by offering up a cutesy explanation for the inner tube and goggles: “Chicken Voila is making quite a splash.” Eventually, you might get it. But none of it really makes sense. A chicken about to jump into a pool isn’t an easy metaphor for a frozen meal that comes to life in a skillet. But you get the sense that everyone from the Creatives to the client thought that this image was so funny, it didn’t really matter. It does. It does matter. Be clever—yes! But be clever *smartly*. It takes a bit more brain power, but that’s what it takes to create effective advertising.

AdError Seven: Overacknowledging Your Competition

It's good to be competitive. But don't let the central idea of your advertising be *about* your competition. It gives them a free plug and defines you by what you *aren't* instead of what you *are*. And that's pretty lame. Competitive strategies that are taken too literally and expressed too blatantly will need to be fixed in either the concept or executional stage.



Example: Smirnoff

First, a history lesson on vodka. Virtually unknown in the West until a Russian refugee named Vladimir Smirnoff sold the formula back in the early 1900s, Smirnoff became the brand that defined the category here in the United States. Indeed, it's the brand that made vodka one of the most popular distilled spirits in the country. Even now, it is still the number one selling vodka. However, the greatest growth in the past decade has been the sales of super-premium brands, such as Absolut, Grey Goose, and Finlandia. Taking action, Smirnoff responded with the above campaign from its ad agency, Lowe Lintas,

which ran in the late 1990s. The tagline “ALL VODKA. NO PRETENSE.,” takes direct aim at the brands nipping at its heels. While not mentioning its competitors by name, headlines such as “This new vodka is filtered through sand imported from Scandinavian fjords. They say it’s so pure it can almost pass for water,” make it plenty obvious. But in the process of denigrating the “upstarts,” Smirnoff takes the spotlight away from itself. Even worse, the brand looks defensive and even a bit scared; these ads tacitly signal that the competition is doing well enough to build an entire campaign around them. Not a good position for anyone to take, but an especially risky strategy for a leader.

AdError Eight: Letting Your Strategy Show

An ad can't be too persuasive if its audience is too aware of its methodology, research results, advertising objective, target audience, and so on. People need to connect to ads viscerally. That other stuff's about as persuasive as a saltine. Plus it can be pretty transparent (and then we're painfully aware that we're looking at advertising). This problem is usually seen in the executional stage . . . often because the advertising has bypassed the concept stage altogether.

It's time for an affordable, fun-filled getaway.



Warm your toes in the sun-baked sand, stroll through moss-draped oaks, experience exciting live shows and savor locally caught seafood all while getting reacquainted with the one you love.

Experience why the Myrtle Beach Area is the perfect place to be.

visit
MYRTLE BEACH
 SOUTH CAROLINA
 VisitMyrtleBeach.com
 866.711.8510

Example: Myrtle Beach, South Carolina

This ad looks like someone just cut a few lines from the strategy statement and pasted them into a piece of paper along with a few stock photos. Even the most effective strategy shouldn't be confused with a good ad. While it may make sense to position Myrtle Beach as affordable (and what vacation shouldn't be "fun-filled"), to simply state it as plainly as that couldn't be any less engaging. True, the message is unambiguous. Unfortunately, it's also flatfooted.

AdError Nine: Being Edgy for Its Own Sake

When the effort shows, it's distracting at best and laughable at worst. "Hipness" is risky because it's inexplicable. One hundred percent authenticity, in both style and substance, is a must. You're either edgy or not. Trying doesn't count. This AdError can rear its ugly head in the executional, layout, and even production stages.

