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To Advertise or Not To Advertise (In the phone book, that is)

by Carolyn West Price



Alas, spring is around the corner. While that brings visions of longer days, blooming daffodils and chirping robins, it also is the time of year that brings out the phone book reps in full force.

Now, don't get me wrong. There is a time and place for advertising in the phone book, but not all businesses need huge colorful ads intended to dominate their category, despite what some enthusiastic sales reps may lead you to believe. To that end, here are some considerations as you review your commitments to those yellow pages.

First, consider your industry and how most people learn about your services. For example, if you do windshield repair, you're in a business for which people are likely to consult the phone book. They need you in a hurry, your service is relatively "low risk" for a poor decision, and the dollar amount involved is relatively low--all of which make the search process minimal.

If, however, you're a provider of healthcare services, and your patient base is people with money who can opt for your elective care, I would suggest that being the first or biggest in the book is really no significant advantage. People searching for plastic surgeons or orthodontists don't go for the most glitz and retail-oriented ads. They ask for referrals from friends and other professionals because the risk of a wrong decision is perceived as greater...and the dollar amount is probably higher than a windshield repair or new tire. They, therefore, look up a name, not a category.

In both of these cases an in-column listing is certainly in order--perhaps an in-column box with red is even appropriate to jump out when people look up your business name (from their referral sources) or search early in the alphabet at the beginning of a category.

Another consideration in the phone book deliberation is your audience. Are seniors your target market? If so, the small print in the phone book often sends them searching elsewhere for phone numbers. Don't waste your money.

Think about geography, too. If you're in Howard County, where do your customers live? Where do they work? How and when do they get to you? You may be in the unfortunate position of needing to be in DC and Baltimore books, which comprise quite a list (and quite a hefty sum of money). For Bell Atlantic alone, there's Maryland Suburban, Laurel, Prince George's and a couple in Montgomery County, not to mention East and West for Baltimore, plus Baltimore City. Throw in the One Book for good measure and you may feasibly want or need a presence in more than a dozen books, and that doesn't even consider local directories, such as Patuxent Publishing.

(With regard to the One Book, you should also know that while there may be one One Book from the consumer's perspective, they, too, have zoned editions. This means, from an advertiser's perspective, there are many One Books to consider.)

Another thought for your consideration is really a simple test that may, in fact, save you money. Open any

yellow pages, flip to any page with regular listings and a few scattered small ads. What jumps out first? The red ads, regardless of size. If you're currently doing anything more than a bold listing, consider adding red--even if you down-size your ad to maintain a budget. I've taken clients from dollar-bill size black ads to in-column red boxed ads, saved them hundreds of dollars, and the response actually increased.Something to consider, and something very few reps will promote, I'm sure.

And, last, but not least, apply the laws of good advertising design and copy if you are doing display ads. Your ad needs to pop and sell benefits (not features), regardless of the publication. Don't sell yourself short by mom-and-popping the art or design since you have to live with this ad, good or bad, for a year and the cost is the same regardless.

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