

Truth in Publishing

How Can a Business Know if They're Advertising with a Legitimate Company?

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Recently I have been in contact with a publisher who is concerned about what businesses are being told when they purchase advertising. His concern is that companies struggling to keep their doors open are making a last-ditch effort to save their business, only to be taken advantage of by ad reps or fly-by-night companies trying to make a sale. His clients are telling him that other media outlets are misrepresenting the numbers they publish and/or where the publications are distributed. How can a legitimate business compete with this? It is not much different from how the BBB was started 99 years ago. The CEO of Coca-Cola was tired of all the snake oil promises his competitors were touting, so he began a truth in advertising federation that became the BBB.

As the economy has changed, so have sales tactics. But many experts caution “buyer beware” when it comes to sweetheart deals offered in advertising. The reality is that costs have actually increased in publishing in the recession—so how then does a publication that you’ve been advertising with come back to offer rates as much as 30% or 40% less than what they were previously? The savings have to come from somewhere, and if they haven’t laid off half their staff then chances are those savings are coming directly from the areas you can’t see—circulation and distribution.

Times have been tough the last couple of years and companies need to make sure the advertising they are buying is based on truthful claims. Below are some questions for businesses to arm themselves with to help avoid the pitfall of bloated claims. Legitimate advertisers and publishers will welcome questions; just like any industry, a few bad ones bring all the good ones down as well.

- How many copies do you print (i.e what is your circulation)? This is a checks and balances question—these numbers should add up. I had a call from a business that said the publication numbers were not what he promised in one instance. When I buy advertising for a community choir I sing in, I want to make sure I’m getting the biggest bang for my buck.
- Where and how are the publications distributed? Every publisher should have lists of where the publication is available, including the physical locations where they are sold and information about in-house delivery. It’s never a bad idea to get the business name out, but a plumber probably does not want to advertise in a publication distributed to vacationers.
- What is my guarantee—what if this advertising doesn’t work? Or what if the publication doesn’t come out in the timeframe you promised? It would be great if the floodgates opened after a business ran an ad. Unfortunately, it rarely works that way. However, a legitimate publisher/advertiser should work with a business to keep them involved in the

ad design process to help make an effective ad. They should show the business that they're in it together.

- Who reads the publication? What is the demographic, how is it quantified and when was the survey conducted that revealed those results? Surveys that were done years ago or from a very small sampling are not going to give an accurate picture of the current demographic.
- Will you create my ad and is there a fee to create it? A business should go thru a contract with a fine tooth comb and ask questions. We get many complaints against companies from consumers who failed to read the fine print. Businesses are encouraged to do the same – they are, after all, consumers as well. Also, make sure the contract has a street date. A summer fishing guide doesn't want to spend a lot of money on an ad that doesn't come out until winter.
- How do you market your publication? A business will want to make sure the publisher is actively marketing the publication and not just putting it in a rack somewhere, hoping it gets picked up by the demographic they say reads it. A business should also wonder, “is this a publication I would read?” If the answer is no, it's probably not where they should be spending their advertising dollars.
- What are the payment terms? Advertising that needs to be paid for in full and up front should raise a red flag, especially if it's offered by a company the business has never heard of. The BBB processes hundreds of complaints against publishers who waltz into town claiming to work with local chambers or schools. They are notorious for selling ads, getting the payment up front, and then riding off in the sunset, never to be seen again. Check with the BBB at www.bbb.org to make sure the company is legitimate before paying for any advertising.
- Will you show me proof of the circulation and distribution? Alas, the most important question of all. Every reputable publisher will have copies of previous print bills on hand and be willing to share them if asked. Likewise, every publisher should have documents outlining exactly where publications are distributed. It is imperative that you verify how many copies are being printed and also the distribution. After all, that is what you are paying for.

Statistically, most businesses fail due to poor or inconsistent advertising. So it is critical to the success of your business that you verify that you are getting what you are paying for. Otherwise you may be buying advertising in media that no one is seeing—the response rate is predictable. And one cannot survive by throwing money down the drain by advertising with fly-by-night companies or publishers who don't live up to their promises. A little homework on the front end will help ensure a positive experience on the back end.

If you have been burned by a company promising things they didn't deliver, file a complaint with the BBB at www.bbb.org.