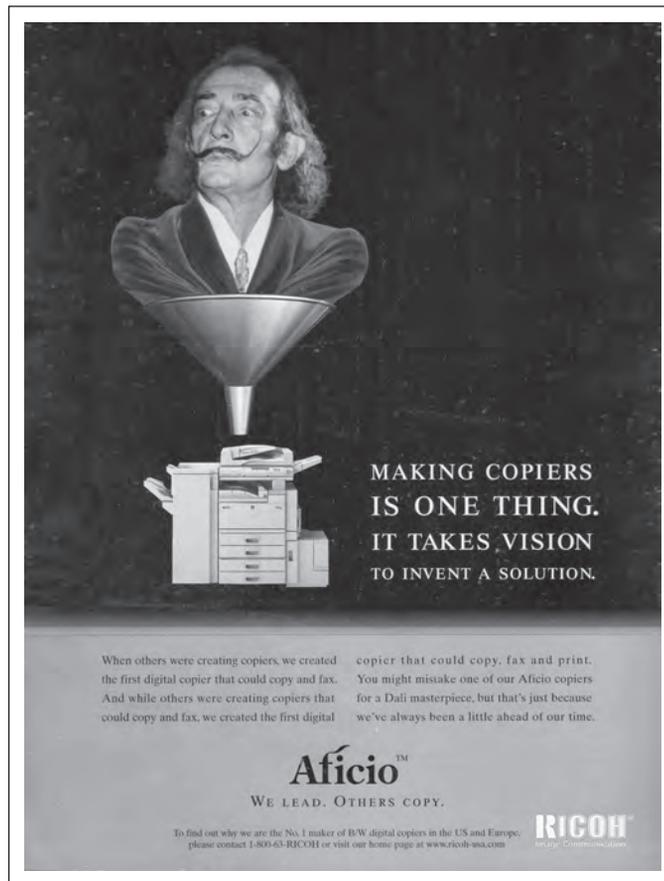


Example: Smith Micro

Wow! Look at that edgy typeface. See that cool dude with the totally awesome haircut and wild hand gestures. Read that headline: "You've got personality." Hey, they must be talking to you: a young, hip student—because who's got more personality than you do? Unless it's the totally cool dude in this ad! Wait a second . . . that's not how the target is going to respond to this ad. At best, they'll quickly turn the page. At worst, the ad will strike them as repulsive as a substitute teacher trying to be your best friend.

AdError Ten: Huh? Using Pretzel Logic, Being Too Subtle or Obtuse

No one should have to suspend reason or work too hard in order to comprehend an ad. And if you think that bad puns and cute copy can explain away tortured contrivances or elusive nuances, think again. Ads that are a stretch and strain are a big pain in the neck. Who needs it? An execution that tries to make sense of a complicated concept will often fall for this AdError.



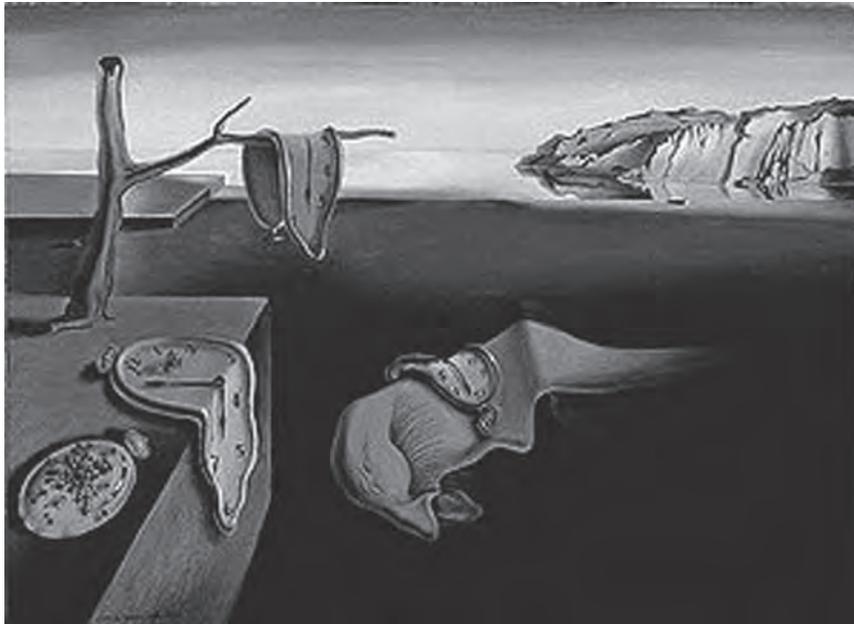
Example: Ricoh

Seeing the master of surrealism being sucked down into a funnel is an interesting visual—surreal, even. But what does Salvador Dali have to do with copiers? Think about it. Do you really want your next copy to come out as absurdly distorted as one of his paintings? Okay, so maybe I'm interpreting the visual too literally. Maybe Salvador Dali

is meant to personify the sort of renegade thinking that Ricoh would like its brand to represent. So let's read the body copy for some clues: "When others were creating copiers, we created the first digital copier that could copy and fax. And while others were creating copiers that could copy and fax, we created the first digital copier that could copy, fax and print." That's pretty cumbersome copy. Plus, it lays out a leadership argument in a very concrete and flatfooted way. Perhaps the visionary part comes later. Let's read on: "You might mistake one of our Aficio copiers for a Dali masterpiece, but that's just because we've always been a little ahead of our time." Hmm. Mistake a copier for a Dali masterpiece? Is that because it's all melt-y like the clocks in "The Persistence of Memory"?

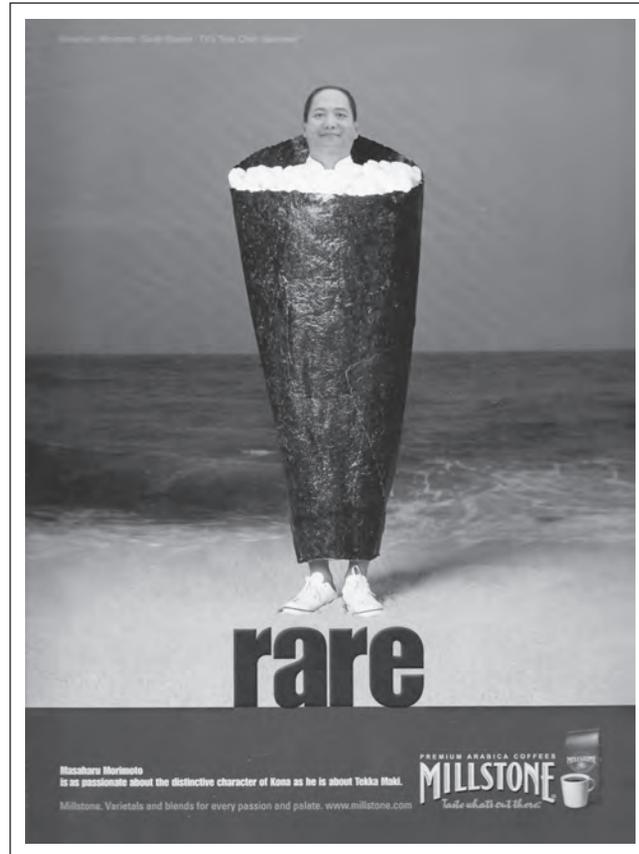
Trying to figure out what Salvador Dali has to do with Ricoh copiers may be lots of fun for an AdError exercise, but no consumer wants to waste time doing it—especially if all that effort isn't rewarded with a reasonable answer.

Salvador Dali's masterpiece, *Persistence of Memory*.



AdError Eleven: Forgetting About the Product

Too often, advertisers get distracted by irrelevant information or sensationalism. So distracted, in fact, that they forget to communicate what's compelling about the product itself.



Example: Millstone Coffee

The biggest surprise here is *not* that Chef Morimoto is wrapped in a sushi roll but that this is an ad for coffee. Generally speaking, coffee is not paired with Japanese cuisine, especially tekka maki. So it's not just a strange spokesperson choice but a doubly odd visual. If the point here is to compare Morimoto's rare skills as a chef with the rare quality of Millstone Coffee, then why wrap him up like sushi—which is raw, not rare? It seems as though the creative team or the client got so excited about meeting their favorite Iron Chef that they forgot that the product they were advertising was a complete mismatch.

AdError Twelve: Being Boring or Too Obvious

Unless it's about a cure for insomniacs, an ad shouldn't put you to sleep . . . it should captivate the brain and galvanize you into action. In addition, effective advertising is interactive. It should do most of the work for the reader . . . but not all. If the brain doesn't engage, the reader feels cheated . . . and unmotivated. Every stage—from strategy to production—can fall victim to this AdError.



Examples: Northland Juice and Cetaphil

Here are two clear examples of this AdError. The ad on the left-hand page communicates that Northland juices are 100% with a headline that states that they're 100% juice against a backdrop of 100% real fruit and that's pretty . . . boring. And if you want to be really obvious about being a doctor-recommended product, then create the ad like the one below that features a doctor "speaking" directly to camera with a headline that begins, "I tell my patients. . . ." Zzzzzzzz.

"I tell my patients with dry, sensitive skin to get serious. Get Cetaphil."

—Helen Torok, MD
Dermatologist

Dermatologists know: Your dry, sensitive skin needs an effective cleanser that's exceptionally mild. Plus a powerful moisturizer free of fragrances or ingredients that can cause irritation. That's why they recommend Cetaphil.

Unlike soaps—which can be harsh—Cetaphil® cleansers wash away dirt, oil, or makeup without harming your skin's natural protective barrier. Perfect for facial and body cleansing.

Cetaphil® moisturizers are loaded with extra-strength emollients and humectants that restore vital moisture and improve your skin's ability to retain it.

Get serious about your skin care. Get Cetaphil.

Dermatologists recommend it. Because it works.

CALL 1-800-360-8276 FOR A FREE BROCHURE AND VALUABLE COUPON.

www.cetaphil.com

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AdError Thirteen: The Tonality and/or Visual Style Is Inconsistent With the Product or Message

Even tried-and-true advertising devices will not be effective if they aren't compatible with your image, product, service, or benefit. Plenty of clients will come to briefings with examples of advertising that they like. "Can we do something like that?" they'll ask. Sometimes, a creative team will see a cool typeface, visual style, or tone in an award-winning ad and want to replicate it for their next project. But you can't pick a style first and then apply it to a campaign if it's not in sync with the message of brand personality. You can usually *see* this misstep, which means it lies in the executional, layout, or production stage. On the other hand, an ill-fitting strategy or concept could be the culprit right from the get-go.

A CALMER WAY TO QUIT.

Cold turkey is the way most smokers try to quit. And cold turkey can be rough. But there is a calmer way to quit, and be better company for the people you love: the NicoDerm CQ way.

You're most vulnerable to nicotine cravings when you first start to quit. So CQ starts you off with a higher level of medicine. Gradually you step down your dose until you're free. And every day along the way, a 24-hour stream of medicine helps calm the cravings that tempt you to reach for that first cigarette.

No stop-smoking aid can be a substitute for commitment. But once the will is there, CQ's a powerful help.

NICODERM CQ

Step 1
6 weeks
21mg

NICODERM CQ

Step 2
2 weeks
14mg

NICODERM CQ

Step 3
2 weeks
7mg

The power to calm. The power to comfort. The power to help you quit.

Success increases when used as directed in step guide. Light smokers start at Step 2. *If you wear it for 24 hours. Quitting is difficult. Individual needs may vary. SmithKline Beecham makes an annual grant to the American Cancer Society to support its cancer fighting mission.

Example: NicoDerm

Here's our final AdError in action. If your strategy has decided to focus on your product's calming method to break the cigarette habit, then *make* your ad calming. Don't SHOUT YOUR MESSAGE IN ALL CAPS. As Marshal McLuhan said, "The medium is the message."

That means that the typeface should express the message as much as the words themselves. As anyone who text messages or e-mails (i.e., everyone) can tell you, all caps means shouting. Bold type means bold communication. And one more thing: Don't feature an action shot of the ex-smoker. If this product were truly effective at calming him down, then he shouldn't look like he's rushing to catch a train.



Visit the student study site at www.sagepub.com/tagstudy for additional online resources including web links, video clips, and recommended readings to learn more about advertising and the creative process.

Critique Exercises

1. Go through magazines you otherwise wouldn't read and find an ad to illustrate each AdError. Bring to class, mount to wall, and have others match the ad to the AdError.
2. Find three examples of celebrity spokespersons who are strategically smart and three that are irrelevant and distracting.
3. Analyze the Sub-Zero ad and write a 200-word essay on your best guess of what the strategic message is. Vote on the class winner—it's anyone's guess.